On Research Methodology

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Abstract - I am pleased to take up the invitation to prepare a brief essay that speaks to ‘the importance of studying research methodology’. First, I set out what I mean by methodology, arguing that its sense is contingent upon the tradition in which it is framed. Second, I consider how methodology is framed within the tradition of critical social science. And finally I consider how such a framing is applied by taking up the example of Honneth’s (2004) inquiry into the phenomenon of inner emptiness and depression in modern society.

WHAT IS METHODOLOGY?

As a working definition, methodology is here conceived as the medium through which methods aspiring to be systematic (e.g. scientific) are forged, applied and warranted within specific communities. Methodology is not reducible to method; and it is not the sum of methods. Rather, it provides the (philosophical) basis for claims that are made for the methodical production of knowledge and the use of particular methods.

This definition of course begs the question of what is meant by, or counts as, ‘science’. As a working definition, we can say, albeit in a rather circular way, that science encompasses whatever is rendered intelligible and significant by the category of ‘science’, recognising that its meaning is polysemic, community-dependent and contested (see Rouse, 1999). There are numerous cultures and types of scientific inquiry, each having their favoured methodologies and associated valorization and engagement of specific methods. As Fuller (1993) has noted, ‘there may be no properties common to all disciplines deemed scientific…If that is the case, then there is no ahistorical essence to science’. Habermas (1972), for example, distinguishes empirical-analytic, historical-hermeneutic and critical types of science, each of which is warranted by a distinctive methodology (see also Willmott, 1997). The point to note is that both methodology and science are contested categories that comprise a diversity of practices gathered under their respective umbrellas.

Scientific communities may be demarcated by broadly shared value-standpoints, even if they are more frequently differentiated by reference to the ontological and epistemological assumptions of those standpoints. For example, one broad standpoint, or group of standpoints, frames the importance to methodology primarily in terms of its contribution to pursuing, or exhibiting ‘rigor’, as demonstrated by compliance with (epistemological) procedures that are deemed to render knowledge properly ‘scientific’. An alternative standpoint place greater importance on ‘relevance’ in terms of its (ontological) alignment with the “real world” and its claimed or measured impactfulness on that world. A third standpoint may strive to give equal importance to ‘rigor’ and ‘relevance’ in respect of, for example, its contribution to rigorous scholarship that is held to be practically germane. Variants of each of these standpoints can be found within diverse types or traditions of scientific inquiry.

It follows from this that the development and application of methodology is contingent upon whatever meaning is ascribed to the value – ‘rigor’ or ‘relevance’; ‘control’ or ‘mutual understanding’, for example – that it is intended to enable. What counts as ‘rigor’ or ‘relevance’ depends upon the traditions of research (e.g. ‘empirical-analytic’; ‘historical-hermeneutic’) that differ in their assumptions about ontology (reality) and epistemology (knowledge). So, if a ‘unity of science’ is supposed, where an ontological continuity between the natural and social worlds is assumed, then what is held to be ‘rigorous’ is substantially borrowed from the methodology attributed to the natural sciences. If, in contrast, ontological discontinuity is assumed, then an alternative methodology – historical-hermeneutic or critical - is forged, or adopted, that is considered to take more adequate account of a distinctive (already meaningful) ontology ascribed to the social world.

Here, I am assuming that the social world differs (ontologically) from the natural world by virtue of its reactivity as well as its relative openness. It is conceived to be open in the sense that human beings are exceptional in having a ‘relationship to their environment [that] is characterized by world-openness’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p 65, emphasis added). This ontology implies that ‘there is no human nature in the sense of a biologically fixed substratum determining the variability of socio-cultural formations…[human beings] construct their own nature...’(Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p 65,67) by rendering it meaningful; and in this process they/we acquire a capacity to predict and control natural and social environments as well as develop forms of mutual understanding of our condition. As ‘human nature’ is comparatively plastic, ‘humaness is moulded by socio-cultural formations and is relative to their numerous variations’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p 67). There is, in other words, a reactivity to the knowledge – whether it is scientific or not – that is produced as it can to ‘act back’, more or less intentionally, upon the sense-making and
world-construction of its producers and consumers. More specifically, this knowledge conditions their/our engagement in practices of prediction and control, developing mutual understanding and our critical reflection upon such capacities. In contrast to other natural phenomena, human beings are effectively ‘made’, by the knowledge that we create. This assumption is particularly significant for the social sciences because, as Giddens (1984, p. xxxv) notes, when comparing theories in the natural sciences with those in the social sciences, in the former, theories are not constitutive of the phenomena that they seek to explain whereas, in the social sciences, ‘theories help to constitute what they interpret or explicate’(1).

**Methodology and Critique**

The constitutive, ‘reactive’ or ‘performative’ capacity of social scientific knowledge is important, Giddens (1984) argues, for methodology and, more specifically, for the role of critique in the formation, engagement and application of methodology. He compares two kinds of methodological engagement with critique. The first presumes the possibility of establishing an authoritative methodology based upon a process of ‘internal critique’ (e.g. continuous refinement by social scientists) which is applied to produce an ‘external critique of lay beliefs that can be the basis of practical social intervention’ (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxv). This possibility – characterized by Giddens as the ‘revolatory model’ - is well established in the natural sciences; and when adopted in the social sciences, it supports a technocratic form of intervention based upon the presumption that “Science Knows Best”. ‘Scientific Method’ is considered to be the sole Method for producing and warranting objective, value-free knowledge, such that there is little impetus for reflection on methodology beyond the development, refinement and application of the Method.

The second kind of methodological engagement with critique arises from a more complex, interactive picture of the relationship between science and its subject matter. Especially but not exclusively with regard to the social sciences, researchers are obliged to rely upon the everyday meanings of lay concepts when (methodically) generating and communicating knowledge that aspires to be scientific. Shared by ‘social scientists and members of society is a significant and inescapable measure ‘mutual knowledge’, as Giddens (1984, p. 336), that enables researchers to ‘gain access to the “subject matter” of social science’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 336). This is important because in the ‘ordinary language’ that comprises ‘mutual knowledge’, facts and values are inextricably entangled: ‘evaluation and description are interwoven and interdependent’ (Putnam, 2002, p. 3). This understanding places in question the notion that ‘internal critique’ can produce a methodology, articulated as Scientific Method, that is value-neutral, rather than being seen, naively or cynically, to present a façade of neutrality that veils some unacknowledged value-ladeness. This entanglement of values and facts is, arguably, evident in, for example, how there are ‘practical (and political) consequences’ of social scientific knowledges ideas and findings. As noted earlier, they contribute to the constitution of its very subject matter(2), ‘regardless of whether or not the sociological observer or policy-maker decides that [the findings of social science] can be “applied” to a given practical issue’ (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxv).

If the logic of this argument is accepted, then a central question and issue becomes: how explicit or ‘up-front’ are the different methodologies, and the knowledge claims resulting from them, about the particular values that guide and constitute their practices? In this respect the tradition of critical social science is, at least in comparison to variants of relatively ‘uncritical’ social science (e.g. empirical-analytical and historical-hermeneutical traditions), open and reflective about its value stance. Methodologically, it distrusts and abandons the elusive quest for value-free revelation of “what is” – with respect, for example, to the identification of value-independent (empirical-analytic) regularities or (historical-hermeneutic) meanings. While prepared to incorporate forms of knowledge oriented to the improvement of prediction and control and to an enhancement of mutual understanding, critical science reframes and harnesses these types of knowledge to processes of emancipatory transformation.

‘Whereas empiricism potentially serves control, governance, planning and social engineering, and interpretativism (sic) the clarification of meaning and furthering of understanding, Critical Theory aims at enlightenment, emancipation and transformation, including self-transformation’ (Strydom, 2011, p. 9).

The methodological orientation of critical social science is towards critical reinterpretation of social realities in a way that takes account of the reactivity, or performativity of scientific knowledge (see above) with the aim of promoting emancipation, as contrasted with contributing to a naturalization of the present by promoting greater control of society or by enhancing mutual understanding without necessarily facilitating substantive (e.g. structural) transformative change. Practically, what this implies for critical social science is devising a methodology that, for example, problematizes the assumptions underpinning widely accepted, ‘commonsense’ definitions of problems and solutions to them as it seeks to ‘unearth the complex of social and cultural conditions making it possible’ (Strydom, 2011, p. 162), and thereby facilitate processes of emancipatory transformation.

**An Example of Critical Methodology**

A specific example of such methodology-in-action is Honneth’s (2004) inquiry into the phenomenon of inner emptiness and depression in modern society(3). Here I follow Strydom’s (2011) three-part framing of the methodological moments of critical theory:

(i) **problem disclosure and constitution**;
(ii) **diagnostic reconstructive explanatory critique**;

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(1) Giddens (1984, p. xxxv).

(2) Honneth (2004).

(3) Strydom (2011).
Honneth’s analysis of the contemporary pathology of self-realization, resulting in emptiness, etc., is situated within this framework (see Strydom, 2011). It will be recalled that methodology is being conceived in this essay as the articulation of processes that support and guide scientific inquiry (see earlier). In the present case, the processes comprise the three phases identified by Strydom and listed above. In broad outline, the purpose of methodology in critical social science is to facilitate a ‘radical re-orientation’ (e.g. of everyday theory and practice of self-realization) ‘by problematizing the background assumptions of the prevailing consensus and thus to convince those concerned of the questionable status of the conventionally accepted mode of practice’ (Strydom, 2011, p. 214). In Honneth’s article ‘Organized self-realization: Some paradoxes of individualization’, what is ‘conventionally accepted’ is a conception of self-realization as a normative ideal whose contemporary pursuit results in its (pathological) negation, as manifest in inner emptiness and depression. Honneth’s study is an example of how a concern with ‘relevance’ - with regard, for example, to the phenomenon of emptiness and depression and its associated suffering - is combined with an effort to subject the phenomenon (of emptiness and depression) to rigorous examination. Recall that the meaning of rigour and relevance is framed within the tradition of critical social science in which inter alia ‘radical re-orientation’ is valorized. Rigor is not evaluated in terms of empirical-analytic criteria (e.g. validity, reliability) or historical-hermeneutic adequacy (e.g. confirmation of knowledge claims by research subjects) but, rather, in terms of what provides a compelling explanatory critique. And relevance is not cast in relation to generating knowledge that aspires to devise remedies for problems that are disruptive of, or damaging to, the status quo. Rather, its meaning is drawn from its capacity to problematize the pathological status quo and facilitate its radical transformation.

‘Problem disclosure and constitution’.

Honneth identifies a negative social state – of inner emptiness and depression - that invites diagnosis and remedial action. He conceives of it as a pathology of individualism related to a contradictory conception and practice of self-realization.

‘Diagnostic reconstruction and explanatory critique’.

Honneth associates contemporary manifestations of inner emptiness and depression with a form of individualism taking the form of an historically distinctive ideal of self-realization. It is distinguished, Honneth contends, by ‘the surrender of a fixed map of personal identity and, instead, an emphasis on grasping the possibilities for personal identity as something to probe and reveal through experimental self-discovery’ (Strydom, 2011, p. 209). Honneth’s conjecture is that since the 1980s established social structures and roles have gradually loosened their grip on ‘personal identity’. As a consequence, identity has become more fluid: there is increasing manifest appeal, as well as latent pressure resulting from expanding opportunities and incentives, to ‘make’ rather than ‘take’ pathways of self-realization - for example, by cultivating an original, authentic life-style (often customized by the advertising and fashion industry). In this context, the process of self-realization is conceived, or idealized, as a process of actively discovering and crafting, rather than receiving and presenting, one’s unique character or ‘personality’. However, the aspiration of self-realization is practically defined and channelled by institutional demands to become flexible and personally self-sufficient; to become an entrepreneur of the self; and to become an avid life-style consumer. As a medium and outcome of this ostensibly liberating and creative process, wider social obligations and provisions (e.g. social security, employment pro,tections) are progressively discredited, dissolved or weakened (see also Honneth, 2014 and Strydom, 2013). To be clear, Honneth does not psychologise growing feelings of emptiness and depression. Rather, he attributes them to wider forces of restructuring, de-regulation and de-institutionalization (e.g. coincident with the rise of neoliberalism) in which the new individualism is promoted and harnessed as a productive force.

In this way, Honneth offers a diagnosis of the phenomenon of interest and provides an explanatory critique of its formation. He contends that institutional processes of restructuring, etc. have captured, colonized and hollowed out the normative ideal of self-realization such that it has become ‘an emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper’ (Honneth, 2004, p. 474 cited by Strydom, 2011, p. 213). The ‘personal’ is methodologically connected by Honneth to the ‘political’ (Hanisch, 1970) as personal troubles are related to public issues (Mills, 1959). Honneth’s analysis identifies and interrogates the deformation of self-realization by comparing it to a counterfactual ideal where its fulfilment is less compromised. And he attributes this disconnect to a range of social mechanisms that block or impede processes of self-realization. But, conversely, the needless suffering and frustration associated with such deformation is seen to hold out the promise of questioning, challenging and undoing its perverse operation and consequences.

‘Scientific-practical validation and practical application’.

This is the phase in which the conjectures contained in Honneth’s ‘Organized self-realization’ are subjected to scrutiny by his peers and ultimately by the public. Strydom (2011, p. 213) suggests that the very title of Honneth’s essay combines two terms – ‘organized’ and ‘self-realization’ that produce a ‘chiasmus signaling precisely the paradoxical process of reversal and inversion that his analysis seeks to
diagnose, explain and criticise’. Honneth presumes that addressees of his analysis have some personal familiarity with the pathological condition that he examines; and that this familiarity enables them to appreciate the insights of his diagnosis and the plausibility of his explanation, and so they provide a credible and compelling basis for engaging in processes of personal and social transformation that incorporate critical insights that can be translated into everyday practices. In this way, the methodology of critical social science is seen to be, and to become, integral to the praxis of socio-cultural formation through which the emancipatory reconstruction of our own nature is enabled.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, the question of why methodology is important has been addressed by recognizing that its content and significance is contingent upon particular traditions of scientific inquiry. Methodology, it has been suggested, is the medium through which particular methods are rendered intelligible and engaged within distinctive research traditions. Methodologies have been differentiated in terms of their emphasis on ‘rigor’ and/or ‘relevance’ and by reference to their intended contribution to prediction and control, mutual understanding or emancipatory transformation. Methodology framed by the latter intent was then illustrated by reference to Honneth’s analysis of increased feelings of emptiness and depression in contemporary advanced capitalist societies.

NOTES

(1) This position requires some qualification in the light of how the application of natural science theories has had an impact on the natural world, notably in changing the climate and the ramifications for natural phenomena (e.g. Species extinction) associated with such change.

(2) One need only think of the influence of Machiavelli and Marx, or of Keynes and Friedman, to appreciate how concepts and world-views of social scientists come to shape the worlds that they/ we seek to understand and/or change.

(3) Some segments of the ‘Hikikomori’ in Japan may be included (see Furlong, 2008).

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