

Philosophical Underpinning in Social Investigation

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Abstract : *The aim of all investigations is knowledge building. Philosophical assumptions play significant roles in this knowledge-building process. The foundation of philosophical assumptions encompasses ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to a philosophical postulation that informs the nature of reality of the sources from which the knowledge is produced. Epistemology, on the other hand, is the science of knowing (the knowledge), which informs how something is known that is wanted to be known. Proper ontological and epistemological knowledge guides investigators to work in the right way. In the knowledge-creating process, researchers' familiarity with the philosophy of knowledge plays a significant role to produce trustworthy information. It also supports interested readers to decide whether they will accept or reject the results of an investigation. This article attempts first to explain the different concepts related to philosophical underpinning. Later it attempted to discuss the necessity of using philosophical aspects, including ontology and epistemology, in the knowledge-building process. This article is written based on existing available literature in the relevant field.*

Keywords : *social investigation, knowledge-building, philosophical assumptions, ontology, epistemology.*

1. Introduction

Undertaking research means trying to find out something new by using systematic and legitimate ways. Researchers look for 'something' by conducting inquiries. Looking is the only way in finding something. Although it is not always possible to find the same thing that was after (Matthews & Ross, 2010). However, people certainly find it to some degree if they look. Research does not always provide the results that researchers exactly want to know. Social investigators attempt to know about various aspects of the social world by systematically looking. The social world is usually considered the setting (or cultural background) in which social inquiries take place.

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Researchers might be concerned to diagnose whether an idea, they got in mind, is true or false. Some may attempt to discover or comprehend how something happens. Some might also need either to know the explanations behind an issue or to describe social phenomena. So, it can be argued that social researchers plan to build knowledge about something within the frame of the social world they live in. For obtaining knowledge researchers look for numerous features of the social world.

Obtaining knowledge is the ultimate goal of all inquiries including social investigations. In achieving the goal, researchers bear in mind that they will gain information to fill up a 'knowledge gap' in the social world. Here, investigators posture a query to get an answer to spread their understanding of the social world.

For having the answer to the question posed in the investigation, researchers champion a process that is usually a combination of continuous series of actions. There are some established sets of procedures in all investigations including social research. They are usually the combinations of epistemology, ontology, and methods from which an appropriate one is required to be chosen by an investigator considering the purpose and nature of a specific inquiry. Choosing an appropriate procedure depends on researchers' knowledge about the 'world views' that encompass ontological and epistemological assumptions, theoretical perspectives that are linked to ontological and epistemological stances, and the relevant methods. Without adequate knowledge of a researcher about the mentioned aspects, an effective investigation is not possible. Bearing it in mind, this article has put efforts to present an overview of the philosophical assumptions encompassing ontological and epistemological views for beginners in the field of social research. The article has also attempted to uncover the necessity of investigators' philosophical knowledge in their journey.

2. Social Investigation

Any research is defined either as a method or a process. Social investigation or social research is one of the inquiries that attempts

to gain knowledge about social phenomena and problems. The considering matter of this kind of investigation is the social world. Researchers in this domain are interested in investigating different social aspects or social phenomena including social relationships, human behaviour, people's way of life and the like. This type of inquiry does not encompass the natural world in its scope. Accordingly, for example, this type of research is not interested in the growth of a tree or in the presence of salinity in the pond, which are parts of the natural world. To expand the realization of the social world is the intention of this type of inquiry.

Social research is usually defined as a process through which social investigators attempt to understand their social world in a way that does not include simple description, common sense or narrative in its scope (Pole & Lampard, 2002). Social inquiry intends to describe, explore, explain, understand, predict, change or evaluate different phenomena of the social world where 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions are usually answered (Blaikie, 1993; Blaikie, 2010). In this research domain, researchers struggle to explore almost all areas of human behaviour to gain a greater understanding of individuals and societies. Social scientists and social researchers attempt to know about people and society. Through their attempts, they can help in designing a range of initiatives to fulfil different needs and solve various problems fully or partially for the betterment of society.

3. Knowledge Building through Social Investigation: The Philosophical Viewpoint

The philosophical perspectives inform us many things about knowledge such as what knowledge is, whether all the beliefs are knowledge, what characteristics make knowledge true, what the sources of knowledge are, how a piece of knowledge (and true knowledge) is built, and many more. Thus, a researcher should have an idea about at least two more concepts—*truth* and *belief*—to get a clear understanding of knowledge and ways of building knowledge. All these can help a researcher to understand the philosophy of knowledge, and, in a broader sense, the ontological and epistemological stances as the frame of building knowledge. So, let us try to know first

about knowledge before focusing on the philosophy of knowledge, paradigms, ontology and epistemology. The idea of knowledge is very much linked to the concepts of belief and truth. So, in the discussion of knowledge, we need to discuss first belief and truth. Then we need to show how knowledge is linked to belief and truth.

3.1 Belief

Generally, belief is considered an assumption or claim about something without any proof. It is an acceptance of the existence or trueness of something without any proof. In philosophy, belief means a position or tendency of mind where faith or confidence is positioned either in persons or things. Belief in *Allah* or *God* can be one example of its kind. Probably those who believe in God believe without any evidence. A dictionary definition (Merriam-Webster, 2018) describes belief as a state or convention of mentality that has trust or confidence in some people or things. It is stated as a feeling of being sure that someone or something exists or that something is true.

3.2 Truth

Generally, truth is considered as the status of an assumption that has been proved as true. Truth has not been defined universally until now like many other concepts. Many have defined it in different ways. The existence of diverse theoretical and philosophical views about the truth makes the task complex to provide a universal definition of it. In the context of actuality, the truth can be defined as the body of actual things, events, and facts. It can also be described as a proposition, judgment, or thought, which is either true or has been accepted as true. So, for being true something should be actual or real. Some characteristics are required in something when it wants to be considered truth. These are a body of real things, facts, and events; a body of accurate descriptions and propositions; and sincerity in action and nature.

Finding truth has got a significant concentration in philosophical discussions of knowledge building. Finding the truth in addressing a knowledge gap of an aspect or phenomenon of the social world is

the extreme goal of research in the social field. People, including social researchers, try to uncover the truth of various aspects and phenomena. Although a researcher (knower) may believe that the thing that she/he has known is true, in reality, it might be not true.

In social research, according to Matthews & Ross (2010), “there is a concern for the truth in terms of how far a knower can say that the investigated knowledge of a social phenomenon corresponds to, or is the same as, the reality of the social phenomenon itself”. It is not easy to identify the real truth all the time. All knowers do not see the same truth, but different knowers may find different truths about a single phenomenon. The nature of truth differs based on the ways social researchers look at the social world. So, philosophical stances matter to find different types of truth. There are different *approaches* to the truth of which the following are considered significant, and through which social inquirers try to see the social world (Blaikie, 1993).

Approach 1: According to Blaikie (1993), “There is truth to be known about the way where the social and natural worlds work; and regularities that make up the independently existing reality can be discovered, described and explained by theories, the truth of which can be reliably established”.

Approach 2: Knowledge that is available in the world is usually uncertain. People never know when they have discovered it. They only can approach the truth. As reality cannot be observed openly, researchers’ knowledge is limited. They can usually choose only through concepts and theories. Changes in concepts and theories bring changes in reality (Blaikie, 1993).

Approach 3: Knowledge of the world, including the social world, is always comparative by nature. It changes in the context of time and space. Therefore, there is no supreme or absolute truth (Blaikie, 1993).

3.3 Knowledge and its Sources

Knowledge is considered a trusted belief (Crotty, 1998). This means knowledge is a belief that is trusted or reliable. Trusted belief means the belief with proof (belief + proof). From this point of view, we can

say that *Knowledge = Belief + Proof*. With this logic, it can be said that knowledge is truth. However, this logic does not work all the time. Some knowledge is not considered true.

Matthews and Ross have described knowledge as a piece of information about something (2010). They also have described it as consciousness of something (such as concern or a fact), and about an understanding of a subject, a reality, and a problem. It is believed in this view that knowledge includes information about and awareness and understanding of something. Knowledge is generally considered a collection of facts as well as the act of knowing where the act of knowing has been highlighted. So, collected facts and the processes of collecting the facts are jointly considered as knowledge. Considering various views, knowledge can be stated as a process of knowing about something—e.g., facts, issues or matters—where the truth is an obligatory component that originates from a belief.

It is already stated that the achieved knowledge of a social phenomenon may or may not be the same as the actual position (reality) of the social phenomenon. In the achieved knowledge, various degrees of trueness might exist depending on various factors—e.g., types of the reality of the sources, knower's views and the like. Thus, knowledge with different degrees of trueness could be generated depending on the sources of knowledge such as (a) authority, (b) experiment, and/or (d) experience.

Although there are many sources of knowledge, five of them are well-known and significant (Matthews & Ross, 2010; and Babbie, 2008).¹

- 1). *Belief*: When we consider something as true based on our belief. For instance, one may believe that sleeping in the evening is not good for health. This belief may come from her/his personal experience although there might have different experiences from others.
- 2). *Authority*: When someone considers something as true because of an authority's statement about its trueness. For example, a follower of a political party may feel something true as the leader of that party has stated it as true although there might have some symptoms in it that

¹ The classification of the ways of knowing (building knowledge) has been done based on the ideas of Matthews and Ross (2010) and Babbie (2008).

create confusion about its trueness. 3). *Experience*: Something known from long experience can be considered true to all. For instance, a teacher may feel from her/his long experience that only the students who are very calm and quiet do well in the examinations although many teachers might have different experiences. 4). *Theory or set of ideas*: Sometimes a theory or a set of ideas helps people with knowledge. For example, existing theories can inform people how discrimination may affect the minority population in society. 5). *Evidence*: Research evidence helps the knower to gain knowledge. The existing research findings may be proved by further research and may establish credible knowledge.

Usually, questions can be raised about what we can know or what we know (i.e., the nature of reality of the sources that means the exactness of the social world, which is known as ontology) as well as how we can know or how we know that we know (i.e., whether the knowledge is gained through belief, or authority, or evidence—which is known as epistemology) (Crotty, 1998).

So, the above discussions provide an idea that the nature of the sources of the reality of knowledge and the way of obtaining the knowledge is very important to understand the degree of the trueness of the knowledge, which is to be gained or is gained. In obtaining reliable (trustworthy) knowledge, researchers should have a good understanding of the nature of reality and the effective ways to know that reality.

From the previous discussion, an idea is revealed that knowledge building is linked to the knower’s belief and the truth that exists in the world. If the knower intends to create trustworthy knowledge she/he should have a good understanding of the three concepts— belief, truth and knowledge. The following table can be helpful to understand the matter easily.

Belief	Truth	Knowledge
Assumption or claim about something without any proof.	The status of an assumption (belief) that has been proved as correct.	Trusted belief where trust could be in various degrees.

3.4 Application of Philosophical Assumptions in Knowledge Building

Once researchers have a topic in mind to inquire about, they have to consider how they will do it. The intention of an investigation usually is to uncover knowledge and truth about some characteristics of the world (natural or social). There are some philosophical traditions of building knowledge and finding the truth that is, in other words, different views about the nature of knowledge and the ways to acquire that knowledge. Finding out knowledge by conducting research is linked to the philosophy of knowledge. There are diverse traditions to undertake research in various disciplines. None is considered the 'single' right way in this regard. Each of the traditions tends to work with its own internally reliable set of selections (choices). This set of selections is called a paradigm (Schwandt, 2001). The sets of choice or, in other words, the paradigms (Guba & Lincoln 1994), the philosophical viewpoints (Moon & Blackman, 2014), the perspectives (Patton 2002), and the world views (Creswell, 2009), can be defined as an elementary set of beliefs that guide actions (Guba, 1990). A paradigm is a belief system that leads the way the researchers do things, or that establishes a set of practices. A paradigm (a set of choices) in social research guides the thinking, beliefs, and assumptions of researchers about the social world in one hand and the position of the researchers in the social world where they live on the other. The term has been used in two ways by Thomas Kuhn (1962). The first one is, according to him, to represent a particular way of thinking that is shared by a community of scientists in solving problems in their field. The second one that Kuhn has mentioned is to represent the commitments, beliefs, values, methods, outlooks and so forth shared across a discipline.

A researcher has to choose a paradigm or a philosophical position in specific research to constitute truth and knowledge. Investigators' approach to a specific investigation, which secures the credibility (reliability) of the research findings, depends on how they think about the problem and the ways by which it can be designed to study. In the field of social science, in its broader framework, there are some recognized standard philosophical positions, which are required to be specified in the particular form of research. When investigators start to design research, they need to clarify the philosophical positions

that the study has chosen in uncovering particular knowledge. By setting out the research philosophy researchers give a signal to other researchers about where their research fits in their social world. The choice helps researchers and others to understand what they can legitimately acquire knowledge about and how they obtain that knowledge.

Based on some traditions of philosophical assumptions a paradigm describes the nature of (social) reality (usually known as ontology), ways to know (known as epistemology) the reality, and the moral code and values (known as axiology which means the belief about the truth) (Patton, 2002). Ultimately a philosophical perspective helps a researcher to employ appropriate ways of studying the social world in producing trustworthy knowledge (Creswell, 2013).

3.5 Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives in Social Investigation

The study of being is called *ontology*. It comes from Greek words. The meaning of 'onto' translates as 'being' or 'reality' or 'existence'. Another Greek word is 'logos', which translates as 'study'. Therefore, 'ontology' concerns the study of reality or being or the world. Ontology is the branch of philosophy, which focuses on the issue of the nature of reality (Crotty, 1998). It deals with the truth or the nature of actuality or truth. Its main concern is recognizing the kinds of phenomena that exist. It helps investigators to discover in research how certain they can be about the nature or existence of objects they are investigating (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Usually, researchers set out the character of the social world along with their position within it by preferring a position in the context of ontology. Ontology deals with three main questions —what existence is, what there is, and what the nature of existence is. Some specific ontological questions, on the other hand, could be—is there a God? Or, what happens to people when they die?

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy, which concentrates its interest on nature, scope and general basis of knowledge. According to Blaikie (1993, 2010), "It is considered a theory of knowledge that presents a view and a justification for what can be regarded as knowledge, what can be known, and what criteria should have therein

knowledge to be separated from belief". Epistemology informs the requirements of acceptable knowledge in a discipline. It examines the relationship between the investigator and reality. However, epistemology's special dealings can be realized through some specific questions. How do investigators go about knowing things (how do they know what they know)? How do investigators distinguish between true and false ideas? How do investigators recognize the truth? How can investigators be certain whether they have located the truth? And how much is the knower close to the known in research?

Ontology and epistemology are two important elements that construct a fundamental set of beliefs, which guides acts in the way of investigation. For example, interpretivist epistemology goes with constructivist ontology and positivist epistemology goes with objectivist ontology (Bryman, 2012; Crotty, 1998). In the same way, different ontological and epistemological trends fit best in different research methods. For instance, quantitative and qualitative methods usually follow opposite trends in conducting research.

Ontology and epistemology collectively give the shape of a research paradigm, known as the worldview, which works as the guiding force of an inquiry. This guiding force provides the research right direction. Methods, also known as a sub-field of epistemology (Babbie, 2008), on the other hand, ensure the process of data collection, data analysis, and data presentation for answering the research questions. Using methods is the practical part of research where researchers find ways to get findings of the research problem by exploiting appropriate techniques, tools and strategies.

Although there are different recognized sets of standard philosophical positions within the broader context of social sciences, researchers need to pick up the appropriate set considering the nature and form of research they plan to undertake. There is no universal opinion about the 'right' way of undertaking an investigation. There are diverse traditions. Every tradition wants to function with its own set of choices.

4. Conclusion

Researchers' main intention in an inquiry is to create knowledge. Knowledge is built from the world (e.g., the natural world and the social world). In any scientific investigation, researchers need to be familiar with some important concepts (knowledge, truth, belief and worldview), which are very important components in the knowledge-building process. An investigation may go in the wrong direction without the idea and knowledge of a researcher about these components. This is true for all investigations including social research. In the field of social sciences, knowledge is created from the social world. It is defined that the social world is the cultural surroundings or setting in which social inquiries are conducted. Social researchers are part of the social world. In the knowledge-building process, a researcher either can maintain a very close relationship with the social world or can keep a distance.

The nature of knowledge might depend on this relationship between the researcher (knower) and the social world (known). The social world contains social phenomena. The nature of the relationship between the researcher and the researched helps researchers to decide to choose more appropriate methods for conducting effective research. For example, qualitative research is useful when researchers maintain a close relationship with the researched the subject matter of research. On the other hand, the distance between the researchers and the researched prefers quantitative inquiry. Thus the philosophical underpinning has a strong role in knowledge-building through the social investigation process. Here ontological and epistemological positions guide choosing methods of research. Different matching sets (paradigms, also can be called 'packages') of ontology, epistemology and methods are appropriate for different types of research.

Although there are various concepts involved in the philosophy of knowledge, researchers need to have an understanding of at least three most important concepts namely ontology, epistemology and methods. In preparing a design and conducting research, every researcher needs comprehensive knowledge about these three. The researcher should also have an understanding of the interconnecting choices of these three.

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