

## Chapter 2

# The Difficult Joining of Theory and Empirical Research: Strengths and Weaknesses of Digital Research Methods

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Many approaches to the study of the social sciences rely on the interpretation of reality itself, giving rise to the quantitative/qualitative dispute. These methods cannot exist one without the other – nor can they necessarily find themselves on opposite poles. To follow one does not mean to forsake the other; on the contrary, both offer the opportunity to observe from different angles aspects of the phenomenon investigated, granting more effective readings of its complexity. While sociology has reproduced its various stances in its scholarly analyses, the most recent debate has relinquished this debate to focus on two alternative features. Both pertain to sociology and the role of social science researchers: the conjugation between theory and empirics and the crisis of sociology in providing answers to societal changes. This contribution aims to address the issues related to the conjugation between theory and empirical research considering digital research methods. The author outlines their strengths and weaknesses without forgetting the original status of sociology as a science.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Plenty of theories, schools, and approaches in the social sciences hinge on interpreting not only cases but also real data, breeding the so-called quantitative/qualitative dispute. Sociology has known this *querelle* from its earliest stages of development. First, with Durkheim's *Suicides* (1897), we are amid the positivist (quantity) phase. Later, with *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920) the focus shifts to qualitative aspects. The switch aims to emancipate sociology from what

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Sorokin called *quantophrenia* and *testomania* (Sorokin, 1955), just a few years after the first edition of Thomas and Znaniecki's book. He meant the reductionist conceptions that follow *mechanical* or *robotic* models (Sorokin, 1956) and leave no room for an open and profound look at the interpretation of social reality through which to give orientation, value, and meaning to the research itself.

And yet, these methods cannot exist one without the other – nor they necessarily find themselves on opposite poles. To follow one does not mean to forsake the other; on the contrary, both offer the opportunity to observe from different angles aspects of the phenomenon investigated, granting more effective readings of its complexity. Researchers, particularly sociologists, must combine the system (objective dimension) with the individuals (subjective dimension); they must blend objective and subjective aspects (Mangone, 2009). The bridge is the interpretation and construction of reality through the relationships between individuals – and between them, society, and culture. The ensuing problems can be overcome only if, in the definition of the sociologist's work, "knowledge is transferred and not ignored". Therefore, research activities must presuppose a connection with knowledge, particularly in an ever-complex scenario where the demarcation of the territory to which to direct actions is increasingly less precise – also due to the mass media (with the multiplication and overlapping of information) and the globalisation processes.

All the social phenomena studied by sociology have, of course, reproduced these opposing stances in the analyses of its scholars. However, the most recent debate has relinquished this controversy to focus instead on two other features, both connected to sociology and the role of social science researchers. First, the conjugation between theory and empirical research; second, the crisis of sociology in providing answers to the societal changes. The inherent complexity of socio-cultural phenomena drives the need to move towards methods that best enable enriching our knowledge of a phenomenon. It is particularly poignant in the current historical phase, with its shift from the *network society* (Castells, 1996) to the *platform society* (van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018). The former is characterised, on the one hand, by the consequences of technological innovation and a change in capitalist structures and, on the other, by cultural transformations based on individual freedom and social autonomy through which to express identity. In the latter, platforms<sup>1</sup> are areas that host a variety of activities: exchange of communicative practices, diverse forms of being together and participating in public life, technologies that allow both citizens and institutions to engage and achieve their goals. They generate a new ecosystem (Boccia Artieri, 2012), to the point of defining a novel perspective, that of *media ecology*. This approach offers an additional key to interpreting socio-cultural processes because its vision is not centred on the medium but includes the relationships between micro and macro aspects of social life interconnected thanks to digital media.

The present contribution aims to address the issues related to the conjugation of empirical research and theory, which is the basis of all the activities of researchers, also considering the digital research methods. For the latter, I will try to outline both their limitations and opportunities in investigating the socio-cultural phenomena of an ever-changing society without forgetting the original status of sociology as a science.

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