

Cultural Variables and the Problematic of Method in Human Sciences

المتغيرات الثقافية وإشكالية المنهج في العلوم الإنسانية

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Abstract:

Objectivity and scientific accuracy are achieved the more the scientific method is independent of the subject being studied, and this is confirmed by the exact experimental sciences. As for the humanities, the separation between the two parties seems difficult. Is it possible to establish more precise and objective methods that do not subject to the conditions imposed by the human phenomenon within a specific cultural context? This article presents an attempt to answer this question taking into account that cultural variables, especially those related to scientific achievements, have an effective impact on shaping the axioms and principles of the method in humanities and help consequently in formulating the results. This article is based on an inductive approach that deals with a set of human sciences as samples for study, such as economics, history, psychology, sociology, and political sciences. The results can be summarized in the fact that scientific method, in the field of human sciences, is not independent, but rather subject to cultural factors and perceptions specific to a certain historical period. As a result, methods remain variable, relative, and subject to revision. And they are either functional or not, according to what is proved by epistemological analysis. In all cases, they are constantly capable of providing a deeper understanding of human life.

Keywords: Method; Human Sciences; Epistemology; Culture; Science.

ملخص:

تتحقق الموضوعية والحياد العلمي كلما كان المنهج العلمي أكثر استقلالا عن الموضوع المدروس وهذا ما تؤكد العلوم التجريبية الدقيقة. أما في العلوم الإنسانية فإن الفاصل بين الطرفين يبدو صعبا، فهل يمكن إقامة مناهج أكثر دقة وموضوعية بعيدا عن شروط تفرضها الظاهرة الإنسانية ضمن سياق ثقافي محدد؟ يهدف هذا المقال إلى محاولة الإجابة عن هذا الإشكال بناء على موقف مفاده أن المتغيرات الثقافية لاسيما تلك المرتبطة بالإنجازات العلمية تؤثر بشكل فاعل في تشكيل مسلمات ومبادئ المنهج في العلوم الإنسانية وبالتالي في صياغة النتائج. يعتمد هذا المقال على منهج استقرائي في تناول جملة من العلوم الإنسانية كعينات للدراسة مثل الاقتصاد والتاريخ وعلم النفس وعلم الاجتماع والعلوم السياسية وتتلخص النتائج في أن المنهج العلمي في مجال العلوم الإنسانية ليس مستقلا بل خاضعا لعوامل ثقافية ولتصورات خاصة بمرحلة تاريخية معينة. ويتربط عن ذلك أن تظل المناهج متغيرة ونسبة وقابلة لإعادة المراجعة وهي إما أن تكون وظيفية أو لا تكون كذلك، حسب ما يثبت التحليل الایستيمولوجي. وفي كل الحالات فهي قادرة باستمرار على طرح فهم أعمق للحياة الإنسانية.

كلمات مفتاحية: المنهج؛ العلوم الإنسانية؛ الایستيمولوجيا؛ الثقافة؛ العلم.

Introduction:

The treated theme in this article is related to the role of cultural variables in establishing different research methods which are applied in human sciences. It focuses essentially on some of them; it means that it deals with certain fields such as economics, sociology, psychology, history and political science. The appropriate method for this study is induction, as we need to move from a scientific field to another, till we could formulate an accepted and significant result. The objectives lie in discovering the influence of cultural components in understanding and interpreting human phenomenon, especially scientific and philosophical factors. Furthermore, in determining the level of objectivity, scientific accuracy and the nature of method in studying human being.

Human sciences can be defined with regard to their subject of study, their methodology and the goal they tend to achieve. Accordingly, it can be said that they are represented in a set of studies that deal with human behaviour in its various aspects by adopting different research methods with the aim of discovering relationships that trace every human phenomenon back to its true causes. Due to the complexity of human phenomenon and its connection to consciousness, the problem of methodology has raised a radical controversy, and has remained the most important epistemological concern.

By adopting the same previous criteria in defining humanities, it is permissible to say that human sciences are the scientific study of human behaviour in its various aspects and manifestations based on scientific methods that try to take into account the conditions of scientific research such as objectivity, accuracy, clarity and consistency. Their aim lies in expanding the understanding of human world through a broad interdisciplinary approach.

Human sciences contain a wide range of fields especially psychology, sociology, history, anthropology, linguistics, economics and political science. The ultimate goal of these sciences goes beyond understanding or explaining phenomena to providing an overview of human life. The value of history, for instance, is not only to teach us what man has done but also what man is (Clarke, 1970, p. 2). It seems that this is not the task of science alone, but also of philosophy. Herein lies the close relation between science and philosophy on the one hand, and on the other it becomes clear that the deduced laws, which are considered as scientific to some extent, remain conditional on a certain social

context and a specific historical period, it means, on special cultural environment.

This aim can be achieved by carrying out comparative studies, mainly between the results founded by human sciences. This also includes employing results of a given scientific research in studying the phenomena in another field since they are not completely isolated from each other. Before we move on to illustrative examples that could represent significant arguments in proving our point of view, we first need to mention in brief some foundational concepts.

1. Foundational concepts:

It is obvious that in every field and at every level of scientific research, especially in epistemological field, a set of main concepts becomes relevant. It is necessary to present them in a procedural way, so that can be employed according to the subject being treated. In this step, we expose the main concepts as follows.

1.1. Scientific research:

It refers to organized, logical and precise methods that aim to reach results based on principles and arguments. According to Young, scientific research is the organized understanding that aims to discover new facts or clarify old facts and analyze the relationships between the latter and their causes. It also aims to develop new concepts and theories that facilitate the study of human behaviour (Young, 1977, p. 30).

1.2. Method:

the word 'Method' is derived from latin 'Metodus' which is taken from a Greek word 'Methodos. It has two linguistic roots; the first is 'Metha'(to or towards), and the second one is 'Hodos', which means a path or a way (Al-nakari 2018, pp. 187-188). So, what exactly does a method mean? As the etymology tells us, a road or a path (Odos) towards (meta): a set of reasonable and rational steps, allowing one to reach a goal (Russ, 2008, p. 24). Method can be seen as the correct order of mental operations that we perform in order to discover and prove the truth (Al-askari, 2007, p. 01).

1.3. Methodology:

The third root in 'methodology' compared with 'method' is 'logos' which means science. Therefore, methodology refers to the study or science that deals with postulates and rules employed by a discipline: a particular procedure or set of procedures used in deducing specific conclusions based on premises. It can be understood as the analysis of principles and procedures of inquiry in a particular field (Guarib, 2012, p. 105).

1.4. Technique:

It refers to the instrument that can be used in a given step when applying a research methodology. It also helps employ the method or approach in an appropriate manner. In any step of research, we can refer to a group of techniques or means such as the questionnaire, interview, and the statistical technique (Guarib, 2012, p. 106).

1.5. The scientific method:

Scientific method can be defined as the systematic analysis and organization of mental and experimental principles and processes that contribute to guiding scientific research. It is used as a methodological tool and is characterized by its reliance on analysis and criticism, commitment to accuracy and precision. It depends on logical rules such as necessity, and logical consistency. The scientific method adopts comprehensive or general character when dealing with rules that can be generalized to all sciences, and specific character when referring to differences between scientific fields, as epistemological rule imposes the necessity of employing different methods (Al-askari, 2007, p. 1).

2. Methods in Human Sciences:

The establishment of Method in the field of human sciences was linked to different cultural conditions related to Western societies during the past two centuries. These different methods, in their final form, were not isolated from the framework of cognitive and scientific transformations, especially in the field of physical sciences, despite the attempts of many scientists to establish methods that may respond to the specificities of human phenomena and help in studying human behaviour.

Many researchers reject the experimental scientific method and believe that certain difficulties or special complexities, which distinguish these phenomena, represent real or final epistemological obstacles. Consequently, they are what prevent their accurate and objective study and therefore, they do not allow for an appropriate interpretation which can lead to the formulation of scientific laws. In their view, this calls for the establishment of new methods that are completely different from the material sciences method. But does the method specific to human phenomena necessarily stop at the limits of these specificities? and if the latter vary from one individual to another or from one social environment to another, then what are the limits of that change and what are the factors or conditions that control it? To what extent will this prevent the establishment of a common method specific to human beings or different human societies? And does this mean the impossibility of reaching scientific laws specific to any human being? Are these methods, especially the more recent ones, suitable for studying our society in the present? Such inquiry is more for our society.

This problem can be investigated from multiple approaches related to the human sciences such as economics, sociology, psychology and political science. To give more clarification of the subject, we need examples of those approaches that are related to human sciences. This attempt consists in exposing some appropriate examples in a way that could help in deducing the relevant result. According to the hypothesis that those approaches came in response to a cultural transformation in which science represents the fundamental element. These transformations affect the way of understanding and interpreting human behaviour.

2.1. Economics:

As an illustration, we can mention the system of capitalist economics that adopted the principle of freedom in economic transactions since the last decade of eighteenth century. The main idea capitalists can be expressed as the following; it is not possible to control and organize both work and market. It is against natural laws to interfere in economical phenomena by imposing various regulations, but rather leave it to laws that operate naturally independent from human will, such as the law determining workers' wages and the law of supply and demand. This understanding of the economic phenomenon is linked to the

mechanical concept of nature, which requires the existence of absolute inevitability and natural laws independent from human will. And is also linked to the idea of freedom as a supreme human value of the Enlightenment era and as a slogan adopted by revolutions in European societies.

2.2. Sociology:

As another relevant example is the positivist approach in studying social phenomena which was seen as a reaction against political and social crises which were the result of employing metaphysical interpretations when studying social phenomena. The solution at that time, in positivist view, consists in transcending this type of interpretation. On the other hand, this approach reflects the results of the biological revolution, which constituted a decisive shift in the history of science, as the founders of the positivist approach were inspired by biological discoveries in formulating their approach. The most important, of these new realities, is that the vital functions of the cell are the same as the functions of the organ and the living organism.

Due to scientific discoveries, mainly in biology, emerged foundational concepts that form this approach: the individual is subject to the group system; his behaviour embodies the values of the group. According to Durkheim individual life does not exist outside social life. In other words, social fact is capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or: which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations (1895). Naming sociology as social physiology reflects the inspiration of the biological model to the extent that everything that applies to the biological phenomenon becomes applicable to the social phenomenon.

2.3. Psychology:

The same thing can be proved in another approach, such as the behavioural approach in psychology. The law of stimulus and response, considered as general law of nature, is based on the assumption that an individual can acquire certain behaviour through experience or training, regardless of his inclinations, abilities, talents, intellectual and social background, family or ethnic affiliation. The underlying principles of this approach could not be understood without taking into consideration cultural variables of american society during the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as truth became a subject to practice and work, success became practically the criterion of truth. This represents the common denominator that allowed the unification and integration of american cultures which have different origins. The american civil war, as a historical event, expressed the deep conflict between american cultures. Although these latter have different sources but they moved finally from diverse to a unified culture.

2.4. History:

If we choose another example from the field of history, we may find that modern schools of history such as the humanist, rationalist, romantic, positivist, historical, marxist, structuralist or Annales school, have developed new methods of research that reflect cultural transformations in Western societies. These transformations are linked to political, social, scientific, artistic, and technical variables. They touch on the most influential cultural components of a given era. For instance, the Annales School had two strategies, one is specific to the scientific status of history and the second strategy is methodological and related to historical specialization (Abdellaoui, 2009, pp. 58-59). One of the most important aspects of the program of this school is its opposition to the traditional historical method which was more related to the historical event and to what is apparent or explicit from historical facts. Le Goff Jacques (1988) summarizes the program of this school by talking about its opposition to political history as a history of events which hide behind it the truth of history. Furthermore, Annales School presented a radical critique to the idea of the historical event (Le Goff, 1988, p.40). The method applied by this school or what is known as comprehensive history method cannot be understood outside a specific cultural framework. The hidden aspect of phenomena has become more important than the visible side. Both in atomic physics, after the First World War, and in psychoanalysis the implicit became the most influential factor compared with the visible aspect. If we look carefully at new scientific discoveries in this period, and at the general perceptions imposed by scientific transformation of Western society, we will understand more clearly the background that shaped the viewpoint of the Annales School towards the historical method.

2.5. Political Science:

The field of political science represents one of the most important and influential fields in the contemporary life of Western societies. Although it is not easy to deal with political issues of a human dimension in isolated manner, so that each one is treated without consideration to any other political issue. But for methodological reasons some issues can be analyzed basing on research hypotheses that often require abbreviation and simplification. So, it is possible for most cases to deal with one aspect or to concentrate on certain variables. For this methodical reason, our choice in this context is related to the subject of political democracy as one of the most important political organizations for man. It is not surprising that the adoption of this form of political organization, especially after the collapse of dictatorial, totalitarian and royal regimes. As a perfect political system, it has reached the point to be the most appropriate and closest to achieve freedom and justice. But what about the idea of the majority and the legitimacy of rule based on the choice of a majority called an overwhelming majority, even if it exceeds the half by only one vote?

Although democracy is an old idea in the political field, for example in Greek thought, its practical success as a political system dates back to a modern period. This could be understood simply because the right of the majority is linked to modern materialistic concepts of life. It is due to what was presented by the mechanical interpretation of nature. As an example of that in the field of physics, and specifically in the field of kinematics, the balance that may exist between one force and another or between action and reaction will disappear as soon as one of the two forces becomes greater than the other. To simplify, a body pulled by a force of ($F_1=5\text{ N}$) will become in a state of equilibrium if it is pulled by a force equal in intensity to the first and opposite in direction. But the state of equilibrium will disappear as soon as one of the two forces increases or decreases (for instance, $F_2=5,1\text{N}$ or $F_3=4,9\text{ N}$). The same idea can be simplified with examples from the field of chemistry or biology. From this, the extent to which the idea of democracy is linked to the materialistic view of natural phenomena is confirmed. If we know the extent to which the theory of evolution influenced the mentality of Western society at a certain stage, we are sure that political behavior was not isolated from cultural data related to non-political fields. This means that freedom of expression, thought, demonstration, election, and everything related to political life was not studied with a completely

scientific and objective method. Rather, the research method is formed within a civilized framework and is affected by certain cultural variables.

The application of this political principle is based on the idea that the majority has the right at the expense of all minorities and that those who constitute the majority in parliament have the right to dispose of all matters such as political, economic and social issues. Therefore, the representation of minorities in different institutions and organizations is considered as a worthless matter. This principle of democracy takes its legitimacy from non-political fields and directs everything related to politics. This is a clear confirmation that the way of dealing with human phenomena seems to be subject to or governed by some assumptions that are not originally related to the field of study or the type of phenomenon being studied. As for the contradictions that may appear consists in difficulties which we may face when dealing with an approach that affects negatively the data of the study and leads us to contradictions. Furthermore, it hinders our understanding and interpretation of political phenomena. On the other hand, the contradiction appears clearly when we discover that formal sciences, such as mathematics and logic, do not provide any scientific evidence to prove that the majority is always right and it has the right to decide whatever seems to be true.

2.6. Common Characteristics:

The approaches applied in the field of human sciences share, in terms of form and not content, three basic points, which are as follows:

- The basic principles or starting points that establish the approach and frame the research process or the foundations on which the approach is based are closely related to the general cultural context in a given era. They express a profound and effective transformation or influence or a specific condition guiding scientific and philosophical thinking, which makes the study of the human phenomenon subject in some way to a certain path and provisions.
- The research method, which is represented in the processes and techniques when moving from the research starting points to results, and which represents the practical aspect of the approach itself or the stage in which the approach is employed.

- The intended goals or aims, which means that each approach has goals and purposes that may be declared explicitly or remain implicit, i.e. they may be declared from the beginning or in the appropriate stage of research. Whereas some of them stay implicit in all steps of research. By studying the different aspects of human life (psychological, economic, social, educational, etc.), human sciences seek ultimately to form an integrated view about the human being. That is, its ultimate goal revolves around the meaning of the human being, at least from a scientific perspective.

Conclusion:

The important results that can be deduced from this analysis are the following: Modern methods of studying human phenomena are the product of specific cultural conditions and variables. It means that a given method is related to a given society in a specific period, in other word it is not a perfect method that can be applied in all circumstances for all societies and at every time.

The results achieved by these approaches are relative and limited because they are conditional on certain variables. This also explains the difficulties faced by these sciences, as these difficulties were generally attributed to the subject of study without giving sufficient consideration to the method itself, which often constituted an obstacle to deeper understanding to the phenomenon being studied. They can be used relatively and to a limited extent when applied in cultural circles, and their use may sometimes lead to unexpected and unhelpful results, the greater the variance between societies in time and space. In other words, it is extremely difficult to generalize methodological rules from one cultural milieu to another. The principles and starting points on which a particular approach is based may completely conflict with the cultural principles of the society under study.

Furthermore, the ultimate aims or goals that we seek from applying a particular approach may not be confined to a limited scientific framework, but may go beyond that to a comprehensive interpretation of human life. If the approaches of human sciences in most cases take on the task of performing this role, they come into conflict with cultural components, especially religious and moral ones. Employing method for such purposes represents an overstepping of

its scientific role; the search for such comprehensive view of man may conflict with scientific principles or with epistemological rules of scientific method.

Therefore, it is more appropriate to emphasize the character of privacy and change that characterizes human phenomena and the need for our society to have a special scientific diagnosis at a specific stage practised by scientists and experts from this society, taking into account all the cultural specificities of our society. There is no harm in being guided by other studies, especially in procedural aspects. Hence, the importance of some approaches such as historical (monitoring the history of the development of a certain phenomenon within the framework of cultural specificities), comparative and statistical within certain limits that require scientific caution, not dazzle and blind dependence on the experiences of others and their methods of research. This requires certain conditions related first to the existence of active parties who firmly and strongly believe in the cultural values and lofty goals of our society and the availability of a political will that frames and manages an integrated scientific and civilizational project.

It is obvious that human sciences have encountered great difficulties from the first step, since then researchers interested in distinguishing its domain and studying the distinctive characteristics of their phenomena compared to the material phenomena (Sylvain Giroux & Ginette Tremblay, 2002, p.17). But the most serious difficulty was represented in the transfer of scientific concepts from the field of material sciences, which are concepts essentially linked to the method of those fields, this led to negative results that do not express the reality of human behaviour.

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