

Topic 1

SPECIFICATION AREA

The relationship between positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods; the nature of 'social facts'

Positivism is an approach in sociology which views society and social behaviour as being caused and explained using similar scientific techniques to those used in the natural sciences, such as physics, chemistry and biology. Interpretivism is an approach emphasizing that people have a subjective awareness involving their beliefs, values and interpretations, and that these influence the way they act.

Social facts are phenomena which exist outside individuals and are independent of their minds, but which influence them in ways which constrain or determine their behaviour (e.g. the law, the family, the education system and the workplace).

Quantitative data are data which can be measured in statistical form or can be measured in some other way, such as age, height, income or the number of days of ill-health.

A macro approach is an approach which focuses on the behaviour of large numbers of people and the large-scale structure of society as a whole, rather than on the behaviour of individuals.

Positivism, interpretivism and sociological methods

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** (see glossary box). Positivists and interpretivists often choose different topics to explore, and use different research methods to investigate them, because they have different assumptions about the nature of society, which influences the type of data they are interested in collecting.

POSITIVISM AND RESEARCH METHODS

Positivists believe that, just as there are causes of things in the natural world, so there are external social forces, making up a society's social structure, that cause or mould people's ideas and actions. Durkheim, a positivist, called these external forces **social facts**.

Positivists believe social institutions create expectations of how individuals should behave and limit their choices and options, with social control making individuals behave in socially approved ways.

Durkheim said the aim of sociology should be the study of social facts, which should be considered as things, like objects in the natural world, and could in most cases be observed and measured quantitatively – in number/statistical form. The feelings, emotions and motives of individuals cannot be observed or measured, and should therefore not be studied. These are in any case the result of social facts existing outside the individual, such as the influences of socialization, the law, the media, family, the experiences of work and so on.

Examples of positivist approaches might be studies of whether people in some social classes achieve poorer exam results, suffer more illness or are more likely to commit crime than those in other classes, by looking at social facts like statistics on education, health and crime. Durkheim (2002 [1897]) used a positivist approach in his classic study of suicide in 1897, using suicide statistics to try to establish the social causes of suicide. Similarly, positivist research on relationships in the family might collect statistical data on who does what around the home, the length of time spent by partners on housework and childcare, and so on.

Positivists argue that, without quantification, sociology will remain at the level of insights and impressions lacking evidence, and it will be impossible to replicate (or repeat) studies to check findings, establish the causes of social events or make generalizations.

Just as the data of the natural sciences are drawn from direct observation and can be measured and quantified, so positivists use research methods which involve the collection of **quantitative** (statistical) **data** to test their ideas. Such quantitative methods are more likely to involve large-scale research – or a **macro approach** – on large numbers of people. These methods include:

- the experiment
- the comparative method
- social surveys
- structured questionnaires

- formal/structured interviews
- non-participant observation

INTERPRETIVISM AND RESEARCH METHODS

Interpretivists believe that, because people's behaviour is influenced by the interpretations and meanings they give to social situations, the 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 which provide an understanding from the point of view of individuals and groups. This process is called **verstehen** (pronounced 'fair-shtay-en').

Instead of collecting statistical information, interpretivists suggest there is a need to discuss and get personally involved with people in order to get at how they see the world and understand it. Examples might be studies of 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 criminal because of the way teachers or the police see them. Atkinson's (1978) study of suicide involves an interpretivist approach which contrasts with Durkheim's study in arguing that suicide statistics are simply social constructions reflecting the behaviour of coroners, doctors, relatives, etc., and their definitions of suicide. They tell us more about the decision-making processes of the living than the intentions of the dead and the real number of suicides (see the activity on pages 142–3). Similarly, interpretivist 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 want them to be.

The methods interpretivists use are therefore those which involve the collection of **qualitative data**. This consists of words, documents and images giving in-depth description and insight into the attitudes, values and feelings of individuals and groups, and the meanings and interpretations they give to events.

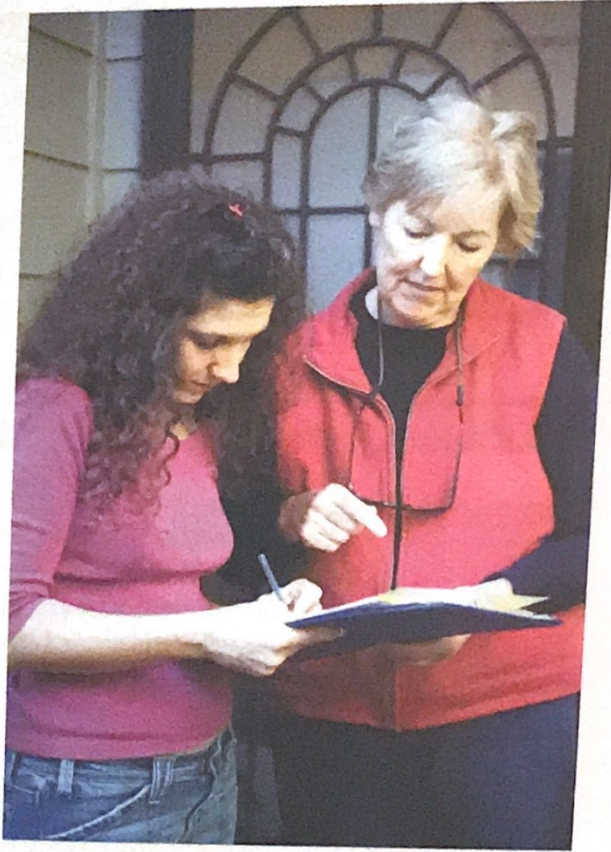
Such qualitative methods include:

- participant and (sometimes) non-participant observation.
- informal (unstructured/in-depth/open-ended) interviews.
- open-ended questionnaires.
- personal accounts, using personal documents like diaries and letters.

These are more likely to involve a **micro approach** to research, with in-depth small-scale research on small numbers of people.

Interpretivists question the value of the research methods used by positivists, such as structured questionnaires and interviews. This is because they impose a framework on research – the sociologist's own view of what is important, rather than what may be important to the individuals being researched.

Figure 3.2 shows the broad links which exist between the two different theoretical/methodological approaches of positivism and interpretivism, other wider theories of society identified with them, and the research methods most likely to be used.



Positivist researchers are more likely to collect quantitative (statistical) data through questionnaires and interviews

Verstehen is the idea of understanding human behaviour by putting yourself in the position of those being studied, and trying to see things from their point of view.

Qualitative data are concerned with the feelings and meanings people associate with, and the interpretations they give to, some event, and try to get at the way they really see things.

A **micro approach** is one which focuses on small groups or individuals, rather than on large numbers of people and the structure of society as a whole.

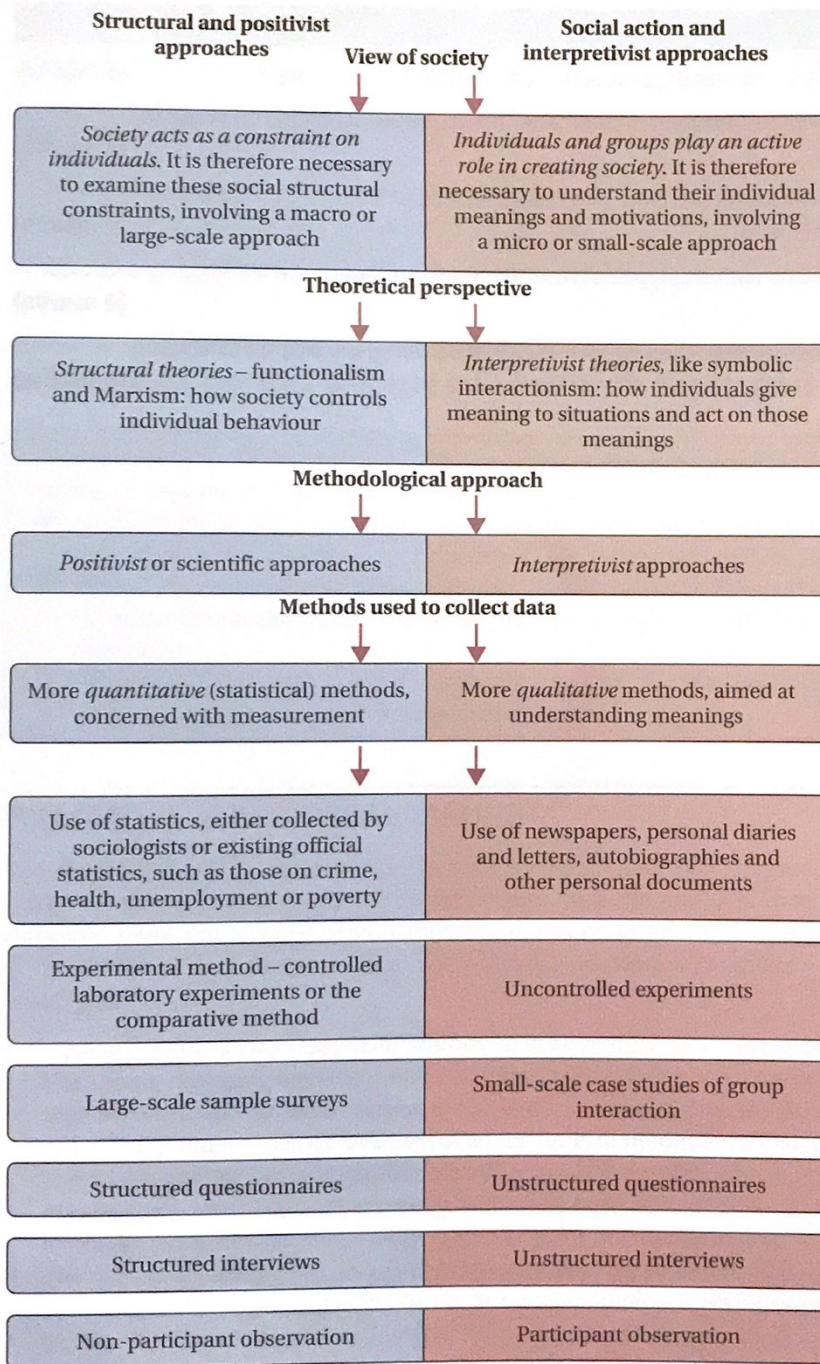


Figure 3.2 The link between sociological theories and research methods: a summary

Activity

Imagine you wanted to do a study of how tasks are divided up between men and women in the home. You are interested in:

- housework and other household jobs.
- childcare (not just who does it, but who takes responsibility for making sure children have new clothes, shoes, the right gear for school, get food they like and so on).
- decision-making.
- dealing with family conflicts and emotions.

Suggest ways that positivists and interpretivists might approach these issues differently, and what types of methods they might use to obtain their information.

Topic 2

SPECIFICATION AREA

The theoretical, practical and ethical considerations influencing choice of topic, choice of method(s) and the conduct of research

Influences on the choice of research topic and method

A useful way to remember the various influences on the choice of research topic and method which are discussed below is by the word **PET**.

- P** – Practical issues, like funding, ease of access to the place or group being studied, time available, and whether the researcher has the personal skills and characteristics to carry out the research.
- E** – Ethical issues, like whether the research will have any harmful consequences, whether participants have given their consent, and whether research is reported accurately and honestly.
- T** – Theoretical issues, such as whether a Marxist, a functionalist, or a feminist approach is preferred, or a positivist or an interpretivist approach.

PRACTICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

The theoretical and methodological issues considered later have important influences on the research topic sociologists choose to investigate, and the methods they use to investigate it. However, there are a range of non-theoretical and more practical factors, and considerations of the **ethics** of their research, that mean they do not have a completely free hand in what to investigate:

- *How easy it is to access those being studied.* In *open settings*, which are public areas open to all, like streets, shopping malls or public buildings, access for research purposes may be easier than in *closed settings*, where access is restricted, such as hospital wards, doctors' surgeries, schools and classrooms, or meetings of educational or medical professionals. For example, access to hospitals and schools for research purposes would require permission from hospital management and headteachers and governors in schools, and researching the physically or mentally ill or school students would require their **informed consent**.
- *The time and funding that are available* to complete the research will influence the scale of the research and the types of method used. For example, large-scale research is expensive, and beyond the means of most sociologists. Research for military or defence purposes will attract funding more easily than research into help for disabled people. Government-backed research is likely to open more doors to researchers and produce more sponsorship than private individuals or small research departments are able to achieve by themselves. Government-backed research often favours quantitative data gathered through large-scale surveys, such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales funded by the Home Office.
- *The availability of existing data* on a topic may limit or decide the topic chosen and the research method adopted.
- *The values and beliefs of the researcher* will inevitably influence whether or not she or he thinks issues are important and therefore worthy of study, and what aspects should be investigated and how. Townsend (1979), for example, clearly believed the study of poverty was important, and particularly the investigation of relative poverty, and his values are reflected in his devotion to poverty research – and methods of exploring it – throughout his academic life.

Ethics concerns principles or ideas about what is morally right or wrong.

Informed consent is where those taking part in a sociological study have agreed to do so, and have given this consent based on a full appreciation and understanding of the nature, aims and purposes of the study, any implications or risks taking part might have, and the uses of any findings of the research.

- *Sociologists are professionals with careers and promotion prospects ahead of them, and they face a constant struggle to get money to fund their research. There is therefore an understandable desire to prove their own ideas right. The desire for promotion may influence what topics are seen as useful subjects for research, and the choice of methods that might be most likely to produce speedy results. The current state of knowledge and what seems a cool topic at the time, or a lucrative research area, can also influence the choice of topic and enhance the careers of sociologists.*
- *The pressure to publish findings* – publishing research articles and books is a very important requirement for university academic sociologists – and publishers' deadlines may mean research is not as thorough as it ought to be.
- *The personal safety of researchers* and whether the research topic or method chosen puts the researchers at risk in some way.
- *The personal skills and characteristics of the researcher.* For example, some topics, such as the investigation of the attitudes of women towards abortion or sexual health, might be better carried out by a female researcher, and participant observation would require the researcher to have personal characteristics and skills that would enable them to fit in and develop relationships with those being studied. Interviewing, particularly in unstructured interviews, requires the interviewer to have good inter-personal and conversational skills to keep the interview going and develop rapport with the interviewee (the person being interviewed).
- *The ethical issues involved in the choice of topic and the research methods chosen, such as whether informed consent can be obtained, and whether confidentiality and the anonymity of those cooperating in research can be guaranteed (ethical issues are discussed further below).*

THEORETICAL ISSUES

The theoretical/methodological issues related to positivism and interpretivism, which were discussed in the previous topic, will have important effects on:

- *how something is investigated* – the research *methods* sociologists choose to investigate and collect information about society.
- *what is studied* – the choice of research *topic*.

The sociological perspective held by a researcher will influence not only how she or he investigates a topic, but also the research topic that she or he sees as important and interesting to study.

Functionalists, for example, are likely to focus on those aspects which show how social institutions contribute to the maintenance of society as a whole, and their role in contributing to social stability. In education, this might involve research on topics like the roles of the overt and hidden curriculums (see glossary and chapter 2 on Education) in reinforcing social norms and values and producing responsible citizens; in health, functionalists might look at the way the health service contributes to keeping the economy running smoothly, by maintaining the health of the workforce, and how doctors prevent people from avoiding their responsibilities by false claims of sickness.

Marxists are more likely to emphasize inequality, conflict and division, and to investigate research topics which highlight these areas, and to emphasize class inequality rather than, for example, ethnicity and gender. This might mean, in education, focusing on research showing how schools reproduce class inequalities from one generation to the next, and produce an obedient and passive labour force; or, in health, emphasizing the way doctors are agents of social control and focus on treating the symptoms of illness rather than the real causes rooted in social inequality.

Feminists are concerned with issues of gender inequality and this will guide their choice of research topic. Feminist research might focus, in education, on how boys and girls are treated differently in schools, and aspects of gender socialization which direct boys and girls into different subject choices and careers. In health, feminist research might focus on whether women face discrimination in the health service, or how child-bearing has become a medical process, designed to suit the needs of male doctors rather than of women themselves, and how this has been accompanied by a decline in the female profession of midwifery.

Figure 3.3 Influence on choices of research topic and method

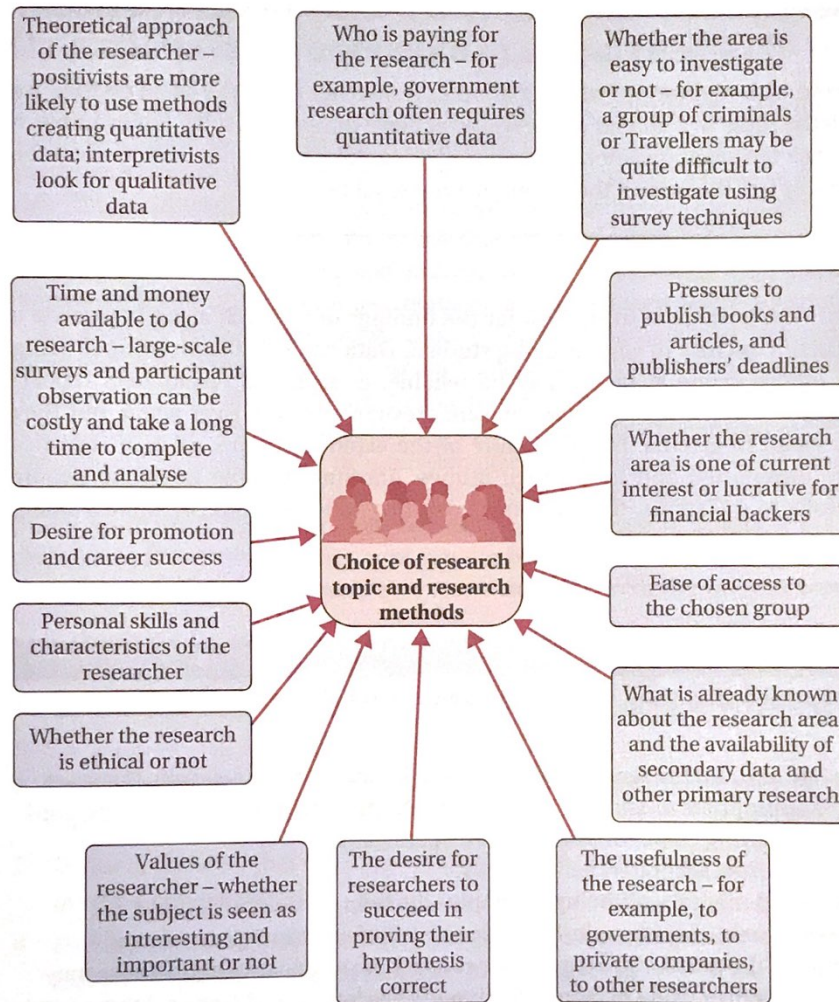


Figure 3.3 illustrates some of these theoretical, practical and ethical influences on the choice of research topic and the methods used.

Activity

Refer to figure 3.3.

- 1 Suggest two ways that sources of funding for research might influence that research.
- 2 Suggest two reasons why investigating some social groups may be much more difficult than others.
- 3 List three *practical* considerations in researching educational settings like schools or colleges, that might influence a researcher's choice of *topic* for research, giving examples to illustrate these.
- 4 Suggest two theoretical issues that might influence the researcher's choice of research method.

Key issues in social research

There are three key issues that should always be considered when carrying out or assessing research. These are the issues of reliability, validity and the ethics of research.

RELIABILITY

Reliability is concerned with replication: whether another researcher using the same method for the same research on the same or a similar group would achieve the same results. For example, if different researchers use the same questionnaire on similar samples of the population, then the results should be more or less the same if the techniques are reliable.

Reliability refers to whether another researcher, if repeating research using the same method for the same research on the same or a similar group, would achieve the same results.

VALIDITY

Validity is concerned with notions of truth: how far the findings of research actually provide a true, genuine or authentic picture of what is being studied. Data can be reliable without being valid. For example, official crime statistics may be reliable, in so far as researchers repeating the data collection would get more or less the same results over and over again, but they are not valid if they claim to give us the full picture of the extent of crime, as such statistics don't include all the unreported and unrecorded crimes. Another example might be people responding untruthfully to questions, therefore not providing valid evidence of what is being investigated.

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ETHICS

The ethics of research are concerned with morality – issues of right and wrong – and standards of behaviour, and when sociologists carry out research they should always consider the following points:

- They should take into account the sensitivities of those helping with their research. For example, it would not be appropriate to ask about attitudes to abortion in a hospital maternity ward where women may be having babies or have suffered miscarriages.
- Findings should be reported accurately and honestly.
- The physical, social and mental well-being of people who help in research should not be harmed by research – for example, by disclosure of information given in confidence which might get the person into trouble, or cause them embarrassment. There may well be ethical concerns over using personal documents like letters and diaries if these were never meant to be made public, causing damage to a person's reputation, even if they are dead.
- The anonymity, privacy and interests of those who participate in their research should be respected. The participants should not be identified by name, and they (or an institution) should not be able to be easily identified.
- Whenever possible, research should be based on the freely given *informed consent* of those taking part in a sociological study. This means that they not only have agreed to take part, but have given their consent based on a full appreciation and understanding of the nature, aims and purposes of the study, any implications or risks that taking part might have for them, and the uses of any findings of the research. In short, researchers should make clear what they're doing, why they're doing it, and what they will do with their findings.

Activity

A useful discussion of ethical issues in social research can be found in the row surrounding *The Bookseller of Kabul*, a bestselling study of Afghan family life published in 2002 by Norwegian journalist Åsne Seierstad. Did she ignore ethical issues and exploit her subjects' privacy and trust in her portrayal of Afghan family life? Take a look at www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2010/jul/31/bookseller-of-kabul-interview-asne-seierstad or do a Google search on *The Bookseller of Kabul*, and decide for yourselves whether ethical guidelines were broken, and, if so, which ones.

Operationalizing concepts in social research

A concept is an abstract idea or theory, like social class, cultural capital, educational achievement, health or disease. In order to explore concepts in any social research, but particularly for asking questions in social surveys (see later), it is necessary to convert a concept into something measurable. This is called operationalizing a concept. For example, if a sociologist wanted to investigate, through a survey, the links between social class and cultural capital (see chapter 2 on Education), or social class and health, it would first be necessary to operationalize the concept of social class, and then the concepts of either cultural capital or health, and then devise questions to measure these.

An abstract concept like social class is often operationalized (converted into something measurable) by using people's occupation and income. The concept of cultural capital might be measured by the number of books people have in their homes, what newspapers they read, what their attitudes to education are, and the occupations and educational qualifications of parents. The concept of health might be operationalized by using measures like time off work or school because of illness, the number of visits to a GP surgery or hospital for treatment, the number of prescription medicines taken, people's weight, diets, levels of fitness or the amount of exercise they get. In these ways abstract concepts are broken down into various components and transformed into things that are fairly easy to measure and to devise questions about.

Practice questions

- 1 Outline **two** practical factors that may influence a sociologist's choice of research *topic*. **(4 marks)**
- 2 Outline **two** ethical issues researchers should consider before carrying out a sociological study. **(4 marks)**
- 3 Evaluate the view that the main influences on a researcher's choice of research method are practical considerations. **(16 marks)**
- 4 Evaluate the view that theoretical issues are the most important influence when choosing a research topic and research methods to investigate it. **(16 marks)**