Topic 4

SPECIFICATION AREA

The relationship between theory and methods

This topic links back to the various sociological methods and the influences on researchers' choice of topic and method which were considered during the first year of your A level course and Topic 1 on structuralist and social action theories, and Topic 3 on the debates over whether or not sociology can be a science in this chapter. You should refer back to these areas if necessary during this topic.

This topic is concerned with the way in which the theories sociologists hold influence the ways they go about researching society, and the different methods they use to collect data either to test their theories or to help in forming them. Tables 5.3 and 5.4 on pages 417 and 419 show the broad links which exist between the two different approaches of positivism and interpretivism, other wider theories of society identified with them, and the research methods most likely to be used, and you should use them for reference throughout this topic, and as a revision tool.

Positivism, interpretivism and research methods

As seen in the last topic, positivists and interpretivists have differing conceptions of the nature of society. For positivists, society has a reality external to individuals – there are social structures and social facts independent of the individual which exercise constraint over her or him and mould their behaviour. For interpretivists, society is a socially created set of meanings shared by a social group. As a result there are conflicting views and a basic disagreement about what counts as proper sociological research evidence, and different explanations and understandings of human behaviour.

Since they begin with different assumptions about the nature of society, positivist and interpretivist perspectives employ different research methods to gain knowledge about society.

Positivism and quantitative data

As seen in Topic 3, positivism holds to the position that social behaviour can be measured and explained objectively and can be and should be researched according to the same or similar principles and methods used in the natural sciences. This involves using the hypothetico-deductive model, whereby hypotheses or possible explanations for some social phenomena are formed, and then these are tested against observable (empirical), measurable data. Positivist research is therefore more likely to involve large-scale or macro research on large numbers of people, and is generally associated with structural theories of society, like those of Marxism and functionalism (discussed in Topic 1). This means they tend to record social facts, using *quantitative*, statistical techniques, including:

- The use of official statistics, like those on suicide, crime, or social class
- The experiment
- The comparative method
- Social surveys
- Structured questionnaires
- Formal/structured interviews
- Non-participant observation.

Table 5.3 A summary of the links between positivism, sociological theories and research methods

Key features	Explanation/comment
View of society	
Society is an objective reality, made up of social structures/social facts that exist independently of the individuals living in society.	Individuals are constrained/moulded by and react to external social forces and social structures that exist outside of them and cause their behaviour. The job of sociologists is to examine and measure these social-structural constraints, involving a macro or large-scale approach.
Theoretical perspective	
Structural theories, like functionalism and Marxism: how society moulds and controls individual behaviour.	Structural theories adopt a macro approach, studying the role of social institutions/social structures like the family, education, the law, religion, the media and the economy in shaping and moulding behaviour.
Methodological approach	
Positivist or scientific approaches.	Sociology can and should study society using similar methods and procedures to those used in the natural sciences. This may enable discovery of the causes of human behaviour, and predictions of future trends. Such methods include using the hypothetico-deductive model to test theories, and quantitative methods to collect empirical (observable) data to measure social facts.
Research methods used to collect data	
More *quantitative* (statistical) methods, applied with objectivity and detachment, to collect statistics on empirical (observable) data.	The use of standardized research methods and careful sampling techniques enables the collection of statistical data that is reliable (can be checked and replicated), and representative. This enables positivists to apply their findings to the whole of society and make generalized statements about the causes and effects of social activities.
Use of statistics, either collected by sociologists using surveys or existing official statistics, such as those on crime, suicide, health, unemployment or poverty.	The use of representative samples and quantitative methods, or large-scale official statistics collected nationally by government agencies, provide reliable quantitative data. *Interpretivists* reject the use of official statistics because they see them as socially and politically constructed and therefore as lacking 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. For example, official suicide statistics are simply a record of decision-making and labelling by coroners.
Experimental method – controlled laboratory experiments, field experiments or the comparative method as an alternative.	Comparative method most likely to be used, as closest alternative to natural science laboratory method. This avoids problems of using the experimental method to study society, such as artificial conditions, ethical risks of harm to participants, practical difficulties of controlling variables in open systems, and small scale creating issues of representativeness and generalizability.
Large-scale sample surveys, using structured questionnaires and structured interviews.	These produce representative quantitative data on large numbers of people that is reliable – it can be checked and replicated (repeated). They involve personal detachment on the part of the researcher, and reduce risks of interviewer bias and promote objectivity. *Interpretivists* see detachment as not getting at what people really think, and structured questions risk the imposition problem, where the researcher imposes their framework and assumptions on those being researched.
Non-participant observation.	Retains detachment, and possible to collect quantitative data by categorizing observations. *Interpretivists* say data lack validity as researchers don't know what meanings and interpretations those being observed give to their behaviour.