

Sociology Shortcuts

M3. Approaches: Interpretivism

Interpretivist ideas about the nature of the social world and how we should study it are, as you might expect, significantly different to positivist approaches.

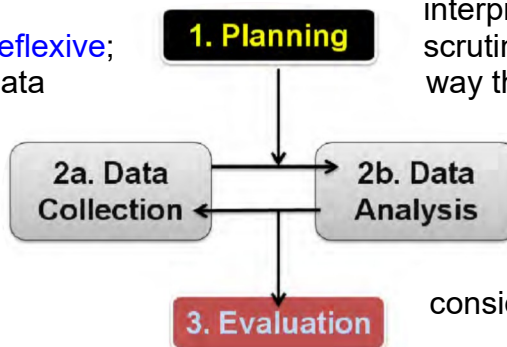
1. Beliefs

The natural and social worlds are *fundamentally different* and can't be studied using the same methods. Human beings - the object of study - have **consciousness**; they are aware of their surroundings and have the ability to **reflect** on ideas and actions. This ability has two major consequences:

1. The research process is **reflexive**; for as **Schultz et al** (1996) data collection involves a "feedback loop" where the analysis of collected data is used to inform *further* data collection which informs *further* analysis.

2. The study of individuals and groups (*social collectivities*) is neither straightforward nor simple; if people are *aware* they are being studied their behaviour may change - something that is not a problem faced by natural scientists.

On this basis the social world must be theorised **subjectively**: it has no objective existence independent of people's everyday behaviour. People, in other words, create the social world through their everyday interactions and this gives human behaviour a dynamic, fluid, quality that is difficult to quantify; even at the moment of measurement the behaviour will be changing - and also changed in some way by the fact of being measured (**Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle**)



Mays and Pope (2000) argue complete objectivity is an unattainable goal, but the researcher can take steps to limit the influence of their personal beliefs and values.

Rather than assuming the beliefs and values they bring to research have no impact, interpretivists argue these should be scrutinised and described in a such a way that the reader of the research is aware of any possible personal bias.

2. Proof

Questions of proof are considered on two levels:

1. **The Subjective**: If 'reality' is whatever people believe it to be, the researcher's task is to reveal two things:

a. How individuals see their world. This involves questioning and observing people to reveal the depth and detail of their perceptions and understanding.

As **Clarke and Layder** (1994) argue, "People have thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being...They define situations and give meaning to their actions and those of others".

b. **The Objective**: Where people share a common *definition of a situation* their behaviour will conform to patterns that can be *objectively quantified* as well as *subjectively described*.



3. Methodology

Methodology must reflect the fact social interaction is a dynamic, constantly changing process that involves people both acting and reacting to the relationships around them.

If the social world is *interpreted* by different people in different situations in different ways and the best we can do is **describe** different **versions** of reality, *constructed* by those researched, and *expressed* through the agency of the researcher.

Valid data are produced by *understanding* how people see and interpret their world and this involves a **deep involvement** with the people being studied.

Data validity involves the researcher accurately documenting people's experiences, beliefs, meanings, and so forth and **proof of validity** is based on the ability to **participate** in and experience the world as others experience it.

Weber (1947) called this **verstehen** or "deeper understanding" to argue sociologists should exploit their ability to **empathise**; by experiencing the world as their subject matter experiences it the researcher arrives at a deeper, more-rounded, understanding of social behaviour.



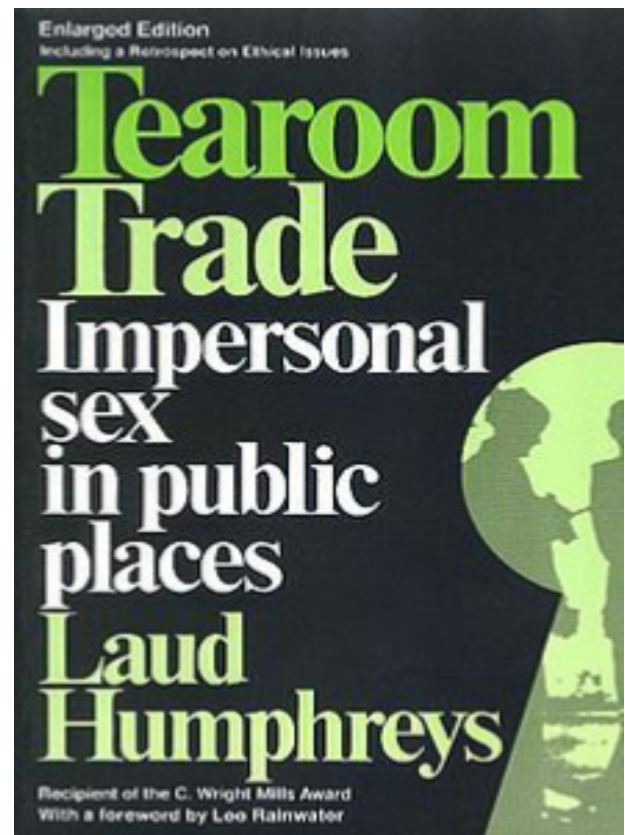
If reality is constructed by individuals on an everyday basis there is little point trying to discover "**behavioural laws**" that underpin patterns of behaviour: the best we can do is reveal the meanings people give to different situations that allow them to "define reality" in broadly consistent ways.

4. Methods

The emphasis on **validity** and understanding the meanings people give to behaviour lends itself to methods that allow the sociologist to understand behaviour from the participant's viewpoint; this involves an **insider approach** to data collection, where *qualitative* methods, such as:

- unstructured interviews and
- participant observation (both overt and covert)

are used to explore and understand behaviour in all its depth and detail.



For **Humphreys** (1970) the researcher gains a deeper understanding because they *become* the people they're studying. the aim is to reveal and explain behaviour from the viewpoint of those involved - and this frequently involves actively participating in that behaviour (hence the preference for *qualitative* research methods).

One potential problem here is this type of research generally has a trade-off in terms of data **reliability**. This is a more problematic concept because if at the moment behaviour is studied it *changes*, we can never accurately **replicate** it.