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**Methodology in Sociology of Religion**  
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**Part One: Methodological Issues of Social Science**

**\*A warning against using introductory textbooks on methods as dogma which prescribe a ritual practice. Textbooks do not show how innovative research is actually performed; they tell students to read research reports and to perform simple exercises.**

**1. Social Research is based on accumulating, evaluating and systematizing knowledge.**

\*Textbooks typically assume that projects begin with an insufficient or contradictory prior knowledge. Especially textbooks on qualitative methods assume that former cases can be ignored. However, all human knowledge is historically embedded and expressed by language. Furthermore, each new case is studied by im- or explicit comparisons. A case can be unique in its combination of characteristics, but some characteristic are shared with other cases.

\*A new project needs to evaluate the relevance and validity of prior knowledge about the problem. This includes laws, statistics, historical sources, media presentations, and of course former research reports. Thereby we can clarify the context and historical background, and we can specify whether some materials should be re-analysed and whether new information is needed.

\*One task for the final analysis is to relate the new findings to the a-priori-knowledge – not only as tests of hypotheses but as an effort to establish a consistent and adequate interpretation of our assembled knowledge about all relevant aspects of the subject.

## **2. The research design should not be deduced from epistemology or ontology.**

\*The philosophical positions are not dogmatic beliefs which demarcate membership of an esoteric scientific priesthood; they are tentative arguments which are subject to rational discourse.

\*Philosophy of science can form a backing for a methodological warrant which can join the data with a conclusion. This presumes that the backing is generally accepted.

\*Logical Empiricism forwarded objectivistic criteria of science which were impossibly narrow. Anti-positivism has established an alternative set of subject-focused criteria which were equally dogmatic. Post-modernism has expelled all criteria.

\*Philosophy of science is a foundation for a collective intellectual discourse; not for forming sects of co-believers. The foundation of social research must be intersubjective consensus. It can neither be subjective belief nor objective proof.

\*Recent philosophy of science aims to move beyond the objective/subjective impasse, such as neopragmatism (Joas) or critical realism (Harre, Bhaskar).

\*This aim can also be detected in social science with the dialectical theories of Habermas, Giddens, Bourdieu, or Archer. Such approaches allow for combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

### **3. Qualitative versus quantitative methods.**

\*Quantitative methods are based on measuring standardised variables, in search of regular patterns of co-variation. Qualitative methods are based on interpretations of contextual expressions (texts) in search of meaningful patterns of ideas.

\*Qualitative methods seem to have a potential for internal validity, by enabling to identify processes, while quantitative methods seem to have a potential for external validity, by establishing representativity. However, external validity includes expanding the thematic scope of an investigation beyond the simple indicators utilised. The conclusion should clarify who and what the claim refers to – beyond the empirical material.

## **Understanding and explaining.**

\*Max Weber's method is not contained by 'verstehen' – especially not if this is understood as a psychological empathy. Weber stressed that social research calls for both an analytical understanding and a causal explanation of social events.

\*Understanding as a method – and as an ideal. Understanding as an analytical tool versus human empathy. Emic-etic as a false dualism. The research process as emication-etication.

\*Double hermeneutics (Giddens): understanding how people understand. Can you understand what people do not realize themselves?

\*Explanation refer to several causal factors: the motive for the process, the structural form of the process, the conditions of the process, the mechanism which triggers the process.

#### **4. The split between quantitative and qualitative methods is misleading.**

\*The qualitative/quantitative split refers to a set of dualisms: qualitative/quantitative data; qualitative/quantitative analysis; inductivism/deductivism; subjectivism/objectivism; hermeneutics&phenomenology/positivistic behavioralism. These dualisms represent simplifications of each dimension and a conflation of all the dimensions.

\*Qualitative methods do not form an assembled paradigm; they refer to many very different methodologies based on different assumptions.

\*Quantitative methods are not logically tied with Positivism. They can be pursued on basis of pragmatism, critical realism and even double hermeneutics.

\*As pointed out by Bryman: The split between quantitative and qualitative methods is not based on epistemological premises.

## **5. The Methodological Critiques Point to Insufficiency rather than Invalidity.**

\*Various methodologies are involved in a stone-scissor-paper game, where each position is rejected in turn by another position which is then subject to a further criticism.

\*Quantitative methods are criticized for being superficial and mechanistic. Qualitative methods are criticized for being subject-focused and in-transferable. Such criticisms do not render these methods irrelevant. They rather point to their insufficiency. This critique can be answered by combining methods.

## **6. Combined Methods Provide Supplementary Information.**

\*The text-book methods are typically positional. They focus either on individual agencies (personal attitudes, in-depth interviews) or on macro-structures. Sociological theories generally refer to relations and this calls for appropriate relational methods.

\*We need to criss-cross between macro- and micro-levels of analysis in order to avoid the ecological fallacy. We also need this in order to demonstrate processes of either social emergence from massed individual actions or structural determination on dependent individuals.

\*If we are to understand motives, identify conditions, and both operative and latent mechanisms of change, we need to combine several methods.

\*It is not sufficient to regard empirically occurring patterns. In order to reveal latent causal mechanisms, we also need to identify counterfactual or non-occurring events. For practical purposes, it is just as important when a theoretically possible outcome has not happened, than to seek regular patterns of events. The identification of non-occurring events depends on a theory which can give reasons for expecting an outcome under certain conditions.

\*When the issue is multidimensional, several methods are probably needed.



## **8. Validation by Combined Methods.**

\*Validity does not only refer to validating a 'measurement'. Basically, validity refers providing an empirically based claim with a warrant. Therefore, the issue of validity is not affiliated with Positivism or empiricism.

\*Validation is stronger if it rests on convergent results based on different methods. (triangulation) Thereby, the data are supported by several warrants rather than one. (Riis)

\*The usage of simple indicators in quantified analyses call for qualitative validation; and the usage of correlations in cross-sectional studies call for analyses of associations and processes.

\*Generalization from qualitative case-studies call for comparative studies (Ragin) or quantitative representative surveys.

## **Part Two: Special Methodological Issues of Sociology of Religion.**

**\*A warning to reflect on the correspondance between teory and method, and reflection on whether religion raises special methodological challenges.**

### **1. Definitions of religion and their methodological consequences.**

\*The core concepts point to different operationalizations: *Religion as* a world view, a functioning institution, an ideology, rational preference, participation in a ritual drama, a moral system, a charismatic affiliation.

\*Religion is also situated at an analytical level: society, organization, individual. Individually based methods – such as interviews, surveys - can not alone illustrate social relations, such as interaction or structures.

\*Theory and method must correspond if data shall point to a theoretical conclusion.

\*The indicators must be adequate for the theoretical definition. When few indicators are used, their scope must be checked first (ie. Church attendance) When many broad indicators are used, their dimensionality must be checked out (ie. Associations with 'religion' in open interviews)

## **2. Recognizing the blind spots of analysis.**

\*The importance of recognizing what is left out of the empirical analysis.

\*Tendency to focus on official religion and forget popular religion. Popular religiosity is democratized. Leaders and members are out of touch.

\*Blindness to popular religiosity in its many forms. Superstition. Religious symbols in mass media.

\*To dismiss multiform religiosity as confused.

\*To regard non-intellectual religions as superficial, not serious.

### **3. Revealing hidden religiosity.**

\*Naive to accept the surface manifestations.

\*Esoteric religion, even in the official one. Ecclesiologiae.

\*Hidden agendas by the elite, not revealed to the public.

\*Hypocrisy as a methodological challenge.

\*Unreflected religiosity: vicarious beliefs and emotive religiosity.

\*Unrecognized religiosity: phenomena formally defined as religious may not be interpreted as such by the person.

#### **4. The Challenge of Understanding Religion.**

\*Understanding religion: Methodological atheism as analytical distance and as critique (ideology, interests, consequences). Can a religious 'tone-deaf' person (Weber) understand religious people?

\*Analytical understanding of religious extreme acts – suicide, sacrifice, terrorism – and of the elite. The difficulty of understanding blurred motives and the masses.

\*Sociology of religion as church marketing. Lack of analytical distance. Blindness to non-formal religiosity.

\*Why is general sociology tone-deaf to religion? Secularization as a social process, resulting from a policy of secularism – and secularization as a social discourse, eliminating religion as irrelevant.