

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M3: Methodologies [1]

Introduction

In this section I am going to outline the **basic principles** involved in three major sociological methodologies, (by which is meant is the way in which a sociologist considers it possible to produce knowledge about the social world that is both reliable and valid). In this respect, the three methodologies involved are

**Positivism,
Realism and
Interpretivism.**

In order to do this, these Notes are organised into two main sections:

- a. Firstly an outline of "three basic principles" that are seen to be crucial beliefs about each methodology.
- b. Secondly, I have tried to elaborate upon these essential principles, in a separate set of Notes, by briefly considering each methodology in terms of four sub-sections, namely:

Ontology - or what do we believe exists?

This involves the fundamental beliefs that someone holds about the nature of the social world and its relationship to individual social actors.

Epistemology - or what proof will we accept about what constitutes reliable and valid knowledge?

This level of proof relates to what we believe exists and how it is possible to study it reliably and validly (are we happy to accept things on trust, through faith, through empirical observation, through interpretation and personal experience, etc.?).

Methodology - or how we can go about the task of producing reliable and valid knowledge.

This idea relates to how we go about the construction of theoretical knowledge about the social world. For example, do we adopt a Hypothetico-deductive model of knowledge production or do we need to develop some other model for this purpose?

Methods - or how we actually physically collect data to test our theories.

This involves the basic nuts-and-bolts of data collection (questionnaires, interviews, experiments, participant observation and so forth).

Although, for convenience, each of the above is outlined separately, you need to be aware that, in reality, they are all connected closely to each other...

A. Positivism: Interconnected principles...**Principle 1:**

Valid knowledge can only be produced on the basis of direct observation that involves the ability to measure and record something. "Observation", in this sense, means only accepting empirical evidence (evidence that can be produced through our senses - sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing) as valid evidence. Thus, things that cannot be seen (such as people's thoughts) cannot, by definition, be accepted as valid evidence and knowledge.

Principle 2:

From the above, the task of science is seen to be that of attempting to isolate, analyse and understand the causes of human behaviour (to establish "cause-and-effect" relationships that are true for all time - "laws"). As we have seen earlier, the basis for this idea is that people do not behave randomly; behaviour is caused by something (social structural pressures) and if we can understand these causes then we can explain and predict human behaviour.

Principle 3:

Since this version of science is concerned only with what is - rather than what we might think, believe, want or hope - it follows that a scientist must be personally objective and value free in his / her work. The methods used should not be dependant upon the subjective interpretations of a researcher and research should be capable of exact replication (as a means of checking for error, falsifying a theory and so forth).

B. Interpretivism: Interconnected principles...**Principle 1:**

The social world is seen to be produced and reproduced on a daily basis by people going about their lives. Thus, things that hold true for now (this minute, today, next week...) in our society may not hold true in the future or in another society. In this respect, the social world has no "external features" or "social structures" in the sense that this idea is understood by positivist and realist scientists. The social world is simply experienced "as if" our behaviour were constrained by forces that are external to us as individuals - in effect "social structures" are considered to be little more than "elaborate fictions" that we use to explain and justify our behaviour to both ourselves and others.

Principle 2:

From the above we can see that the fact that people actively (if not always consciously or deliberately) create their world means that the attempt to establish "cause and effect" relationships / laws is theoretically misguided. If people's behaviour is conditioned by the way in which they personally interpret their world (and no two interpretations can ever be exactly the same), it follows logically that "simple" causal relationships will be impossible to establish empirically - primarily because the conditions under which a relationship is theoretically established will have changed by the time that we have established such a relationship...

Principle 3:

In this respect, the social world is understood ("interpreted") by different people in different situations in different ways (something you interpret as a "problem", for example, may not be seen by me as a problem). Thus, everything in the social world is seen to be relative to everything else; logically, nothing can ever be wholly true and nothing can ever be wholly false. The theories we create to explain the relationships we observe are, on this basis, simply one more elaborate fiction that we construct in an attempt to understand our world.

In order for a scientist to understand social behaviour, therefore, they have of necessity to understand how people (individually and collectively) experience and interpret their world (the meanings individuals give to things, the beliefs they hold and so forth). Thus, the methods that can be employed in this task (observation and interpretation) have to reflect the fact that people consciously and unconsciously construct their own sense of "social reality".

C. Realism: Interconnected principles...

Principle 1:

Like positivism, realist science accepts that social structures have some form of independent existence which is experienced as "external" to us as individuals. These structures act upon us - pressurising and constraining our behaviour - and, for this reason, the study of social structures is considered to be of primary importance for realist science.

On the other hand, like interpretivism, realism accepts that what we believe to be real will have important consequences for our behaviour. As Durkheim, for example, has argued, those things we believe to be real are experienced by us as real. If, for example, I believe myself to be middle class (my subjective belief), whilst every indicator we can use to define social class holds that I am working class (my objective class position), then this will have important consequences for my personal behaviour.

Unlike positivism, however, realist science argues that social structures are themselves the product of specific social relationships; they are created not just by people, but by powerful groups (or classes) pursuing their own particular interests at the expense of less powerful social groups / classes.

Unlike interpretivism, social structures are seen, as I've noted, to have an objective existence over and above the people who create them - and such structures cannot be easily changed. When we enter into a relationship with someone, for example, that fact changes not only the way we relate to them; it also changes our relationship with others. When I marry someone, for example, my relationship to my girlfriend is not only changed, it also changes my relationship to all other women...

As Richard **Kilminster** ("Theory" in "Developments in Sociology" edited by Michael Haralambos) notes,

"The basic drift of realism is that the social and natural realms are real, exist independently of us and have a structure of their own, which sciences attempt to describe and explain. Unlike the positivists...the realists claim that what we directly observe in both nature and in society is generated by hidden mechanisms which we cannot observe, but which scientists infer from observations and theoretical work. This view is opposed to forms of constructivism [interpretivism] which state that scientific theories are simply constructions or fictions".

Principle 2:

Social structures are "real" only in their effects - they are not permanent and unchanging (although, as I've noted, they are very difficult to change). We can, therefore, only study them in terms of particular sets of social relationships that exist at a particular time and in a particular place. Social structures, in this respect, are simply the product of underlying - or hidden - relationships; things we cannot see, but which nevertheless have some form of existence. For example, a child's relationship with their parents involves the recognition of a "special" kind of bond, one that is different to the bond between brother and sister. We cannot "see" this bond empirically, but we know that it exists.

As human beings, we have the ability to think; we are conscious of both ourselves and our relationship to others. However, the meaning of any relationship (parent - child, employer - employee, husband - wife and so forth) depends upon the social context within which it exists and by which it is supported. A relationship cannot have a social meaning without this supporting structure or framework of ideas.

Although people (because of their ability to be aware of a social context to their behaviour) ultimately create social structures (or "frameworks of social relationships that have a meaning to people), we have to be aware that the structures we create reflect back upon our behaviour; the social context of our behaviour clearly affects the range and choice of behaviour that we adopt.

Realism, therefore, **resolves the "positivist - anti-positivist" conundrum** by arguing that the task of science is to "deconstruct" social structures and, by so doing, to expose their underlying (hidden or non-empirical) basis.

Principle 3:

From the above, it is evident that all knowledge about the world is considered by realist scientists to be ideological. What we "know" (or think we know) is simply the product of particular forms of social (structural) relationships that have an "objective" form of existence (one that is, independent of individual consciousness) . If we accept this idea, the task of science is to demonstrate the way in which we can construct a form of human society based upon moral (ideological) principles that is the fairest, most egalitarian way of organising our social existence.

If we leave aside, for the moment, the question of how it is (methodologically) permissible to study the social world (we will look at this in greater detail when we consider subjectivity, objectivity and value-free sociology), another question arises which, thus far, has been taken for granted, namely, we have merely assumed that Natural scientists simply follow the methodological principles that they have elaborated over the years. We have assumed that Natural scientists actually employ the methodological principles they propound as being the basis for the scientific study of the natural world. The question we now have to turn to, therefore, is one of how closely scientists adhere to the methodological principles they have established as the basis of "scientific practice".

As I hope you can see, this difference between the subject matter of the Natural and Social sciences has important ramifications for the nature of a "scientific methodology".

As I have tried to suggest, "positivism" - like "interpretivism" and "realism" - is fundamentally an ideology. By this I mean it involves a closely-related set of dependent values which are used by a researcher to guide the way in which data is collected and knowledge produced.

In this respect, each of the above are ideologies because they involve a clearly-defined "world view" concerning the way in which it is considered "right and proper" to study the world, collect data about that world, etc..

Each of the above are also methodologies; that is, they "tell" the researcher how to go about producing valid knowledge (what methods to employ, for example, in order to produce valid forms of knowledge). We can perhaps understand this more easily if we now look briefly at the ideological principles that underpin each of these methodologies...

To which basic sociological perspectives do you think the ideological and methodological principles of positivism, interpretivism and realism are most likely to appeal:

1. To Structural Functionalists.

Briefly explain why you think this is most likely to be the case.

2. To Interactionists.

Briefly explain why you think this is most likely to be the case.

3. To Conflict Theorists.

Briefly explain why you think this is most likely to be the case.

Please Note: This set of Notes can be used in conjunction with the Lesson Plan "What's Your Methodology?"