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Methodological, Ontological and Epistemological Relevance of Paradigms in Sociological Analysis and Research Development**¹Vitus Achu Amadi**
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ABSTRACT

Research paradigms are the basic belief systems or world views that guide the investigator not only in the choices of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways. Research generally is a process of finding out the answers to problems or the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Research methods and data form only part of the complex process of sociological research. In a research process the investigator is not only concerned with the appropriate methodology to be adopted in the consummation of the research, he also seeks the appropriate already existing theories or a set of theories to base the analysis of the research. It is these theories and their implied methodological approaches that constitute a research paradigm. The major import or primary focus of this paper, therefore, is to identify and discuss the relevance and purposes of paradigms in sociological research in relation with their methodological, ontological and epistemological implications. The study adopted the qualitative method of data collection and analysis, while the theory of knowledge formed its theoretical framework. From these analyses the following conclusions were reached: that as world views or belief systems, research paradigms enable the investigator in sociological research situate his work in its proper context; and that by knowing the specific research paradigms, the investigator will be able to determine, ab initio that it is a study in functionalism.

Introduction

Knowledge is an integrated process. Like many other processes, it occurs in related sections and stages. The reasons for this are that the universe within and around which human knowledge is circumscribed had many parts each demanding special attention. Consequently, we have such areas of knowledge as philosophy, science, literature, medicine, engineering, sociology, anthropology etc. That notwithstanding, the universe is not static, since various aspects of the universe are subject to change. As the changes occur overtime, our knowledge not only changes, but also accumulates more knowledge. Similarly, as different people specialize in and carry out different types of work, so do people branch out to specialize in and propagate different aspects of knowledge. This is possible through empirical research (Hamlyn, 1970; Spencer, 1981).

Generally, research is a process of finding out the answers to problems. It is conceived as the process of arriving at dependable solutions to the problems, through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It is also conceived as logical scientific thinking. It is consequent upon this that a study or any other human activity is not considered a research until it is undertaken or conducted under higher levels of rigorous, vigorous and scientific reasoning. Put differently, research is a process of seeking answers to hypothetical questions or problems using scientific methods of inquiry to produce valid information (Durkheim, 1938; Imogen, 1972; Spencer, 1981). As a scientific method of investigation, sociological research uses investigative methods, which are consistent with the basic procedures and operating conceptions of science. Although the various fields of science differ in their techniques, they all accept the same methodological principles which include the following approaches: careful observation, hypothesis formulation, experimentation, verification and theory formulation (Haralambos & Heald, 1984; Haralambos & Helborn, 2013). However, what matters most in any scientific endeavor is the method by which knowledge about any aspect of reality is acquired (Anikpo, 1986).

Research methods and data form only part of the complex process of sociological research. They cannot be separated from this process. Sociological investigation or research is based ultimately upon the researcher's assumptions about the nature of man and society. These assumptions guide his entire research operation from the selection of a problem for investigation to the analysis of the data and the

interpretation of the results. They influence the research methods employed and the type of data obtained. Methodology is, therefore, concerned with the entire process of sociological research and the logic and assumptions on which it is based (Adelola, 1986; Hess, 1988).

Before the advent of scientific methods, there were other methods of acquiring and advancing knowledge, such as philosophy, rationalism, sophistry, humanism, empiricism, pragmatism or radical empiricism, positivism, each occurring either as a critique or a refinement on the other (Onyewuenyi, 1993; Iroegbu, 1995). However, it is worthy of note that the truth or falsity of what we know (i.e., our knowledge), depends entirely on the methodological bases of such knowledge which also explains its ontological and epistemological origin or linkages (Davis, 1973; Fieldling, 2004).

In a research process, the investigator is not only concerned with the appropriate methodology to be adopted in the consummation of the research, he also seeks the appropriate already existing theories or set of theories to base the analysis of the research (Hamlyn, 1970; Davis, 1973). It is these theories and their implied methodological approaches that constitute a research paradigm (Zetherbery, 1965). Corroborating this view, Anikpo (1986: 10) argues that to predict something means to enter a possible conclusion to it by reference to facts and laws that are already known. It is this premise or assumption that leads scholars to justify the conceptualization of research paradigms as the basic belief systems or world views that guide the investigator not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways (Strauss, 1994).

The major import or primary focus of this paper, therefore, is to identify and discuss the relevance and purposes of competing paradigms that guide sociological research in relation with their methodological, ontological and epistemological implications.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the relevance and purposes of research paradigms in sociological analysis and research development?
2. Do research paradigms possess methodological, ontological and epistemological properties that guide sociological research fundamentally?

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following as its objectives:

1. To identify the relevance and purposes of research paradigms in sociological analysis and research development.
2. To establish that research paradigms possess methodological, ontological and epistemological properties that guide sociological research fundamentally.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative method which is descriptive in nature. It used secondary source of data collection. The data and information were described, explained and analyzed within the context of the problems under investigation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theory of knowledge otherwise known as epistemology as its theoretical framework. The theory of knowledge which was developed and expounded by Popper (1959) and Hamlyn (1970) is essentially concerned with the question about the status and extent of our knowledge of the world, of ourselves and other people, and the answers that may be given to them. It is the gamut of these issues that constitute or form part of that important branch of philosophy called epistemology or theory of knowledge.

The theory of knowledge is a set of defense works against skepticism of the very possibility of knowledge. Thus, the theory of knowledge is primarily a theory about what makes it possible. Epistemology, therefore, involves what is sometimes referred to as the search or inquiry for certainty as well as the truth and falsity of what we know. Put simply, the proper epistemological question is whether what we claim to know is true, and we try to find out the truth by examining and testing such assertions, beliefs, views, ideas, propositions, and assumptions, made through critical inquiry and research process.

As will be noted in this study, philosophy and science play complementary roles, and every problem has both scientific and philosophical components (i.e., ontological and epistemological components). Science derives from knowledge, while philosophy determines the end to which this knowledge is to serve in fostering the major goals of the social order. It helps us also to define and clarify the problems to be solved and the assumption under which the conclusions derived from science or scientific inquiries are true. Philosophy, therefore, is the highest form of thinking, but it must be backed up with empirical research which involves the

application of scientific methods for it to be authentic, reliable and generalizable. The theory of knowledge, therefore, provides more valid theoretical explanations and analysis of the subject matter of study.

Research Paradigms and their Relevance in Sociological Analysis and Research Development

Every academic discipline and or research process has a theoretical basis; otherwise knowledge is reduced to ordinary common sense. Reiterating the methodological, ontological and epistemological implications of a paradigm or a theoretical orientation in an empirical research, Anikpo (1986:11) contends that a research process (work) will be accused of being theoretically unfocused (i.e., eclectic) or methodologically weak, (i.e., unscientific) if it is not located within the framework(s) of already existing theory or paradigm or a set of theories or paradigms. Very often in a scientific endeavor, it is not necessarily, what one finds out that matters but how one does the finding (Anikpo, 1986; Ragin & Howard, 1992). This does not imply that the former is not very important, but rather, that in most cases to consummate a research process, a researcher is expected to locate or identify his work within the framework of already existing theories in order to justify the claim to have established a clear methodological direction through which the final theory is arrived at (Anikpo, 1986; Ragin & Howard, 1992).

In the social sciences, there exist a good number of well-known theories which offer plausible and reliable approaches or methods to the understanding, explanations and analyses of certain social realities and phenomena. Sociology as a social science parades a good number of these theories otherwise known as sociological theories, and sociologists employ them vividly in their attempts to study or investigate, explain, understand or analyze social realities and phenomena. (Ragin & Becker, 1992; Silverman, 1993; Ross, 2004). Corroborating this view, Haralmbos and Holborn (2013) define sociological theory as a set of ideas which provides an explanation for human society. Otherwise known as competing paradigms, sociological theories view things or the society from different perspectives, hence there appears to be no agreement among them as to which of them is all encompassing. These competing theories and their methodological approaches constitute a research paradigm or a set of paradigms (Haralmbos & Holborn, 2013). They include as it were : functionalism, structuralism both of which are called liberal- bourgeois paradigms; Marxian dialectics and historical materialism both of

which are known as Marxian conflict paradigm; symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology which are otherwise referred to as interactionist-interpretative paradigm or its strands; power paradigm; feminist paradigm; macro-micro analytical paradigm; positivism or positivist paradigm; social Darwinism etc (Babbie, 2007; Ritzer, 2008; Haralambos & Holborn, 2013).

Thompson (1982:9-10) observes that sociology is not one of the mutually agreed way of studying Society. There are a variety of different approaches within sociology which are based on different theories of society and different methods of investigation. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that sociologists are continually examining, re-examining, refining and re-refining their own approaches and their own assumptions and about what they study as well as how they study it. This makes the way in which different sociologists approach their work very important under the scrutiny of sociological enquiry or research. This is evidenced, is according to Thompson, by both the methodological approaches and the theoretical orientations used as the frameworks of analyses, explanations and clarifications of sociological phenomena, concepts, imputations, propositions and social realities in sociological research (Thompson, 1982; Haralmbos & Holborn, 2013).

The relevance and purposes of research paradigms in sociological analysis or research cannot be overemphasized, hence they have been defined as the basic belief systems or world views that guide the investigator (researcher) not only on choices of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways. (Davis, 1973; Fieldling 2004; Babbie, 2007; Ritzer, 2008). Otherwise known as theoretical orientations, research paradigms which are significant, inseparable and indispensable in sociological research and analysis, can also be defined as the frameworks of already existing theories and concepts. As has earlier been observed by Anikpo (1986), two major problems arise in the research process: one is theoretical and the other is methodological. Still according to Anikpo (1986), a research work/report be it term paper, seminar paper, conference paper, dissertation or thesis etc, will be adjudged eclectic (*i.e.*, theoretically unfocused) or unscientific (*i.e.*, methodologically weak), or put succinctly, lacking theoretical base or has no methodological direction, if it is not located within the framework of existing theories or paradigms or a set of theories or paradigms as the case may be.

Critics of sociology sometimes object to the emphasis which sociologists place on theory and

suggest it might be better to let the facts speak for themselves. But it is worthy to note, that there are no facts without theory as it is obvious also that facts do not speak for themselves either. Facts like we know, are the outcomes of research endeavor and are explained or predicted by laws. To predict something means to infer a possible conclusion to it by reference to facts and laws that are already known, both of which emanate/precipitate from theories, and there cannot be theories without research and vice versa (Jasso, 1988; Presser and Blair, 1994). At the level of prediction, a statement is regarded as a hypothesis which submits itself to scientific proof for validation. This further underscores the obvious relationship between theory and research. However, while some of the competing sociological paradigms as earlier enumerated overlap in both content and function, they differ in notions of pattern and approach, which describes their different methodological entities (Babbie, 2007). A classification of patterns describes the kinds of concepts social scientists and researchers use to explain social realities and phenomena and the forms monological explanations can take. On the other hand, approaches are attempts to develop strategies for directing the research activities of the social scientist (Ritzer, 2008).

Different social science researchers and authors have used different criteria to regroup these paradigms. Social science theories and their methodological implications have been conceptualized into two broad paradigmatic groups namely: those that emphasize order (*i.e.*, consensus) and those that emphasize disorder (*i.e.*, conflict) (Timasheff, 1967). Another distinction may be those that emphasize system and those that emphasize action (Parsons, 1952; 1964; Thompson, 1982). Every paradigm, notwithstanding how broad based, contains a set of theories otherwise referred to by some authors as meta-theories as well as specific methodological parameters whose internal linkages legitimize their unity under one paradigm (Gouldner, 1971; Babbie, 2007). Also intra-paradigm variations may involve little or no change in content but with slight shift in methodology (Okeibunor and Anugwom, 2005). These regroupings must have arisen or been based on the similarity of assumptions about the ontological and epistemological status of social science and their different frames of reference with regard to the nature of society which is, of course, perceived in two broad categories: “consensus or conflict”, “order or disorder”. Quoting Burrell and Morgan, Anikpo (1986) explains that intra-paradigmatic variations is like in music where sound vibrations are distinguished as highlife, disco,

reggae, jazz etc. yet each one contains as much variation as there are artists. He goes further by contending that the term paradigm is intended to emphasize the commonality of perspectives which binds the work of a group of theorists together in such a way that they can be usefully regarded as approaching social theory within the bounds of the same problematic.

Using the competing paradigms in sociological theory as an example, the liberal-bourgeois paradigm which include structuralism, functionalism, systems theory or analysis, although may be treated as separate paradigms without prejudice to the cross linkages between them as rival intellectual traditions or schools of thought, they belong to the same paradigmatic group 'known as those that emphasize order, consensus and system'. Conversely, the Marxian conflict or radical paradigms which include the theory of dialectics or dialectical materialism, historical materialism, alienation theory and the other strands of radical perspective according to Afansyer (1963), Aja (1997 and 1998), are not only generally grouped and referred to as "those that emphasize disorder or conflict", but also within the same paradigmatic perspective (Abrahamsen, 2001; Ritzer, 2008; Haralmbos & Holborn, 2013).

Another paradigmatic distinction occurs in the interactionist- interpretative paradigms which include: symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, phenomenology and ethnomethodology which belong to the group of thoughts known as action theory simply because of the commonality of their attributes and perspectives (Garfinkel, 1967). The grouping together of the various paradigms, irrespective of the fact that they are rival intellectual traditions or schools of thought, explains their ontological origin, (*i.e.*, their common philosophical root) as well as their epistemological sources and relevance (Zetherbery, 1965; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1971). The divergence into specific paradigms reflects the multiplicity and historical development of human scientific knowledge. It also reflects the intellectual differences associated with epistemology, ontology and methodology of science as a branch of knowledge. To further illustrate this implication, Scriven (1972: 71) contends that when an issue is under conceptual debate and hence unresolved, it is regarded as philosophy. When on the other hand, a sub-topic in philosophy is cleared of most of its conceptual ambiguities and is settled, it is given a new name science. Thus, philosophy is the mother of sciences. This implies that knowledge begins with philosophy and metamorphosizes into science through the application of scientific method

to resolve its ambiguities. Put succinctly, philosophy is the mother of all knowledge (*i.e.*, the highest thinking), but it must be backed up with empirical research using scientific methods for it to be authentic, reliable and generalizable. In other words, the growth and development of knowledge started at the level of philosophy and ends at the level of science, while epistemology embraces both ontology and methodology (Hamlyn, 1970; Iroegbu, 1995).

The growth, development and advancement of knowledge begin at the level of philosophy, *i.e.*, conceptualization, formulation and proposition of ideas which are ambiguous, unsettled, unresolved. These ideas are thus, subjected to rigorous and vigorous processes of research and analysis through the application of scientific methods of careful observation, hypothesis formulation, experimentation, verification or hypothesis testing, analysis and theory formulation in order to clear most of the ambiguities and resolve or settle most of the doubts surrounding these concepts, imputations, suppositions, hypotheses, assumptions and propositions (Onyewuenyi, 1993; Iroegbu, 1995). This, in other words, is known as scientific research. The final outcome is the formulation of new theories and laws. It is the application of these scientific methods that legitimizes the procedure and the outcome as objective, (*i.e.*, scientific). Science is, therefore, the application of scientific methodology to understand the social realities, phenomena and fundamental social laws that guide a research process (Scriven, 1972; Sill, 1972; Hess *et al*, 1988; Babbie, 2007).

According to Anikpo (1986), science is the generation and organization of knowledge on the basis of explanatory principles which ultimately end themselves to testing. The implication of this statement/definition is that scientific knowledge is gathered systematically and in accordance with specific procedural imperatives, which also upholds the empirical elements in scientific research. It is also necessary to re-emphasize here that science is not necessarily the subject matter of any particular discipline but rather the procedure or method applied in studying the subject matter. It is the totality of these processes that not only knowledge, but scientific knowledge is developed, acquired and advanced. This also explains the inherent and undisputable correlation-ship of ontology, methodology and epistemology (as the theory of knowledge).

Fundamental Purposes of Research Paradigms in Sociological Analysis and Development *vis-à-vis* their Methodological, Ontological and Epistemological Implications.

Babbie (2007); Ritzer(2008); Haralambos and Holborn (2013), argue that research paradigms perform some fundamental useful purposes in sociological research or analysis. The foremost purpose is to apply a provisional codified guide for adequate and fruitful analysis of social phenomena and concepts. This objective evidently implies that research paradigms contain a set of concepts with which sociologists or social researchers must operate in order to carry through an adequate analysis of social systems and subsystems, phenomena and concepts. As a corollary, they are used every now and then as a guide for the critical study of existing analysis in sociology. They are, therefore, thus, intended as a guide to the formulation of researches in sociology and as an aid in locating the distinctive contributions and deficiencies of earlier researches.

Research paradigms are intended to lead directly to the postulation and often tacit assumptions underlying sociological analysis. As we found in the earlier works of many sociologists, some of these assumptions are of central importance, others insignificant and dispensable and yet others dubious and even misleading, though. Also they seek to sensitize the sociologists not only to the narrow scientific implications of various types of sociological analysis and research, but also to the political and sometimes ideological implications of human society. The points at which a given research paradigm analyzes the society presupposes an implicit political outlook, and the points at which it has bearing on social engineering and concerns which find an integral place in sociological theory (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969).

More so, according to Emerson et al (1998); Babbie(2007); Ritzer (2008), research paradigms provide frameworks for critical examination and analysis as well as explanations of the vocabularies, postulates, concepts and ideological imputations now current in the field of sociology. For instance, the paradigm put forward by Merton which provides a framework for functional analysis in sociology was based on a synthesis or critical analysis of the paradigms of other functionalists. Sociological analysis is mainly and basically an intellectual process of defining, explaining clarifying social phenomena and problems. This, put simply, implies the comprehension of areas that are in any way related to social system. This means that no area will be ignored in sociological analysis without any

damage to the social process or social development.

As an intellectual process, sociological analysis is of necessity a multi-disciplinary process and an aspect of the study in sociology. The social analyst or researcher must build a bridge across all disciplines in order to get ideas to understand, interpret and analyze social issues and problems. For instance, the social analyst must be acquainted with the psychology of a people and their cultural inclinations before reaching a conclusion on their social behaviors. It is neither scientific nor analytic to transplant causes of events from one social system to another. This will be regarded as a one dimensional approach and it is socially discouraged in sociological analysis (Emerson et al,1998; Babbie 2007, Ritzer 2008).

A one dimensional approach to sociology or social life cannot adequately cope with the role of explaining in detail the complicated system of social life. Therefore, to be able to explain social phenomena, the social analyst must adopt a wide range of concepts, methods, variables, approaches, models, theories and theoretical orientations otherwise known as paradigms or paradigmatic perspectives, etc, which are available. This is because sociological analysis or sociology itself is not yet a finally evolved field of study/discipline. It is pertinent to note that some theories which purport to explain social issues or phenomena and supply the foundation for constructing accredited social system all over the globe(East, West, North, or South) can be relied upon but they are neither final nor conclusive for they can be subjected to rigorous and vigorous scientific tests or social researches (Babbie, 2007; Ritzer, 2008).

However, considering the scope of sociology, it is difficult and almost incomprehensible to talk of sociological analysis. This is because there is a level of analysis (micro and macro) involved in the study of sociology or in sociological analysis. At the macro level of analysis, sociology as a discipline is so volatile that the proper object and understanding of the subject matter is froth with complexities and ambiguities. The social system in which sociology thrives undergoes such rapid changes that by the time one event or phenomenon had been properly understood, explained or conceptualized, another happens which renders the first invalid (Chafetz, 1978; Neuman, 1998; Howard, 2000).

Sociological analysis and research involve understanding of the individual and group actions as well as actors, because the social system is made up of individuals and groups who are so fiscal and unpredictable that they are not amenable to scientific

control and observation and since sociology involves the projections of human behavior at the larger society, an analysis of sociological phenomena must necessarily unravel human activities, motivations and expectations. But this, of course, is not very easy to accomplish except with a spectra of theories, paradigms and concepts (Turner, 1989; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Ritzer, 2008).

Nevertheless, sociological analysis is concerned with how sociologists and social scientists the world over have conceptualized, explained, interpreted, comprehended and analyzed social life. It covers early modern, modern and contemporary explanations of the origin of human society, as well as total and partial explanations of social life, social phenomena and the social system at large such as the social fabrics of political life (political sociology), analysis of bureaucracy and human organizations, systems analysis, structural/functional analysis, games theory Marxian social theory and analysis, power relations theory and analysis, interactionist/interpretative theory and analysis, social exchange theory and analysis, industrial and labour relations theory and analysis among many others. It is these theoretical orientations, which provide both the frameworks and the methodological guides for analysis of social phenomena in sociological research that are referred to as research paradigms.

In conceptualizing a research one must think about the most appropriate paradigms to articulate one's analysis. Paradigms which are the combinations of the theoretical and methodological guides to any research especially in the interpretation and analysis of data ordinarily refer to "patterns" or "models" applied in the design of a research. In sociology, for example, there are a good number of competing paradigms that guide and provide the theoretical frames or act as frameworks for the analysis of sociological research.

It is pertinent to observe that while some of these competing sociological paradigms overlap in both content and function, they differ in notions of pattern and approach which best describes their different methodological entities, their different ontological and epistemological relevance and purposes (Gouldner, 1971; Davis 1973; Fieldling, 2004) A classification of patterns describes the kinds of concepts social scientist use to explain social realities and phenomena and the forms monological explanations can take. On the other hand, approaches are attempts to develop strategies (methods) for process of interaction such that where positivists emphasize facts and cause-effect relationships, interactionists emphasize insight and

understanding (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969; Blumer, 1969; Gouldner, 1971; Wash, 1972; Babbie, 2007).

Similarly, since it is not possible to get inside the heads of actors, the discovery of meanings must be based on interpretation and intuition. For this simple reason, therefore, objective measurement emphasized by positivists is not possible and the exactitude of the natural sciences cannot be duplicated in the social sciences or in the study of human behavior. Also since meanings are constantly negotiated in ongoing interaction processes, it is not possible to establish simple cause and effect relationships. Thus, some sociologists seriously contend that sociology is limited to an interpretation of social action, a simple fact that makes phenomenological approaches to sometimes be referred to as interpretative sociology or paradigm (Simmel, 1950; Timasheff, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Steward, 1981).

Synoptically, from phenomenological perspective, therefore, man does not merely react and respond to an external society; he is not just acted upon, either rather he acts; and in his interactions with others he creates his own meanings and constructs his own realities and, therefore, desires his own actions. Hence the phenomenological paradigm is also referred to as an action theory (Simmel, 1950; Parsons, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967; Atkinson, 1988). This extols its philosophical components.

Conclusion

From these analyses the following conclusions were reached: that as world views or belief systems, research paradigms enable the investigator in sociological research situate his work in its proper context; that by knowing the specific research paradigms, the investigator will be able to determine, ab initio that it is a study in functionalism, Marxism or Marxian dialectics etc which makes it easy for the entire research process; that philosophy and science play complementary roles in a research endeavor; that every problem has both scientific and philosophical components; and that as frameworks of existing theories, research paradigms basically possess methodological, ontological and epistemological properties which are fundamentally relevant and useful in sociological analysis and research development.

Recommendations

- Sociological researchers /investigators should locate their researches within the frameworks of an existing theory or a group of theories which makes it easier for them as to the right choice of methods to adopt in the

prosecution of the entire research process.

- Researchers should also be conscious of the fact that empirical knowledge is developed, acquired and advanced through the application of research paradigms in a research process.
- It should further be noted that philosophy and science play complementary roles, and that every problem has both scientific and philosophical components.

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