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Competing paradigms in historical method

Historical method as a research methodology offers much to media researchers to study mass media behavior and performance. It has even been christened as the omniscience of research method (Beard, 1934). Even though this may be the case but the number of studies being carried out by media scientists to study media phenomenon using this research method has been somewhat limited. An informal survey of mainstream media and communication journals would indicate that the positivistic method of inquiry is still the preferred choice for doing research. Studies on media using historical methods have always been relegated to journal dedicated to such methods of inquiry or monographs, especially *Journalism History*.

Such a scenario persists because historical method has always been considered a humanistic method of inquiry. This being the case, the vast potential of using historical method in studying media phenomena has never been truly explored in conducting social science inquiry. Without any condescending intent, I must admit that the cause for such an aversive action is ignorant and the overwhelming exposure on positivistic methods of inquiry at institutions of higher learning. Thus media scientists tend to shun away from using the historical methods because of its humanistic or non-positivism tendencies. The irony is that the importance of empiricist philosophies within the natural science is on the decline which has a profound effect on the social sciences as well.

The case for historical method has never been put forth convincingly. Writers of books on social research methods

seldom include a chapter to discuss the procedures of doing historical research. Such discussion has been limited to books written specifically on historical research method (see Collingwood, 1946; Murphey, 1973) with the exception of the books written by Stempel and Westley, 1981 and Berger, 2000.

Objectives

Is historical research a social scientific or humanistic method? This seemingly mundane question needs to be addressed cogently so as to assist budding researchers in comprehending this method. The above question has been the root of numerous acerbic rhetorical debates between historians and social scientists about how they should conduct historical research and write history (Berger, 2000). Idealistic philosophers such as Collingwood (1946) and Dray (1957) maintain that history as an academic discipline deals with the past and therefore this makes history essentially different from science. This does not mean that the method of history can only be used to study matters of the past but can also be used to study matters pertaining to the present (see Becker, 1966; and Beard, 1934). The "presentness" as opposed to the "pastness" of historical analysis offers media study an omniscience method of inquiry.

I will, in this paper, not debate for or against historical method as a social scientific or humanistic method, since such debate would not be fruitful and furthermore all research methods are not irrefragable ukase. However, I will in this paper seek to outline the prevailing dominant paradigms that exist in historical research method. Before going any further, let me state categorically that the debate and controversy about methodology should never be resented. I am in full support of the view of Pearce, Cronen and Harris (1982) that argues such development should be considered as any natural epistemological event. What is more important is what will the social scientific community do about it? Is it not more prudent for the scientific community to rise above the clouds and be imaginative in producing a new methodology that will lead to the discovery of more powerful new theories and productive programs of research?

Competing paradigms

This paper begins with the discussion of Berkhofer (1969) book entitled *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis*. The title of this authoritative book suggests the existence of a social scientific historical method as opposed to the humanistic historical method. Berkhofer argues for a more effective use of social scientific concepts in doing historical analysis. Such an argument undermines the complexity of doing historical analysis. It also ignores the traditional paradigm of doing historical work within the discipline of history.

Traditionally, historical study has always been grounded within the humanistic framework. The historian may not be seen to have an elaborate procedure of doing research when compared to the larger corpus of social and behavioral science (Landes and Tilly, 1971). To disregard the humanistic philosophical ground will be liken to belittling the importance of history both as an academic discipline and a research method. Even without the elaborate procedure, a research done by a humanistic historian can never be accused as being lacking in rigor and vigor. In fact, all knowledge is history. Thus, we should forge a pluralistic perspective on research methods and shunt ecumenist or monist tendencies. Was it not Becker (1966: 235) who said that "history is the memory of things said and done?" On this point, I would like to rephrase Beard (1934) who said that the importance of history lies not in its actuality, record or specific knowledge but in its thought. "(The) thought ... (is) authenticated by criticism and ordered with the help of scientific method" (Beard, 1934: 219).

As with other fields of knowledge, history as an academic discipline and its research method has not remained static. The call to use new methods in doing historical research is nothing new. In fact, a renowned communication historian, Carey mooted the idea that historian should change their mind set so as to "pursue different purposes and methods and ... draw upon much diverse sources of inspiration" (1985: 39). Thus, new ideas are injected into history with the arrival of new knowledge on consciousness. Without such a consciousness, "this memory of things said and done ... today would be aimless and ... tomorrow without significance" (Becker, 1966: 236). New ways are sought to comprehend the human mind. In understanding the human mind, historians as with all other social scientists have been looking for indicators

of the unobservable. No local historians have ever met Hang Jebat or Parameswara for that matter nor have any social scientists ever seen an "attitude" or "intelligent" or "consciousness".

To grasp the unobservable, historians whether they are using the social science or humanities model, always have some concept or theory that guides them. The reduction of reality is unavoidable in doing research. On this point, Berkhofer said:

"Historians do not choose to deal even with all the facts derivable from the available evidence. They confine their interest to man's past, but not even all of that concerns them, for they further select from these data those parts that can be organized according to some interpretation or theory. Thus a historical synthesis is a highly selective account of a postulated past reality. Theory in the most general sense is crucial to every phase of historiography (Berkhofer, 1969: 23)."

In humanistic historical report writings where narrative is the norm, the guiding theory used in studying a phenomenon is never stated overtly. The theory is hidden and buried within the research report. The theory guides the historian in his quest for evidence. Thus to a novice historian or to diehard social scientists entrenched within the positivistic paradigms, the analysis and the subsequent report will be seen as though it was done in the absence of a theoretical framework. In his decisive work entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Kuhn (1970) dismisses the existence of any form of conceptualized framework in doing any type of research. Each researcher in his research quest is guided by what he termed as a paradigm. In fact, Kuhn stressed that paradigms are actually above rules or procedures in doing research. Paradigms are the source of coherence for normal research traditions and not rules. Kuhn (1970: 42) said: "Rules ... derive from paradigms, but paradigms can guide research even in the absence of rules."

Paradigms in doing historical research can be viewed as a researcher's perspective. Stevens and Garcia (1980) suggested three perspectives or approaches: cultural, sociological and psychological. In elaborating these perspectives, Stevens and

Garcia (1980: 38) states that cultural approach "depends on collective perception of appropriate behavior; thus, it concludes how people believe they are expected to behave as well as the behavior. Sociology includes interactions of groups, institutions, structures, and relationship in structured situations. Psychology refers to the force, nature, choice, and susceptibility of individual personality, independent of external qualities."

Is there any research that follows a particular approach in its pure form? Stevens and Garcia (1980) did not say that there is none. Stevens and Garcia (1980) in their book *Communication History* also stopped short of suggesting that in doing historical research; a researcher can merge one or more of the approaches. A combination of approaches is unavoidable so as to allow a historian to comprehend the full extent of a researched phenomenon. A combination of approaches, one that combines the sociological with the cultural approach, is readily available. The approach is called structuration as suggested by Giddens (see Giddens, 1979; Parker, 2002).

But historical research is no different from any other forms of research method in that it is also has its pitfalls. Such pitfalls are unavoidable because social science and humanities research is resolute on understanding the human consciousness. Research, whether in the social science or humanities, as a human endeavor can only estimate and never fully comprehend the extent of the human consciousness. Within this context, historians admit "whether the aim of the research is to supplement or to supplant previous historical knowledge, they know that they will produce no final answers, for none exist in historical study" (Startt and Sloan, 1989: 14). The objective of a historian's pursuit is to seek a truthful understanding of something based on the best evidence available. Thus historians flag the attention of readers by using term likes "motives" to indicate the real reason for a behavior which is hidden in the consciousness. With the understanding of the past, historians hope to anticipate the future (Becker, 1966).

A distinguishing feature between social science historiography and humanities historiography is the approach use in building and testing of theory. Social science historians are more adept at using deductive model. In deductive

reasoning, the researcher begins with an abstract but logical relationship among concepts, then move toward concrete empirical evidence. The theory suggests the evidence that historians should gather. After gathering and analyzing the data, the researcher will conclude whether the findings support or reject the theory.

The alternative mode of approach mostly found in studies done by humanistic historians is the inductive model. The model calls for the detailed observation of the world or the subject matter and moving toward more abstract generalizations and ideas. The model is characterized with the researcher having a topic and a few vague concepts. On continuous observation, the historians will refine the concepts, develop empirical generalizations, and identify preliminary relationships. Thus the theory is built from the ground up. In order to achieve such a feat, researchers need to develop a sense of theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1990: 46) wrote that "theoretical sensitivity is the ability to recognize what is important in data and to give it meaning.... Theoretical sensitivity has two sources. First it comes from being well grounded in the technical literature as well as from professional and personal experience.... (Secondly), theoretical sensitivity is acquired during the research process through continual interaction with the data —through collection and analysis of the data."

An incessant contested point between social science and humanistic historian is what can be considered as empirical data. Data should not be limited to only those that are accepted by the positivism school of thought. "Positivists often try to convert the data into a qualitative form or analyze it using quantitative techniques. For positivists, qualitative data are mental states or conditions that cause measurable behavior" (Neuman, 1991: 328). Humanistic historians are not interested in converting data into reliable, objective numbers. As such, they are more interested in "documenting real events, recording what people say (with words, gestures, and tone), observing specific behaviors, studying written documents or examining visual images. These are all concrete aspects of the world" (Neuman, 1991: 328).

In this sense, social science historians differ from humanistic historians epistemologically and ontologically. Epistemologically, social science historians approach a

phenomenon using a cause-effect relationship model. Data are collected carefully so as to allow the researcher to predict and comprehend social universe. Such a predilection is possible because of the positivist's ontological view of reality. Positivists hold that social and physical reality as real. Moreover the social reality is not random but consists of patterns and has order. This basic assumption is important so as to allow researcher to make predictions.

Epistemologically, humanistic historians approach a phenomenon by systematically analyzing socially meaningful action. This is done by directly observing people in natural settings with the purpose of understanding, interpreting and constructing how people create and maintain their social worlds. Thus the purpose of doing research between social science historians differs from humanistic historians. Humanistic historians are not interested in predicting the causal outcome by introducing an element into an environment that positivism paradigms cherish so dearly. To the humanist, the environment can never be broken down into bits and pieces for analysis. This is because what they are being observing are human beings and the observer as another human being cannot detach himself or herself from the environment. The observer and the "observee" are both human. Even though, historians do not attempt to predict the future, this does not mean that they cannot anticipate what is forthcoming but understanding the past.

Whether the historical research is done using the deductive or inductive approach, a social science or a humanistic historian's task is to gather data from primary and secondary sources. Within this context, Jick (1979: 602) maintains that "researchers can improve the accuracy of their judgments by collecting different kinds of data bearing on the same phenomenon." Commonly used types of primary sources of data are newspaper articles, records from diaries or journals, and data from governmental agencies. Secondary types of data are mostly articles by other historians, articles or books by scholars, autobiographies and biographies, and ideas from philosophers, artists and others. Historians are fully aware that materials from all these forms must be considered with suspect. People tend to be biased or lie when answering questionnaires, newspapers articles are sometimes full of errors, autobiographies tend to focus on the positive aspects

and downplay negative ones, and thus the list goes on and on. Within such circumstances, the researcher will have to have to consider the findings within such and such limitation.

Whether historians are doing research using the social science or humanistic approach, they have to find meaningful patterns in human behavior. In doing so, Berger (2000) prompts historians of a pertinent question in the quest to find patterns in human behavior. "The question that (they) must be asked is whether historians impose a pattern on the material they are dealing with (because of their theories about how to interpret historical data and other material), or whether they elicit from the material or, to be more precise, discover in this material, a pattern" (Berger, 2000). All historians are well advised of the axiom: It is not I who speak, but history which speaks through me.

In writing their report, the humanistic historian will weave a story or a narrative from the materials collated (Berger, 2000). The story is written in the first person narration (see Becker, 1966). History in this sense is a story that is sometimes gripping and compelling. In telling the story, all historians "employs all devices of literary art (statement and generalization, narration and description, comparison and comment and analogy) to present the succession of events in the life of man, and from the succession of events thus presented to derive a satisfactory meaning" (Becker, 1966: 248). The story is framed according to the gathered evidence which also conveyed the historian's interpretation and reason (Landes and Tilly, 1971).

The report submitted by a social science historian will defer from that of the humanistic historian. The scientific report with the distinctive third person narration will be used to discuss the implication of the historical findings done by the social scientist. It is argued by the positivists that using the third person narration will allow social scientist to maintain objectivity in his report. The implication of the findings in terms of the theoretical framework is highlighted with the aim to help the social science historians to predict future behavior. But this distinctive style of report writing where third person narration is the accepted norm that delineates history written by social science from humanistic historians is now fast blurring. Social scientists in the West are now more open and have adopted the humanistic style of report writing. The dull

and unimaginative scientific report is being replaced by a more creative and energetic writing style that injects life to a lifeless report. Alas, such changes in the academic writing style are slowly forthcoming in the Malaysian academia. A period of adjustment, and we are in the midst of it, is needed before such scientific writing is embraced openly. During this period, we would be confronted with all sorts of skepticisms, and one must be prepared to accept outright rejection from fellow colleagues who argue that such writings as unscientific, bias and intolerable, thus not fit to be published in any academic journal.

Conclusion

In summation, I would like to quote Giddens (1979: 230) who maintained that *"there simply are no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history—appropriately conceived (original emphasis)."* Similar arguments have been put forth by Nord and Nelson (1980) who argued that debates differentiating social science and humanistic historians are actually non issues. *"History is an empirical study that uses various levels of generalizations to describe, interpret, or explain collections of data. Scholars with strikingly different goals and methods work within this catch all category. All are historians (Nord and Nelson, 1981: 279)."*

In other words, researchers may defer in the paradigms that they use, the procedure they employ to collect and analyze data, and the way they present the report but the ultimate aim is to present all the facts synergistically so as to uncover the "truth". While "truth" about a phenomenon should be allowed to be debated and would probably change with the coming of new knowledge, but these events should not give the impression that there exists inherent weaknesses of a particular paradigm, researcher or research finding. It should be viewed as a pit stop to reflect on past achievements before gearing up to greater heights in the quest to comprehend human consciousness. We should welcome such pluralism in methodology for there is no place for academic obduracy in any institutions of learning.

Already such methodological debates have given rise to a "new" paradigm that is part positivistic and humanistic. Please note that I have emphasized new because it has been

here for sometime already. The paradigm so aptly named post positivism concedes to the limitation of the positivistic human research methods in understanding human consciousness, thus different methods that were not previously used but accepted within the humanistic paradigm are now being recognized and embraced by social science scholars. Like the positivistic paradigm, the post positivistic paradigm also aims to predict and control social phenomena, whether physical or human (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Post positivistic paradigm defers from positivistic in the nature of knowledge. For the post positivists, knowledge consists of nonfalsified hypothesis that can be regarded as probable facts or laws. With better methods and the arrival of new knowledge, social science and humanities may one day offer a law so as to match the accomplishment of our colleagues in the natural science. We in the social science and humanities have succeeded mostly coming up with mid-range and grand theories.

Author

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