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## On Peter Winch and Qualitative Social Research

Miad Ranjbar

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**ON PETER WINCH AND QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH**

by

Miad Ranjbar  
B.Sc., York University, 2011  
M.A., Ryerson University, 2013

Major Research Paper

Submitted to the Department of Sociology

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the tenets of the philosophy of Peter Winch, a Wittgensteinian philosopher, and the relevance of his work to conducting qualitative social research. In this paper, Peter Winch's philosophy which is elaborately presented in his book *The Idea of Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* is first extrapolated and examined. I then discuss how his philosophical reasoning can substitute for the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism, critical realism, and pragmatism as qualitative social research paradigms. In this paper, it is argued that the history of empirical social studies has been prone to important conceptual confusions both when researchers dwelled on the principles of positivistic and post-positivistic structure of the social scientific methodology, but more importantly, upon and after the emergence of qualitative sociology. Although the claim to the *understanding* of social behaviour as opposed to *explaining* it has been declared as the hallmark of qualitative methods, the philosophical arguments pertaining to intelligibility and rationality have been hugely omitted in discussing what it means to *understand* social action. According to Peter Winch and other supporters of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is the attending to such notions that makes it possible to give a true account of the nature of social phenomena in general (Winch, 2008, p.41)

## Acknowledgments

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this Major Research Paper is to assess the philosophy of Peter Winch and use it to examine the paradigmatic frameworks of constructivism, pragmatism, and critical realism in contemporary *qualitative* social research. By drawing from the work of Peter Winch in “*The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*” (ISS), this paper shall examine an array of sociological concepts as they relate to individual identity, rationality and intelligibility, social relations and interactions, and finally, the ‘empirical’ assessments of such notions. This examination will start with Winch’s conceptions about the role of philosophy and his arguments about why “any worthwhile study of society must be philosophical in character and any worthwhile philosophy must be concerned with the nature of human society” (Winch, 2008, p.3). Then, I will discuss how the idea of understanding social action is incompatible with the empirical approaches of natural sciences and their emphasis on explanation building. Wittgenstein’s (and Winch’s) conceptions about the rule-governed nature of social action will then be explicated and its relation to sociological theory and methodology will be assessed.

As will be discussed shortly, the history of the social studies can be characterized by its heavy dependence on the idea that the *a posteriori* approaches of the hard sciences are foundational to creating any kind of epistemologically justified knowledge. Although this holds true in the case of the natural sciences – but not entirely, as recently, there has been much skepticism about the interrelations of epistemology and scientific inquiry in the philosophy of science (Rosenberg, 2008) – the reliance of social researchers on empirical inquiry takes the *truth* of realism and other similar ontologies as granted. Such ontological frameworks have been and continue to be challenged by contemporary

phenomenology, German idealism, existentialist arguments, and most importantly, by Wittgensteinian philosophy (Steel & Guala, 2011).

The Wittgensteinian depiction of philosophy is foundational to the work of Peter Winch. In fact, in *ISS*, he uses this depiction (which he sees to stand firmly against the ‘underlabourer’ conception of philosophy advocated by David Hume and other prominent empiricists) to underlie the importance of social relations, conceptual inquiry, and ‘language games’ in delineating what it means to *understand* social action. Although the claim to the *understanding* of social action as opposed to *explaining* it has been repeatedly declared as the hallmark of qualitative methods, according to Peter Winch, overreliance on empirical methods in the investigation of social action hugely nullifies this purpose. Winch further argues that to investigate the nature of social action is to investigate the nature of the *concept* of social action (they amount to the same thing); as such, the only appropriate method is that of philosophy through *a-priorism* and conceptual inquiry (Winch, 2008, p.68).



## **Chapter 2: Philosophical Foundations**

This section will address two main philosophical discussions; the first will be the work of Peter Winch in *ISS* and the second will be concerned with contemporary research paradigms. In the first part of this section, I will attempt to critically engage with Winch's philosophy through the use of various examples to help clarify his arguments. This part will end with an explicit examination of how Winch's theses can relate to the concept of sexual orientation, a concept deliberately selected due to an abundance of operationalizations and categorizations that have fallen somewhat exclusively under constructivist theories and interpretivist sociology. I will carry this example onto the next part of this section while examining the nature of contemporary qualitative research paradigms and their claim to the understanding of social behaviour.

### **On the Relationship between Social 'Science' and Philosophy**

In *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (*ISS*), Peter Winch (2008) presents a series of arguments in defense of the notion that the very idea of a social *science* is nonsensical. Here, it must be mentioned that this view is apart from Weber's distinction between explaining human behaviour (the aim of the scientific mode of inquiry) and understanding it. Winch claims that because we cannot separate language from reality – as “the limits of my language means the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein, 2007) – and that any action (including language) can be understood as following (or breaking) intersubjectively accepted social rules, the meaning of social relations can be understood only as the interwoven relationship between language and the practice of social rules. This central theme of Winch's writings dismisses the idea of a theory as a concept independent of the nature of social reality (which is the very nature of a scientific

theory), including the rules that govern social behaviour. As will be discussed shortly, the true nature of social enquiry, according to Winch, must be philosophical, not empirical.

### *The 'Underlabourer' Discipline*

Winch starts the book by attempting to clarify certain conceptions that are held about philosophy, its mode of inquiry, and its place and role in the pursuit of knowledge. Starting by contesting David Hume's conception of philosophy as the '*underlabourer*' discipline and in charge of clearing the path of the *real* sciences of linguistic rubble, Winch argues that this (and similar) conceptions are misguided due to a major confusion about conceptual and empirical questions (Winch, 2008, p.7). The '*underlabourer*' conception of philosophy is in line with the view that philosophy's methods cannot advance our state of knowledge about the world. In other words, given the *a priori* method of philosophy and the historical debates within the analytical tradition surrounding the legitimacy of *a posteriori* over *a priori* reasoning, it is contended that true knowledge can only be acquired through the use of systemic, empirical, and reductionist approaches, such as those used in the sciences.

This conception, according to Winch, is simply incorrect because of philosophy's roles in answering *conceptual* questions about the world, questions that cannot be answered through the use of empirical means. The question 'what is real?' is an example of such conceptual inquiries. To proclaim that 'the world is real because we can see it' is to propose an empirical answer to this question. The reason why such answers are fundamentally mistaken is due to such answers' treatment of observable phenomena as real (what is seen is *already* accepted to be real). Philosophy is concerned with the *concept* of reality and questions such as: 'what should count as real?'; '*can* observable

phenomena be considered as real?'; 'is reality mind-dependent?' Such questions cannot be answered by science with its empirical means of enquiry, and should be left to philosophy, providing conceptual explications of the notion of reality.

### ***Conceptual versus Empirical Questions***

For Winch, questions pertaining to the nature of social action are conceptual questions (like that of philosophy), not empirical ones. To clarify this argument, let us examine the types of questions asked (and allegedly answered) in sociological enquiry, and assess them based on the conceptual/empirical divide advocated by Winch. Inspired by the work of certain recent scholars who contest the imposition of the social category of sexual orientation onto the Iranian population (Bucar & Shirazi, 2012; Mahdavi, 2012; Rastegar, 2012), an interested sociologist might ask: "do any Iranians engage in homosexual acts?" Now, let us consider two other questions that can be defined as belonging to the scientific and the philosophical domains (empirical and conceptual questions, respectively): 1) "are there any Canadian geese in South America?" and 2) "is there a relationship between reality and the knowledge of reality?" Though the sociologist's research question might at first glance be seen as similar to question 1, according to Winch's arguments, this is the very mistake that has given rise to the view that the study of social phenomena should be left to science.

For question 1, a biologist can provide an answer by discovering a Canadian goose in South America, or alternatively, by not discovering any geese after a thorough examination of the South American continent. The point is that a conclusive answer is produced either way, because there are established and agreed-upon *criteria* that comprise the characteristics of a Canadian goose, no matter the context in which it is

discovered. On the other hand, the sociologist's ideas of "homosexual acts" and the philosopher's conception of "reality" cannot be determined by experimentation. The criteria for these two concepts are dependent upon the purpose and the context in which they are said to occur. There can be agreement about what they mean, but not in abstraction from the specific contexts and the purposes to which they relate. For instance, the concept of "homosexual activity" has a meaning associated with it that differs across different contexts. By providing a universal operationalization for this term, we cannot claim that we have *understood* the concept in any way because the intelligibility of "homosexual activity" is only possible upon the careful consideration of how it plays out in a specific social context. Similar to the question of reality, an understanding of "homosexual activity" requires attention to the *concept* of "homosexual activity" which is only apprehensible upon the consideration of what it means in the life of social actors.

### ***Philosophy of Language and Its Relation to Conceptual Inquiry***

The other aspect of the mentioned conception of philosophy (the 'underlabourer' conception of philosophy) is the view of the discipline as freeing the path of other disciplines of linguistic confusions. According to Winch, philosophers' interest in language, *aside from* ridding other disciplines of their linguistic confusions, is in language as such, and in general. The role of language in answering questions pertaining to "what is real" is a crucial role to consider. To distinguish between the world and the language that is used to describe the world is fundamentally flawed; when we talk about language in such a way, we assume that it is something that is *independent of* the world, or that it does not belong to it. On the contrary, the *concepts* of what is real and what

belongs to the world are given by language. In fact, the notion of a *world* is only apprehensible upon the consideration of the *concept* of a world.

Therefore, we can see how the role of philosophy, as providing the means for *conceptual enquiry* is a crucial role. Along the same lines (by considering the role of language in giving us the *concepts* through which we are in contact with reality), Winch discusses what constitutes the nature of social behaviour. Understanding social behaviour (which is the aim of the social sciences), therefore, necessarily involves the examination of the *concept* of social behaviour, which leads to the point that “what constitutes social behaviour?” (Winch, p. 17) (just like ‘what should be considered as ‘real?’) is a conceptual question, not an empirical one.

As we can see, the reason Winch is so concerned about the correct delineation of the role of philosophy in such a way is because of the nature of the social life as we *know* it. To reiterate the previous point, in understanding social reality, we can *only* use concepts that we are given in our language. Understanding such concepts are incompatible with empirical means, and rather, require conceptual enquiry; true sociological inquiry, therefore, must be philosophical, not scientific.

Characterizing the philosophical method as conceptual enquiry sets forth the consideration of philosophy as being concerned with the relationship between thought and reality (intelligibility). To show how intelligibility is possible, Winch delves into the discussion of what it means to *understand* in society, and the roles it plays in social activities: “social relations are expressions of ideas about reality” (Winch, p. 21). Therefore, social relations can be said to demonstrate one’s understanding of reality. This ambiguous position is elucidated by Winch through the use of the concept of ‘following a

rule'. In order for us to use a word *correctly*, it means that we are using the word the same way as the definition suggests. But what is it for something to be *the same* as another? For instance, when someone points to a table and says: "this is wood", how can we know if he is talking about the table (definition of a table) or the material with which the table is made? What if we were to say the *same* thing (wood) when we saw a table made from marble? We don't, because we consider the primary definition of the concept of a table originally given to us. In language, therefore, we are concerned with the pragmatics of the meaning of the given words, which is gained through awareness of the context in which it is used. There are no formulae for this, but context-dependent rules, that if followed, one would be able to use the definition of a given word *correctly*. Therefore, for Winch, when we talk of the meaning of a word, we are talking about the notion of following a rule.

### ***On the Role of Understanding in the Social Studies***

For Winch, providing an extensive account of why and how conceptual questions differ from empirical questions sets the ground for the rest of his arguments. In the positivist tradition of social scientific enquiry, a crucial component of the methodological approaches employed is their abilities in explanation building. Explanation, or the drawing of causative links between two or more phenomena, is assumed to be the mark of true science. Clearly taken from the natural scientific methods of investigation, the notion of explanation is primarily linked to empiricism, an epistemological framework where information coming through the senses are said to be the only valid source of knowledge (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p. 342). Though Winch regards the role of empirical enquiry an important role where it is appropriate, he contests its application in the study of social

phenomena, which as described above, are argued to be closer to the *a priori* approaches of philosophy than the empirical ways of science (Sharrock & Anderson, 1985, p.120). The use of *explanatory* approaches, which are used to connect natural phenomena to one another in a causative manner and through the use of empirical means, is similarly rejected.

As we can see, Winch's primary concern is with regard to *investigation* in social studies. When it comes to understanding action, according to Winch, the overarching notion that there is an explanatory connection between concepts and actions is to be discarded. In applying this to the understanding of other societies, the very idea of accepting (or rejecting) another society's *explanations* of their own actions is the issue at hand; for Winch, before we can explain an action, we need to be able to *identify* it. This can be done exclusively through seeing how the concepts and actions form (or fit within) a way of life. Understanding an action, then, is looking at it as rule-following behaviour (to be discussed in depth later).

### ***Concepts, Actions, and Explanatory Methods***

Before I explicate the matter further, let us discuss what it means for a concept to explain an action. According to Sharrock and Anderson (1985), in the philosophy of social science, it is assumed that concepts offer explanations of the practices to which they relate. If we wish to understand an action, we would need to look at the concepts which are said to explain (or provide intelligible accounts for) that action (p. 121). Many times, when we come across 'bizarre' behaviours in both our own and other societies, the concepts may not seem intelligible to us. A social scientist can render such actions unintelligible because the concepts used to explain the actions do not accord with an

established theoretical account. This will not do, as it is granted that intelligibility is a characteristic of human conduct. In other words, seeing that the behaviour is done by a human is *enough* to call it intelligible. What is left to do is to look for better explanatory pathways. We *see* the action being done as it is, and we *look for* concepts that can explain the action better.

Let us consider the sociological concept of sexual orientation and relate it to the argument above. As a sociologist, when I see two men kissing, or two women engaging in flirtation, I cannot use the explanatory theories offered about what “regular” sexual behaviour is like. Furthermore, my previous understanding of sexual relationship involving the ultimate goal of conception should now be rejected. I, instead, develop the concept of sexual orientation to better explain the behaviour I see. The courting behaviour of two men or two women can now be *explained* by their sexual orientation.

Opposite to the belief of many philosophers of social science, Winch does *not* offer an alternative explanatory pathway, one that is alleged to be in line with social constructionism or relativism, *but questions this entire view about human action*. Primarily, for Winch, not *all* human actions are intelligible, but only those actions that commit the individual to future behaviour. In other words, just as the rule-governed character of a word (its definition, and its use in a given context) gives rise to its future use, so does the nature of meaningful and hence, intelligible behaviour. This results in refuting the claim of the sociologist (who comes across the ‘bizarre’ action) from the very beginning. This is because the decision of the sociologist to provide better explanatory accounts of the ‘bizarre’ behaviour is based on the belief that by virtue of being done by a human, the action is intelligible.



Furthermore, according to Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008), Winch is often misunderstood as claiming that if our own explanations (social scientists' points of view as outsiders) are incongruent with what 'really' happens, we should ask the individuals engaged in the action in order to find the correct explanations of their actions (p. 14). This conception has led to the view of Winch as a relativist, claiming that the truth of why social actions occur (explanations of social actions) is relative to the reasoning of the individual actor (Hutchinson et al., 2008). This is precisely what Winch dismisses (asking individuals for *explanations*, and the *truth* of *why* social actions occur). In the case of our example, Winch would not advocate for the view that if we were to make sense of the action of the two men or the two women, we should be inquiring about their own *explanations* of why they do the things they do, or that 'individual realities' are what *shape* human action. *For Winch, before such explanations can have the slightest chance of making any sense, we need to say exactly what it is we are explaining.* For the social scientist interested in explanation building, the social action in question is often perceived to be in need of no description or identification (or if it is, an arbitrary "operationalization" of the concept is deemed sufficient, as long as the concept can be quantifiably measured); the problem of the social sciences, so to speak, is about which explanations best suit the observations of a *given* behaviour.

Winch rejects this notion, claiming that we cannot just assume that we know what an action is (or by adhering to common sense descriptions of actions). In the case of our example, we cannot say that the concept of sexual orientation *explains* their courtship behaviour, because what we consider to be courtship behaviour is taken as granted. To elaborate, we cannot point to their behaviours and say that the constituents of

homosexuality are two men or two women holding hands, engaging in flirtation, and even engaging in coitus; these behaviours cannot be *explained* by assigning the label of homosexuality to them. This is because we have already taken as granted the *meaning* of the actions we see (i.e. this is holding hands, that is flirtation, this is coitus). The *true* meaning of these behaviours can only be achieved if we pay attention to the context and circumstances within which they occur. The concept of homosexuality, or sexual orientation *cannot* explain those actions; rather, this concept and those actions fit within a way of life, holistically giving meaning to the experiences of the individuals involved.

Therefore, the task of the social scientist, according to Winch, is the provision of the correct *description* of the social action in question, as opposed to explaining that action, which is given secondary status. Not only do we need to have a *clear understanding* of what it is we want to explain before we explain it, this *clear understanding* is often sufficient, and no further explanation needs to be done. In other words, if we have a correct identification and description of the social action in question, we probably would not even need to provide explanatory accounts for *why* it occurs. Winch builds his arguments by recognizing the significance of concepts, not as explanatory tools, but “as constituting the terms within which people carry on their lives.” (Sharrock & Anderson, p. 122) For a ‘homosexual’ man, the knowledge of another man’s ‘sexual orientation’ *means* sharing similar traits, similar experiences, the possibility of sharing sexual encounters, among other things. At times (in certain contexts), this means that the other man can be approached and flirted with (whatever these *mean*), and at other times, it means that no attention should be paid to the concept of sexual orientation. To detach the meanings associated with the concept of sexual orientation for the individual

actors who act on them is to move *away* from any chance we have of understanding the concept in question. As will be discussed later, for Winch, to correctly describe the action is to grasp the rules and the application of those rules.

### ***On Interpretivist Sociology and Verstehen***

The emphasis placed on understanding and meaning of social actions thus far might create (and in fact, it has created) the illusion that Winch's contentions are of an *interpretivist* nature (Hutchinson, Read & Sharrock, 2008). His work is often cited as belonging to the wave of anti-positivist movements in the philosophy of social science (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p. 84). This movement, which grew with the recognition that the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social life is inappropriate, has been often regarded as a general move towards *interpretive* social studies (Verstehen), with focus on the meaning of social life, the interpretation of interactions, and construction of meaning in social relations (Steele & Guala, 2011). According to Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008), the Verstehen school of thought can only be applicable to the Winchian theses as long as Verstehen is translated as understanding and *not* interpretation (p. 20). Against the notion of interpretation, the authors provide certain arguments that can help in distinguishing the work of Winch from the interpretivist approach in the philosophy of social science, which can further help us better understand its relation to what he means by the *meaning* of social action.

Primarily, Winch distinguishes between following a rule and interpreting a rule. For Winch, to understand a social action is to grasp what the action means to the individuals who are engaged in the activity. For one to understand another's words, one does not engage in interpretation of the words, but rather simply hears them. Similarly,

when a man expresses sexual interest in another man, he does not engage in *interpreting* his words, but simply expresses interest back or avoids him.

According to Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008), the focus on interpretation is an instance of a fallacy in which extensional qualities are given primacy. The reality is that in social interactions, interpretations of others' actions do not actually happen, especially as advocated by philosophers such as Manicas who argue that 'judgements' of others' actions are central to understanding. To elaborate, let us examine what Manicas (2006) means by the word 'judgement' and how it relates to the example of sexual orientation. According to Manicas, *verstehen* is something we are all engaged in intuitively and consistently. This is the way we make sense of others' actions, through *re-living* their experiences. Further, when we come across evidence to support our hunches about what we believe another person is doing or evidence that is contradictory to what we believe the meaning of someone's action is, we further strengthen our judgements or refute it, respectively.

To use our previous example, a sociologist who is interested in knowing whether homosexual acts exist in Iran might come across two men who hold hands as they walk in public. The sociologist might *judge* this action to mean that homosexual acts *do* exist in Iran. Subsequently, when the two men kiss each other, the sociologist's judgement becomes stronger. This empirical assessment is conceptually confused, according to Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008), for the following reason: this assumes that the action in question has a preconceived definition. If the question was "are there any rabbits that live in the vicinity of this garden?" half-eaten leafs and rabbit footprints can be used to *judge* their existence in the vicinity. Further, we cannot say that seeing a rabbit

*strengthens* our judgements in its existence. When we see a rabbit, the notion of *judgement* no longer makes sense: the fact is there are rabbits in the vicinity of this garden. Judgments of this sort cannot be applied to the case of the sociologist in Iran. Judgements about the meaning of social action are not related to the notion of evidence. Because the question is a conceptual one, the line of reasoning used in assessing whether or not there are rabbits in the vicinity cannot be applied here. Judging whether or not a rabbit exists in the vicinity should be considered redundant when we see a rabbit. However, judging whether homosexual acts exist in Iran does *not* end with pointing to two men holding hands or kissing.

### ***The 'Rule-Governed' Nature of Meaningful Behaviour***

So far, it has been argued that for Winch, the idea of a social science based on the methods and approaches of the natural sciences makes no sense. This is because in doing so, a major confusion about the nature of questions pertaining to social actions is committed: conceptual questions are taken to be empirical ones. On the other hand, for the philosopher of social science who believes that due to his emphasis on the notion of the *meaning* of social action, Peter Winch is an interpretivist, arguments from “*There is No Such Thing as a Social Science*”, by Hutchinson, Read and Sharrock (2008) were cited to refute this assumption. At this point, I will discuss Winch’s views of social action as rule-governed behaviour and will relate this to the social category of ‘sexual orientation.’

Mentioned previously, in ISS, Winch starts his assertions by clarifying the misconceptions held with regard to the role of philosophy as an ‘underlabourer’ discipline, in charge of clearing the path of other disciplines of linguistic confusions. The

problem with this conception of philosophy is its treatment of language as something that exists *in* the world or *independent of* the world (or many other conceptions: there's a world, and there's language). This view of language has given rise to its study as something that people *do* as a *part* of their day to day lives. This is a gross misconception about the nature of language: the concepts of what is real and what belongs to the world are given *by* language (Read, 2012).

Therefore, the philosopher's interest in language is *as such* and *in general*. The philosopher's (Winch's) interest in language can be further elucidated by citing Wittgenstein's position against the possibility of a private language, and the rule-governed, social nature of language. To say that one *knows* about one's own experiences through the use of a private language is logically incompatible with what *knowing* is. For example, let us assume that whenever a child feels pain, he draws a made-up icon in a notebook. The child then 'reads' from the notebook, proclaiming that he has made up a language that only he understands. This, according to Wittgenstein, cannot be used as an example of a language, for the icon 'representing' the child's *knowledge* of his pain is nonsensical. This is so because one does not *know* that he is in pain, he simply *feels* pain. Similarly, one does not *know* that he *had* felt pain, one *remembers* it. The reason why I have provided this example is because in Wittgensteinian philosophy, the social, interactional, and rule-governed nature of language are enunciated (rendering arguments about the possibility of a 'private' language nonsensical). As such, and in contrast with Weber's notions of subjectivity and the individual actor's knowledge of what he has done privately (relying solely on his own 'conceptions' and 'meanings'), for language to be what it is, it needs to be done *correctly*, implying the possibility of making mistakes.

Hutchinson, Read, and Sharrock (2008) write: “Winch is not a social theorist and the talk of rule-following is best heard as an analogy. Alternatively, we might say learning about other people is to some extent *like* learning the rules of a game. (Rules are an *object of comparison* that Winch is suggesting for us; that is their central role in his text.) In important respects, Winch brings in rules to point out that in many areas of activity the notion of doing things ‘correctly’ and ‘making mistakes’ are involved, and this could not be so if those activities were to be causally explained...” (p. 41) Winch’s views regarding ‘language games’ and ‘rule-following’ are about the *standards that establish what constitutes an activity of this kind as opposed to another*. In other words, for Winch, the delineation and emphasis on rule-following is to provide a conceptual look into *what* an activity is. Again, the example of sexual orientation will help clarify this matter further. For the sociologist interested in knowing whether homosexual acts exist in Iran, he/she must be able to adhere to this definitive identification to decide whether or not such acts exist. To establish the identification, the sociologist must first be able to figure out what homosexual acts *mean* for the participants, and whether, for instance, holding hands, is a constitutive aspect of ‘homosexual acts’. What I mean by *mean* is exactly what an Iranian man, after being prosecuted due to engaging in “homosexual acts”, means when he says to a social researcher: “do you know what it *means* to live in this society?”

Therefore, for Winch, rule-following (and breaking) involves the social components that cannot be avoided if we are to *understand* the *meaning* of that behaviour.

### ***On the Relationship between Winch and Sexual Orientation***

I will now attempt to summarize what has been discussed in the preceding sections with regard to what *can* and *cannot* be said about sexual orientation. Primarily, it was mentioned that by virtue of being a social phenomenon, ‘sexual orientation’ (whatever it means, this will be examined later) *cannot* be studied through the use of empirical, natural scientific modes of investigation. Instead, conceptual enquiries giving rise to the meaning of the concept in the lives of the participants acting on said concepts must be endorsed.

Let us now assume the two following scenarios: 1) that the notion of *sexual orientation* has been developed by social theorists through their *observation* of two men or two women engaged in activities that are normally characterized as *sexual* conduct, done by a man and a woman, and 2) that the notion of *sexual orientation* has been used by certain individuals in any given society to be able to talk about their day to day lives. In the rest of this section, I will use these two scenarios to describe how Winch’s writings can be ‘applied’ to the notion of sexual orientation.

In the first scenario, in accordance with all that has been discussed thus far, the notion of ‘sexual orientation’ *makes no sense*. This is because of the following reasons. Primarily, the theorists who coined this term used their observations to arrive at a conceptualization of human ‘sexual activity’ (or sex) that can be expressed as ‘sexual orientation.’ First, the theorist had used the concept of sex to *explain* the actions partaken by a man and a woman. Going back to the arguments above, this approach is conceptually confused, and results in nonsensical accounts of human social action. The reason for this is that *before* this explanatory suggestion can make any sense, we need to say exactly what it is we are explaining. For these theorists, the social action in question



is perceived to be in need of no description or identification; sex needs not be described or identified. According to Winch, we cannot just *assume* that we know what an action is; it is the correct description of the action that is needed before being concerned about explanations. We cannot say that the concept of sex explains the 'x' or 'y' activity between a man and a woman, because what we consider to be the 'x' or 'y' activity is taken for granted.

Second, the theorist had abstracted this definition of sex from its context (between a man and a woman) and imposed it on the *same* activity between two men or two women. This has two interconnected problems that ultimately results in a fallacious conclusion. First, as discussed previously, the question of "*what is* a sexual act" is not like the question "are there any Canadian geese in South America." This is because the identification of a Canadian goose in South America can be done through the use of established and agreed-upon *criteria* that comprise the characteristics of a Canadian goose. On the other hand, to identify a sexual act, the purpose and context in which it is said to occur must be considered; this cannot be done by experimentation and the use of empirical approaches employed by the social theorist. There can be agreements about what a sexual act means, but not in abstraction from the context and purposes to which it relates.

The other problem which would take us back to the importance of context in the process of understanding an action is the failure to assess the notion of *the same* activity in the work of the social theorist (i.e. the same activity (sex) between a man and a woman is observed between two men or two women). Let us consider the notion of 'following a rule' again. As previously discussed, when Winch emphasizes the importance of

following a rule, *he is not interested in developing a macro-level sociological theory*, but to basically highlight the importance of the possibility of social actions being done *correctly*, and of making mistakes. In ISS, Winch argues that to use a word correctly, it means that we are using it the same way as the definition suggests. But what is it for something to be the same as another? For example, when one points to a man and a woman and says “this is *sex*”, how can we know if he is talking about the activity or if he is pointing to their hair colour? The fact is that we do not make such mistakes, because the context in which this occurs is considered. To assume that there are formulae that can be used to identify this activity outside its context is a fallacious conclusion; there are only context-dependent rules that if followed, one would be able to use the definition of a given word *correctly*.

The conceptual confusions of the social theorist who has come up with the term ‘sexual orientation’ can only result in the view of this concept as nonsensical. In other words, as long as the concept of ‘sexual orientation’ is discussed as a theoretical concept through which sociologists can talk about certain human actions, we are gravely mistaken on all fronts. However, what about the notion of sexual orientation developed by individuals in a given society to discuss their experiences? For example, what about when Sally asks David: “what’s your sexual orientation?” Well, we do not know, until we examine the meaning of the concept by considering the context and the purpose of this conversation. Let us assume that Sally is interested in asking David out; but since they met each other at a gay bar, Sally needs to make sure David is not gay before she asks him out. Let us now assume we were *in* that setting, quietly leaning in and eavesdropping on the conversation. Knowing this, we can say that the meaning of sexual orientation for

Sally is whether or not David could possibly be attracted to her. For David, it means how he might consider himself lucky to be approached by a straight woman in a gay bar. The point is, the notion of sexual orientation is not being used to *explain* the behaviour of these two individuals; rather, for the eavesdropper, understanding the activity of these two individuals necessitates paying attention to what sexual orientation *means* for them, in this context.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

As long as we are viewing, discussing, thinking about, considering, defining, recognizing, (etc.) human social action, *we are using concepts given to us by the language we use*. The concepts do *not* explain social actions; neither do we engage in never-ending interpretations of each other's assertions. Instead of viewing concepts as explanatory theories, for Winch, they constitute terms within which people live their lives. Understanding a way of life and understanding the concepts are the same thing; upon the correct identification (and hence, understanding) of the concept, one has learned to describe the action; no explanations are needed. Similarly, if sexual orientation is a concept developed to *explain* people's 'sexual' actions, we are fundamentally losing any chances of understanding the action to which this concept is ascribed. Alternatively, a *correct* identification of the concept of sexual orientation (as it plays out, so to speak, in the lives of the participants) *is* the understanding of the action to which it relates.

### **The Philosophical Basis of Qualitative Research**

So far, it has been argued that according to Peter Winch, understanding social action is understanding the concepts that relate to those actions. To study such concepts, we require the conceptual methods of philosophy and not the empirical methods of the sciences. I will now turn to how such arguments can substitute for the traditional philosophical paradigms of qualitative social research. In order to do this, I will first outline what a social research paradigm is based on the current literature on this topic.

### ***Philosophy of Social Research***

The notion of a paradigm is drawn from the work of Thomas Kuhn, a physicist and philosopher, who is regarded as a prominent icon in the sociology and philosophy of science. A paradigm, according to Kuhn, is a historically-dependent concept that essentially shapes the perceptions of scientists about the world (Read, 2012). In the history of the sciences, there have been distinct phases of theorization and experimentation with each phase belonging to a distinct paradigm. This view stands firmly against the traditional view of science as a somewhat linear progression of ideas throughout history with an ultimate goal (understanding *everything*). According to Kuhn, each scientific paradigm depicts a different world with an inherent ‘incommensurability’ between paradigms.

This view about the nature of science has found its way into the philosophy of the social sciences with many scholars viewing the nature of social scientific methodology to be shaped by an array of *philosophical* paradigms. These arguments belong to

epistemological theories, ontological perspectives, axiological arguments, and methodological approaches. Congruent epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies and methodologies constitute a social science paradigm which supposedly underpins the knowledge production aspect (research) of any given social scientific discipline.

*Epistemology, Ontology, Axiology, and Methodology*

Epistemology – the philosophical tradition concerned with human claims about the nature, extent, and justification of knowledge – has been shaped by theories that date back to ancient Greek philosophers (Crumley II, 2009). Such theories, comprising and defended by a vast array of logical arguments, holistically define our understanding of the nature and accessibility of knowledge. In other words, epistemological theories are claims about knowledge that involve asking the following questions: What is knowledge? How can it be acquired? To what extent can an entity be known? (Crumley II, 2009; Aune, 1970) Furthermore, epistemological arguments serve the purpose of proposing tools that ultimately result in *justified* knowledge – knowledge whose validity and truth can be universally guaranteed (Crumley II, 2009; Delanty & Strydom, 2003).

Epistemological theories are shaped by theories in a branch of metaphysics, known as ontology (Crumley II, 2009; Delanty & Strydom, 2003). Ontological theories are concerned with the nature of reality and involve claims and argumentations about what we should consider to be real (existence). In other words, ontology is concerned with the following questions: What exists? What is the nature of existence? What is reality? When it comes to the link between ontology and epistemology, questions about the nature of reality (ontological questions) define ways of seeing the world that ultimately affect the ways we perceive knowledge and its justification (Crumley II, 2009).

For instance, an individual who believes that reality is necessarily existent (it is out there – a realist), will adhere to an epistemological explanation of knowledge that sees knowledge to be acquirable through observations (an empiricist), and/or that it is acquirable through systematic attempts to conceptualize observations to reach a general understanding of reality (a rationalist) (Aune, 1970; Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). On the other hand, a person who sees reality to be dependent upon the personal characteristics of the observer (a relativist, or an idealist) might arrive at the conclusion that knowledge is socially created (a constructivist) and that it is the observer, the social researcher, that comes to *construct* an account of the subjective reality of the individual(s) under study (Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Franklin & Nurius, 1998).

Axiology has been declared as another tenet of social science paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This component is concerned with the human value systems affecting acquisition of knowledge which relates to the following questions: what are the roles of ethical concerns in research? Are values inevitably existent in research? What is the extent of achievable knowledge given the boundaries created by value systems? The emergence of the axiological aspect of social research is due to the rise of non-positivistic paradigms which have challenged the view that there can be universally accepted methodological rules; rather, it is often argued that the discipline as well as the theoretical perspectives of researchers has much to do with the selection of an appropriate research approach (Delanty & Strydom, 2003). Ontological, epistemological, and axiological concerns go hand in hand in formulating accounts of reality; they present a certain way of

looking at the world that gives rise to justifiable approaches of investigation. These approaches of examination are known as methodological approaches.

Methodology – or the approaches taken to discover and/or construct social knowledge – follows epistemological choices in that the social researcher who employs a type of methodological approach would necessarily have to adhere to the underlying epistemological theories that support the processes involved in the acquisition of knowledge (Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Feilzer, 2010). To elaborate, a social researcher who holds the belief that knowledge is acquirable through systematic observations (an empiricist) since knowledge is necessarily existent (a realist), would employ a methodological approach that aims to *discover* the objectively existent truth (Aune, 1970; Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The researcher in this scenario would employ a quantitative methodology whose defining characteristics are in turn shaped by the scientific method – a methodology developed in the natural (or hard) sciences that aims to predict and control the phenomenon under study (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). On the other hand, a researcher who sees the nature of knowledge as a set of ever-changing and socially constructed phenomena (a social constructivist) would necessarily believe that since knowledge cannot exist outside of the knower (an idealist), he/she, as a social researcher, would have to employ a methodological approach that aims at *understanding* the phenomenon under study (Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Franklin & Nurius, 1998). In doing so, the researcher *constructs* an account of the observed phenomenon through the use of a qualitative approach aiming to understand the social phenomenon as opposed to attempting to predict future ones (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007).

## *Approaches and Characteristics of Qualitative Research*

What connects the social researcher to the social phenomenon under study is, therefore, shaped by ontological beliefs, epistemological perspectives, axiological concerns, and ultimately, the resultant methodological approaches. Philosophers of science and the social sciences consistently exercise many different ways to elucidate the linkages between these four components of a research paradigm (Rosenberg, 2008). Examples of such linkages were presented above. To reiterate, a philosophical worldview characterized by the belief that reality is subject independent (realist ontology), attainable through sense experiences (empiricist epistemology), and with minimal imposition of value systems results in the employment of a research methodology whose findings are objectively accurate, replicable, and generalizable (e.g. experimental method). These considerations outline the research paradigm of positivism which underlies the quantitative research approach. Alternatively, a philosophical worldview characterized by the belief that reality is multiple and subjective (idealist ontology) and constructed through social interactions (constructivist epistemology) would *supposedly* result in the employment of a research method whose findings are representations of subjective realities, rich in detail, and case specific (e.g. narrative analysis method). These considerations outline the research paradigms of constructivism and interpretivism, postmodernist critical theory, and to some extent, critical realism (Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007).

In the current literature about the nature of qualitative social research, there are qualities that are considered most dominant amongst social researchers and the philosophers of social science. For instance, it is commonly held that qualitative research



sees the researcher as *involved* in the social research process, from start to finish (Creswell, 2009; Frankfurt-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Slevitch, 2011; Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). As such, this requires the researcher to reflect on all aspects of the process and to work with the general understanding that one can never be without a subjective worldview and to observe a social phenomenon as an outsider. This type of research always aims to interpret social phenomena through the provision of a holistic description of their occurrences; this necessitates regarding social phenomena as naturally irreducible. This is accomplished through the use of narrative, phenomenological, ethnographic and other research methods that aim to capture the whole by the use of observations, interviews, and surveys. Finally, the overall goal is not to predict, but to describe and to understand.

### ***Constructivist Social Research***

Constructivism is a paradigmatic view that regards knowledge as individually constructed and socially mediated (Franklin & Nurius, 1998; Dicken, 2010). The main tenet of constructivism is the notion that reality of the world may or may not be mind-independent, but knowledge of that reality depends on the knower. As such, knowledge cannot be objectively defined as it is personally constructed (Franklin & Nurius, 1998; Rosenberg, 2008). Constructivism, as a paradigmatic framework, is rooted in two ontological theories: relativism and idealism (Dicken, 2010).

Relativism is a general viewpoint that regards aspects of reality to be *relative* to other entities (Franklin & Nurius, 1998). For example, moral relativism is an ontological viewpoint that regards the reality of morality to be relative to the mind of the individual who rationalizes about it. The reality of morality can be seen to be *relative* to the society

in which an individual lives. Because relativism is based on the notion that reality is relative to the mind of the individual thinking about it, this notion can be extended as follows: reality is *non-existent* outside of the mind of the thinker (Franklin & Nurius, 1998).

Idealism is an ontological perspective, first appearing in the work of the famous rationalist, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Aune, 1970; Cottingham, 1988). This viewpoint was presented against another school of thought, known as materialism, whose characteristic features involve the belief in the existence of matter as the only real entity (Carlin, 2009; Cottingham, 1988). Therefore, materialism refutes metaphysical explanations of consciousness and individual realities; according to materialist arguments, consciousness and individual realities are the work of interactions between matters, whose subsistence is real. Leibniz's idealism stands against traditional materialism in that it states that the only entities that truly exist are ideas. Ideas, therefore, are *objectively* existent and are what shape realities. Since there are no ways to substantiate the correspondence of one's ideas with another's, idealism becomes an ontological view which supports the notion that (similar to relativism) reality does not exist outside of the mind of the thinker (Aune, 1970; Cottingham, 1988; Delanty & Strydom, 2003; Landesman, 2002).

An epistemological component of constructivism, known as social constructionism, views knowledge production to occur as a social process; furthermore, it is social interactions that define and shape an individual's knowledge, including knowledge of what is real (Madill & Gough, 2008; Dicken, 2010). The important ontological tenets of constructivism apply here: knowledge is individualistic, mind-dependent, and

constructed. However, social constructionism adds another layer to this array of arguments: knowledge is *socially* constructed (Alexander, 2006; Dicken, 2010; Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009). Since, according to this position, all knowledge is socially constructed yet confined to the mind of the individual, *acquisition* of knowledge would be possible through the investigation of the individual. However, another crucial epistemological assumption of social constructionism must be mentioned here: investigation of the personal truth is a *social* act; as such, research is a social endeavor that *further constructs* knowledge (Asberg, Hummerdal & Dekker, 2011; Dicken, 2010).

The constructivist approach in the social sciences is often characterized by its emphasis on the social construction of knowledge and reflexivity in research. The constructivist turn in the philosophy of the social sciences was based on a revival of relativism and its relation to the meaning of social actions and interactions (Creswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The choice of the methodological approach in the study of the social phenomenon of interest is rooted in the ontological and epistemological framework to which a researcher adheres. Working with a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, one cannot be investigating overarching and universal truths about social life. Rather, one would rely on dialectical approaches (such as interviews) in the study of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Finally, the *choice* of conducting research in one way as opposed to another highlights the inevitable existence of values in any social research endeavor (axiological dimensions). In a constructivist paradigm, the value of research is in the extent to which it serves social emancipation (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Constructivists reject the existence of an objective reality outside the human mind. Consequently, knowledge of reality is said to be constructed in social interactions as opposed to a reflection of the world as it is (Creswell, 2009). Given that social research is a social interaction, the knowledge that is gained by the researcher is what has been created in the process and does not find realization outside the research interactions. Therefore, a social researcher can never view him/herself as completely removed from the research process simply because what has been found in the research process did not exist prior to data gathering. Instead, a researcher must be reflexive about his/her roles in the research process and how they have shaped the interactional patterns which have resulted in the emerged findings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Though it may seem that the role of reflexivity is that of reducing one's personal imposition onto the research process, in accordance with a constructivist approach, the role of reflexivity is to better understand *how* the research has resulted in the emerged findings and not something else. In other words, by being reflexive about his/her role in the research process, a social researcher can add a more abstract layer of meaning and understanding to the findings, one that highlights how the interactional patterns between all the involved individuals (the researcher and the participants) have given shape to what emerged from the data (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). Constructivist social researchers further advocate for unpacking and deconstructing the properties of emerged phenomena in order to better understand the phenomena and to provide answers to 'why' and 'how' questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Reflexivity about how the research process and the lived experiences of the participants are founded in the specific social and political conditions can arguably add

much to the understanding of the phenomenon under study (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). Given that the abstracted understanding of the social phenomenon is imbricated with the context in which it has been ‘discovered’, a constructivist researcher must pay attention to the roles of the context in defining the lived experiences of the participants (and him/herself), and how these are related to the larger social structures and discourses. Awareness of these social processes affords a researcher with a level (or nature) of understanding that cannot be achieved through an objectivist framework.

### ***Critical Realism and Mechanisms of Causation***

Critical realism is a research paradigm that assumes a “transcendental realist ontology, an eclectic realist/interpretivist epistemology, and a generally emancipatory axiology” (Easton, 2010, p. 119). It is a relatively new approach born from the work of Roy Bhaskar (Ayers, 2011) and is often characterized as a middle ground to the stringent and objectivity-oriented post-positivist research philosophy and the more eclectic and subjectivist constructivist/interpretivist paradigms.

Critical realists generally assume that causation (or causal language) is always used in the description of the world (Easton, 2010; Dunn, 2011). Further, it is argued that there is a real world out there (reality is existent, independent of the mind of the observer/investigator), but it can never be proved. However, it departs from the original epistemologies that arise from a realist ontological outlook (e.g. objectivism) through enunciating the importance of being critical on the object of science. Another important aspect of critical realist research is the assumption that knowledge of the world is theory-laden, not an objective mirror of reality. Social phenomena are said to be concept dependant; this implies that in explaining them, we would have to rely on the researcher’s

explanations of their meaning and his/her interpretations of them. Most importantly, critical realists argue that the world includes objects, structures, power dynamics, etc. and that such entities do not necessarily present regular pattern of events. This, according to Easton (2010), is an important tenet of this philosophy which is often argued to mean that the world is socially constructed, but not in its entirety.

Easton (2010) further argues that the explanations of objects and entities are essentially the building blocks of theoretical frameworks. They exist (they can be complex or simple), and their existence is not like that of “variables” which are, in reality, only the measurements of objects and not the objects themselves. Objects are argued to have causal powers; for us to understand the world, we must accept that things cause other things to happen (Easton, 2010; Nellhaus, 1998). A critical realist researcher must ensure that events (outcomes) are properly explained; their non-occurrence when they are expected to occur must also be explained (Scott, 2005).

Furthermore, according to the critical realist viewpoint, emergence structure, and necessary and contingent relations are also to be considered (Easton, 2010; Scott, 2005). Where causation is the issue under question, both necessary and contingent relations can be used to shed light on the critical realists’ account of causation. Necessary relations include the cases where two things are necessarily linked; entities resulting in events are, at times, related in that changes in one will result in changes in another. According to critical realist literature, (and arguably where it departs from social constructivism) both necessary and contingent relations exist and this is what explains the world. Explanations of events (entities causing events to occur) can be done through the use of mechanisms; however, a rigid understanding of the concept of mechanism is not employed.

Therefore, in allowing critical realism to lead a social research project, an explanatory component is necessarily existent (explanation of phenomena can only be achieved if causal inferences are made). Also, taking a critical realist perspective means that the researcher is attentive to different social factors that shape individual realities and is critically engaged in the examination of the social phenomena under study; alongside this, as mentioned previously, this paradigmatic choice allows for inferring causation between phenomena (Burgoyne, 2009; Evans, 2011). However, explanation through the use of critical realism as a guiding paradigm is done differently from positivism. Primarily, critical realists deny the existence of regularities in social systems. For internal regularity (i.e. similar outcomes from supposedly similar conditions) to occur, according to Dunn (2011), the external conditions must be regular. The internal and the external conditions do not show regularity because social systems are inherently open systems.

Critical realists contend that we must move away from the tenets of positivistic research, which include neutrality, universality, and reductionism, to that of realism, which includes fallibility and theory laden-ness of knowledge, and belief in irregularity of social models (Easton, 2010). However, critical realism agrees with the notion of truth as an independent notion, and *not* as ideas (idealism). Other characteristics of critical realist research involve the belief that there is necessity in the world (objects are *necessarily* related to one another in causative ways); objects, events, structures, and other entities have powers and can generate events; and finally, scientists must be critical about the objects of their field (Evans, 2011). Through the use of critical realism as a paradigmatic framework for conducting social research, a researcher ensures that a) causative links are identified, b) the mechanisms that link one phenomenon to another are identified and

described and c), at all times, evaluation of phenomena and the causative links are done critically (Easton, 2010).

An important feature of this approach, according to Dunn (2012), is the emphasis on the mechanisms that play important roles in going from one phenomenon to another. What that means is that social phenomena do not occur in isolation, and collection of *more* data (a solution offered by the positivist tradition) would not solve our inability to find regularities in social systems. Rather, regularities are singular (characteristic of single cases/events) and can only be observed through the observation of mechanisms that create this regularity. “A causal claim is not about regularity between separate things or events but about what an object is like and what it can do and only derivatively what it will do in any particular situation. Causal analysis...is about getting beyond the simple recognition that something produces some change, to understanding what it is about the object that enables it to do this.” (p.8). Therefore, “the discovery of empirical regularities may draw attention to objects whose causal powers might be responsible for the pattern and to conditions which are necessary for their existence and activation” (p. 9); however, in order to confirm the existence of causal mechanisms, qualitative information is needed on the nature of the objects involved and not merely more quantitative data on empirical associations.

### ***Pragmatic Approaches to Social Research***

Many philosophers of the social sciences argue that pragmatism in research is both a desirable and an inevitable outcome (Asberg, Hummerdal & Dekker, 2011; Duffy & Chenail, 2008; Feilzer, 2010; Harrits, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Morgon, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Nancy, 2005; Pole, 2007; Slevitch, 2011; Trifonas, 2009).



Pragmatism, as it relates to approaches in social research, is the philosophical doctrine that strongly embraces practicality and conscious and continuous awareness of the appropriateness of methods based on what the situation necessitates (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Nancy, 2005). To elaborate, proponents of this philosophical tradition argue that research methods drawn from the quantitative design (such as the employment of experiments, correlational studies and surveys) and those taken from the qualitative approach (such as case-studies, ethnographies and phenomenological approaches) are mere tools that are at the disposal of the social researcher (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). It is, then, the job of the social researcher to employ appropriate methods taken from either category in all or some components of a research study in a structured manner.

Therefore, researchers who embrace a pragmatic paradigm in social research are less concerned about staying true to the philosophical foundations of social research, and are more interested in attaining a more comprehensive understanding of the social phenomenon under study than what would be possible through an exclusive adherence to traditional (positivistic) and emergent (qualitative) approaches to social research. This approach strongly embraces practicality and awareness of the appropriateness of methodologies based on the unique requirements of each research endeavor (Feilzer, 2010; Morgon, 2007).

It must be noted that philosophical debates surrounding social research would not end as a result of adherence to a pragmatic approach to social research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Rather, pragmatism is the view that the purpose of social research must be the priority of a social researcher, and not justification of the knowledge

produced (Aune, 1970; Morgan, 2007). Because the purpose of social research is often multifaceted and the nature of social phenomena are complex, more can be known about them if they are approached from multiple directions as opposed to when they are studied with one view in mind. It must be noted that pragmatism does not entail a compulsory adoption of multiple methods (mixed-method research); rather, this view allows the researcher to decide how the purpose of the research can be achieved (Pole, 2007; Morgan, 2007).

Pragmatists also argue that the focus on justification of knowledge gained through the employment of a certain methodological approach is first, an antithesis to the general objectives of qualitative research, and second, creates unnecessary frustration for social researchers. It is further argued that methodological writing (especially those that take on philosophical forms) are of very little use to social researchers who pursue research as a craft, where experience, trial and error, and apprenticeship are concepts that are more likely to be encountered, than the congruency (or lack thereof) of philosophical positions. The pragmatic approach to social research stands against the arguments posed by researchers who work with constructivist and postmodernist approaches in that such approaches introduce a type of criteriology that is often regarded as unnecessary by pragmatic researchers. The project of criteriology, according to Seale (1999) works to regulate and constrain qualitative research endeavors, a research approach whose main philosophical tenets emphasize the importance of creativity, flexibility, and methodological pragmatism.

Pragmatism as a research paradigm may seem to create an inescapable logical anomaly, and this is because of the overarching assumption that philosophical discussions

regarding legitimacy of social research methodologies are not as significant as the methodologies themselves (Seale, 1999). If that is in fact the case, then how can we justify the replacement of such philosophies with pragmatism, given that pragmatism itself is a philosophical doctrine? In other words, if devotion to *philosophy* of social research is the issue we would want to avoid, how can pragmatism as a *philosophy* of social research be any different? The most satisfactory answer given to this question may be that what should be considered is not the abandonment of research philosophies altogether, but only philosophical assumptions that set forth unnecessary and impossible to observe requirements (Harrits, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, by substituting the traditional research paradigms with that of pragmatism, it is contended that the link between philosophy and methodology is one that cannot, and should not, be dissolved.

### ***Conclusion***

In the second part of this section, I provided a general overview of three leading philosophies of qualitative social research. Constructivist approaches are often characterized by their emphasis on the social construction of knowledge and reflexivity in research. Critical realists stress the importance of causation and causal language in describing social action with an emphasis on the causal mechanisms that connect social phenomena to one another. Pragmatic researchers generally avoid the discussion of philosophy in relation to methodological suitability and strongly embrace practicality and

awareness of the appropriateness of methodologies based on the unique requirements of any given research project. In the next section of this paper, I will attempt to critique these paradigmatic foundations of qualitative social research by adhering to the Wittgensteinian philosophy of Peter Winch.

### **Chapter 3: Analysis**

In this section of this paper, I will examine the philosophical arguments that are embedded within the three approaches to qualitative social research discussed above. I will not attempt to provide specific criticisms about the soundness of each paradigms; rather, I will try to reiterate the philosophical tenets of Peter Winch as they relate to the general assumptions of the paradigmatic frameworks discussed previously. Holistically, all mentioned philosophies rely on the notion that empirical inquiry is the only valid way

to produce knowledge (especially, critical realists), they abstract theoretical positions from the empirically achieved data (especially, constructivists), and they depreciate the fundamental role of conceptual enquiry and *a-priorism* in social investigations (especially, pragmatists). In order to elucidate the significance of these shortcomings, let us reconsider the arguments of Peter Winch in defense of the notion that social studies should be philosophical, not empirical.

### **The Significance of Language in Conceptual Inquiry**

As repeatedly mentioned in the first section of the last chapter, Winch is concerned with establishing the interrelations between following a rule and language because of the key role of language in providing the concepts within which social actions are to be considered meaningful. Language, as the limits of reality, is the very thing in which social relations find themselves. This view of language involves the understanding of words in terms of their use by the individuals who use them. It only makes sense to talk about language, along with the notion of intelligibility by referring to the social interaction between the people who use it. This view of language further sheds light on the nature of other social acts (as following rules), which leads into the discussion of what ‘meaningful behaviour’ means.

### ***On Meaningful Behaviour***

Primarily, Winch dismisses the idea that a meaningful behaviour is a behaviour that is preceded by a reason (note critical realists’ reliance on mechanisms of causation). For example, let us think of an individual who goes to school because he/she believes that attending school will help him/her succeed in the future. But what if this person did *not*

believe this, and yet attended school? Should we call the behaviour of the former meaningful, and the behaviour of the latter not? Winch does not think so. This is because the behaviour is the same, even when there is no ‘motive’ or ‘reason’ behind it. Meaningful behaviour, then, has a different definition for Winch: *it is a behaviour that commits the individual to future behaviour, and makes the individual to behave in one way as opposed to another in the future.*

Why does this matter? Winch relates the relationship between this kind of behaviour and future behaviour to the relationship between the definition of a word and the future use of the word. In other words, just as the rule-governing character of a word (definition, and its use in a social context) gives rise to its future use, so does the nature of meaningful behaviour. Therefore, all meaningful behaviour is, ipso facto, rule-governed. In line with this view, understanding human activity can never be done by a set of principles (consider criteriology – conforming to criteria that ensure a correct methodological pathway is followed – in constructivist research), but by looking at how the behaviour progresses in the social context, and what comes next. As long as an individual can distinguish between what he/she should or should not do, his/her behaviour can be deemed meaningful; this person needs not know the rules he/she is following for his/her actions to be called rule-governed, and hence, meaningful.

This delineation of what it means to do meaningful behaviour is done by Winch in order to support his position regarding the investigation of such behaviour. At this point, we delve into the discussion of why a social scientist cannot, given the *rule-governed* social behaviour he/she is interested in studying, study the matter through the use of the predominant paradigms of qualitative social research. When we discover the motives of

an individual for acting a certain way, we can assume that this helps us better understand this individual's behaviour. For this understanding to occur, we do not need to know about the social *reasons* for his/her behaviour (e.g. her being upset is *due to* an undesirable interaction with another individual). Similar to this, causal explanations (e.g. explanations due to personality traits), which are based on generalizations from observed behaviour in the past, are different from the individual's motives. Referring to the accepted standards of what is considered as reasonable behaviour in the social context in which an individual behaves relates to the motives of the individual to partake a certain action.

Let us assume that we are interested in the causal mechanisms that make a particular individual angry. This causal examination can be done through the administration of a survey to the individual. Yet, the 'discovered' causal mechanism does not tell us anything about why the individual behaved a certain way at a certain time. For such a scientist, explanation of human behaviour, which is done through proposing *causes* for human behaviour, would lead to understanding human behaviour. In other words, the ultimate goal of the social sciences, which is that of understanding social actions, is said to be achievable through the *explanation* of human behaviour. However, proposing an explanation for why an individual behaves a certain way is completely different from the individual's perceptions of his/her own reasons for behaving that way. To propose an explanation of the behaviour based on *abstracted* theoretical propositions (done by the critical realists and constructivists alike) is to make up something that does not find realization in any *specific* context, and proposing solutions for this abstraction.

### ***Theoretical Abstractions and Reasons for Social Action***

Reasons for behaviour should be distinguished from causes, and as such, the role of social enquiry, in understanding social action, is to be done by looking at the reasons of the social agents (with rule-governed social behaviour). Natural scientists, for example, deal with only one set of rules: those created by the scholars within the discipline. For example, a physicist, in advancing the state of knowledge in the field of physics, would only have to deal with the *concepts* developed in the social context that is comprised of other physicists. These concepts (e.g. scientific terminologies) are about the natural events they are referring to. However, it is critical to note that *the natural events have an existence independent of the concepts* that are used in physics to talk about them. This is not the case in the social sciences. Not only is a social scientist concerned with the concepts used in the respective discipline, he/she is interested in studying concepts that are used by social agents in their day to day lives.

Winch follows Albert Schutz's (1953) notion of "constructs of the second degree" when he notes that if a social scientist is using theoretical concepts drawn from the work of other social scientists (as established before, these are explanatory concepts), he/she must assume that the social actors he/she are studying engage in unreflective understanding. To further elaborate this point, Winch discusses the relationship between issuing command and following them. By equating this process (command → following command) to a mechanism of causation (that is,  $x \rightarrow y$ ), we can only conclude that the notions of command and following command must have happened after the *concepts* of command and following command were formulated. This is *precisely* what is lacking in any qualitative social scientific investigation. Going back to the previous points regarding social relations, for Winch, the social nature of human behaviour is exemplified, *par*



*excellence*, by the concept of rule-following, or rule-breaking. As such, building on Winch's argument about the *philosophical* nature of social enquiry (which arguably results in the correct identification of the action in question), it does not make sense for the social enquiry to apply causative approaches disguised as 'theoretical frameworks'. Furthermore, the philosophical task of the social scientists becomes the understanding and interpretation of said rules and social relations whose existence are shaped by them.

### ***A Final Thought on Causation***

To better elaborate Winch's ideas regarding the inappropriateness of applying causative methods to social investigations, I will use Raimond Gaita's (Winch, 2008) example of a behavioural psychologist interested in studying a group of teachers who are considering disciplining their students. Because, from a behavioural psychology stance, discipline is regarded as a response administered towards behavioural problems, discipline should be regarded as a form of behavioural modification (a behavioural psychology term). The teachers, however, do not look at their own actions in such a way. They do not think that they are using a "behavioural modification" technique in order to change children's behaviour. For instance, one teacher might say to another: "let us use bribery to persuade children to behave better, or to encourage other children to ostracise the poorly behaving child which can lead to the child to behave in the desired way." They are not *only* thinking about the instrument of changing children's behaviour; they are also considering certain actions and what those actions mean. What I mean by the word "mean" in the previous sentence is similar to what one teacher might say to another: "don't you know what it *means* to be humiliated like that?"

What the theoretical propositions of behavioural psychology (and arguably, *any* other causative approach) do is that they neutralize the behaviour through abstractions, sloughing off all moral/ethical connotations associated with it. If the ultimate goal of explaining social behaviour is that of understanding, we see that this goal is not achieved in this process. In fact, this is the furthest we can be from understanding the behaviour of the teachers. A common sense attempt at understanding the behaviour in question does a much better job at this, because it does not attempt to reformulate and restructure the behaviour until it fits a theoretical model. Behavioural manipulation is unjust; to try to look at it causally, one would disregard the ethical connotations of this behaviour, and would say that these teachers are only modifying children's behaviour. In this process, a social scientist necessarily distances him/herself from the language used by these teachers. Again, this distancing impedes understanding and leads to "proving" an aspect of a theory that is independent of what is *real* for the social agents whose behaviours we are interested in.

### ***On Structure, Agency, and Sociological Theory***

With this, I turn to what can be concluded from the writings of Winch about social structure, agency, and sociological theories. These concepts are foundational to *all* types of sociological analyses, including constructivist, critical realist, and pragmatic approaches. Social structure and agency are one of the many dichotomies at the core of the social sciences. Other similar dichotomous entities include realism/idealism, objectivism/subjectivism, holism/reductionism, among others. The point to consider is how and why such dichotomies, especially that of the structure and agency, remain within sociological analysis and social science research. According to Hutchinson, Read,

and Sharrock (2008), the consistent penetration of sociological theories with their supposedly generalized applicability is, in the view of many sociologists, what separates the legitimacy of investigations in the discipline from ideologies. The aim of sociological theories goes hand in hand with that of the structure/agency dichotomy because of the persistent assumption that what holds society together is either the individual actions of the members of the society (agency), or what the individual actions have given rise to (structure). As the argument goes, there cannot possibly be any other sources of *causal* influence on the human condition. In line with the many arguments provided before regarding the conceptual confusions about the use of explanatory approaches in the social studies, sociological theories are designed to give *causative* accounts of human behaviour for the ultimate goal of understanding and not the kind of understanding advocated by Wittgenstein and Winch.

The contentions against the need for sociological theories due to their causative accounts of social action is not to endorse voluntarism, with the assumption that individuals are free to do what they wish to do at any given moment, nor is it in line with structuralism, with the view that humans are the products of social structures. It is the view of social action as rule-governed behaviour. The Wittgensteinian (and Winch's) views about this matter is that no structural 'forces' are *needed* to give descriptions of human social actions, but that a clear understanding of the social action in question can be done by paying attention to the purpose of the action and the context within which it occurs. Going back to one of the first examples provided in this paper, in the case of the sociologist in Iran, giving *structural* accounts of *why* homosexuality acts do not exist in Iran (which is often done by such sociologists) is to appeal to explanations of social

phenomena without actually identifying and describing what the phenomenon is. Ultimately, this generalized ‘understanding’ further distances us from the true nature of the behaviour of the individuals we are studying as this lies solely in the *correct* identification of the rules that govern these individuals’ social actions.

#### **Chapter 4: Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to discuss the tenets of the philosophy of Peter Winch in relation to the predominant philosophies of qualitative social research. In this paper, a thorough examination of the philosophy of Peter Winch which is elaborately presented in

his book *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* was first conducted. I then discussed the philosophical underpinnings of constructivist, critical realist, and pragmatist approaches to qualitative social research. Finally, I analyzed the legitimacy of these philosophies in accordance with the Wittgensteinian claims about the conceptual and rule-governed nature of social behaviour, the primacy of conceptual inquiry in investigating intelligible social action, and the view of language as the limits of reality.

As was repeatedly attested to in this paper, the history of social scientific investigation can be characterized as continuously committing a number of important conceptual confusions both when researchers dwelled on the principles of positivistic and post-positivistic structure of the social scientific methodology, but more importantly, upon and after the emergence of qualitative sociology. Although the claim to the *understanding* of social behaviour as opposed to *explaining* it has been declared as the most important feature of qualitative methods, the philosophical arguments pertaining to intelligibility and rationality have been hugely omitted in discussing what it means to *understand* social action. According to Peter Winch and other supporters of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, it is the attendance to such notions that makes it possible to truly understand what it means to be a social actor.

Winch's primary concern is with regard to investigation in social studies. When it comes to understanding social action, according to Winch, the overarching notion that there is an explanatory connection between concepts and actions is to be discarded. Using Albert Schutz's notion of "constructs of the second degree", Winch argues that social scientists use theoretical concepts drawn from the work of other social scientists to arrive at an understanding of social action. However, social theories are generalized abstractions

with causative suggestions. When a social scientist, adhering to any paradigmatic framework including constructivism, critical realism, or pragmatism, uses such theoretical constructs, he/she assumes that the social actors under investigation engage in unreflective understanding (as do the objects of natural sciences). What is lacking in contemporary social scientific investigation is a true understanding of the nature of social action *before* attempting to explain those actions and not the other way around. The true nature of social action, according to Winch, can only be achieved by investigating the nature of the *concept* of social action through the use of conceptual inquiry, not empirical assessments. Holistically, all mentioned philosophies rely on the notion that empirical inquiry is the only valid way to produce knowledge, they abstract theoretical positions from the empirically achieved data, and they depreciate the fundamental role of conceptual enquiry and *a-priorism* in social investigations.

Though Winch regards the role of empirical enquiry an important role where they are appropriate, he contests their application in the study of social phenomena, which as described above, are argued to be closer to the *a priori* approaches of philosophy than the empirical ways of science. The task of a social scientist should be the understanding and interpretations of the rules that govern social behaviours and social relations in the specific contexts within which they occur.

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