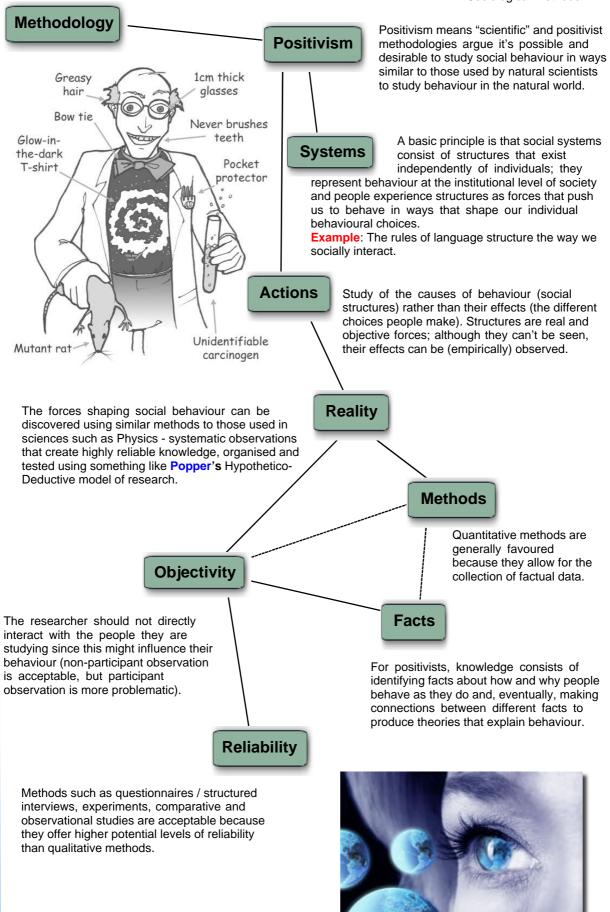


Revision

Sociological Methods

"The relationship between Positivism, Interpretivism and sociological research methods".

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The social world is similar to the natural world in terms of how it can be studied, because human behaviour is. determined by rules developed within social groups. **Example**: The need to survive leads people to develop work groups and the need to socialise children leads people to develop family groups.

Society

Because societies are social systems - the needs of which push people to behave in certain ways - we experience the social world as a force that exists over-and-above our individual ability to change or influence it. Just as we can't escape the fact of gravity (even while flying in a plane, gravity still exerts a force), positivists argue we cannot escape social forces (such as roles or norms).

Positivism

Structure

Objectivity

Science is concerned only with what is rather than what we might want something to be - and scientists must be personally objective in their work (they don't get directly involved in the behaviour being studied; this avoids biasing or influencing the data collection process. The methods used should not depend on the subjective interpretations of a researcher and research should be capable of exact replication.

Science

The task of (social) science is to isolate, analyse and understand the causes of human behaviour and to understand how social forces shape behaviour we need to (systematically) study social groups rather than individuals.



Empirical

Evidence about social behaviour is reliable and valid only if it is capable of being observed and tested. Anything not directly observable (such as people's thoughts) cannot be considered valid knowledge.

To reliably and validly study behaviour sociologists must use methods involving the use of our senses (sight, for example).

Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857) - the father of positivist thinking in Sociology

Revision Mapping 2

Evidence

Interpretivism

Actions

Interpretivist sociology is based around the idea that social interaction is based around three principles:

Co We ar

Consciousness -

We are aware of both ourselves (as unique individuals) and our relationship to others.

--> Action

People make deliberate, choices about how to behave in different situations.

Unpredictability

If behaviour can be unpredictable it means we can't study it in the way Positivists suggest we should...

Subjectivity

Meanings

For Interpretivists the social world consists of and is constructed through *meanings*.

Example: Every time you go to school, this behaviour helps to recreate the structure of education.

Society doesn't exist in an objective, observable, form; rather, it is experienced subjectively because we give it meaning by the way we behave. In other words, we create and recreate a "sense of the social system" on a daily basis, minute-by-minute, piece-by-piece.

Feelings

Reality

something *forcing* us do things like go to school or work - we are creating a convenient (fictional)

Methods

The social world is different from the natural

explanation for our own behaviour - "society" doesn't make anyone do anything; only people

world. When we think about society as real - as

When studying behaviour the best we can do is describe and explain it from the point-of-view of those involved.

Facts

For Interpretivists, "facts" about behaviour can be established, but these facts are always context-bound; they will not apply to all people, at all times, in all situations. They may not even apply to different people in the same situation.

Reactions

Example: If I steal something from Woolworths and get caught, it's a fact I will be labelled "a criminal"; if I don't get caught then it's a fact I'm seen as just another law-abiding person. The only difference here is not what I did, but how others react to what I did.

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Relativity

Your account of behaviour is just as reliable and valid as anyone else's; from this methodological perspective knowledge is always relative.

Qualitative

Interpretivist methodology leans towards the collection of qualitative data and uses methods such as unstructured interviews and participant observation that provide this type of data.



The social world has no objective features (or social structures) in the way Positivists understand these things. "Society" is experienced "as if" our behaviour were constrained by external forces and "social structures", therefore, are elaborate merely fictions we use to explain and justify behaviour.

Subjectivity

The social world is produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. Things that hold true for now in our society may not hold true in the future or in another society.

Society

The fact people actively create the social world means any attempt to establish cause and effect relationships is misguided.

Interpretation

Actions

Interpretivism

Meanings

The social world is understood ("interpreted") by different people in different situations in different ways. Everything in the social world, therefore, is relative to everything else; nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false; the best we can do is describe reality from the viewpoint of those who define it - the people involved.

Empiricism

If behaviour is conditioned by the way people interpret their world, it follows logically that "simple" causal relationships cannot be empirically established - there are just too many possible variables involved in the social construction of behaviour.



Reality

Understanding social behaviour involves understanding how people (individually and collectively) define and interpret their particular social situation (how they, in effect, construct "social realities".





The methods employed by a researcher (various forms of participant observation and interpretation) have to reflect the fact people consciously and unconsciously construct their own sense of social reality. Research methods, therefore, must be capable of capturing the quality of people's interpretations, definitions, meanings and understandings.

Exam Questions

At AS level it seems unlikely that examiners will ask **direct** questions about sociological methodology (such as "Assess different methodological approaches" exam questions asked at A2 level).





However, what this means is that students have to recognise instances (usually in the higher mark AS questions) where it is appropriate to introduce methodological arguments and debates into the question.

For example, a question like:

"Using material from Item B and elsewhere, assess the usefulness of unstructured interviews to the sociologist. (20 marks)"

Invites the student to discuss some of the methodological reasons for some sociologists seeing unstructured interviews as a useful research method...



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