

Positivist Methodology

Readings

- Marc Blaug (1992) The Methodology of Economics or How Economists Explain. Pages 12-17, 27-37

Concerns with empiricism

- Any empirical observation is theory laden and to that extent a joint product of cognitive and social dimensions
- Objects that cannot be sensed: black hole(exist due to a combination of theory and indirect evidence)
- Experimental results or readings do not have an ontological claim of their own, they make sense only in the context of a conceptual or theoretical framework

The dyad of theory and empirical observation

- Acknowledging that scientific knowledge cannot exist only on the basis of observations, there emerges the question of the interplay between theory and data
- Association and causality
- Generalizability and inductive logic- the problem of verification
- Deduction and logical positivism

Cornerstone of positivist methodology: Popper's falsifiability criterion

- A scientific theory is one that is open to falsification
- A theory should fully specify the appropriate test for it
- i.e. the conditions for potential falsification are laid out
- Testing for the Null Hypothesis(think statistical significance)
- A (scientific) theory is a hypothesis open to falsification
- This is still dominant in formulating research in many social sciences

Some issues with falsifiability

- Reliability of the tests
- Reliability of observations
- Falsification need not be time invariant
- Stories to explain data vs theories that are open to falsification through data
- Marx: the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles
- Kuznets: Inequality first increases and then decreases with per capita income

Reading for next class

- Some Problems of Empiricism and Positivism (Chapter 3 in Ted Benton and Ian Craib: Philosophy of Social Science)
- Response papers due next Tuesday (16th Jan) for Aadi and Siddiqua