

IS SOCIAL SCIENCE A SCIENCE?

The status of social science has always been very questionable and from the beginning, social scientists have tried to explain that their methods are just as good as those of any scientist who studies the natural world (the physical scientist). 'Look at how many statistics, we use' you hear them exclaim. So by applying the same research methods as the physical scientists, the social scientists consider themselves 'respectable' scientists.

There is a problem though: in using the methods of the physical sciences while studying humans (including their artefacts and their interactions), social scientist forget the most important aspect of what makes a being human: that he lives in a constructed semantic habitat. Meaning, knowledge and language being the main aspects defining this semantic habitat.

So the difference between physical science and social science lies in my view in the difference between the nature of the subject at hand. Stones and atoms ('things' we can see through instruments) are quite different from humans. On the physical level, objects can be seen, they can be displaced and they can be felt (heavy and cold for example). But as the materialists have pointed out: humans are made of materials too. So humans can be heavy (most of them in the West are) and can feel warm. They move and they displace things. They also make things (artefacts) and interestingly enough, they exchange sounds (communicate) with each other.

Understanding (causal) relationships between entities (the realm of theory and model building) and predicting the time-space positions of entities (the realm of the testing of conjectures) is the main aim of all sciences. Can we predict the time-space position of humans and the consequences of their movements, and do we want to? Yes, we want to and yes, we can. But these predictions are not formulated by theories built with instruments borrowed from the physical sciences but built by analysing language and understanding its semantics. With the analysis of language, knowledge and communication we can understand the meaning of movements (we call them actions) and by consequence we can establish causal relationships between movements and through the theories we can predict these movements.

If we look at our world, we can divide it into 5 levels:

I: the subatomic,

II: the physical,

III: the biological,

IV: the mental (including the sensations) and

V: the social (defined as human interactions).

Research on biological entities and biological functions is conducted with the same type of methods as in the physical sciences. The study of the mental state is the most difficult to do, in my opinion. This is the study of fantasies, of thoughts and of (physical) feelings. The underlying entities of these phenomena being the brain and the neural network of a body.

Pain, for example is a sensation that belongs to world IV. It is indefinable and cannot be 'explained' by material entities (world I, II and III). Pain can be related to the presence of activity in some neuron circuits, but as everyone knows, a correlation does not necessarily imply a causal relation. We are dealing here with the age-old mind-body problem.

Let's round off with some additional thoughts on social science; the science of world V.

1) Exerting a physical force on a human will never supply the desired effect because humans will always try to counteract physical forces that impinge upon them and they will always try to reinstall their previous physical and semantic state.

2) By analysing communication and its semantics we can make predictions. In fact we do it all day long. For example, if you hear a man making an appointment for 7 p.m. this evening with his girlfriend for the opera, you can predict that they will be there at 7 p.m. this evening. By no means can you predict this with the use of methods borrowed from the physical sciences.

Conclusion: social science is a science because we can make predictions based on theories. The methods used are different from those of the physical sciences.

In 1958 Peter Winch (14 January 1926 – 27 April 1997) already wrote a very interesting little book: The idea of a social science. But Peter is a philosopher and elucidating concepts is his profession. Social scientists on the other hand try to predict the way humans will interact with each other.