

# Between Meaning and Mechanism: A Unified Approach to Social Phenomena

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## Abstract

*Comprehension and explanation are frequently presented as opposing methods in the analysis of social phenomena, although there exists a functional relationship of complementarity between them. The understanding of the meaning attributed by actors to their own actions and the identification of causal mechanisms that govern collective behaviors are not mutually exclusive undertakings, but components of a more nuanced and more effective approach. Avoiding methodological extremes requires the articulation of the two perspectives within a coherent construct capable of reflecting the complexity of social reality. Such integration enables not only the clarification of individual motivations, but also the identification of interdependencies and regularities at the systemic level. The mixed approach is supported as a mature epistemological solution, offering a balanced framework for the understanding and analysis of the social fact. It is thus argued that the traditional divisions between quantitative-explanatory orientations and qualitative-comprehensive ones should be overcome in favor of a unified endeavor adapted to the specificity of the analyzed object. The integration of comprehension and explanation does not represent a concession between two epistemological camps, but a necessity imposed by the profoundly ambivalent nature of the social fact. The dynamics of human interactions, imbued with meaning but also structured by external constraints, cannot be reduced either to subjective interpretations or to impersonal causalities. An approach that combines them offers a more faithful perspective on reality, avoiding both relativism and determinism. Through the articulation of the two dimensions, analysis becomes more nuanced, allowing for the understanding of the motives behind actions and, at the same time, the investigation of the way in which these actions fit into broader social logics.*

**Keywords:** *comprehension, explanation, social fact, sociological methodology, epistemology, hermeneutics.*

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Knowledge in the social sciences is subject to a constant methodological tension, derived from the nature of the object under investigation. Social facts are not entities independent of the subject observing them, but the result of human actions, invested with meanings and situated within variable historical and cultural contexts. The reflexivity of social reality, its symbolic character, and the intersubjective nature of knowledge determine the limits of the transferability of methods established in the natural sciences (Vlăsceanu, 1982).

In this context, the opposition between comprehension and explanation has generated one of the most enduring epistemological controversies within the field of social sciences. Comprehension entails the understanding of the meanings attributed by actors to their own actions and presupposes an interpretive approach, in which empathy, intuition, and the reconstruction of motivations become central elements (Gadamer, 2001). In contrast, explanation seeks to identify causal relationships between phenomena, involves the formulation of testable hypotheses, and relies on the observation of regularities (Dima, 1980). The two perspectives correspond to different epistemological traditions: one hermeneutic, the other positivist, each proposing a distinct view of scientific rigor and validation (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993).

The present article aims to analyze the status of comprehension and explanation in the social sciences, with the objective of investigating the possibility of a complementary use of the two approaches. Such methodological compatibility is supported by authors who have questioned the rigid separation between understanding and causality. Max Weber proposes the concept of “comprehensive explanation,” in which the interpretation of subjective meaning constitutes the starting point of the explanatory construction (Weber, 2001). Similarly, G. H. von Wright (1995) argues that teleological explanation, centered on purposes and intentions, does not contradict causal explanation, but rather complements it in the understanding of human action (von Wright, 1995).

Starting from these positions, the article seeks to highlight the manner in which comprehension and explanation can function in relation, not in opposition. In the first instance, the two types of approach will be conceptually delineated, based on the specialized literature. Subsequently, comprehension will be analyzed as an interpretive method, applicable to situations in which intentionality plays an essential role in the generation of social behavior (Aron, 1997). The role of explanation in the empirical grounding of sociological

knowledge will then be discussed, particularly in contexts where causal relationships can be established on an inductive or probabilistic basis (Johansson, 2021). The final section will propose a coherent articulation between the two methods, with an emphasis on the relevance of this endeavor in contemporary applied research (Chelcea, 2004).

## **The Conceptual Framework of the Relationship Between Comprehension and Explanation**

### *Clarification of the Notions of Comprehension and Explanation*

Comprehension and explanation represent two fundamental modes of epistemological reference to social reality. They reflect different views regarding the nature of knowledge and the status of the phenomena investigated within the social sciences. Comprehension primarily concerns the subjective meanings attributed to actions by social actors. It does not consist in a simple recording of behavior, but in a reconstruction of the intentions, motivations, and symbolic context in which the action acquires meaning (Weber, 2001). Within the hermeneutic tradition, comprehension becomes a condition of understanding, and the researcher cannot remain external to the observed phenomenon, but must participate reflexively in the process of knowledge (Gadamer, 2001).

Comprehension involves a qualitative approach focused on contextualization and interpretation, in which meaning is not extracted through logical deduction, but reconstructed through empathy and immersion in the symbolic universe of others (Aron, 1997). It presupposes a direct relationship between the knowing subject and the investigated object, in which intersubjectivity becomes a condition of validity. Far from representing a form of relativism, comprehension provides access to the deeper structures of social action, particularly where intentionality constitutes the central element.

In contrast, explanation belongs to a positivist tradition in which social reality is analyzed through methods inspired by the natural sciences. This approach entails the formulation of hypotheses, the identification of causal relationships, and the empirical validation of statements (Dima, 1980). Phenomena are regarded as objective and quantifiable, and knowledge involves the discovery of regularities that can be expressed in the form of correlations or general laws (Johansson, 2021). From this perspective, objectivity is achieved through the rigorous control of variables and through the exclusion of the subjective element from the research process.

Within the positivist epistemological tradition, explanation presupposes the application of a logical cause-effect model, in which understanding is subordinated to demonstration. Knowledge thus becomes possible through the formulation of general statements that are deductible from a coherent and empirically supported theoretical system. Validation is achieved through replicability and internal coherence, while comprehension is often perceived as insufficient for the construction of a predictive theory.

Nevertheless, the distinction between comprehension and explanation should not be absolutized. Several authors have proposed integrative models that transcend the traditional opposition between the two approaches. Max Weber introduces the concept of “comprehensive explanation,” in which the identification of causes is indissolubly linked to the understanding of the meaning of action (Weber, 2001). Likewise, von Wright argues that teleological explanation, centered on purposes and intentions, can complement causal explanation without diminishing its validity (von Wright, 1995).

Thus, comprehension and explanation can be regarded as complementary components of a rigorous methodological approach in the social sciences. Their articulation allows not only for an in-depth understanding of human action, but also for the testing of the validity of formulated statements, within research that combines interpretive sensitivity with empirical rigor.

### *Epistemological Distinctions: Objective Determinism and Subjective Determinism*

Comprehension and explanation are situated within two epistemological traditions that stem from different conceptions regarding the nature of social reality and the possibilities of knowledge. At the epistemological level, the distinction between the two approaches is expressed through the opposition between a form of objective determinism and a form of subjective determinism, each presupposing a distinct positioning of the researcher in relation to the object of investigation.

Objective determinism is specific to the positivist paradigm, within which social reality is conceived as an autonomous structure governed by causal laws, identifiable through systematic observation and logical analysis (Chelcea, 2004). From this perspective, knowledge requires distance from the object of study, rigorous control of variables, and the validation of hypotheses through replicable empirical methods. The research model thus becomes an explanatory

one, in which observations are integrated into a coherent theoretical system, and the goal is the formulation of general statements applicable to a broad range of situations. This type of determinism affirms the existence of external causalities, independent of the intentionality of social actors, which allows for the predictability and testability of results.

In contrast, comprehension is based on a form of subjective determinism, according to which social actions are motivated by intentions, beliefs, and interpretations that are historically and culturally situated (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). In this paradigm, knowledge is not reduced to the discovery of external causes, but entails understanding the meanings that actors assign to their own behavior. Social reality is not objectively given, but symbolically constructed, according to the reference frameworks of the participants. Therefore, the scientific approach involves an empathetic immersion into the universe of meanings of those being observed, with the aim of logically reconstructing the motivations and representations that underlie their actions (Weber, 2001).

This positioning highlights the intersubjective character of knowledge in the social sciences, emphasizing that epistemic distancing cannot guarantee absolute objectivity. Instead, the validity of interpretations is conferred by fidelity to the meanings expressed by social actors and by the analyst's capacity to coherently render these structures of meaning (Gadamer, 2001). Whereas explanation aims at regularities, comprehension seeks the understanding of the particular, of contextual uniqueness, and of the internal logic of human actions.

The orientation toward these forms of determinism is not merely a theoretical option, but entails concrete methodological consequences in the design of research. Choosing an explanatory approach involves standardization, quantification, and testability, while opting for comprehension privileges qualitative analysis, detailed description, and the interpretation of phenomena within their specific context. This also accounts for the difficulty in reconciling the two perspectives into a unified vision, given that each involves a particular social ontology and a distinct set of epistemic rules (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020).

Nevertheless, despite these differences, the specialized literature increasingly indicates the necessity of an integrative approach that acknowledges the legitimacy of both types of determinism, depending on the nature of the phenomenon under analysis and the research questions formulated (Johansson, 2021). Without forcing an artificial synthesis, this methodological pluralism can

offer a more flexible and adequate framework for complex social realities, avoiding the excessive simplifications of a single dominant paradigm.

### *The Dual Epistemological Legacy of Social Science: Positivism and Hermeneutics*

Within the social sciences, comprehension and explanation are not merely technical options, but reflect adherence to distinct methodological paradigms, with profound implications for the status of knowledge and the legitimacy of scientific inquiry. Positivism and hermeneutics represent the two major directions that have shaped modern sociological thought, each offering its own set of concepts, methods, and validation criteria.

Positivism, established by the Enlightenment tradition and consolidated in the nineteenth century by thinkers such as Auguste Comte, presupposes the rigorous application of the scientific method in the study of society. In this paradigm, social reality is considered objective, external, and governed by causal laws, similar to those in the natural sciences. Knowledge becomes a process of observing, measuring, and explaining phenomena, with the aim of formulating general and predictive statements (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020). Accordingly, sociological research is structured around testable hypotheses, quantitative data, and explanatory models that aim to identify consistent relationships between variables. The validation of results is achieved through replicability, generalization, and empirical verification.

This orientation has had a major influence on the methodology of the social sciences, particularly in the postwar period, when the standardization of research and the use of statistical tools became dominant. Positivism presupposes axiological neutrality, distance from the object of study, and the minimization of the role of subjective interpretation. From this arises a reliance on experimental control, factorial analysis, and all those methods that promise objectivity and precision in the representation of social reality.

In contrast, hermeneutics affirms the fundamentally interpretive character of the social sciences, arguing that human actions cannot be understood by mere reduction to observable variables, but rather through the reconstruction of the meanings attributed by the actors themselves. In this paradigm, the social world is seen as a symbolic universe, in which meanings are negotiated and contextualized, and knowledge becomes a process of “understanding” (Verstehen), not of mechanistic explanation (Mucchielli, 2002).

The foundations of hermeneutics are found in the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, but they were methodologically developed by authors such as Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. In this tradition, the researcher is not a passive observer, but an active participant in the process of interpretation. The dialogue between the observer and the investigated phenomenon is essential, and understanding involves a circularity between parts and whole – the so-called “hermeneutic circle.” Validation is no longer achieved through replication, but through the depth of interpretation, internal coherence, and the analyst’s capacity to faithfully convey the logic of social actions.

This paradigm supports qualitative methods, case studies, in-depth interviews, and the analysis of symbolic content. Hermeneutics does not completely reject generalization, but subordinates it to the understanding of context, emphasizing the uniqueness of situations and the complexity of human actors. It does not offer universal laws, but interpretive models intended to reveal the structures of meaning that give coherence to the social world.

Positivism and hermeneutics are not merely methodological alternatives, but express opposing views on science, objectivity, and the role of the researcher. One seeks causes, the other seeks meanings. One measures, the other understands. The tension between them has shaped the evolution of the social sciences and continues to generate debates concerning the validity, purpose, and limits of sociological research.

### **Explanation: Between Causality and Methodological Pluralism**

#### *Typologies of Explanation in Social Research: From Nomological Deduction to Probabilistic Reasoning*

Within the social sciences, explanation has been significantly influenced by the deductive-nomological model, specific to positivist epistemology. This model, associated with formal logic, presupposes the deduction of a particular event from a set of general laws and initial conditions, thus guaranteeing the predictive and verifiable character of knowledge (von Wright, 1995). However, in the study of human behavior, the applicability of these models has been limited by the complexity and variability of social actions. For this reason, other types of explanations have also been proposed. The teleological model, in particular, introduces the idea that actions can be understood as oriented toward goals, and their meaning derives from the actor’s intentions (Weber, 2001). This type of explanation does not oppose

causality but complements it, emphasizing the subjective rationality of action. In addition to these forms, probabilistic explanations have been used to account for situations in which no firm regularities can be established, but significant trends and correlations may be identified (Johansson, 2021).

In the context of the social sciences, the problem of explanation has frequently been associated with the deductive-nomological model, established within positivist epistemology as the standard of scientific reasoning. This model presupposes that a phenomenon can be explained if it can be logically deduced from a general law and a set of initial conditions. Therefore, the scientific character of an explanation would be guaranteed by its internal logical structure, while the verifiability of results would derive from the replicability of conclusions in similar contexts (von Wright, 1995). Recourse to this type of explanation has long dominated quantitative social research, especially within functionalist sociology, which aspired to identify general laws of collective behavior.

However, with the development of alternative schools of thought, it has been recognized that the deductive-nomological explanation is not always adequate for capturing the complexity and variability of social phenomena. Human actions cannot always be reduced to simple consequences of prior causes, and the observed regularities are often unstable and dependent on cultural and historical contexts. Thus, other types of explanatory models have been proposed, adapted to the specific nature of social research.

The teleological model, for example, presupposes that human actions can be explained by reference to the goals pursued by actors. In this view, the meaning of the action derives from the intention that motivates it, and comprehension becomes an essential element of explanation. In the tradition of interpretive sociology, this approach is essential for understanding both individual and collective behavior. Max Weber emphasizes that social action must be interpreted by reconstructing the actor's motivation and by situating it within a framework of meaning (Weber, 2001). Teleology does not replace causality but complements it, offering a different perspective on the mechanisms underlying social behavior.

Furthermore, insofar as social phenomena do not always conform to strict laws but rather to general trends, probabilistic explanations become relevant. These do not offer absolute certainties but highlight statistical relationships between variables, indicating the degree of probability that an event will occur under certain conditions. This type of explanation is frequently encountered in sociological

research based on surveys and complex quantitative models. Johansson (2021) draws attention to the heuristic value of probabilistic explanation in the analysis of dynamic and unstable social processes that escape strict determinism.

Finally, causal explanations in the broad sense remain fundamental in scientific inquiry, but they must be understood in a flexible manner, adapted to the social nature of the research object. Causality in the social sciences is no longer viewed as a linear and univocal relationship, but as a network of multiple influences, in which cause-effect relations are often mediated by symbolic, institutional, or cultural factors. For this reason, explanatory pluralism becomes not merely a theoretical option but a methodological necessity.

### *Critique of a Possible Unified Model of Scientific Knowledge*

The idea of a unified model of scientific knowledge – even though it has never been articulated as a coherent theory in the scholarly literature – has often functioned as a tacit normative horizon, especially during the period when positivism dominated methodological thinking. According to this view, methods established in the natural sciences (such as controlled experiments, quantification, and hypothesis testing) would be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to social research as well. Thus, “standard” criteria for valid knowledge were delineated: objectivity, rigorous measurement, replicability, and observer neutrality.

However, the unreflective application of these standards to the social sciences would generate numerous objections. Social phenomena are not impersonal mechanisms, but configurations sensitive to intentions, values, and cultural contexts. Human actions cannot be reduced to crude causal relationships but must be interpreted in light of the meanings attributed by the actors themselves. This complexity renders the use of a single methodological framework for all forms of research inadequate and highlights the need to adapt validation criteria to the specificity of the investigated object (Zamfir, 2005).

For this reason, the critique of such a model – even if hypothetical – does not imply the rejection of the idea of rigor, but rather its reconfiguration. As Mucchielli (2002) argues, robust research does not necessarily entail quantification or replication, but rather internal coherence, contextual sensitivity, and the capacity to provide meaningful explanations. Scientific knowledge in the social domain must be flexible and pluralistic, precisely in order to reflect the complexity of the world it investigates.

Therefore, what is contested is not the necessity of epistemological criteria, but the claim that such criteria could be uniform, immutable, and universally applicable. More than any other field, social research requires an open methodological grammar – capable of combining explanation with understanding, causality with interpretation, and rigor with nuance.

### *The Diversity of Explanations in the Social Sciences*

Recognition of the diversity of explanations in the social sciences entails an explicit departure from single models of interpreting reality, in favor of a methodological and epistemological pluralism that reflects the complexity of the research object. Social phenomena are not reducible to a single type of causality or to a unique mode of understanding. They simultaneously involve objective structures, individual actions, historical contexts, and symbolic configurations, which makes the application of a single explanatory framework impossible without incurring the risk of excessive simplification (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020). In this context, explanation becomes an adaptable theoretical construction that must take into account the particularities of the studied situation, rather than a fixed scheme imposed from the outside.

Some sociological theories privilege explanation through structural causality, emphasizing the role of institutions, norms, or economic systems in determining individual behaviors. Others, on the contrary, focus on the intentionality of the actor, on subjective motivations, and on the meaningful context in which the action takes place. For example, phenomenological or hermeneutic approaches do not reject the idea of explanation, but rather reformulate it within a comprehensive register, in which meaning and interpretation become central to understanding social reality (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). In this regard, there is no irreconcilable opposition between explanation and understanding, but rather a variety of hybrid forms that combine causal, interpretive, probabilistic, or teleological elements.

This variety should not be perceived as an epistemological weakness, but rather as a natural reflection of the plurality of levels of reality that characterize society. Quantitative explanations, of a positivist type, are valid in the analysis of repetitive phenomena with a high degree of regularity. By contrast, qualitative explanations, oriented toward meaning, prove more useful in the study of emerging phenomena, of deviance, of micro-interactions, or of cultural processes. The choice of an explanatory model should not stem from adherence to a particular school of thought, but from the internal

coherence of the research and the adequacy of the method to the investigated problem (Mucchielli, 2002).

Thus, explanation in the social sciences acquires a polyphonic form: it is, at the same time, deduction, interpretation, contextualization, and theoretical construction. Acceptance of this diversity is essential for the development of a reflexive social science capable of responding to the complexity of the contemporary world without falling into methodological dogmatism or excessive relativism.

### **Methodological Complementarity and the Limits of Exclusion**

#### *Foundations for the Convergence between Explanation and Understanding*

The integration of understanding and explanation does not merely represent a theoretical reconciliation between two divergent epistemological traditions, but rather a practical necessity in the face of the irreducible complexity of social reality. Attempting to comprehend social phenomena exclusively through an explanatory lens often leads to forced simplifications and to the neglect of the profound meanings that social actors assign to their own actions. At the same time, a purely interpretive approach risks falling into interpretive relativism, losing sight of the causal structures and regularities that enable anticipation and intervention in social processes. Consequently, a mixed approach is required, one that articulates the subjective dimension of meaning with the objective dimension of explanation.

The relationship between the two is not one of exclusion, but of mutual conditioning. Understanding provides the necessary context for formulating explanatory hypotheses, while explanation offers a framework for validating the obtained interpretations. As Zamfir and Vlăsceanu (1993) emphasize, understanding without explanation may degenerate into mere narrativization, while explanation without understanding risks being applied to facts distorted by the lack of cultural and symbolic comprehension of the context. The integration of the two approaches is therefore an act of epistemological responsibility, which reflects both the specificity of the object of social research and the commitment to scientific rigor.

Moreover, the paradigm shifts in the social sciences over the past decades have facilitated the emergence of transversal approaches that combine methods, perspectives, and tools belonging to both traditions. In the analysis of complex social phenomena – such as migration, radicalization, or cultural transformations – it has become

increasingly evident that neither of the two perspectives is sufficient on its own. The recourse to complementarity thus becomes not merely a methodological option, but a condition for relevance and validity in contemporary research (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020).

This methodological synthesis is supported by an increasing number of research efforts that choose to combine statistical analysis with qualitative investigation, using both quantitative data and interviews, participant observation, or discourse analysis. Far from diluting scientific rigor, this combination allows for a dual anchoring: in the measurable regularities of collective behavior and in the meaningful particularities of subjective experience (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). Mixed research thus proves capable of capturing social phenomena in their complex dynamics, avoiding both the pitfalls of forced generalization and those of excessive fragmentation (Mucchielli, 2002).

At the same time, methodological complementarity contributes to enhancing both the external and internal validity of the findings. The integration of the two approaches supports data triangulation, providing reciprocal confirmation of results from different perspectives. This is essential in a field where the studied reality is constituted precisely by interpretations, actions, and human interactions (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020). Therefore, recognizing the impossibility of excluding either the explanatory or the interpretive dimension becomes not merely a matter of epistemological preference, but a condition for the honesty and effectiveness of social research (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993).

### *Examples of Interdependence: Understanding as a Path to Explanation, Explanation as a Form of Validation*

The interdependence between comprehension and explanation in the social sciences reflects an essential dynamic of contemporary research, in which the understanding of meanings and the explanation of causes do not exclude, but rather condition each other. Comprehension ensures access to the subjective meanings that social actors attribute to their own actions, being indispensable for the formulation of relevant hypotheses. Explanation, in turn, plays the role of testing and systematizing these hypotheses, providing logical and empirical validation for the interpretations (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). Without a profound understanding of the cultural and symbolic context, explanation risks being superficial; without rigorous testing, comprehension remains a mere intuition.

This interdependence is clearly manifested in field studies, where qualitative data obtained through participant observation or

interviews are often complemented by quantitative data, aimed at explaining behavior patterns or statistical distributions. In research on civic participation, for example, the meaning individuals attribute to community involvement may be identified through hermeneutic methods, but must be correlated with factors such as age, education, or exposure to public discourse, in order to formulate generalizable explanations (Chelcea, 2010). Thus, comprehension generates hypotheses, and explanation puts them to the test.

Moreover, the inverse relationship is equally valid: some explanatory results, apparently counterintuitive, may require a return to the interpretative framework. For example, if a quantitative analysis reveals a low level of voter turnout among a group presumed to be civically active, the researcher is compelled to revisit previous interpretations and recontextualize the meanings of the action (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020). Therefore, comprehension and explanation do not follow one another mechanically, but continuously correct and support each other, forming a flexible epistemological framework adapted to social complexity.

In the analysis of emerging social phenomena, the complementarity between comprehension and explanation becomes not only useful but absolutely necessary for constructing a robust scientific approach. For example, in research on youth radicalization, the mere identification of structural factors – such as socio-economic marginalization or exposure to extremist discourse – is not sufficient to understand the deeper mechanisms of adherence to radical ideologies. An interpretative reconstruction is also essential, concerning the subjective trajectory, the symbols, and the values through which the individual comes to internalize those beliefs. In this case, comprehension provides the foundation for generating explanatory hypotheses, while explanation, in turn, enables the verification and extension of the validity of those interpretations (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020; Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993).

Likewise, in the evaluation of public policies, the interdependence between understanding and explanation acquires an applicative dimension. A social policy cannot be evaluated solely in terms of technocratic efficiency, but must also be analyzed according to the perceptions, reactions, and meanings attributed to the intervention by its beneficiaries. Understanding how targeted individuals perceive a social inclusion program, for example, allows for the formulation of explanatory hypotheses concerning its success or failure. Furthermore, the results of explanatory evaluations may lead to conceptual adjustments of the initial interpretative framework. Thus,

the two approaches not only collaborate, but create a reflexive, circular, and self-regulating process, in which comprehension opens the path for explanation, and explanation grounds and reconfigures understanding (Chelcea, 2010).

### *Mixed Methodology as an Epistemological Solution*

Mixed methodology is increasingly used in the social sciences as a response to the complex nature of the phenomena under study, where the plurality of levels of reality, the fluid relationship between subject and object, and the diversity of forms of manifestation necessitate the transcendence of the rigid boundaries of a single epistemological paradigm. The researcher is no longer called upon to choose between “explaining” and “understanding”, but to construct a coherent inquiry in which explanation and comprehension mutually reinforce each other. Thus, quantitative methods - statistics, surveys on large groups, predictive models - provide benchmarks regarding the regularity and magnitude of certain phenomena, while qualitative methods - interviews, participant observation, content analysis - enable access to the symbolic and motivational substratum of actions. A conclusive example is the study of poverty: statistical data outlines the social profile of the affected population, but only interviews and observation can reveal the mechanisms of adaptation and the meanings attributed by individuals to their own condition (Mucchielli, 2002).

The application of mixed methodology requires an integrated research design, in which stages and methods are not arbitrarily juxtaposed, but articulated within a logic of complementarity. It is not a mere addition of qualitative instruments to a quantitative approach or vice versa, but an epistemological construction in which each dimension has its place according to the questions formulated and the hypotheses proposed. For instance, a study on the effectiveness of public policies may begin with a quantitative analysis of performance indicators, followed by a qualitative investigation of beneficiaries' perceptions, in order to explain potential discrepancies between data and lived reality. In this context, the selection of methods becomes a theoretical decision, not a matter of technical convenience. Consequently, mixed methodology fosters a reflective and flexible approach, but one that remains epistemologically rigorous (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020).

The use of mixed methodology, however, raises considerable challenges, particularly with regard to paradigmatic coherence. Quantitative and qualitative approaches originate from different

assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge and of reality, which may generate tensions in the integration process. Therefore, the researcher is obliged to explicitly assume a theoretical position and to justify the compatibility of the methods employed. This clarification is not merely an academic formality, but a condition for scientific rigor. Moreover, the integration of data requires a careful analysis of convergences, possible contradictions, and interpretation modalities. Precisely this difficulty makes mixed methodology not a convenient solution, but a mature one, which demands a high level of competence and discernment in the use of research instruments (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993).

From a methodological perspective, the recourse to mixed research is increasingly encountered in evaluations of public policies, in studies of emerging social phenomena, or in community-based research. This trend reflects a reconfiguration of research practice, in which the emphasis no longer falls on allegiance to a single paradigm, but on the capacity of research to generate relevant and valid knowledge. Through data triangulation, the combination of sources, and the integration of perspectives, mixed methodology enables not only the validation of results, but also the discovery of dimensions of reality that are inaccessible through a single epistemological lens. In an increasingly fragmented and interconnected social world, methodological flexibility becomes an asset of the researcher, not a weakness. It reflects not relativism, but adequacy to complexity and an integrative epistemological vision (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2020).

Finally, the value of mixed methodology lies not only in its concrete applicability, but also in its potential to form an integrative vision of knowledge. The social researcher, positioned at the intersection between causal analysis and the interpretation of meanings, becomes an epistemological mediator, capable of building bridges between explanation and comprehension. Rather than opposing numbers to narratives or excluding statistics in favor of “actors’ intentions”, the researcher learns to articulate them into a coherent and substantiated account. This approach, far from relativizing scientific inquiry, ennobles it, demonstrating that rigor does not lie in rigidity, but in methodological adequacy to living reality. Thus, mixed methodology is not merely a technical option, but an epistemological attitude of openness, dialogue, and scientific responsibility (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993; Mucchielli, 2002).

## Conclusions

In the analysis of the social sciences, the issue of explanation and comprehension can no longer be addressed from an exclusivist perspective. Far from being antagonistic, the two approaches prove to be complementary in the understanding of the social fact. This complementarity does not derive from a mere methodological equation but from the very nature of social reality, which is both determined and meaningful, structured and interpretable. Any attempt to reduce this complexity to a single dimension produces distortions, and the research becomes either rigid or superficial. Therefore, epistemological pluralism is not a theoretical luxury but a logical necessity for a responsible scientific endeavour.

The rejection of a unitary model of scientific standards does not imply the abandonment of rigor criteria, but rather their reformulation in relation to the specific nature of social research. Social phenomena involve intentionality, symbolism, and contextual variability - features that demand an adaptation of investigative strategies. In this context, the mixed methodology becomes a suitable framework for exploration, as it enables the integration of quantitative and qualitative dimensions without imposing an artificial convergence. Research is thus no longer merely the application of techniques, but a process of interconnecting levels of understanding that faithfully reflect the complexity of reality.

The use of mixed methodology is not reduced to a technical choice but expresses a mature epistemological positioning. Choosing this direction implies the recognition that no method, in itself, is sufficient to account for the full variety of social behaviours and structures. The integration of explanation and comprehension reflects not only a formal compatibility but a substantive convergence, wherein knowledge is neither purely predictive nor exclusively interpretative, but a dynamic synthesis of both. This perspective rehabilitates the role of the researcher as a reflexive agent, capable of selecting appropriate instruments without being the prisoner of methodological dogmatism.

Examples of interdependence between comprehension and explanation are numerous in the practice of social research. Any serious analysis of a phenomenon generally begins with an interpretative phase, in which the meanings actors assign to their actions are identified, followed by a causal explanation stage that ensures the generalisation and validation of hypotheses. This type of alternation and mutual reinforcement between dimensions not only enhances the accuracy of the results but also enables well-founded

social intervention, as knowledge is no longer confined to a purely descriptive or purely normative plane.

A genuine scientific approach in the social sciences cannot ignore either the subjective dimension of reality or the demands of objective rationality. The acceptance of the complementarity between comprehension and explanation does not indicate a weakening of scientific standards but their adaptation to the specificity of the field. Mixed methodology, as an expression of this complementarity, offers a coherent framework for the development of relevant, rigorous, and ethically grounded research. The researcher is no longer a mere detached observer but an interpreter aware of their own epistemic choices and of their impact on the construction of knowledge.

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