

Positivism vs. Interpretivism

<p>Positivism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society has a reality external to individuals - there are social structures and social facts independent of the individual which exercises constraint over him or her and moulds their behaviour • Social behaviour can be measured objectively • Methods should be similar to those used in natural sciences e.g. the hypothetico-deductive model (hypothesis is devised, then tested against empirical, observable and measurable data) • More likely to be large-scale, macro research on large numbers of people • Generally associated with structural views e.g. Marxism and functionalism • They use quantitative, statistical techniques including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Official stats (e.g. suicide, crime, social class) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Experiments ➢ Comparative method ➢ Social surveys ➢ Structured questionnaires ➢ Formal/structured interviews ➢ Non-pp observation 	<p>Interpretivism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerned with understanding the meanings that individuals give to situations • Natural science methods are inappropriate for studying society – society is different to the natural world • Inductive approach - theories emerge from insights, issues and evidence gained • <i>Verstehen</i> (Weber) – developing closeness and empathy to understand the world through the other person's eyes i.e. through deep conversations/unstructured interviews/close observation e.g. on crime, not looking at the causes like positivists do, but like Becker looking at why some behaviour gets labelled as deviant while other similar behaviour does not, and people's response to being labelled criminal or deviant • More likely to use qualitative methods, giving in-depth descriptions and insight into the attitudes/values/meanings/interpretations/feelings of individuals and groups • Close involvement is the only way of gaining a truthful, valid understanding • Small-scale/micro research on small numbers of people, associated with social action theories such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology
<p>Key Features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View of society – society is an objective reality made up of social structures/social facts that are independent of individuals – individuals are constrained/moulded by and react to external social forces and social structures that exist outside of them and cause their behaviour • Theoretical perspective – structural theories e.g. functionalism and Marxism – structural theories adopt a macro approach, studying the role of institutions/structures like the family, education, the law, religion, the media, and the economy in shaping behaviour • Methodological approach – positivist/scientific approach – more likely to discover causes of human beh., and predictions of future trends • Research methods used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Quantitative methods with objectivity and detachment – standardised methods and careful sampling means more reliability and representativeness, making it easier to generalise ➢ Use of statistics (surveys or official stats e.g. crime, suicide, health, unemployment) – use of representative samples and quantitative methods, or large-scale official stats means quantitative data (reliable and easy to analyse) ➢ Experimental method – comparative method most likely due to avoiding problems of artificial conditions, ethical risks of harm, practical difficulties etc. ➢ Large-scale sample surveys – representative, quantitative data on large numbers of people (reliable and can be checked and replicated). Also involves personal detachment which reduces risk of interviewer bias. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Non-pp observation – detachment, collect quantitative data by categorising 	<p>Key Features</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View of society – society is a social construction of meaning – individuals have free will and choice, and actively construct society through their social action, driven by meanings and interpretations they give to their own behaviour and that of others • Theoretical perspective – social action or interpretivist theories e.g. symbolic interactionisms/ethnomethodology – micro approach, studying interaction between individuals in small groups to discover the meanings and motivations behind their actions and how these are created in the process of interaction • Methodological approach – interpretivist approaches – society is different from the natural world, must adopt verstehen approaches that enable them to gain insight into people's motivations and meanings by seeing the world as they do • Research methods used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ Qualitative methods, achieving validity through involvement and empathy – ensures greater understanding of people's meanings, interpretations and motives, and how these influence their behaviour ➢ Newspapers/autobiographies/personal diaries/letters – personal views and opinions told by the people themselves. Where positivists prefer social facts e.g. official suicide statistics, interpretivists prefer to study the coroner's decision making process and to understand the rules they use to interpret sudden deaths and label them as suicides ➢ Uncontrolled experiments – field experiments (e.g. Garfinkel – asked students to behave as visitors or lodgers in their own homes and to record how their parents reacted to the sudden change in the taken-for-granted relationship they had with their parents) reveal meanings and assumptions people attach to everyday interaction ➢ Unstructured/semi structured open-ended questionnaires and interviews/group interviews/focus groups – verstehen achieved in these groups gains insights into what people really think, as they can express and develop their answers in their own words. This helps to avoid the imposition problem in the structured questionnaires and interviews used by positivists ➢ Participant Obs – enables verstehen by fully immersing the researcher in the world of the researched. Produces highly valid, in-depth data and detailed accounts of the world as seen by those being researched.
<p>Criticisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretivists argue the methods do not produce valid data/a true account of society – they simply impose the researcher's own frame-work and assumptions e.g. they decide what questions to ask (or not to ask), and give little opportunity for people to explain and elaborate about what they think and feel • Detachment means they do not develop a rapport (empathy and closeness) necessary to understand the meanings and interpretations of people • Interpretivists reject the use of official stats because they see them as socially and politically constructed, and therefore lacking in validity. They are simply a record of official decision-making, labelling and interpretations, and political decisions about what statistics to collect and what not to collect, rather than objective social facts e.g. suicide stats are simply a record of decision-making and labelling by coroners. 	<p>Criticisms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positivists argue that such small scale research tends not to be representative. It is hard to replicate to check findings, and the closeness and involvement of the researcher with the researched can be distorted, invalid findings generated by factors like interviewer bias • Positivists see the closeness and involvement (verstehen) as producing data that is not reliable, as it is hard to check findings, which depend on the researcher's interpretations of what they observe. The Hawthorne effect is also something that positivists think these methods encourage. • It is often difficult for other sociologists to check the findings of interpretivist research or to repeat the research as it depends so much on the personal characteristics and skills of the researcher. • The small scale of the research means it is not generalizable to the whole population, or even to other groups, and so is of limited use.