Sociology Shortcuts

Approaches to Research

Researching the social world is arguably different to researching the natural world because the object of study (people) has **consciousness**. While a physicist's research isn't complicated by its subject's **awareness** of being researched, in the social world such complications are ever-present.

Just as human relationships have a **moral dimension**, so does how we believe we can study these relationships - hence we find a range of different **research approaches (Positivism**, **Interpretivism**, **Realism** and **Feminism**) we can understand in terms of four organising categories.

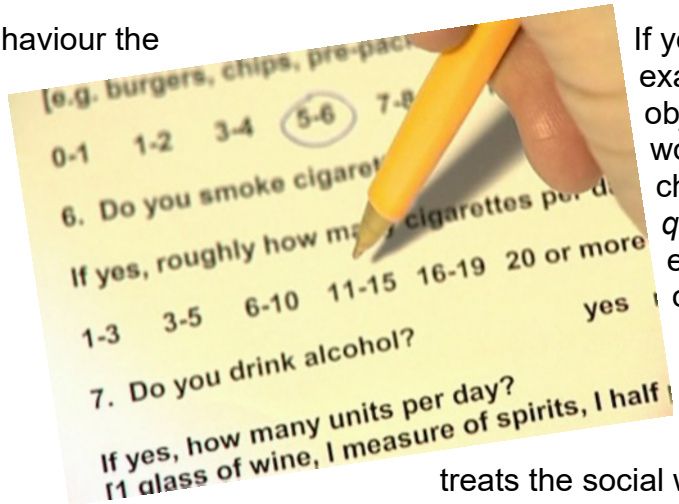
1. Beliefs

What do we believe about the nature of the social world? is perhaps the most-fundamental question we can ask - and our answers (Do we see it as socially constructed or causally-determined? Does social structure determine social action?) impact on all subsequent research elements.

2. Proof

This refers to the **evidence** we will accept to justify our beliefs. In the **natural sciences** *beliefs* about the world (that it is governed by **causal relationships** that form the basis for the discovery of **laws** of physical behaviour) influence beliefs about the kind of proof needed to establish these relationships. A physicist, for example, will not accept proof can be based on **faith** - whereas for a religious individual proof (of god's existence) is based on exactly that.

For the study of social behaviour the range of possible proofs may be greater, but the general principle holds true. If you believe proof should be built around the development of **reliable** data that can be exactly **replicated**, participant observation is unlikely to figure highly in your choice of research methods.



3. Methodology

This concerns the **reliability** and **validity** of both knowledge and the methods used to generate it. Methodology can provide a link between *theory* and *method* by specifying how to generate data to test a particular **hypothesis** (positivism, realism) or **research question** (interpretivism).

4. Methods

These relate to each of the above in the sense beliefs about the nature of the social world - such as whether it can be studied objectively (positivism) or subjectively (interpretivism) - have an important influence on a researcher's choice of method. Although there is no simple, hard-and-fast, relationship between different approaches and different methods, some methods are more closely aligned with some approaches than others

If your general approach, for example, stresses the objectivity of the social world then the methods chosen to generate data - *questionnaires* for example - are likely to be ones that reflect this belief.

Similarly, if your general approach is one that treats the social world as a wholly subjective experience you are likely to choose research methods (such as *participant observation*) that reflect this belief.

Approaches: Positivism

1. Beliefs: The fundamental beliefs associated with positivist approaches can be expressed in terms of two ideas about the social world:

a. It has an **objective existence**, governed by causal relationships, over and above the control of individuals.

b. It is similar to the natural world in the sense both involve *patterns of behaviour* that are capable of being discovered through careful observation / research.

Human society consists of **identifiable patterns** of behaviour (for example: all societies develop family structures and organised forms of work) and consistent behavioural patterns must have (social) **causes**.

Although the social and natural worlds are different (people have **consciousness**), this 'problem of difference' is resolved by arguing social behaviour is a **reaction** to social stimulation (such as the socialisation process). Human behaviour, therefore, is explained by understanding the **cause** of the reaction (structural pressures on the individual) rather than the **effect** (individual actions).

2. Proof involves **objective knowledge** based on **empirical evidence**. An hypothesis is true or false because it has been tested, not because the researcher takes on trust its truth.

Reliable and valid knowledge is based on **replication**; for something to be considered true (or *not false*) it must be *repeatedly* shown to be true. Like their natural scientific counterparts, social scientists must be objective in two ways:

a. **Personally:** research must not be influenced by values, beliefs, opinions and prejudices (**value-freedom**). Positivism is concerned only with what *is*, not what we might *want* or *personally believe* something to be. A researcher must "stand apart" from the behaviour being studied and observe it dispassionately and record it objectively.

b. **Systemically:** research methods must be *capable* of producing **objective** data.

3. Methodology is based on the ability to **quantify** and **measure** social behaviour. If something cannot be tested and measured it belongs to the realm of **opinions**, not facts. Reliable and valid evidence is produced using **empirical** methods - anything not directly observable or capable of being tested is not reliable or valid knowledge. R**eliability** is important and can be encouraged in two ways:

a. Through the systematic organisation of the research process (such as **Popper's** (1934) **Hypothetico-deductive model**).

b. Research methods should produce data that can be *replicated*; the more times research is repeated with the same results the more-certain we can be that data is reliable. Replication also involves checking previous researchers actually followed the procedures they claimed to follow.

4. Research methods reflect the principle knowledge about the social world consists of identifying facts about how and why people behave as they do and, eventually, making *connections* between facts to produce **theories** that explain behaviour.

Research methods that produce **quantifiable**, **empirical** data, are **objective**, capable of **replication** and known to produce **reliable** data are favoured by positivist approaches

For positivist approaches, **quantitative data** has significant advantages because it allows the researcher to test **hypotheses** by, firstly, collecting **reliable** data and, secondly, establishing **causal connections** between observed phenomena.

Quantitative data

An advantage of quantitative data is that it allows **comparisons** between different **variables**, such that the researcher can track the effect of changes in one area of society on another.

Quantification establishes an objective platform from which to compare something - such as social inequality over time - and while it is sometimes criticised as 'an end in itself' (counting something simply because you can) that sacrifices depth and detail for reliability, quantification may also be the basis for *speculation* about possible explanations for people's behaviour.

By comparing data it's easier to identify relationships and, therefore, construct theoretical explanations (rather than simply provide *descriptions*) that allows the researcher to speculate about **causality** (the idea that one thing allows makes something else happen).

A further advantage of quantitative data is that it can be **standardised** for comparative purposes.

A researcher can, for example, measure the effect of introducing social policies designed to outlaw workplace discrimination on the life chances of women or ethnic minorities.

For example, the fact female educational achievement has increased over the past 25 years is an important piece of quantitative data – but it doesn't tell us *why* this increase occurred.

If we add some comparative quantitative data – the number of women staying single or delaying marriage (until their early 30s) – this gives us further evidence; we can, for example, **hypothesise** that changes in workplace behaviour (women becoming increasingly likely to pursue an independent career) may be a cause of educational improvement.

McCarry et al's (2008) research into same-sex domestic violence, for example, used quantitative data because they wanted to compare data from their questionnaire survey "with existing data on domestic violence in both heterosexual and homosexual communities".