

### CHAPTER 3

## *Philosophy, social science and method*

In the last chapter we saw that the physical sciences face a number of difficulties in the search for a method that can provide certain knowledge. Despite these, there appears to be general agreement that the whole point of the exercise is the pursuit of universal explanations. Therefore, most philosophers of science tend to agree upon the ends of science, but disagree upon the means for the attainment of such ends. The social sciences do not enjoy such a level of consensus. A fundamental disagreement lies at the heart of social science about whether social phenomena can be subject to the same kinds of explanatory goals as physical phenomena. Doubters maintain that social phenomena are distinct enough to require not just different standards, but a distinctive conceptual framework upon which social investigation can be based. For those who believe there can be a “unity of method”, there are not just the difficulties of justification and verification to be faced, but how to deal with the very obvious differences that social phenomena present in comparison to physical phenomena.

In their infancy, sitting in the shadow of the physical sciences, the social sciences experienced no such widespread crisis of confidence and were distinguished by an empiricist method. Indeed positivists, notably Durkheim, based their claim for the scientific nature of social science on the assertion that the methods used to study the social world did not differ in any important way from the methods used to study the physical world. The crisis of method was yet to come. As such, it was with some confidence that the positivists could make this assertion.

Given the strong emphasis on method, the actual nature of what was to be discovered was thought unproblematic. Only the subject matter itself

distinguished one discipline from another and it was unthinkable that the subject matter might dictate the appropriateness of method. After all, physicists, chemists and zoologists all studied quite different phenomena, but it was held that this made no difference to the methods they employed. Though positivism appeared to be at the leading edge of social science, it did not have an epistemological monopoly. An important alternative tradition existed in the form of hermeneutics that held the view that there were crucial differences between the physical and the social worlds, although the “*verstehen* sociology” of Max Weber, in particular, offered a serious empirical alternative to positivism. Though Weber was equally as concerned as Durkheim to establish the “scientific” credentials of social science, he emphasized that human consciousness was a distinguishing feature of the social world. Quite simply, because human beings have the capacity for autonomous reflection, they cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate objects.

Today no-one seriously doubts that subject matter makes a difference to method. However, how these differences manifest themselves and what their implications are for the study of social phenomena, are matters of some controversy; all of which have important implications for research methodology. Therefore, this chapter is concerned with examining two very distinct views on the social sciences. First, the view that the physical and social sciences are constrained to share key logical, epistemological and methodological features. Although the subject matter is important, social research should be just as scientific as research in the physical sciences. It follows from this position that it is legitimate for the social sciences to pursue the same goals of explanation, generalization and prediction that characterize the physical sciences.

In contrast, a second position argues that the differences in subject matter are so important that any attempt to study them in the same way is doomed to failure. Those who take this view cite the inability of the social sciences to produce any “law” like statements such as those in physics and chemistry. This argument rests on the premiss that the nature of social life precludes both explanation, such as that found in the physical sciences, or any form of prediction that can hold true for all people at all times and in all places. In other words, if science necessarily is about explanation and prediction, then the social sciences are different, but not inferior to, the physical sciences. Thus, we begin our discussions by asking can social research share, with the physical sciences, the goals of prediction and explanation and if not, what are the alternatives?

## EXPLANATION, PREDICTION AND GENERALIZATION

### *Explanation, prediction and generalization*

When a scientist investigates a phenomenon, the desired outcome might be an explanation of that phenomena. The explanation for a substance turning litmus paper blue is that it is alkaline. The explanation for a moon remaining in a particular orbit is the nature of the gravitational attraction of a nearby planet. In everyday life we seek explanations that will satisfy us and although what will satisfy the scientist is perhaps more rigorous than what will satisfy us, it remains the case that science and everyday life both seek forms of explanation. It is important to note, however, that philosophers of science differ in what kind of things can count as an explanation, or whether universal explanation is possible.

More disagree about the goal of prediction in science. As we have seen, the method and success of prediction is by no means settled in physics or chemistry. Some believe that our predictions can rest upon the principle that the future will resemble the past in important ways; others argue that we can only show what cannot be the case. Yet explanation can be said to presuppose prediction. Take, for example, our simple litmus paper example. If it remains true that an alkali turns litmus paper blue, then we can predict that all other alkalis will have the same effect. Even a falsificationist would agree that this prediction is legitimate because it may be subjected to continual testing. If an explanation is a good one then it will lead to successful prediction. The reverse also holds: a prediction, if correct, becomes an explanation. Our prediction is that if a substance is alkaline it will turn litmus paper blue. A substance is explained as alkaline if it does this, or an acid if it turns the paper red. Thus, "the logical structure of a scientific prediction is the same as that of a scientific explanation" (Hempel 1994:45).

In everyday life we routinely predict and explain. Perhaps you will predict that on your birthday you will receive gifts from friends and relations; that one day of the year you are the sole recipient of gifts is explained by it being your birthday. On the other hand, predictions about birthdays and similar social events may turn out to be wrong. For instance, an incident may occur with the result that your relatives no longer speak to you. Alternatively, you may move to a society in which it is expected that you will give gifts to your friends and relatives on your birthday! Despite such possibilities we seem to get by with these sorts of predictions in our everyday lives. In the physical sciences, however, there is a desire for something stronger than predictions that are "quite likely" to be

accurate. After all, a great deal of important technology rests on the success of scientific prediction. Science requires invariable laws of nature in order that our predictions about the tensile properties of steel, or the escape velocity of space shuttles, do not end in disaster.

Scientists can and do routinely and successfully predict events and produce explanations. Although Kuhn may be correct in his observations that, from time to time, whole paradigms are overthrown in science, prediction and explanation are still conducted with high degrees of success in "normal" science. Scientific laws tend to hold true. Disasters to do with bridges, or space shuttles, are the results of error or forces of nature that are beyond the control of human beings, not exceptions to laws as such. Though our understanding of the status of a particular "law" may change, as with the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, the empirical consequences remain, for most purposes, similar. For instance, the advent of relativity did not seem to make any difference to the odds of toast falling buttered side down!

Despite these observations, the question remains as to whether we can predict with such degrees of certainty when it comes to social life. As social scientists, the types of events that interest us are more like birthdays than gravity. Predictions and explanations concerning crime levels, for example, are fraught with problems. Even economics, often assumed to be the most "legitimate" of the social sciences, does not have a good record on prediction and explanation; the success of which will depend upon whether one is a neo-classical, Keynesian, or Marxist economist.

Three reasons, in particular, have been offered for the apparent lack of success in prediction and explanation in the social sciences (Scriven 1994). First, the generalizations made in social science are more complex than the physical sciences. More "standing conditions" must be specified in order to describe even the most simple of relationships. It follows that more variables must be measured to obtain the most basic data upon which to base generalizations. For example, a specification of the "standing conditions" needed to explain the boiling of water are pretty well exhausted once we know that under conditions C water will boil if heat is applied. Once we have this information, it is easy to predict in what circumstances water will boil in the future. Contrast this with the controversial attempts to measure intelligence in humans (Eysenck 1953:19–40). Just one aspect of this seems to present insurmountable difficulties. Quite simply what it is that is being measured will be culturally specific. What it is to be "intelligent" in Western Samoa will be manifested in a very different way to what it is to be intelligent in the US, and in the UK there will be cultural

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 1

*European integration and housing policy predictions*

Social researchers, particularly those engaged in quantitative research, routinely make predictions and such predictions often begin from explanations of past events. This can take the form of statistical analysis, and modelling prediction may arise from an examination of existing or newly implemented policies, or the research may seek to adjudicate between two or more differing viewpoints. Priemus et al. (1994), for instance, conducted analyses of the likely outcomes of the 1991 Maastricht Treaty on the European Community. The research question centred upon the consequences of European integration for national housing policies. Their work begins with a description of the key features of economic and monetary union and then moves on to examine the consequences of the liberalization of markets and the probable economic effects that will, in their turn, impact upon decisions at a national level concerning housing. Their conclusion was that whereas such decisions will continue to be made at a national level, economic and social policies made at a European level will produce a tendency towards similarities in the development of housing markets in European countries. The assumptions here are both inductive and deductive. It is assumed, from an inductive viewpoint, that certain economic conditions or trends will hold in the future. Given this, it can be deduced that particular consequences for housing will follow. A causal path is thereby implied. European economic and monetary union will lead to specific economic consequences that will lead to an effect on housing policies.

variations in what is considered to be “intelligent” behaviour. To this we must add an even greater variation in the psychological and physiological states that an individual can occupy at any given time. Even an Einstein can have a hangover, or be worried about his tax returns. There are an awful lot more variables to measure in social life even to produce the simplest of explanations, or predictions.

A second difficulty relates to a perceived need to use the concepts of physics, or mathematics, for the purposes of describing the social world. Notwithstanding the problems described above in relation to intelligence

testing, if we say that Garfield has a higher IQ than George, not only are we postulating the existence of an entity (IQ) that possesses certain characteristics, but we are implicitly or explicitly suggesting that they are measurable. In other words, to produce explanations that will count as "scientific" requires the use of scientific concepts; the very concepts over which there is disagreement as to their applicability for studying the social world.

Thirdly, in everyday explanation and prediction we tend to use "low level" laws, such as those related to birthday presents, that result from experience. The consequence is to "skim off the cream" from the subject. For instance, everyday life provides us with at least partial explanations that the social scientist, unlike her physical counterpart, must take into account in her formulations. There are no "everyday" explanations in spectrochemistry. The implication is that the social sciences must exhibit some congruence between everyday explanations and social scientific explanations in order that the latter are "valid".

The first of these above differences has given rise to both optimistic and pessimistic views about the possibility of explaining the social world. The optimistic view is that the social world is very much more complex than the physical world, but this is a matter of degree, not fundamental difference. Essentially, this was the view of Mill and that of positivism in general. The claim here is that improved explanations will result from more accurate descriptions of the constituent variables and these, in turn, will lead to more accurate identifications and descriptions of the relevant variables themselves. Pessimists might agree that this is true, but it is not very helpful in practice. It would take so long to arrive at levels of explanation as good as those in the physical sciences that humans beings would probably no longer inhabit the planet!

There is another view on this topic. Not only is the social world more complex than the physical world, but it is of a completely different nature (Rosenberg 1988). The very use of the concepts of science is merely the use of a special language that actually blinds us to the need to develop a different language to describe the social world. In taking this view, the second and third of Scriven's difficulties disappear because "folk psychological" concepts are the very topics that the social researcher should focus upon. The search for laws of social life is thus doomed to failure. Moreover, the use of the language of the physical sciences is singularly unproductive. Social researchers are not in the business of "predicting" or "explaining" and if the concept of "explanation" is to be

## CAUSALITY, MEANING AND REASONS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

used in the social sciences, then it will have a very different meaning. It is necessary that we investigate this view in more depth. However, we must first consider what makes the social world so distinct from the physical world according to this perspective.

### *Causality, meaning and reasons in the social world*

If the goals of science are explanation and prediction, then this rests upon the notion of identifying relations of cause and effect. Indeed, we might characterize science as the search for causes. In order to predict, we must first identify causes. Similarly, an explanation of X relies on identifying the cause of X. As we suggested in the previous chapter, this is not always a straightforward matter. For Hume, causes were actually observed constant conjunctions between events. We noted, however, that often we can specify more about a cause than the simple observation of two events and that we can even point to a distinct set of conditions that govern whether or not something will occur. Along these lines, can we identify the “necessary” and “sufficient” conditions that comprise a cause in the social world?

There exists a view in the social sciences that approximates the Humean notion of “constant conjunction”. Behaviourism takes the view that only observable and measurable concepts are appropriate foci for scientific study. The aim is to systematize observable behaviour. As such, underlying phenomena are regarded as unknowable and thus irrelevant to the study of social life. Systematization is achieved by “providing general statements that enable us to correlate observable environmental conditions with the behaviour they trigger” (Rosenberg 1988:52). The environmental conditions associated with Sid hitting George might be that Sid was observably angry with George. In causal language, we can say that Sid’s anger with George caused Sid to hit him.

The behaviourists’ argument, like that of Hume, is that we cannot know any more than we observe. A behaviourist may then wish to generalize and say something to the effect that person A hitting person B is a manifestation of the anger of A with B. The problem here is that A and B may be boxers and hit each other for either pleasure and/or profit. All the behaviourist aims to achieve is a specification of the environmental conditions with which certain behaviour may be associated. Like Hume, they seek to establish the presence of constant conjunction.

In our boxing example, the behaviourist would either have to abandon his generalization about the causes of anger, or specify some necessary and sufficient conditions associated with it. Let us say, for the moment, that the outcome of certain types of behaviour results in physical confrontation. The problem is to know whether general manifestations of physical violence may be explained by the same causal mechanisms, or whether different ones are required according to time and place. In causal language, there is a need to specify both sufficient and necessary conditions. In terms of sufficient conditions, from a behaviourist vantage point, there is less of a problem. Anger, in this case, appears to be a sufficient condition for one person to strike another. However, in order for this to be generalizable it would have to be held that anger is a sufficient cause for striking another person. Clearly this may not be the case in all instances in which such behaviour is manifestly observed.

Necessary conditions are more difficult to specify. Clearly, one necessary condition will not cover all instances of people hitting each other. For this reason, the necessary conditions will rest upon other observables in the environment: for example, whether A and B were wearing boxing gloves. The core issue here is that those phenomena that we might observe will not exhaust the possible necessary conditions that are associated with the causes of people striking one another. Quite simply, there may be a surplus of observed causes that are indistinguishable from one another. To distinguish one from the other, we would need to know the full range of reasons that people invoke for striking one another. Proffered reasons imply internal mental states that are anathema to behaviourism with its analysis of external environmental effects on human behaviour. A may hit B because A is angry, but A may actually exhibit symptoms of mental imbalance. Despite this possibility, the outward manifestations of their mental states appear similar. Behaviourism ceases explanation at the level of observable relations with an external environment, because any other level of explanation or mode of understanding is thought to require unjustified imputations regarding a person's mental state.

For many social scientists, the reasons that people give for their behaviour are taken as a beginning, not an end point, to explanation. In everyday life, we explain our actions by giving reasons for them. Therefore, if there is to be a congruence between social scientific and everyday explanations, then the reasons people have for what they do, or say, become a legitimate area for investigation (Davidson 1994). In social

## CAUSALITY, MEANING AND REASONS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

science reasons are used to explain not just micro level individual interactions, but large scale social phenomena: for example, the rise of capitalism (Weber 1985). However, what comprises a “reason” for behaviour? When we attribute a reason to someone for doing something we are implicitly suggesting that a person had a belief about certain things in the world and, from this, desired certain outcomes. An explanation of Tamsin drinking a beer would require an investigation of her desires and beliefs. It may well be that she was thirsty and desired to drink beer in the belief that it would satisfy her thirst. But why beer and not water? On the other hand, perhaps she desired the effect that she believed the beer would provide. Clearly, the number of beliefs and desires that might inform possible explanations for Tamsin’s action is as wide as her imagination.

Beliefs and desires appear dependent upon the attitude of a person toward his, or her, environment, as well as the actions of others in that environment. People attach meaning to things in the world, as well as the actions of others. From this point of view, social research is not just about behaviour, but about meaningful behaviour. Clearly, the action of gravity has no meaning in the sense that voting or drinking may have. Meaningful behaviour is the product of consciousness and experiences. It is this that is at the heart of the claim that human action is different to phenomena in the physical world.

As Popper (1966) has pointed out, the autonomous actions of conscious human beings produce open systems. From this point of view, we cannot logically anticipate outcomes for they are, it is claimed, indeterminate. Because the possibilities for individuals to take any number of different actions exist as an option, successful prediction in the social world will be limited. It is perhaps limited because of the difficulties we have in specifying causes. Our “causes”, in social science, are therefore more properly thought of as reasons. The question must now be: can reasons serve as causes?

There have been numerous attempts to produce a form of words that will incorporate the language of beliefs and desires into something that might be said to provide a universal formula upon which to base explanation and prediction in the social sciences (see, for example, Papineau 1978:78–84). They tend to take the following form: If agent X desires Y and believes that A is the best way to achieve it, then X will perform A. There are two possible classes of objection to this form of explanation. The first is that beliefs and desires are about future states and to specify them as being the same as causes leads to teleological explanation: that is,

RESEARCH EXAMPLE 2

*Changing attitudes to cohabitation  
in the British Household Panel Survey*

The BHPS is a longitudinal study based on a cross-sectional sample of households who are interviewed at regular intervals over a period of years:

[the BHPS]...shows how things follow from each other in the lives of real people. It allows us to see how our conditions and manner of life at one point in time turn us into the people (and kind of society) we subsequently become (Gershuny et al. 1994:11).

Since the 1960s there has been an increasing tendency for people to live together outside of marriage. The BHPS found that 30% of women and 25% of men aged 21–24 had cohabited before marriage, whereas only 4.6% of women and 7.4% of men 60 years and older had cohabited. This indicates a change in attitudes between generations leading to a change in behaviour. Indeed, this is borne out by parallel findings which show that of those born since 1960 only 6.8% of women and 7.5% of men thought cohabitation to be wrong. However, changing attitudes are not necessarily reasons for these may be more complex. Thus, the cause of cohabitation may lie in factors such as a desire to live together prior to marriage, or as the result of the break up of a first marriage. Therefore, while disapproval may have been a reason not to cohabit in the past, the absence of disapproval is not likely to be a reason to cohabit now. Even if reasons can serve as causes, an exact specification of those reasons may not be an easy task.

explanations that rest upon the specification of end states and thus attribute purposes to actions or social systems. This is considered illegitimate because to specify an end state (a desire) as an explanation for action actually reverses cause and effect. The future cannot *cause* the past. This is sometimes answered by saying that in specifying the desires and beliefs of an agent, we are not talking about actual end states at time  $t_2$ , but what it is that makes the agent act at time  $t_1$ . Even if we said the explanation for Tamsin

drinking beer was that she was thirsty and believed beer would quench her thirst, this would not imply any necessary outcome. Tamsin could have had precisely the same beliefs and desires, but have been thwarted by the fact that the bar was closed, or had run out of beer!

The second class of objections to this form of explanation, though more obvious, is also more serious. Agent X may desire more than one thing. Further, A may be one of two, or even more, equally good ways of achieving end state Y. There may be less of a desire to achieve Y than to avoid Z and so on. Now, although we can make numerous attempts to further specify what a universal formula should be by adding these possibilities, the difficulties never really go away. Thus, even if reasons (consisting of beliefs and desires) can be said to be the equivalent of causes in the physical world, there is still the need to attach many more caveats, or what are known as *ceteris paribus* clauses, to our universal formula. Eventually, we will have to attach so many that we end up saying that X will do A, all other things being equal. In scientific terms, this appears not to be anywhere near good enough and would seem to preclude successful explanation and prediction. If reasons are treated as causes we end up with  $n$  possible causes of a particular action. It would be as if we could identify plenty of sufficient conditions for combustion, but no necessary ones.

### Rules and rationality

The foregoing has charted some of the difficulties in the search for causes in individual human action. However, much of social science is concerned to explain events at a macro level. For example, Wall (1990) used census data to explain the differences in the structure of English and French households. Such explanations rely on, for example, being able to differentiate norms within particular societies. Thus France has a higher proportion of elderly people living as couples than in England, and in the South of France households tend to contain more related members than in the North (Wall 1990:18–19). A description of the differences between family and household structures in these societies therefore implies the existence of social norms, defined as shared expectations of behaviour that are deemed culturally appropriate.

Norms in society can be regarded as rule following. In social research the discovery of a social rule may count as a sufficient explanation of behaviour. If we wish to explain why it is that drivers drive on the right in

the United States, but on the left in Australia, it would be unusual to seek an explanation via individual reasons and more usual to cite a rule that is subject to sanctions. In this way, rules may come to stand in for laws. However, not only are rules broken, but different rules apply in different times and places. In this sense, they lack the robustness of laws in the physical world. Nevertheless if, as researchers, we want to explain social behaviour then rules appear indispensable. What do we mean by rule following, or indeed rule breaking behaviour?

Rules imply something else central to social explanation—rationality. To behave rationally is to follow explicable rules. To break a rule does not necessarily imply that a person is behaving irrationally. The difficulty lies in deciding what counts as rational and what counts as irrational. We have seen the difficulty in attempting a universal specification of reasons for individual actions. Perhaps the implicit assumption behind such attempts is that human beings act rationally. This is a reasonable assumption, for social life would be difficult if we continually misunderstood the meanings others attached to their and our actions, or utterances.

An important area of microeconomic theory is that of rational action theory. This begins from the assumption that agents behave rationally in that they will always attempt to calculate the most effective way to achieve their ends (Elster 1986). Quite apart from the unwarranted assumption often made that the ends an agent will wish to attain are motivated by pure self-interest, this approach treats rational behaviour as a straightforward relationship between ends and means in individual actions. Social life is not that simple for it depends on our ability to anticipate the actions of others that themselves may be the product of our own actions. Moreover, goals may be benevolent and/or consensual.

To consider the above, let us take the hypothetical case of firefighters who are confronted with a burning building in which people are trapped. In attempting a rescue, the likelihood of severe injury, or death, is often considered less important than the desire to rescue the people in the building. These goals may be viewed as benevolent and contrary to self-interest. The rational choice theorist may wish to say that it is the individual who will decide her ends and the best means for their attainment. Nevertheless, this leaves us with a very narrow definition of what it is to act rationally and one that is not particularly useful to describe a myriad of actions in varied social circumstances. After all, what is thought to be a rational way to act will be dependent upon a variation in circumstances along the dimensions of time and place.

## CAUSALITY, MEANING AND REASONS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

The difficulty in specifying what is a rational way to behave lies in the absence of ahistorical, or acultural standards that we might employ for the purpose of adjudication. It is not just that what is rational in Western Samoa may be different to that of the United States, but that within the US itself there may be difference. In other words, standards of rationality possess both exogenous and endogenous variations. Moreover, even within given societies what is rational changes over time. In Britain during the Second World War, the sound of church bells would have prompted the rational reaction that invasion was underway. Nowadays, it tends to signal that a religious ceremony is about to commence or has just finished.

In the English-speaking world, a very influential exponent of the view that rationality, and thus rule following, is a normative product of a given society is Peter Winch. Winch (1990) argued that an explanation of an action can only be accomplished by evaluating it against the standards current within that particular society. According to Winch, it follows that causal explanations of human behaviour are invalid. Unlike causal generalizations, rules admit of exception. In this way, rationality becomes the mode through which we understand the rules of the particular society in which we live. The statement that X was behaving irrationally is a product of local standards. Viewed from his vantage point, X was perhaps behaving perfectly rationally. For Winch, therefore, an investigation of a society requires an understanding of the normative behaviour of that society. We will return to Winch presently, but for the moment let us examine in a little more depth this alternative to “scientific” type explanations.

### Meaning, language and understanding

We now turn to the second “position” that, for the sake of convenience, we will label the “interpretivist”. The core of this position has informed many of the above critiques of causal explanations in social science. However, it is important to also note that the position itself has a distinct philosophical pedigree to positivism.

Interpretivism rests upon the philosophical doctrine of idealism. Although there are several variants of idealism, all hold the view that the world we see around us is the creation of mind:

Hunger, pain and anger in the human world cannot be described without investigating how individuals use language and symbols

to construct what such states *mean for them*. For it is only by understanding the individual experience of subjective interpretation that we will understand why human beings behave in the way they do; why, for instance, thresholds of pain, attitudes to death, and so on, differ so markedly from person to person, and from culture to culture (Johnson et al. 1984:75. Original italics).

It does not follow that the world is considered “unreal”, but simply that we do not have any kind of direct “one to one” relationship between us (subject) and the world (object). The world is interpreted through the mind. Indeed, our very observations of the social world depend upon a classificatory scheme that is filtered through our minds. Given this, we cannot know the “true” nature of the object world, separate from our perception of it.

Kant applied the term “transcendental idealism” to his view that the objects of our experience, those things that exist in space and time, are simply appearances and have no independent existence from our thoughts. This was a view that Weber took seriously in his analysis of the relationship between particular Protestant values and the ethos that underpinned the development of capitalism (Weber 1985). The Calvinist doctrine of “predestination” held that all were “saved or damned”, whatever their actions. Despite this, the early capitalists attempted to discern signs of their fate via their worldly success, or lack of it. This desire for salvation led to asceticism, thrift and good works, but particularly the desire to re-invest in enterprising schemes.

Prior to Weber’s work, Karl Marx had explained the rise of capitalism as a result of material economic circumstances. However, Weber viewed this explanation as incomplete, for it failed to tell us why society A developed capitalism and B did not, even when the antecedent material conditions appeared similar in both societies. The missing part of the explanation rested on the meanings that individuals placed upon events and actions. It is quite irrelevant whether the Calvinists were correct in their beliefs about predestination, what is important is that their beliefs made them act in a particular manner. Only by knowing the meanings that agents attach to their actions can we hope to explain them. The social world thus becomes the creation of the purposeful actions of conscious agents. For Weber, no social explanation was complete unless it could adequately describe the role of meanings in human actions.

Weber was not the first to emphasize meaning in the study of social life.

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 3

*Appearances and meanings in studies of national identity*

The contrast between appearance and intention is illustrated in studies of national identity. Kellas offers data from a survey of Scottish identity carried out in 1986 (Kellas 1992). Respondents were asked “how do you regard yourself in terms of nationality?” Possible responses included Scottish, British, equally both, more Scottish than British and vice versa. Clearly, no differentiation could be made on whether one asked “Scottish” or “non Scottish” people this question in the first place, because the aim was to find out how Scottish respondents felt. What of in-migrants? Even if they had begun to feel Scottish, we might still be justified in expecting quite different replies than from someone born and bred in the Highlands able to trace his, or her, ancestry back to the clans!

The problem in the above example lies in what the respondents themselves regard as “Scottishness”. It is fine for the researcher to define what she means by “Scottishness”, but unless this has some congruence with what the respondent means, the explanation will lack validity. In other words, social explanations must be derived from the meanings of the people we are investigating. For researchers, this is a problem of validity—can we be sure that the question asked is meaningful to the respondent and/or the reply we receive is meaningful in terms of the research question? In contrast, other more recent sociological and anthropological studies described by MacDonald (1993), place emphasis on learning about what counts as national identity via the way in which people construct those identities from the meanings they place on objects and relations in their social world. As she points out: “Identities [are] not merely relations which were present or absent, but actual phenomena which could be relatively strong, weak, confused disordered or in crisis” (MacDonald 1993:7).

The key here is a German word that is often associated with Weber’s methodology, *verstehen*, which means to “understand”. Vico (1668–1744) was one of the first to insist on an ontological distinction between nature and human consciousness; a distinction born of the desire to understand

the active processes of human history. Its practical significance in social science was the result of the work of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911).

Dilthey's work occurred at an important time in the history of philosophy. Enlightenment reason, which had underwritten the burgeoning sciences, found itself under attack from a movement known as romanticism; a reaction against the increasing rationalization of human life. This reaction, which emphasized the centrality of the individual spirit and imagination, was typified in the writings of Shelley and Goethe. Dilthey's work was thus carried out against a background of the opposites of the rational and the empirical versus the metaphysics of the romantics. The romantics were philosophical idealists who emphasized the unknowability of what Kant called the noumenal world: that is, a world beyond appearances, the "thing in itself".

Dilthey, although wishing to emphasize a different set of philosophical assumptions for social science, still wished to rule out metaphysics as its basis. He took the view that in the physical world we can only study the appearance of a thing—the thing in itself (the noumena) remains hidden. On the other hand, the subject matter of the social sciences is human consciousness, which can be known directly (Manicas 1987:121–2). Speculative metaphysics is unnecessary because in social science we are not dealing with "representations" of the unknowable, but with what Dilthey, following the German idealist philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831), called "objective mind":

Every single human expression represents something which is common to many and therefore part of the realm of objective mind ...the individual always experiences, thinks, acts, and also understands, in this common sphere (Dilthey quoted in Outhwaite 1975:26–7).

In the pursuit of a new epistemological basis for the social sciences, Dilthey's work was to take this historical path. To understand society, we must understand history not just as a series of events, but as the outcome of human creativity. To say, for example, that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, in Sarajevo, "caused" the First World War is erroneous and misappropriates the language of the physical sciences in the social sciences. The search for cause and effect, in history, is as mistaken as the alchemists' search for gold. To understand history we must recognize that

## CAUSALITY, MEANING AND REASONS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

it represents a meaningful reality for those who “create” it. For this reason, the physical sciences are seen to represent a search for causal explanations, whereas the social sciences seek understanding.

As a method, understanding must begin from the presupposition that there is at least some common ground between the researcher and the person whom they are studying:

Interpretation would be impossible if the expressions of life were totally alien. It would be unnecessary if there was nothing alien in them. [Hermeneutics] thus lies between these two extreme opposites (Dilthey quoted in Habermas 1972:164).

Understanding thus begins from commonality; in particular, from shared experience that requires empathy on the part of the investigator. If we are to understand why Al Capone turned to a life of crime, we have to understand the meanings his world held for him. We have to understand the context and to do this we have to introduce our own lived experiences. Of course, life in London now (or even Chicago) is very different to Capone’s day, so this process requires the exercise of imagination. Nevertheless, there would be enough in Capone’s biography for us to imagine ourselves in his situation. Obviously, the more we are able to culturally situate people the better will be our understanding.

Weber, drawing upon the work of Dilthey, distinguished between modes of understanding. Not all modes involve empathy. Indeed, in history and sociology the search must be for what motivated a person to act in the way that she or he did (Weber 1949:101–2). Here, Weber’s search is a candidate for the pursuit of the “truth” that involves understanding. His work thus begins to look less like hermeneutics and a little more like positivism. Thus, he defines sociology as, “a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (Weber 1949:88). Understanding becomes the starting point whose aim is the production of propositions that give rise to explanations that are adequate at the level of cause *and* meaning.

For Weber, the above was a necessary step to produce accounts of social, as opposed to individual, actions. For this reason, although an understanding of the social begins with an understanding of individual subjective meanings that are directed towards others, they are not the end of the story. Weber, though often thought to emphasize idealism, considered

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 4

*Communist identity construction in Italy*

The ethnographic strategy of participant observation is an attempt to get close to what is being studied by becoming part of that social setting. As with Kellas in the previous example, Chris Shore (1993) was concerned with the construction of identity. In this case, it was that of Communist identity in Italy, but more specifically, “the dialogue between communism and Catholicism in a city wide context” (1993:33). Shore’s research was carried out in an inner city area of Perugia and was an “account of the processes and relations observed...in the ethnographic present” (1993:29). Though he was concerned to understand the lived experience of the people he studied this was inevitably from the point of view of a foreigner. Yet, as he notes, this was not always the most important factor in leading to acceptance or rejection in the community (the former being a prerequisite to obtain worthwhile data). Often the impression he gave about his political views was crucial. A rejection of capitalism and a particular view of the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was enough to win acceptance as a “comrade”. Conversely, among the non-Communist Catholics his religion, or lack of it, became important to some of those with whom he spoke. To understand meanings is to understand context and to do this it is often necessary to become an insider- or at least to stop being an outsider. A central issue here is, can an English non-Communist come to “know” the meanings of an Italian Communist?

the intentionality of conduct, alongside the pursuit of objectivity in terms of cause and effect. This was translated into an interest in both the meanings and the material conditions of action. In this sense, Weber’s methodology appears iconoclastic for he attempts to form a bridge between the traditions of positivism and interpretivism. The question for social science then becomes: what motivates people to act in particular ways and where do their meanings come from in the first place?

To return us to our discussion of rules, there are those within the interpretivist tradition who argue that our actions are not governed by cause and effect, but by the rules that we use to interpret the world. In the

## CAUSALITY, MEANING AND REASONS IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

phenomenological tradition of philosophical thought, “outer” explanations for human action based on, for example, the class position of an individual in society, are substituted by two different questions. It is these questions that should be the focus of social research. They are, “how does reality come to be constituted by mental operations as a known object?”, and secondly, “how do we go about constructing our ideas of what reality is?” (Johnson, Dandeker & Ashworth 1984:78). In this sense, Weber’s use of *verstehen* towards the goals of social scientific explanation cannot be justified.

A number of responses to this issue have occurred, that either build on the work of people such as Dilthey, or the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who sought the basis of “true understanding”. Among these, the work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) stands out. It is he who moved the focus of phenomenological inquiries from epistemology to ontology and in so doing posed a challenge to the ideas of Kant. For Heidegger, we are not simply observers of an external world that is mediated and sorted by our consciousness (Husserl), but are members of that world who exist as “beings-in-time”. This moves social science away from Dilthey’s neo-Kantian preoccupations with the question of appropriate methods for the study of social life, to an analysis of what Heidegger called *Dasein*. This is not an easy concept to grasp, but it may be considered as “pre-understanding”:

the *place* where the question of being arises, the place of manifestation; the centrality of *Dasein* is simply that of a being which understands being (Ricoeur 1982:54. Original italics).

Importantly, Heidegger does not try to “solve” the question of the relationship between a subject (person) and the world (object) that they inhabit through the formulation of an appropriate method, such as *verstehen*. Understanding does not simply require the prioritization of human consciousness in the study of the social world, as it had for Husserl and Dilthey, because understanding is part of a “mode of being”. Understanding actually emerges from a gap that exists between where people are located in history and the possibilities that are then made available to them in the future.

The point of this discussion is that ideas, such as *verstehen*, are not a method to be appropriated by the human sciences, but actually a fundamental part of human existence. Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) has been much influenced by the ideas of Heidegger. His concerns are ontological, rather than epistemological and in this focus three questions

become of importance: how is it possible to “understand”; what kinds of knowledge can “understanding” give us and what is the status of such knowledge? Gadamer uses the hermeneutic language of “text” for this purpose, maintaining that understanding is made possible by grasping not just what the text says, but its cultural location. The text becomes an involuntary expression of a particular historic reality. The investigator can then access the meaning of the text through its context and the social context is accessible through the interpretation of the text. As such,

Gadamer’s position would require us to look beyond what is said to what is being taken for granted while it is being said, to the everyday meaning of both the language used and the situation in which the conversation occurs (Blaikie 1993:64).

As with Heidegger and Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the ontological over the epistemological through his concern with the relationship between language and meaning. He agrees with Weber that meaning is the central concern of the social sciences. With Gadamer, however, he shares a concern with the interpretation of “texts”. For Ricoeur, a text is a discourse fixed in writing, but social action itself does share some of the general features of a text. Although both employ language, the important difference is that speech forms a dialogue, whereas (and here he disagrees with Dilthey) a text does not. A text does not necessarily carry the intentions of the author; intentions that are present in dialogue. Quite simply, if two people are having a conversation the intention of the other is apparent, whereas there can be any number of interpretations of a text, each of which is equally correct. Ricoeur’s aim here is to unite explanation and understanding. Language “has no subject” for it exists outside of time and it is this quality that allows for differing interpretations of texts. Two readings of texts are then possible. First, we can explain it in terms of its internal relations via the logical structure of languages or, secondly, we can treat it as speech and offer interpretations that lead to understanding.

The approaches of Gadamer and Ricoeur are essentially philosophical. In fairness to both, this is their intention. For this reason it is difficult to see how their prescriptions would “work through” in the world of research. However, their emphasis upon the centrality of language is important. Language offers us common horizons in which investigation becomes possible simply because meanings are shared and understood. As Gadamer argues, even the worlds of other languages can be grasped from our own,

## SUMMARY

because we have the capacity to broaden our insights to know other social realms. This optimism needs to be tempered with a logical point implicit in Ricoeur's work. If it is the case that we really cannot know the author's intention from the text, then how can we know we have achieved an understanding, or an explanation, consistent with the meanings that the author intended? On this basis, we cannot know whether we can know other social worlds!

This appears to be an overall problem when meaning is used as a "resource" in investigation. Dilthey believed hermeneutics could bridge the gap between the known and the alien. At a superficial level, this is clearly correct. However, the method ultimately relies on the philosophical assumption that we can know other minds. On the face of it, there seems little evidence to support this. After all, our best guesses as to what others are thinking are based on evaluation of their thoughts from our viewpoint. Maybe as a child you played a game whereby you had to guess what your friend was thinking and vice versa. The temptation is always to change your mind to thwart the person guessing! As social researchers who wish to *understand* social groups we are required to find meanings for action; a tall order in such circumstances. What we are actually constrained to do is to link actions and utterances to interpretations of meanings. We are back to Ricoeur and the inevitability of different interpretations.

### *Summary*

In this chapter we have contrasted two "traditional" views of how we can investigate the social world. Through behaviourism, we have demonstrated the limits of traditional, naturalistic, approaches to social life. The failure of behaviourism lies in its sole reliance on observation and not accounting for the same kind of behaviours being generated by quite different motivations. Further there is no one-to-one correspondence between reasons for action and the action itself. This, in turn, casts doubt upon whether causal explanations are valid in social science, simply because they offend the principal characteristic of causal explanation: that is, the same cause should produce the same effect.

Such problems open up possibilities for the position we have characterized as interpretivism. Interpretivism is not without its difficulties; not least those arising over the issue of "knowing other minds". Social investigations, in order to be more than introspective examinations of one's

## PHILOSOPHY, SOCIAL SCIENCE AND METHOD

consciousness, must rely on claims about knowing other minds. Moreover, if they are to produce findings that are anything other than trivially interesting, claims about their representativeness, validity and potential for generalization must hold.

Implicit in the debate between those who wish to find causal explanations for social life and those who argue this to be mistaken, is a fundamental dispute over the nature of knowledge itself. Philosophical naturalism, for the most part, depends on a correspondence theory of truth. Theories of causality, whether they are Humean or of the more complex kind we described, are also dependent in this way. Yet, if meanings are to be intersubjectively held, a coherence view of truth must operate whereby the agents sharing the meanings agree on the “truth” of the matter.

Difficulties exist in both naturalist and interpretivist explanations. Despite these, social research is still commissioned on a daily basis for the purposes of describing and explaining social phenomena. Therefore, if we are to render justice to this topic, we need to move beyond the arguments in this chapter, to examine the nature and practice of social science from other perspectives. In the next chapter, we examine a range of approaches that either regard the problems noted here as unimportant, or resolve them by starting from a quite different sets of assumptions.

### *Questions for discussion*

1. Can reasons be causes?
2. Must the findings of social science be generalizable? If so what (if any) are the limits of generalization?
3. Should explanations be adequate at the level of cause and the level of meaning?
4. What is it to be rational?

### *Suggested reading*

Hage, J. & B.Foley-Meecker 1988. *Social causality*. London: Unwin Hyman.  
Manicas, P. 1987. *A history and philosophy of social science*. Oxford: Blackwell.  
Papineau, D. 1978. *For science in the social sciences*. London: Macmillan.  
Rosenberg, A. 1988. *Philosophy of social science*. Oxford: Clarendon.  
Ryan, A. 1970. *The philosophy of the social sciences*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.  
Wilson, B. (ed.) 1970. *Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Copyright of An Introduction To The Philosophy Of Social Research is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.