

'Let's get real'

The realist approach in sociology

Sociologists have for some time been looking at ways of overcoming the positivist/interpretivist divisions. Our authors make the case for 'realism'.

IN THIS ARTICLE we outline an increasingly influential approach to sociological analysis that provides an alternative to those of 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' which are commonly described in textbooks such as Haralambos (1991) and Bilton (1987). This alternative is known as 'realism' and has been recently developed by a number of writers including Keat and Urry (1975), Pawson (1989) and Layder (1990; 1993). We shall begin by sketching the more well-known approaches and then indicate to what extent realism overlaps with, or differs from them. We will end with an exercise which will enable you to test your understanding of what you have read.

In order to meet the demands of the A-level syllabus it is necessary to understand the nature of scientific inquiry and the extent to which sociology is a science. Apart from helping you to understand and evaluate the sociological work that you read, the question of the scientific nature of sociology is very important with regard to the practical aspects of social research. For instance, the differing views of sociologists on this matter have a considerable bearing on the way researchers gather empirical data (facts and information about society). That is, different approaches influence the methods and techniques which sociologists use as practical research tools to help them investigate particular events or aspects of society. Furthermore, basic differences in approach also affect the manner in which sociologists analyse and explain the data that they gather. That is, such views significantly affect the theories that sociologists come up with.

POSITIVISM

Positivists believe that society can be studied basically using the same principles and procedures as the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry and so on. This is because they believe that society is very much like the physical world. Just as the growth of plants is

influenced by light and water, so human behaviour is largely determined by objective social factors — for example, people marry and produce children in response to society's expectations of them. In this sense there is a relationship between the institution of marriage and the family and people seeking partners to share their lives in order to raise families. The positivist sociologist seeks to gather evidence of such relationships with a view to providing a firmer understanding of them. The positivist approach can be summarised as follows:

- It places particular emphasis on those aspects of society that can be directly observed. The researcher will seek to define the subject of the study, for example 'educational failure' and then go on to define the possible variables that are responsible for it such as 'school size' or 'social class'. Having decided what the variables might be and how they can be investigated empirically, the research develops some provisional ideas about how they are related to each other;
- this 'hypothesis' (an explanation in need of empirical support) is then tested by gathering primarily quantitative evidence, for example from survey questionnaires or from existing records of the statistical relationship between 'educational failure' and such variables as social class, school size, gender, housing, and so on (However it must be noted that other kinds of data such as extracts from interviews are often used to supplement statistical evidence.);
- aspects of society and social processes are explained by making empirically valid statements about the relationships being tested. For example, working-class children with an IQ of 130+ are half as likely to go into higher education as middle-class children with the same IQ.

INTERPRETIVISM

Unlike the positivists, interpretivists believe that society cannot be studied in the same way that natural scientists study the physical world. They insist that unlike matter, human beings have consciousness — thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. They define situations, and give meaning to their actions and those of others. As a result, they do not merely react to external stimuli but interpret their situation and then act. Hughes (1990) gives the following description of the anti-positivist position:

... unlike physical phenomena, social actors give meaning to themselves, to others and to the social environments in which they live. They can describe what they do, explain and justify it, give reasons, declare their motives, decide on appropriate courses of action.... The social scientist, then must come to terms with these meanings for ... the origins of the researchers' data lies in these meanings (pp. 96-97).

For interpretivists social reality is the product of meaningful social interaction. Their aim is to understand the social world from the point of view of the actors (people) they are studying. Thus their methodology differs greatly from the positivists:

- Social life is investigated by attempting to understand people's own perceptions and interpretations of the world fashioned through interaction with other actors. Language is central to this process because meaningful human communication depends on it;
- an understanding of how individuals create reality in interaction with others is obtained through the collection of qualitative data. For example this might involve attempting to understand educational success or failure through in-depth interviews with teachers in which they are asked about their perceptions of the children.



Why are things the way they are? Why is this a 'romantic' image?

simply moulded by 'external' social factors, they are conscious intentional agents who both create and recreate the social world (Harré and Secord 1972). In this sense realism combines a concern with the 'external' social causes of behaviour with an attempt to understand the viewpoint and creativity of those people who are involved in the activities and events in question. Realism also endeavours to break down the division between a preference for quantitative data (mainly by positivists) and the opposing view, often voiced by interpretivists, which insists on the primary importance of qualitative data.

How then does a realist approach to sociology differ from the other two approaches?

① Firstly, realism concentrates on the nature of society as a whole rather than the smaller elements that make it up.

Positivism tends to break down the analysis of society into small segments (relationships between 'variables' like income and crime, or suicide rates and social isolation) so that they can be easily observed and studied. In a similar manner interpretative sociology tends to focus on the observable features of face-to-face behaviour (like rows and tension between family members) rather than the larger social context (such as more general ideas about the importance of the family as a social unit). By contrast, realism focuses on the wider elements of society that produce or cause the relationships between variables (as those above), or events

(like a family dispute). As such realism insists that *all* dimensions of society (both larger and smaller, immediate and more remote) are of equal relevance in the explanation of particular aspects of social life.

For example, for realists a particular incident of racial harassment must be understood as the outcome of many factors, not just those immediately connected with the incident, such as the particular people involved and the exact setting in which it took place. Other factors such as the influence of society-wide ideologies of racism and forms of discrimination in housing and job markets will be of equal relevance in understanding the detailed aspects of how and why a particular people suffer racist jibes or are subject to a violent attack. In this sense realists understand particular aspects of social life to result from the workings of society as a whole,

Alternatively this may be achieved through close observations of interactions between pupils, and teachers and pupils where the researcher tries to blend in with the setting as much as possible;

society and social events are analysed by providing descriptions of how social life is 'made to happen' by those involved. That is, behaviour does not simply result from the external demands that society makes upon people, rather people *themselves* are actively engaged in creating their social circumstances. For example Michelle Stanworth, through in-depth interviews and observations of both teachers and pupils, demonstrated 'the subtle way in which classroom encounters bring to life and sustain certain sexual divisions' (1983 p. 49).

REALISM

Realism shares some features of both the above approaches, but also tries to improve on them. First, like positivism, realism suggests that there are some lessons to be learned from the natural sciences and that therefore some of their methods and procedures can be used. In particular a concern with how social processes and events are caused is an important question for sociologists to answer. But as we shall see, realism proposes a rather different approach to this question than positivism. Similarly, a concern with the objective nature of some aspects of society is a key aspect of realism that draws it closer to the natural science model. On the other hand realism acknowledges that human beings are not objects like those studied by physical scientists. People are not

rather than focusing only on those segments that can be immediately observed or are 'apparently' involved. This general aspect of realism allows us to examine some of its more particular features.

2) Realism tries to combine an interest in the analysis of human activity as it occurs in face-to-face encounters with an interest in the institutional elements of society, such as economic and political organisations or religious ideas.

That is, it attempts to draw together aspects of human agency and social structure. As we saw in the example of an incident of racial harassment, one of the central aims of realism is to try to account for the influence of structural or institutional factors (such as racist ideologies, or discriminatory practices over jobs, career promotion or housing), on particular examples of behaviour (such as a fight caused by racist abuse). The assumption is that people's behaviour is always influenced by the wider institutional context of society. Realists argue that interpretivists analyse human activity without taking into account these wider (structural) features and thus ignore real mechanisms in society which have an important influence on human behaviour.

The influence is not all one way. Human activity also has an effect on the wider social context. Importantly people may contribute to the maintenance of the institutional environment (for example by engaging in various forms of racism or sexism, or simply by refusing to challenge them). On the other hand, people are always capable of transforming their social circumstances to some degree or other (for example by resisting or challenging forms of discrimination and unequal opportunities). Whether this occurs, to what extent it occurs, who is involved, the amount of pressure they are able to exert, and the effects this has (the extent of the changes it produces) are all things that will vary according to the exact circumstances and thus cannot be predicted in advance. The main point is that for realists there is a mutual influence between people's activities and the social structure in which they operate.

3) Realism is interested in aspects of society which may not always be apparent to an observer or even a trained researcher.

Ideologies of racism or sexism, forms of discrimination, exploitation and the power resources on which they are based are not

easily observed since it is their 'low profile' which serves to maintain and enforce them in the first place. To understand particular instances of racist abuse or sexual harassment as the outcome of the personalities of the people involved or the particular features of the situation (a local neighbourhood, a school yard) as interpretivists tend to, simply fails to take into account some of the underlying reasons for this behaviour. Realists are keen to identify these causes and construct models of them which describe how they work and produce the effects they have on people's behaviour.

In this respect it is important to accept that underlying causes (such as racist ideologies and institutional discrimination) may not be readily observable in the way that other aspects of social life are (such as overt conflict between people or groups of different racial and ethnic backgrounds). A central assumption of realism is therefore that there are some aspects of society and social life which stretch beyond our control and awareness as individuals, but which nonetheless affect our lives as social beings. For example, we may attempt to resist or challenge people who are engaged in racist or sexist practices. However, this action in itself will not dislodge or uproot the firmly entrenched ideologies and routine discriminatory practices which exist on a society-wide basis, even though it may contribute to such a goal in a minor way. Deeply entrenched beliefs and practices cannot be swept away without massive and far-reaching social changes brought about through collective action. However, the important point for realism is that such features of society have an existence which

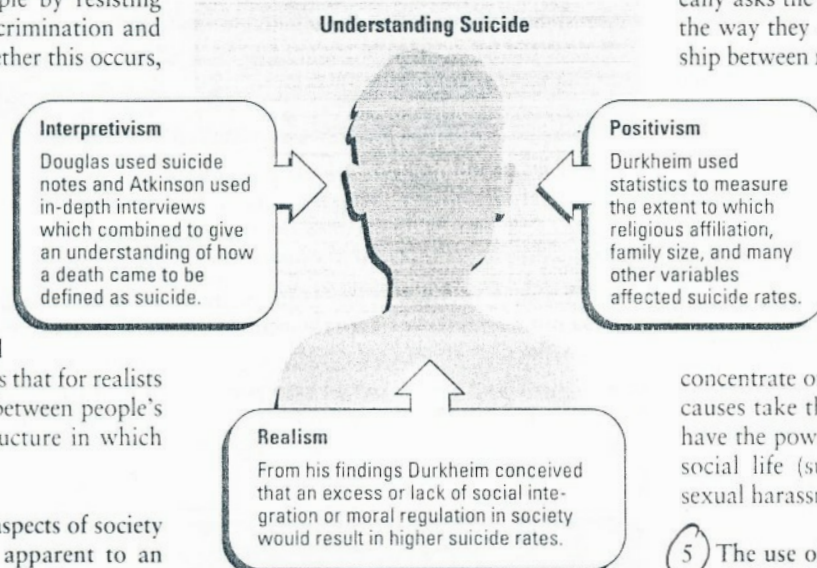
does not depend on our own experiences and awareness. Realists like to call these features 'generative' mechanisms, because they give rise to phenomena like sexism and racism and produce their effects in our lives. Thus, such generative mechanisms exist even if we are ignorant of the effects of racism or sexism (or even more improbably if we are unaware of the existence of these things altogether).

4) Realism searches for explanations in terms of underlying causes.

Realism is quite unlike positivism and interpretive approaches since the latter tend to disregard anything which cannot be readily observed and described. This makes for quite a difference in the kinds of theories and research conclusions that the respective approaches are able to come up with. Positivists tend to stick to descriptions of the relations between particular variables — for example, that suicide rates vary with the extent to which particular religious beliefs and organisations provide support and psychological comfort for people. Interpretivists tend to describe the meanings and values that provide the focus for particular people and groups in society — for example, the meanings that drugs hold for drug addicts or the meaning of the emotional support that nurses are required to give as part of their jobs. In both approaches the theories and research conclusions attempt to faithfully mirror those things which have been observed and recorded in the process of research. Whilst the realist is certainly interested in these things they are regarded as the starting point of analysis rather than the conclusion. That is, the realist typically asks the question, *why* are these things the way they are? *What causes* the relationship between religious affiliation and rates of suicide? *How* are the meanings and values of drug addicts and nurses related to the wider social structure? In short, the realist asks the question what are the underlying reasons (or causes) that produce the observable events or processes that other approaches concentrate on? For realists these underlying causes take the form of mechanisms which have the power to produce certain effects in social life (such as incidents of racial or sexual harassment).

5) The use of explanatory models in social analysis.

Realists are concerned with describing the underlying mechanisms which produce observable effects in social life. In this respect



Note: Durkheim is often regarded as a positivist but his development of the concepts of social integration and moral regulation are clearly realist.

Figure 1 Theorising suicide.

they attempt to develop models of the causal processes at work beneath the surface of events. For example instead of describing the link between say crime and unemployment, realists would try to develop a model of the social processes that have produced this relationship (perhaps emphasising how unemployment enforces people to make lifestyle choices which involve petty criminal activities). Or instead of explaining racist incidents (like name-calling among schoolchildren) simply in terms of classroom interaction, a realist would want to explain the wider influence of ideologies of racism and how they intersect with other cultural and power resources in the wider social context (Troyna and Hatcher 1992).

The underlying mechanisms that produce social events or incidents are not always 'active' and observable. In this respect they represent powers which are not constantly 'used', but rather they have a potential capability. For example Porter (1993) argues that racism does not continuously intrude into everyday life in absolutely all spheres of society. The manifestations of racism are variable and are more likely in some situations and in some sectors of society rather than others. Although there is always the potential for racism because of the existence of the underlying mechanisms (cultural, ideological factors and forms of domination), their actual effects in terms of the presence of a racist incident will vary according to the exact circumstances in question. This makes the realist position very different from that of the positivist who searches for the constant connections between variables, or the interpretivist who focuses on the presence of certain kinds of events and behaviour. The realist, for example, would insist that the absence of actual conflict between black and white children does not mean that racism is absent from their lives, as Troyna and Hatcher (1992) demonstrate.

CONCLUSION

When undertaking coursework for A-level many students use both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to minimise the limitations of positivism and inter-

GROUP EXERCISE

If you wished to undertake a project on young people and crime what might you look at and which methods might you use if you wanted to work within:

- positivism;
- interpretivism;
- realism.

EXERCISE

Now you have had an opportunity to come to an understanding of these three approaches, read through the following research questions and consider which approach they are likely to be based on.

- 1 What social processes have resulted in a gendered labour market?
- 2 What are the similarities and differences between the experience of young men and young women in the labour market?
- 3 To what extent does family size affect women managers' promotion prospects?

pretivism, and to draw on their strengths. Whilst realism draws on the strengths of the other two approaches it is more than a synthesis of them in that it acknowledges and seeks to discover and explore social processes that are not immediately observable. You may like to adopt a realist approach if you are taking a coursework option in the A-level examination.

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