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| ***Positivism and Interpretivism*** |
| The main research methods in sociology broadly flow from two different theoretical or methodological approaches to the study of society. These two approaches are known as positivism and interpretivism. Positivists and interpretivists often choose different topics to explore and use different research methods to investigate them, because they have different assumptions about he nature of society, which influences the type of data they are interested in collecting |
| ***Positivists (quantitative)*** | ***Interpretivists (qualitative)*** |
| * Just as there are causes of things in the natural world, there are also external social forces making up a society’s social structure, that cause or mould people’s ideas and actions
* Durkheim, a positivist (see functionalism), called these external forces social facts
* Positivists believe that social institutions create expectations of how individuals should behave and limit their choices and options, with social control making people behave in socially approved ways
* Durkheim said sociology should study social facts, and that these should be observed and measured quantitatively i.e. numbers and statistics
* Feelings/emotions/motives cannot be measured and therefore shouldn’t be studied i.e. use objectivity not subjectivity
* Examples of positivist approaches might be studies of whether people in some social classes achieve poorer exam results, suffer more illness or re more likely to commit crime than those in other classes (i.e. working class vs middle class) by looking at social facts like education, health and crime
* Durkheim (2002, 1897) used a positivist approach to study suicide in 1897 using official suicide statistics to try and establish a social cause of suicide
* Similarly, positivists research on relationships may use statistics to try to investigate family lifestyle by looking at division of labour in the home including who does the housework, who looks after childcare and who earns the most income for the household etc.
* Positivists argue that without quantification sociology will remain at the level of insights and impressions and will lack evidence and it would be impossible to replicate studies to check findings/to find causes of social events in order to generalise to a wider population (i.e. an attempt to increase population validity)
* Positivists aim to study sociological occurrences in a scientific way and like quantifiable data
* They favour research methods including:
* Lab experiments
* Comparative methods
* Social surveys (using closed questions)
* Structured questionnaires
* Formal/structured interviews
* Non-participant observations
 | * Interpretivists believe that because people’s behaviour is influenced by interpretations and meanings they give to social situations, a researcher’s task is to gain an understanding of these interpretations and meanings, and how people see and understand the world around them
* Sociology should therefore use research methods that provide an understanding from the point of view of individuals and groups – this process is called verstehen
* Instead of statistics, they believe we should discuss and get personally involved with people in order to grasp their understanding of the world and society
* Examples could include whether people in some social classes tolerate or dismiss ill-health more than those in other classes, or are more likely to fail in education or be labelled as a criminal because of the way teachers or the police see them
* Atkinson’s (1978) study of suicide involved an interpretivist approach, in contrast to Durkheim, and he stated that suicide statistics are social constructions reflecting the behaviour of coroners, doctors and relatives etc. and their definitions of suicide. They tell us more about the decisions of the living, rather than of the dead and the real number of suicides
* Interpretivists research on relationships in the family might carry out in-depth interviews with family members, to find out how they feel about doing jobs around the home, whether they see housework and childcare as shared out equally or not, and whether they’d actually want them to be
* They therefore prefer to collect qualitative data (e.g. words, documents and images, all giving in-depth description and insight of the individuals and groups being investigated) using methods including the following:
* Participant (and sometimes non-participant) observations
* Informal (unstructured, in-depth/open-ended) interviews
* Open-ended questionnaires
* Personal accounts using personal documents e.g. diaries and letters
* These are more likely to include a micro-approach, using in-depth small scale research using small numbers of people (but this could cause issues with population validity)
* Interpretivists question the value of research methods used by positivists because they impose a framework on research - the sociologist’s own personal view of what is important, rather than what may be important to the individuals being researched
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