



Qualitative Sociology Review – Book Reviews

Volume V, Issue 1 – April 2009

Piotr Chomczyński
University of Lodz, Poland

Book Review:

Theory and Methods in Sociology. An Introduction to Sociological Thinking and Practice, by John A. Hughes and W.W. Sharrock.
Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills 2007

According to the intention declared by the Authors, this book should help to *write a text which better combines sociological theory and method than hitherto*. John A. Hughes and W. W. Sharrock decided to put an emphasis on link between theory and method to make a step toward better research practices and progress in sociology as a discipline.

[...] We ourselves subscribe to a fondness for the idea that sociology will eventually establish itself as a well-grounded empirical discipline. (from Preface)

“Theory and Methods in Sociology” seems to be a valuable book for students and social scientists. The main advantage of this book is a concise presentation of relations between theory and methods in different paradigms and particular theories. As a result a reader has an opportunity to look at a selected problem from a more holistic perspective, which includes theoretical suppositions and methodological practices. Moreover, we can find many examples that make discussed issues better explained and transparent. Additionally, at the end of each chapter there is presented selected bibliography that helps us broaden our knowledge on this area. Thanks to that, a reader has a good opportunity to direct his interest on selected problem and find some additional information about it. However, it must be stressed that the book is rather closer to a compendium than to a monograph, so those who look for more detailed information relating to specific problem may not be fully satisfied.

The book “Theory and Methods in Sociology” consists of an introduction and three parts: “The Positivist Project”, “The Qualitative Turn” and “Critical Questions”. Each part encompasses selected issues divided to specific problems presented in detail. Now I will try to present shortly the content of each part.

“Introduction”

In the first part the Authors made brief presentation of the following chapters. In the “Introduction” Hughes and Sharrock also point out on the dilemma that is the leitmotiv of this book: what characterizes sociology as a science: pluralism or disarray? There are discussed some issues, which among sociologists are perceived as basis of disagreement in their conception of sociology as a social science, for instance: dispute between qualitative and quantitative methods of social research, the problematic gap between theory and method and its consequences, building generalizations, holistic and atomistic thinking represented by different schools and paradigms etc. In this part we can find “introduction” to the complexity and contradictions present in contemporary in sociology.

“The Positivist Project”

In this part the Authors present the philosophy of positivism in sociology. In the second chapter entitled “The Positivist Project: Introduction” there is discussed the ontology of sociology as a science. Hughes and Sharrock describe contribution of “Founding Fathers” in the process of building theoretical and methodological fundamentals of sociology. We can find there some basic information about the role of classics such as Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld in building foundations of sociology.

The next chapter “Building a Science of Sociology” is devoted to the major premises of positivist strategy. There is presented methodology of logico-deductive way of forming hypothesis and building conclusions. We can find there Karl Popper’s model of falsification and confirmation, brief description of selected formal theories (evolutionary theories, exchange theories, game theory, behaviorism, the model of social system by Talcott Parsons). Next, there are presented middle range theories (Merton’s social structure and anomie) and growing tendencies of mathematical description of reality.

In the fourth chapter entitled “Variable Analysis and Measurement” there are characterized different types of variables, relations between variables (independent and dependent), levels of measurements and their methodological consequences but also some basic means of quantitative analyses (cross-tabulation, contingency table, correlations, associations etc.). The chapter also encompasses the problem of operationalization and its role in theory building and much more. Presented issues are well illustrated with many practical examples and case studies.

Chapter five “Interviews and Questionnaires” is oriented not only on techniques of social research but also concerns some general methodological problems connected with their application. Hughes and Sharrock present the philosophy of using questionnaires (the connection between questions, answers and obtained data, responses as indicators of phenomena etc.). The Authors also deliver some basic characteristics concerning the types of questionnaires, but also some useful general rules relating to their use in research. At the end of the chapter there are discussed different approaches and practices concerning the process of interviewing. There are also presented some conclusions and remarks connected with questionnaire as a tool of data gathering.

Chapter six “The Social Survey and Multivariate Analysis” is devoted to the problem of large sample research and data analyses. The Authors describe the history of social survey and its growing role in public opinion research. There are also

discussed hopes directly connected with making generalizations in case of studies that base on social survey technique. The next part of the chapter contains some technical description of statistics, analyzes and types of samples linked procedures of using social survey but also some practical aspects and methodological conditions of doing surveys.

Chapter seventh "The Demise of Positivism?" presents criticism expressed both by supporters and opponents of positivistic paradigm. The Authors investigate the reasons of decay the model of sociology as a science that bases mainly on mathematical and statistical models of building conclusions. In their opinion:

[...] positivism failed by its own standards, at least insofar as the adoption of those standards was meant to render sociology 'genuinely scientific'. (p. 158)

"The Qualitative Turn"

Part two "The Qualitative Turn" characterizes qualitative movement present in sociology after "hopes' lost" linked with attempts to build quantitative model of sociology as a "genuinely scientific" science. Chapter eight entitled "The Contest over Realism: Introduction" begins from the presentation of Blumer's critique of positivists' conception of variable as too mechanical point of view on human relations. There are also described basics of symbolic interactionism, especially Chicago School and grounded theory as an opposite proposals of interpreting reality and making research.

In the following chapter "The Method of Fieldwork" a reader can find deepened information concerning links between developing methods rooted in field and naturalistic theories that put emphasis on viewing reality from the perspective of actions and processes initiated by social actors. The Authors present many aspects of fieldwork studies in relation to "new methodology" principles. The new methodological and theoretical standpoint is illustrated with examples of techniques used by sociologists oriented on qualitative methods such as participant observation, case study, qualitative interviews etc.

In chapter tenth "Explorations in the Actor's Point of View" Hughes and Sharrock discuss [...] *shift in sociological thinking proposed by interactionism and issues arising from the interactionist perspective* [...] (p.235). The main problem touched here is the emphasis on "the actor's point of view" and actor's definition of situation both the basic assumptions of interactionists' stance. The Authors contrast this standpoint with the requirement of objectivity that is essential for positivists.

[...] we reviewed some of the arguments which not only were critical of positivist sociology and social research methods, but also proposed an alternative conception of the sociological endeavour. (p. 255-256)

In the next parts there are presented some theories and their assumptions that base on mentioned fundamental "actor's point of view" premise.

"Data Collection versus Analysis" encompasses one of the most important and timeless problem present in countless sociological discussions. In this chapter, the Authors are trying to deal with still raised questions: What kind of data a social scientist should choose - hard or soft? What kind of research to do - qualitative or quantitative? Triangulate methods or not? If so, how to do it and under what

conditions? These questions are discussed from the perspective of interactionist theories.

“Critical Questions”

The next chapters from the third part “Critical Questions” relate also to issues mentioned in the previous chapter. The Authors treat the problems that concern the modern sociology and its ideas of describing the surrounding reality. Hughes and Sharrock write for instance that

[...] in part of the book we aim to examine more recent developments in sociological thinking that seek to refurbish and reassert the critical posture of discipline. [...] A major element in this refurbishment was a subtle critique of contemporary society and its dominant modes of thinking, especially its preoccupation with science, and particularly with positivistic science. (p. 279)

There are presented theories standing in evident opposition to dominant and widely shared visions of society and methods of research that are popularized by them. We can find in this part discussion over arguments raised by structuralists and post-structuralists, modernists and post-modernists and other critically oriented schools or representatives of independent ideas. The Authors have rather successfully mixed different theoretical and methodological outlooks, presenting as a result some alternative ways of perceiving sociology as a science. This part encompasses also selected questions raised by both classics like Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Claude Levi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud and many others but also ideas initiated by their followers and critics. As an outcome part “Critical Questions” is interesting as well because of some original commentaries given by the Authors.

The final conclusions

In my opinion this book is innovative by the fact that the Authors do not quit from problematic questions and issues, instead presenting their own ideas and commentaries on these subjects. Moreover, the problems in spite of their complexity are described in accessible manner what makes this publication an interesting proposal especially for students who write M.A. thesis or Ph.D. dissertation. The next advantage of this book is a well presented combination of theory and method illustrated with many examples useful during first stages of research designing.

Citation

Chomczyński, Piotr (2009) “Book Review: Theory and Methods in Sociology. An Introduction to Sociological Thinking and Practice.” *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. V Issue 1. Retrieved Month, Year
(http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)