

# **METHODOLOGICAL PREDICAMENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE ATTAINMENT OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGS) IN NIGERIA.**

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In view of the contemporary emphasis on specific research techniques, it is interesting to note how little attention has been focused on general and specific problems of methodology in social sciences. Social science is invested in controversies over the appropriate methodological stance. It cannot escape the ideological perspectives of particular interests or groups nor can social sciences be universalistic and free from bias? Should analysis be limited to the solution of empirical problems or should social scientists seek to develop generalized encompassing theories? Should social sciences study subjective meaning or objective behavior? Which are more potent in social life, ideal or real forces? These problems are perennial. Science is often described as a cumulative enterprise and knowledge may have accumulated, as a consequence of the efforts of social scientists, yet there is no emergent consensus on first methodological premise. The seemingly eternal quality of the methodological disputes in social sciences is a consequence of the sources of the issues: what appear to be resolvable philosophical issues actually reflect inescapable tensions in the character of social life itself. The objective of this study is to assess and evaluate the problems of research methodology in social science towards achieving (MDGs). This paper explores these methodological dilemmas in social sciences and its effect on Millennium Development Goals. (MDGs)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is interesting to reconsider in light of what has been learned from the study of social sciences method, means solution to any of these presupposes a solution to others. Advancement in our understanding of methodology improves our ability to deal with the problems under study. Nevertheless, as Duncan (2009) put it, “methodological approach in social sciences are the easiest to pursue, however, if one concludes that a category or procedures of explanation suits some circumstances better than others, but there must be universal criteria to determine how, when, where and which method is preferable in determining the outcome of a study which is generally acceptable to the generality of the public.” The general methodological predicament of social sciences is the concept of belief, tradition, modernity, subject matter among others. These, depend on the consciousness that undermined human association in an effort to describe and explain the outcome of the investigation, at which the line between the method, procedures or modalities and the prediction of thought are sought.

Consequently, the weaker the ties of procedural agreement about which things are as well as about what ought to be, the greater the likelihood of poor method. The capacity or the ability to convey similar message are not as different as they might at first seem. Although, this may have some limitations in the kind of message one intended to share. Similarly, it is even more difficult to convey similar messages in different ways.

Methodology in social research covers the entire terrain of scientific research in social science (science of society). Any scientific research, in the social (or the natural science), involves a search into a problem or problem area, with the ultimate intent, of contributing to the corpus of scientific knowledge, which then becomes available to the world (Mukherji (2000). This production of scientific knowledge goes through a process of legitimization based on: (a) the method(s) that has been adopted to research the problem; (b) how competently this method(s) has been applied (e.g. reliability, validity of data, etc); and (c) with what effect. That is, in what way it has contributed to theoretical understanding or its accumulation in the unraveling or understanding of reality, and its applied value.

When we speak of methodology it generally denotes a combination of: (a) technology of data collection, namely tools and methods of research, such as the questionnaire, interview, case study, survey, content analysis etc; (b) analytical tools such as statistical tests and methods; and (c) philosophy, theory and epistemology of social science guiding the conduct of research in the definition and understanding of the problem and the logic of inquiring (Kaplan, 1985: 4293; Akindele, 1989: 347; Mukherji, 2000: 14-15). Thus, methodology is concerned with analytic approaches, conceptual frameworks and paradigms to the study of an academic discipline.

Social sciences are invested in controversies over the appropriate methodological viewpoint. In the conduct of inquiry we are continuously subjected to pulls in opposite directions and researchers are in dilemma as to take which pull. This paper explores these methodological predicaments in social sciences. It attempts to outline the nature and scope of social sciences, it highlights the nature and the characteristics of science; it analyses the problems/predicaments in social sciences methodology. It concludes with suggestion on how to resolve the differences in social sciences so as to actualize the MDGs.

#### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are to;

- i) access and evaluate the methodology of social science as to whether or not there was/is standard of methodological research in social sciences.
- ii) compare social and pure sciences methodological procedures;
- iii) examine ways on how methods of social sciences can help in achieving (MDGs) in Nigeria and
- iv) recommend ways on how social scientist can standardize their methods of conducting research.

#### **NATURE AND SCOPE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

A rough working definition shows that social science is the study of the group behavior of human beings. It is concerned with the behavior of families, factories, communities, nations and other groups. It is also concerned with the behavior of individual people insofar as this is influenced by their belonging to groups. What social scientists do broadly as all scientists do: are to observe, generalize and verify.

The scope of the social sciences is very much open to debate. There is unclarity today in the classifications of the social sciences (SSCN, 1998). The classification varies from country to country, University to University, group to group and even from individual perception, understanding and adoption to the other. In the course of its development, social science has been specialized into separate social sciences. This trend is part of the specialization typical of modern life. Although we are more concerned with social science as a whole than with its separate specialties, nevertheless, to understand social science as it is organized today, we must understand the disciplines into which it is divided.

Most scholars, and as it is generally regarded in the universities, and in line with that described in the Newsletter of the Social Sciences Academy of Nigeria (2000:8), classified the social sciences into the core theoretical disciplines of economics, political science, and sociology. But prior to this classification, in *The Social Sciences: an Outline for the Intending Student*, edited by David C. Marsh (1965) as including Sociology, Economics, Political Science, Social Psychology, Geography and Social Anthropology. Law, Education, History and Linguistics, which are regarded by some as social sciences are excluded as these subjects are not normally taught within the social sciences faculties of Universities. The latest development contains the birth and rise of many special fields. The new fields are often labeled interdisciplinary, more recently. The Gulbenthan commission report on the restructuring of the social sciences recommend what it called 'open the social sciences', is an expression of the view that the old division in many respects have become obsolete. The lack of consensus among the social scientists on the scope of social science is part of its predicaments.

## **NATURE AND PRINCIPLES OF SCIENTIFIC METHODS**

Social sciences are part of man's effort to understand his universe through the methods called science. All through history some people thought about their society and tried to understand it. To a large extent, however, it has only been in the last 200 years that their thinking was combined with systematic observation (Calhoun, 1971). Science, of which social science is a part, rests first of all upon systematic observation, which is different from several other methods of getting knowledge.

From the aim to uncover the laws that governed the workings of the universe a view of what constituted reality (ontology) and of knowing about that reality (epistemology) developed into a standpoint that we commonly called the attitude of scientific inquiry. In part, this involved a particular doctrine applied to the method of science, which consisted of a set of principles about how scientific (i.e. valid and reliable) knowledge could be acquired.

The principles of the scientific method are:

- a. Observation (only that which can be observed can be measured. All basic concepts must be clearly defined).
- b. Hypothesis formulation (on the basis of systematic observation, the scientist formulates a proposition that explain what has been observed).
- c. Experimentation (the hypothesis is tested to ascertain its truth).
- d. Scientific laws (from the results of experimentation, general explanations (or laws) can be developed that wholly or partly explain particular phenomena, e.g the law of gravity).
- e. Theory formulation (the discovery of particular laws can lead to the development of more general theories (or model) that enable more thing to be explained using a unified approach).
- f. Flexibility (if new evidence is found that falsifies or change an explanation, the scientist should acknowledge this and change the law and theory).
- g. Replicability (the procedure used, including definitions of main concepts along with data should be open for other scientists to scrutinize, thereby enabling others to replicate the work).
- h. Objectivity (scientists should be neutral observers of the world and not concern themselves with morality or ethics, nor should they be motivated by anything other than the pursuit of knowledge).

Accordingly, there is consensus of activities in scientific activities. Igun is of the view that:

*Consensus of meaning is one of the defining characteristics of science....increasing consistency results in increasing coherence and utility value of the products of any scientific enterprise (1994:1).*

Thus, science is a body of observation and theory. It is a method of verification. It is also an attitude. The scientist is committed to learning about how things are, regardless of how his findings affect his personal interests or prejudices. What then, does it mean to ask whether social science is a science? At the minimum the question is whether social science comprises knowledge characterized by verifiability, system, and generality? Dynamically considered, the question also asks whether social scientists are simply husbanding, and perhaps rearranging, such knowledge or whether they seek continuously to add to it.

There are several points of view on this subject. Some people hold that the study of social phenomena is not science, and never can be. Others believed that social phenomena can be studied scientifically, but require different methods from those used in the natural sciences. Others hold just the opposite, that the social sciences will never be scientific until they adopt the same methods as the natural sciences. (Dyke, 1960). Bond (2007) identified obstacles in the scientific study of social sciences as: the obstacles to search for facts versus the development of science; obstacles to the verification of general propositions; the multitude of variables and the necessity of selection; the inconstancy and variety of human purposes; environmental change; and the problem of verbiage.

In compares therefore, as a general proposition, the natural sciences are better. The laws of social science are generally less precise than those of natural sciences. It may be that social science is more difficult because social scientists are more influenced by their prejudices and therefore find it harder to be objective. Its data are in general the most complex known to science, and this fact causes special problems. And social science is less able than other sciences to use certain methods.

Thus, despite having advanced briskly in the study of the scientific method and development of theory in social science, there is still significant distance down the road to becoming a 'real' science. The standpoint that positivism demanded from science was questioned by scientists wanting to investigate the social world. Many social scientists were particularly keen to question the objectivity of science and rid themselves of stricter forms of positivism. In essence, the claim of science as the only or most certain form of knowledge no longer remains uncontested. "It (social science) accused of being ideological, subjective and unreliable".

The critiques who question the claims to truth assertion by science contend that the bases of the social scientists does not affects the 'selection of problems', in the 'choice of theoretical premises, and the use of defining metaphors, both at the individual level of the scientist and at the institutional level of scientific establishment or institution, resulting in deliberate' and/or 'structured or institutionalized bias (of which the scientist may not be aware)'. This, Wallerstein (2000) says, 'seems evident for the social sciences but appears to have been true for physical sciences as well'. In sum, Mayhem view summarized the argument thus:

*"Science" is not another name for rational truth. It is a mode of discourse that proceeds to construct an integrated body of statements about the world according to a set of distinctive rules. (1976:60).*

Therefore, subjectivity exists in what could be termed 'pure scientific research where scientists carry out well managed and well documented experiments. The choice of experiments and to some extent, the questions they ask of the data in order to interpret it are based on essentially subjective research questions a need to know some thing rather than others. This can be determined by different times and places, different needs and abilities, the opportunities for different kinds of study, and different subjects.

### ***METHODOLOGICAL PREDICAMENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES***

The fundamental and pervasive issues in the methodology of the social sciences reflect tensions inherent in the nature of social life itself (Mayhew 1976). In general sense the conflicts among social sciences are

defined by polar opposites. The differences are based on different approaches and answers to question and issues related to methodological policies, perspectives and standpoints to do with research (Hart, 1998:85). A continuing debate exists, therefore, between many different camps about what we should use as the standpoint for thinking about and investigating the social world.

The scientific investigator may often face hard choices between such dilemmas as satisfying but idiosyncratic approaches to problem versus detached but communicable approaches, between short-run success and long-run economy, between meaning and effective methods, and between competing strategic postulates about the nature of the world of scientific objects. The choices are hard because it is not always possible to satisfy multiple criteria at the same time. The solution to one side of a problem intensifies the other side. We face dilemmas in our everyday life and also in our scientific activity. Mayhew argued that:

*Extreme methodological stances in social science represent attempts to place exclusive emphasis upon one of the functional requisites of social science considered as an action system and that for each of the functional tensions of social life there is a corresponding methodological dilemma in social science. (1976:61).*

And he identified the following predicaments in social sciences:

#### **THE PROBLEM OF VALUES AND BIAS**

The problem of the role of values in social sciences is the most controversial of all metadata theoretical issues. Proponents of scientific neutrality often rely on a casual and facile reading of Weber. Weber's position was not so clear and so unequivocally accepting of neutrality. He recognized that there is a value bias, explicit or implicit, in all thought because of the inescapable selectivity of human statement. Hence, values permeate scientific investigation. Social scientists can remain value free only by refusing to formulate any soluble problems. The conflict between committed and neutral stances in social science is more usefully seen as a conflict between narrow and wide perspectives.



In this light, the conflict can be seen as parallel to a similar tension in social life itself, for both relatively neutral and relatively colour perspectives are functional requisites of organized group activity. The conflict in social sciences over how neutral we should be or can be, reflects a tension deeply noted in the dilemmas involved in orienting ourselves to objects in socially relevant ways. Kaplan (1973) uses bias, for adherence to value of such a kind or in such a way as to interfere with scientific objectivity. What constitutes bias is that the will to believe is motivated by interests external to the context of inquiry itself. And it is a common place that bias is more or less easily identifiable in many studies of political, social, and economic problems. Therefore there is methodological dilemma in reconciliation of value relevance and value neutrality.

### **THE PROBLEM OF LEVEL OF ABSTRACTION**

The contribution of social science to the solution of social problems represents an output from science to other social systems and is in this sense a 'goal' of science. But, considering science as a cultural system, this is a relatively derivative goal. The first-order goal of science is the production of scientific knowledge. Science, like other social systems, confronts a dilemma as to the allocation of resources to generalized faculties or to immediate output. In social science, this antinomy is often expressed in the relative priorities of theory and research.

### **THE PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY**

A third historic issue in metatheory divides those who insist that the subject matter of social science is the tangible physical behavior of human beings and those who say that social science must go behind external behavior to the inner intentions or states of mind of the actor. The latter position is variously termed subjectivism. Hence, in all interaction there is a functional dilemma as to whether to orient oneself to the actor's concrete behavior or to his meaningful intentions.

### **THE IDEAL VERSUS THE REALISM**

In many systems of thought, the problem of subjectivity is closely bound up with the problem of the influence of ideal factors in social life.

Those who assert that motives and intentions must be taken into account are easily led to the position that values, ideals, meanings and norms shape the social order. Those who assert that only objective behavior can be studied find it difficult to acknowledge the importance of concepts with such elusive referents.

The problem of ideal and the real may be stated as a dilemma between characterized social reality as a body of cultural definitions, and systems of thought or as a complex of needs, interest, and demands. Idealism, by positing ideas as 'eternal' objects that become embodied in social reality, finds an extreme solution to the problem of defining a set of stable objects of study for social science. On the other hand, the purest materialism, which reduces all human activity to the impact of environmental forces, destroys the integrity of the subject of study.

#### **THE PROBLEM OF CHANGE**

The foregoing treatment of the problem of idealism represents one way of looking at the problem of change. In short, we can speak of the tension between stability of structure and the validity of integrative solutions.

#### **THE REALITY OF THE GROUP**

Should social science see groups as the sum of their individual members, or are group's subgenres, a reality in their own right? This is equally a dilemma in social science. In summary, in the conduct of inquiry we are continuously subjected to pulls in opposite directions: to search for data or to formulate hypothesis, to construct theories or to perform experiments, to focus on general laws or on individual cases, to engage in synthesis or in analysis. In essence, consensus is always a fragile state of tension located somewhere between the extreme poles of the wholly standardized and the wholly unique.

Conceptualization or categorical and explanatory concepts that dominate social science behind their use lie implicit or explicit theoretical and ideological presuppositions and values, existing terms are endlessly re-worked and new ones introduced when their differences become too troublesome; no universally acceptable order of concepts; the existence and rapid growth of 'interdisciplinary' fields at all levels of study (e.g gender, globalization, conflict studies etc) are to great extent evidence of

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dissatisfaction.

Beneath the disagreement on concepts, terminology, and the structures of disciplines and interdisciplinary studies, lie more fundamental disputes as to the nature of the social sciences – and, in particular, the nature of ‘social’ on the one hand and ‘science’ on the other. These differences are impediment to methodological stance, hence have a great impact on research and development as social scientists belong to different or particular disposition and will place him somewhere along the line between extreme roles. His perspectives will then be reflected in the literature he produces and in the use he makes of writings of others.

Whatever the future conditions of the social sciences, the fact of the matter is that the consensus which we so often seek is plainly lacking at present. The roots of the disagreement and variety lie much deeper than has been suggested – in the individual and temperamental dispositions that differentiate one social scientist from another. It can be suggested that, the earlier the social science and scientist harmonize their difference the better for development and united social science.

#### **SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGS) IN NIGERIA.**

Methodological predicaments are more profound in Africa and Third World in general. The rise of modern social science in Africa followed a different trajectory, it was a colonial transplant, a child of imperialism and/or a Western transplant (Hart, 1998). Lamenting over what he cogently described as the “crisis of social sciences in Africa”, Hutchful (1998) in Abubakar (2001:15) asserts that the most pertinent questions facing the social science community in post-colonial Africa is not only that of “collapsed state” and infrastructures but even more fundamentally the challenge of “imported paradigms and the problem of relevance”.

And, it will be called to mind, Ake (1979) in one of his path-breaking works thoroughly argued that “given the Eurocentric perspectives of social sciences concepts, paradigms, and theoretical frameworks, the gamut of the discourse is essentially in service of imperialism” (Ake, 1979) in Abubakar (2001). Thus, according to Abubakar, the critical questions still remain: has African social science discourse significantly experienced an epistemological break from its Eurocentric antecedents? What is the relevance of the social sciences in positioning Nigeria, and indeed the African continent, in the

seemingly competitive knowledge millennium of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

According to Abubakar (2001) African social science is in a crisis not only because of the loss of a sense of history but also the absence of a coherent organizational and conceptual clarity. The implication of this is indeed profound. African social scientist "...is the "sickman" of the new knowledge based world order". For this reason, it is alarmingly losing its capacity to think for it and increasingly falling to dependence on externally generated and externally driven concepts, and paradigms. Sanda (1981) was equally of the view that "the practice of the social sciences in Nigeria derives its inspiration, theories, paradigm and methodologies from western societies. The usual practice, according to Hart (1998:185) "was (and still) to interpret the observational findings in terms of some prevailing dominant ideas or theoretical perspectives developed in the West".

In spite of the assumed universality of science, the effect of this western origin of the social sciences on the amount of impact that the disciplines have been having on society appear much more important than that the cultural-contact theorists could have anticipated. However, there was a growing recognition among African social scientists that there was something seriously lacking in social science studies in the continent. Some scholars attributed the drawbacks to the practice of interpreting African society in terms of concepts and theories developed in the context of Western societies. They held that African society was unique by itself and therefore called for a totally different kind of conceptual and theoretical apparatus for its understanding.

This historical fact, however, is very important for the understanding of the current predicament and limitations of social sciences in Nigeria and Africa. The realization of millennium development goals in Nigeria and indeed African continent as a whole based on the western oriented theories, paradigms and methodology will still be mirage just as modernization theory had failed to develop Africa as proposed by modernization theorists.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The problems that have commanded the attention of social scientists since the emergence of the field have been profound. These are divergent concepts and theoretical approaches; divergent methods-based approaches and subject-specific controversies. All of these possible lines of disputes characteristically overlay each other in virtually every discipline in social sciences. Theories, methods and evidence/analysis- none of these can be

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taken as “settled”, “accepted” or “resolved”. These debates are not about empirical questions but rise because considerations of vital importance to one school of thought are seen as marginal by others.

There are concerned with appropriate orientation of the social scientist to his materials. Should he attempt to implement values or should he be neutral? Should he be concerned with broad general theories or with solution to specific problem? Should he be interested in concrete behavior or in subjective intentions? The other problems, concern the appropriate scientific strategy for defining the object of study. Is society an embodiment of cultural values or is pressed to realistic conditions? Is it stable or constantly changing? Is it a reality in its own right or a sum of the acts of individuals?

The conflicting positions are irreconcilable when stated in their usual form. However, compromise can be found to the predicaments based on the fact that social life goes on. Somehow the tensions inherent in social organization do not bring social life to a grinding halt. A series of arguments have been presented suggesting that an understanding of how, in our ordinary social life, compromises are found to the dilemmas inherent in defining social objects and in orienting ourselves to objects helps to understand how social science can deal with its cognate problems.

In sum therefore, any problem to study in social sciences important enough to be studied with methods that yield accurate and unbiased results. One implication of this line of argument is that basic methodological disputes are endemic and permanent in the sense that no one-sided resolution is possible, for in the long run any such resolution must be unresponsive to a given functional requisite of social science. For Africa and indeed Nigeria in particular to achieve meaningful development and the actualization of MDGs, Nigerian Social Scientists must think for themselves and not fall to dependency on externally generated and externally driven concepts, paradigms, theories and methodologies. Now it is time to imitate our teachers by traveling in the opposite direction, back along the road by which they came.

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