Perspectives on Human Nature and Implications for Research in the Behavioural Sciences

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Abstract

This paper examined the perspectives of human behaviour as a precursor to determine the methodological preference for inquiry into the knowledge of its complex and intricate nature. The paper identified some fundamental taxonomies of action, expressed in human action, social action, purposive action, environmentally constrained action, and emergent process action. These constitute perspectives on action that are broadly categorized into prospective and retrospective perspectives on action. The prospective view holds that meaning of action is constructed and known before the action, while the retrospective perspective presupposes that meaning of action can only be constructed and known after the action. However, the bipolar views tend to elicit different methodologies from opposing intellectual domains. The paper contended that for the sake of robust social knowledge, mixed methods defined in methodological pluralism should be adopted in inquiry related to the behavioural sciences.

1. Introduction

The unending quest for knowledge of human beings is more complex, dynamic and demanding on their behaviours, rather than on their physiological nature. This tends to be so because, whereas the latter dwells on givens, that are constants in the human biology, the former tends to be individual and situation specific, requiring more than general knowledge on the characteristics of the human body (Pfeffer, 1982; and Horton, Leslie & Larson, 1985). The human behaviour is highly complex, dynamic and intricate, making understanding of it difficult in all ramifications of his psycho—social existence. This difficulty arose from the fact that man is a minding animal, and with his mind, he may be very physically close, yet he is distant in millions of miles away. Thus, the nature of man is intricate and complex. He has the capacity to do unimaginable things with his mind, and can as well conceal same from another man. Thus, the nature of his mind makes it difficult to obtain absolutes or water tight conclusions in the study of human behaviour,

This nature of his mind makes absolutes to be difficult to attain in the study of human behaviour. Thus, (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010) argued that behavioural sciences cannot be absolute as do biology, physics, chemistry or any of the other strict sciences. The mind of the man remains a "black-box" that only he can decode, with the observer only dwelling on what emanate as action. Thus, the bases of studying to understand, explain, predict or control human behaviour is in the realm of action. The mind develops from early formation, having a part that by default, man possesses innate and inherent emotional characteristics; while the other part remains empty, waiting to be written on, to contain rationality to enable him perform logical tasks (Ted & Ian, 2001; Lawson & Shen, 1998; Robbins, 2008), and (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2012).

This paper examines the perspectives on human nature, with particular reference to action, as the only visible signpost to make meanings of human behaviour. The paper expresses logical concerns on subjective and objective perspectives; voluntary and determinative perspectives; social and human action perspectives; and purposive, random and emergent perspectives. It also considered the implications of the several perspectives with respect to subjectivism, objectivism and methodological paradigm necessary for adequate inquiry (Blaikie, 1991). The paper thus, reviewed the epistemological considerations in the light of positivism and anti-positivism strands, and suggested methodological pluralism to combine the strengths in empiricism, interpretism, pragmatism and constructivism to generate valid and reliable knowledge on human behaviour in the world of walks. (Blaikie, 2001, and Bryman, 2001)

2. Perspectives on Human Nature

Human behaviour is the centre of inquiry in the social sciences. In spite methodological similarities of the sciences in general, behavioural sciences are at a distance from the natural sciences. This disparity exists because of the fluid and abstract nature of behavioural phenomena as against the "hard sciences" dealing with matter.

In the context of this thought, the human nature is considered with respect to what causes human behaviour (Robbins, 2018; and Charles, 2008). A bipolar view which presents opposing strands is rooted in one of the dimensions of objectivism and subjectivism, as philosophical intellectual traditional debate (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, Eketu & Aguwamba, 2014) and (Hay, 2002).

The objectivists' view is that human nature is deterministic. This view on human nature determinism holds that human behaviour is determined or constrained by the environment (Pfeffer, 1982; and Park, 2001), that man merely responds to environmental dictates to construct his behavior. This implies that the meaning of behaviour is tied to the predominant elements or the specific stimulus in the environment initiating the action.

On the other strand, in subjectivism, the tenet of human nature is argued to be shaped by the human capacity to volunteer his actions. This is human nature voluntarism, explained away that the teleologic or purposive nature of man is strengthened by his capacity to volunteer his actions (Asawo, 2006; Ndu, 2018; Waribugo, 2018, & Eketu, 2016). Implied in this contention is the strength of his mind to choose his actions according to his desired purposes that are presumed to be always predetermined.

3. Perspectives on Action

Action is the overt realm of behaviour, which is likened to the tip of an ice-berg. This suggests that what gives rise to action is larger, more complex, and equally in a high state of flux than action itself. Several perspectives have been proffered in contending the chemistry of human action (Pfeffer, 1982; and Berkeley, 2000). The first category of thought is that action may be human or social. Human action is any act done without the doer been conscious of an observer, and also done without the expectation of a reciprocal action (Pfeffer, 1982; and Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This represents action done in conscious or unconscious isolation. Contrary to human action is social action. An action is social, when it is conducted with the consciousness of any observer or with the expectation of reciprocal action (Archer, 1995; Pfeffer, 1982; and Berkeley, 2008). Social actions are reciprocal because they are consciously done to trigger another action or chain of actions from the observer. Thus, social actions are done to influence further actions or behavior in predetermined direction.

However, it is reported in Eketu (2016) that an understanding of the "philosophical argument in social science research requires a comprehensive explanation of the paradigms relating to social action, and what constitutes social action. This understanding and explanation are considered necessary because, the focus of social inquiry is the social action that may evince the convention of social institutions. Social action is distinguished from human action in the sense that the former is carried out with the subjective awareness of a spectator". Weber (1964) argued that an action is social, insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by acting, it takes account of the behaviour of others.

However, within the contentions on the construction and interpretation of meaning, on social action, Pfeffer (1982) reported that three perspectives are dominantly evoked. These are: action seen as purposive, which is intended, rational and goal directed. This represents a prospective perspective on action; there is also, externally constrained or situationally determined, with meaning drawn from the environmental context within which the action occurred; the third dimension is seen as somewhat more random and dependent on an emergent, unfolding process, with meaning emerging correspondingly from unfolding process. Rationality in the first perspective, involving prospective and purposive behaviour, is constructed before the action, as it is intended. In the second perspective, involving externally constraints perspective on action, rationality is constructed after the action, as meaning is interpreted from the environmental circumstances permitting or constraining the action. In the third perspective involving the almost random, emergent, process perspective on action, rationality as meaning is constructed during and after the action, as meaning of action is derived from the emerging processes.

Thus, as placed in this discourse, rationality in the second and third perspective is constructed after the facts, to make sense of behaviour that have already occurred. The variation of prospective (involving intended and constrained meaning) and retrospective perspective (involving emergent meaning) appears to broadly polarize social action on the basis of what Hortor, Leslie & Larson (1985); Pfeffer (1982); and Spicer (2004) described as action emerging from response to stimulus, and meaning of action emerging from social process without any response to stimulus, respectively. From this categorization, it implies that purposive intended action and environmentally constraints action are stimulus responses, while emergent almost random action is non-stimulus response oriented (Archer, 1995). The prospective perspective appears to dominate most theories of organization, and rooted in the philosophy of free will and conscious choice. The extensive implication of this thought is that every behaviour is calculated upon the values of its outcomes, as action is view as a

teleologic behaviour (Lawson & Shen, 2010; May, 2001; Putnam, 1990; and Park, 2001, and Mcshane & Von Glinow, 2010).

Thus, it is Pfeffer's (1982) view that, the dispositional theories of organizational behaviours arise from the perceived ability to construct individual's preference and disposition corresponding to his values, desires and intents by careful observation. Also, it tends to be clearer that, the implication of the external constraints perspective on action presupposes that behaviour results from the pattern of constraints, contingencies, or demands confronting the social entity or the individual that is acting (Westen, 1996). Pfeffer (1982) argues that, when cognition is considered by theorists in this constraint domain, the role of cognition is viewed as a mechanism for making sense of, or rationalizing behaviour that has already occurred. Thus, the external control or situation constraints perspective talks to the issue of retrospective rationality. This, suggests that the role of cognition in this sphere, therefore, rests on the ability to retrospectively link events and possibility of understanding social reactions from predicted environmental contingencies. However, concerning the almost random, emergent, process perspective on action, Pfeffer (1982) collaborate Kumar (2002) that, the sequential unfolding nature of activity in organization is stressed by decision process theories, but because participation in organization decision is both segmented and discontinuous, because preference develop and change overtime, and because the interpretation of the results of action, the meaning of history is often problematic, behaviour cannot be predicted *a priori* either by intention of individual actor or by conditions of environment. This view logically tends to focus on the perception that as people, problem and solution come together into organizational context, meaning of behaviour emerges from the context process that cannot be intended or environmentally predicted.

4. Implications for Research

The ultimate objective of research, particularly applied research, is to improve knowledge for the gainful understanding of man's complex universe, as he sought to solve problems (Asawo, 2006; Angen, 2000; Mayer, 2005, Berkeley, 2000; and Creswall, 2003 and Tasbakkori, & Teddie, 1998). In the social sciences, where the crux of research is human behaviour, the complexity of knowing is even more entangled with uncertainties that make knowledge of behaviour subjected to rapid obsolence, context dependant, and something less than a predictive science. The attendant consequences are the plethora of intellectual domains that are rooted in traditional intellectual dogmas. These domains tend to hold strictly their philosophies of knowledge of the social upon which they contend that meaning closer to the truth can be constructed. In this paper, we have restricted the discourse to objectivism and subjectivism as philosophical strands through which our thoughts are extended to possible methodologies that befit each perspective on action. This is partly so because, too many parties involved in participation to predict resulting actions can be specified and addressed or treated to relevant methods of inquiry.

Graziano & Raulin (1993) argued that the purpose of behaviour is to discover preference through experiencing various outcomes. On objectivism, the contention is that an objective social reality does exist in a concrete universe, independent of the human consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1999). This purported characteristic is the bedrock upon which the objectivists contend that social phenomena can be objectively studied with scientific precepts and precision (Eketu & Aguwamba,2014; Dana, 2010; and Polper, 1972). Considering this view, objectivism as a strand in the philosophy of knowledge in the social sciences bears: ontological realism, epistemological positivism, human nature determinism, and nomothetic methodology. The implication of dwelling in this philosophical domain is that empirical research can be conducted in social inquiries, where social phenomena can be observed, data collected and analyzed quantitatively, and the findings drawn, without the temptation of dwelling in the risk of biases (Graziano & Raulin, 1993; Seknran, 2003; Putnam, 1983; and Syvia & Eketu, 2016).

On subjectivism, the contention is that there is no social reality outside the consciousness of man. The social is a product of the human mind, thus, cannot be objectively studied (Marsh & Furlog, 2003; and Meyer, 1999). Progressing in this thought is through: ontological idealism; epistemological anti-positivism; human nature voluntarism; and ideographic methodology (Spicer, 2004 and Ted & Lan, 2001). The implication for further research is that social phenomena should be participatively observed, and qualitative data collected and analyzed, then the findings naturally drawn from interpretation. This later paradigm involves interpretism, and constructivism, through phenomenology, solipsism, hermeneutics, etc (Maxwell & Loomis, 2003; Riordan, 1995; Mayer, 1999; and Eketu, 2018).

Drawing from the above, the methodological and paradigmic prescriptions for social inquiry become an object of contestations. However, when this is considered in the context of the perspective on action, methodologies tend to be determined by the nature of the respective perspectives. For instance, the prospective paradigm of action presupposes that action is volunteered and meaning can be constructed only from the purpose. But since the human mind is at the centre of all voluntary, purposive and teleologic action, seeing the world through the eyes of the actor could be the most reliable way to construct meaning of action (Eketu, 2006; 2012,2018; Charle, 2000; and Maxwell & Loomis, 2003).

This means participatory observation, interview and personal discussion are all necessary means to generate data on social phenomena, whereby construction and interpretation of meaning can be done through

phenomenology, solipsism, hermeneutics and related ideographic methodological paradigms (Eketu, 2018; Marsh & Furlong, 2002; and Kumar, 2002 and Bryman, 2001).

Nevertheless, because behavioural sciences involving the use of historic data of a numerical nature as those found in finance, accounting, actuarial sciences to extrapolate future numerical trends, the empirical paradigm, involving nomethetic methodology, with strict scientific considerations may suffice (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Creswell, 2003; and Fisher, 2004).

However, the notion that in research, the ultimate desire is not the celebration of methodologies, but rather closeness to the truth in knowledge, has compelled post-modernists to suggest methodological pluralism. In this view, pragmatism and inclusion of methodologies of the opposing intellectual tradition are made in the same study (Ndu, 2018; Sylva, 2018; Angen, 2000; and David & Donald, 1999). This allows for harvesting the advantages of mixed methodologies in the efficacy of producing most reliable research findings (Blaikie, 1991).

5. Conclusion

The paper views the human nature as both deterministic and voluntaristic, compelling action to be both an object of environmental dictates and teleologic outcomes. This presupposes that meaning can be generated on human behaviour from prediction done through understanding of the human environment, and information derived from observation as the investigator sought to see the world through the eyes of the social actor under investigation. Also, the prospective and retrospective perspectives as paradigms of constructing meaning of action tend to dictate the methodological preference for inquiry in behavioural science, because of the gains in mixed methodologies. The paper contends that, the inquiry into social phenomena should adopt such approach as methodological paradigm triangulation, methodological pluralism, data triangulation, theory triangulation, investigators triangulation, setting triangulation and pragmatism, to generate robust knowledge that will be closer to the truth. However, the combination required should be dependent on the nature of the inquiry, with a main intellectual domain, supported with some aspects of the opposing paradigm. Pluralism will permit more than one method; data triangulation (both qualitative and quantitative); theory triangulation (using multiple theories); investigator triangulation (involving researchers from different disciplines); setting triangulation (conducting the study in different settings), etc to develop comprehensive knowledge that is reliable and valid for use in the complex and dynamic social world of man.

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