

Sociology Factsheet



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Positivism -v- Interpretivism

What is Positivism and Interpretivism?

Positivism

The view that Sociology should be studied in a scientific manner. Positivists believe that the social world (as the natural world) is made up of facts which can be studied like the natural world. It is the search for laws of social behaviour using the logic and methods of the natural sciences. Positivists argue that by applying scientific principles of research to the study of society, Sociologists will be able to put forward proposals for social change which will lead to a better society.

Interpretivism (also known as anti-positivists or phenomenologists)

Interpretivists believe that society cannot be treated as a science. They stress the ability of individuals to exercise control and choices over their actions and because everyone is different with different views and attitudes it is not possible to use scientific methodology to study society. Scientific approaches are not suitable for the study of society because the social world differs to the natural world.

Why is Positivism and Interpretivism important?

Because sociologists have different ideas and different theories about how society should be studied, this will influence what they study, the methods they use to study it, what data is collected, how the data is interpreted and what conclusions are drawn from the study.

There is often debate about whether the methodological approach influences the theoretical approach or vice versa. The diagrams below shows how the process works and how there are arguably two different starting points.

So what is the difference between theory and method?

- Theories are ideas that sociologists come up with, ways of thinking about society.
- Methods are the ways sociologists go about collecting the evidence/ideas to create or to back-up theories.
- Both are important –
Theory with no methods means that ideas have not been tested. Methods with no theory behind them means that data is being collected with no purpose.
- More recently, sociologists have become less concerned with having a single approach to social research. It has become more common for sociologists to gather a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

Both methods and theory influence Sociological research

Diagram A: Theory determines methodology

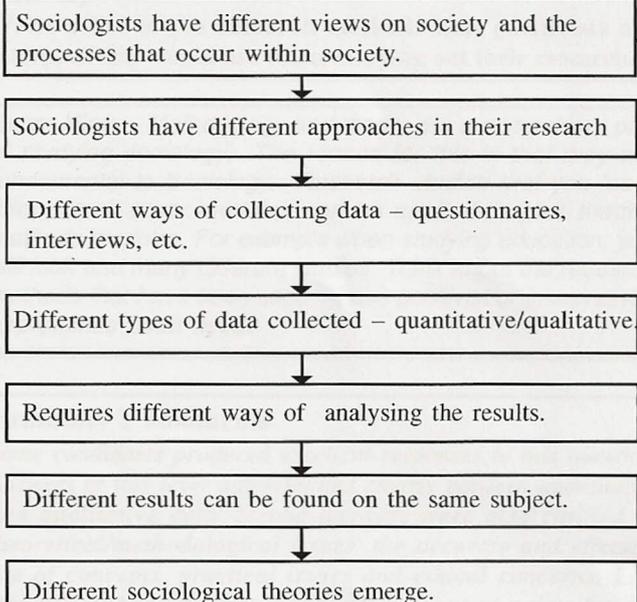
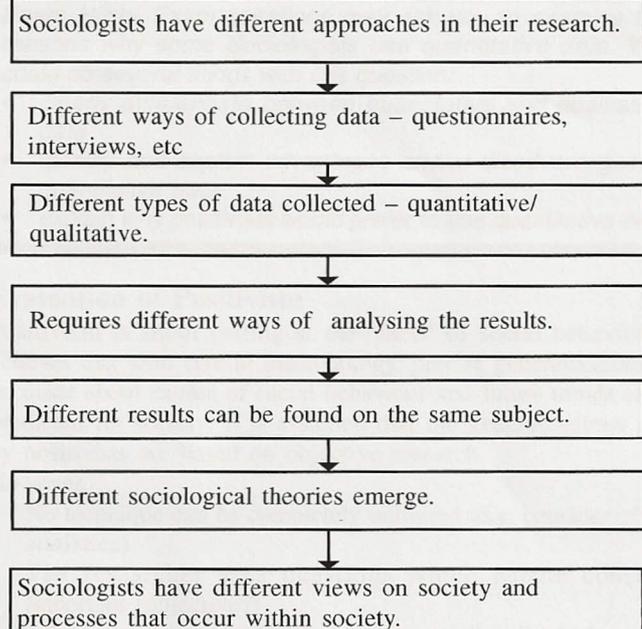


Diagram B: Methodology determines theory



How research should be carried out is an important consideration for any research project. Do you start with a theory which you want to test by doing research or do you conduct a specific type of research to develop a theory?

These two main approaches in sociology are positivist and interpretivist. These are outlined in the table below.

Positivist and interpretivist methodological approaches

| Methods consideration | Positivism | Interpretivism |
|--|--|--|
| Should sociology be scientific? | Positivists believe that sociology is a science. The study of society should be carried out in the same way as the natural world. Research should start with a hypothesis. Positivists believe that the collection of data should be collected objectively and categorised. Information gathered should be social facts. | Interpretivists believe that society cannot be treated as a science. They feel that a humanistic approach must be used. Scientific approaches are not suitable for the study of society because the social world differs from the natural world. |
| What type of data should be collected? | Data should be statistical, measurable. This means that it can be quantified and analysed to observe trends and correlations. From this, laws of human behaviour can be identified. | Data should be detailed in order to gain depth and understanding (verstehen). |
| What should be the scale of the research? | In order to find laws of human behaviour, trends and correlations must be found using quantitative data. This needs to be large-scale to ensure that the facts found apply to the whole of society. | Research should be small in scale because this allows more detailed data to be collected. The findings of research can be subjective because different people have different experiences of society. |
| Which is most important – reliability or validity? | Research is reliable if it can be repeated and another researcher would reach the same conclusion. This is important to positivists because scientific research works this way. | Validity is important and can be gained by gathering qualitative data which is rich and in-depth. |
| Should research be objective or subjective? | As they view Sociology as a science, positivists believe that research should be objective; that the research process should not be influenced by the researcher; variables can be controlled. | Research can be subjective. The researcher's perspectives can be valuable to the research. In the research of human behaviour, variables cannot be controlled because society and people are unpredictable. |

Activity

Write a list of the research methods that positivists and interpretivists would use when carrying out their research.

Exam Hint: – Methodology and theory are a compulsory part of studying sociology. The reason for this is that they are fundamental to Sociology. Research studies that you learn about in all other modules can be applied to your theory/methods modules. For example when studying education, you will look and many different studies. Think about the research methods that have been used – have positivist or interpretivist approaches been used?

Examiner's comments

Some candidates produced excellent responses to this question. Answers at this level differentiated clearly between quantitative and qualitative data. Strong answers were also typified by theoretical/methodological issues, the accurate and effective use of concepts, practical issues and ethical concerns. Less effective responses often stated a fair range of points but left them undeveloped. In terms of theoretical issues, this often took the form of simply stating that 'Positivists use official statistics' without explaining what it is about official statistics that positivists find useful.

Exam Hint:- Exam questions may ask you to examine the reasons why some Sociologists use quantitative data. You could do several things with this question:

- clearly differentiate between quantitative and qualitative data
- identify and explain advantages and/or disadvantages of quantitative data
- explain why positivists would prefer to use quantitative data

Evaluation of Positivism

Positivism is about getting at the 'facts' of social behaviour. It believes that with careful methodology, precise generalisations can be made about causes of social behaviour and future trends can be predicted for society. It is assumed that the generalisations made by positivists are based on objective research.

However,

- No technique can be completely unbiased (e.g. consider official statistics)
- The researcher asks questions which he/she considers important (objective?)
- All interactions are subjective as we are all individuals
- Research may produce results which are different to how people would behave in the real world (e.g. consider the Hawthorne effect)

Evaluation of Interpretivism

Interpretivists apply research methods that reveal subjective experiences of those being studied. In assuming that a subjective account of society produces more 'true-to-life' data, interpretivists encounter several problems:

- The data may be little different from fictional accounts of the social world. Do they really tell us anything (e.g. consider tabloid newspaper reports)
- The presence of the researcher may affect the behaviour of those being studied producing social situations that are different from that originally being studied
- It does not provide a systematic or unbiased view of social life.

Both positivists and interpretivists agree that sociology is empirical (studies produce data) even though they approach their research in different ways.

Realism

Realism has been seen as the answer in this debate. It is influenced by the natural sciences in term of scientific methods and procedures (like positivists) but it also takes into account the view that people's behaviour can create and transform the social world. Realists try to combine these two theoretical approaches. Realism wants the best of both worlds – to be scientific and to obtain meaning. Realism therefore applies elements of both positivism (scientific approach) and interpretivism.

Realism as a methodology, offers an alternative to the two main approaches.

Key theorists

Comte

Comte's work was first published in the mid 1800s. He believed that there were a number of scientific subjects and that sociology was the most important. It was Comte's belief that by gathering scientific knowledge about society, society could progress. Comte was a positivist.

Durkheim

Durkheim's work was first published in the mid 1800s. His work on suicide demonstrated many positivist characteristics, although his work did not follow all positivist rules. **Ask yourself why?**

Douglas

Douglas also carried out work on suicide (1967). However, he took an interpretive approach, criticising the use of official statistics. Douglas looked at suicide notes and coroner decisions on suicide and argued that these are influenced by others in society, such as friends and family.

Weber

Weber believed that to study sociology (he called this social action), it is important to understand meanings and reasons related to the behaviour of humans. Even more important, according to Weber, is the *interpretation* of meanings and reasons associated with people in society. For example, rather than researching levels of crime, Weber would have argued that it is important to discover the motives behind each individual crime.

Activity

Look at these work of these Sociologists (and others that you have studied) and draw diagrams (as shown on page two) to show whether their work was influenced by theory or method. Add information about their specific work in the appropriate boxes.

Exam Hint:-You may be asked to assess the strengths and weaknesses of particular research methods e.g. questionnaires or participant observation. The examiner would want to see some understanding of positivist/interpretivist view of these different research methods. Consider which of the two would find questionnaires/participant observation more problematic/more useful in their approach. The same can be done if the question is asked about non-participant observation, official statistics/unstructured interviews etc.

Test your understanding

1. Identify the key characteristics of positivism
2. Identify the key characteristics of interpretivism
3. How would you summarise the difference between positivism and interpretivism?
4. What research methods would positivists prefer to use in their research and what research methods would interpretivists prefer to use in their research
5. Explain in your own words what realism is