

## 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
<p><b>View of society</b></p> <p>Society is an objective reality, made up of social structures/social facts that exist independently of the individuals living in society.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>Theoretical perspective</b></p> <p>Structural theories, like functionalism and Marxism: how society moulds and controls individual behaviour.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>Methodological approach</b></p> <p>Positivist or scientific approaches.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p><b>Research methods used to collect data</b></p>	
<p>More quantitative (statistical) methods, applied with objectivity and detachment, to collect statistics on empirical (observable) data.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Use of statistics, either collected by sociologists using surveys or existing official statistics, such as those on crime, suicide, health, unemployment or poverty.</p>	<p>The use of representative samples and quantitative methods, or large-scale official statistics collected nationally by government agencies, provide reliable quantitative data.</p> <p><i>Interpretivists</i> 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.</p>
<p>Experimental method – controlled laboratory experiments, field experiments or the comparative method as an alternative.</p>	<p>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.</p>
<p>Large-scale sample surveys, using structured questionnaires and structured interviews.</p>	<p>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.</p> <p><i>Interpretivists</i> 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.</p>
<p>Non-participant observation.</p>	<p>Retains detachment, and possible to collect quantitative data by categorizing observations. <i>Interpretivists</i> say data lack validity as researchers don't know what meanings and interpretations those being observed give to their behaviour.</p>



Positivists regard such methods as valuable, as they provide quantitative empirical data, which, by using representative samples and survey techniques, can be generalized to the whole of society. They regard such data as *reliable*, as the findings can be checked and replicated (repeated) by other researchers using the same or similar methods. Such methods also involve objectivity and the personal detachment of researchers from those they study, and avoid the risk of personal values and prejudices influencing research. This is similar to what they claim is achieved by natural scientists using the scientific method. Positivists see such methods as producing the kind of data that enables the creation of cause-and-effect explanations of human behaviour, and of predictions of what might happen in similar circumstances in the future.

### Criticisms of positivist approaches

The main criticisms of the positivist approach come from the interpretivist view discussed in table 5.4 and in the following section. Interpretivists suggest that the methods adopted by positivists do not produce a valid or true account of society, as they simply impose the researcher's own framework and assumptions on those being studied. For example, 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. The detachment of the researcher means they do not develop the empathy and closeness necessary to really understand the meanings and interpretations that people hold. They argue the statistics positivists produce through surveys are simply social constructions created by the categories and questions positivists themselves create. Official statistics, which positivists regard as factual information, are also seen by interpretivists as social constructions – simply a record of decision-making by officials, over what statistics to collect and not to collect, and how they categorize events. The classic example is suicide statistics, which interpretivists suggest are nothing more than a record of coroners' decision-making in classifying sudden unexplained deaths.

### Interpretivism and qualitative data

Interpretivists are more concerned with understanding the meanings that individuals give to situations – how they see things and how these perceptions direct social action. They regard using the methods and procedures of the natural sciences as wholly inappropriate for the study of society, as society is fundamentally different from the natural world, and people's meanings and motivations cannot be measured or discovered by quantitative methods.

Interpretivists generally adopt an **inductive approach** to form theories, rather than the hypothetico-deductive method used by the positivists. This approach, instead of first forming a hypothesis and then testing it against the evidence as positivists do, is much more of an open-ended process. Theories emerge from the accumulation of insights, issues and evidence gained through research into the meanings and interpretations that people hold, providing the possibility of discovering ideas that those using the hypothetico-deductive method may not even have thought of. Glaser and Strauss (1999 [1967]) refer to theory arising from an inductive approach as **grounded theory**, as it is grounded in an analysis of data that have been collected.

Interpretivists generally adopt the *Verstehen* approach suggested by Weber – developing closeness and empathy with people to understand the world through their eyes, rather than the detachment preferred by the positivists. They therefore see a need to get personally involved with people, through deep conversations with them in unstructured interviews, by close observation, and participation in their activities, in order to understand how they see the world and the motives and meanings behind their actions. For example, interpretivist research on crime is less likely to use the positivist approach of looking for the *causes* of crime, but is more likely to study, as Becker did, how and why some behaviour becomes labelled as deviant while other similar behaviour does not, and how people respond to being labelled as deviant or criminal. Interpretivists are therefore more likely to use *qualitative* research methods, giving in-depth description of and insight into the attitudes, values, meanings, interpretations and feelings of individuals and groups. Interpretivists see close involvement with those they are studying as the only means of producing a valid (or truthful) understanding of society. Such methods involve small-scale or *micro* research on small numbers of people, associated with social action theories such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

An **inductive approach** is one which develops theories on the basis of evidence that has been collected.

**Grounded theory** is theory that arises from (is grounded in) analysis of data that have been collected.



**Table 5.4 A summary of the links between interpretivism, sociological theories and research methods**

Key features	Explanation/comment
<p><b>View of society</b></p> <p>Society is a social construction of meaning, that has no objective reality or existence independent of the meanings and interpretations people hold.</p>	<p>Individuals have free will and choice. They actively construct society through their social action, driven by the meanings and interpretations they give to their own behaviour and that of others. The job of sociologists is to understand these meanings and interpretations, involving a micro or small-scale approach.</p>
<p><b>Theoretical perspective</b></p> <p>Social action or interpretivist theories, like symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology: how the action of individuals is based on the meanings they hold, and how they make sense of the world.</p>	<p>Social action theories adopt a 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.</p>
<p><b>Methodological approach</b></p> <p>Interpretivist approaches.</p>	<p>Society is fundamentally different from the natural world. Sociologists have to adopt <i>Verstehen</i> approaches that enable them to gain insight into people's motivations and meanings by seeing the world as they do, and building grounded theories using an inductive approach and qualitative data.</p>
<p><b>Research methods used to collect data</b></p> <p>More qualitative methods, aimed at achieving validity through involvement and empathy, to gain insight and understand meanings.</p> <p>Newspapers, autobiographies, personal diaries, letters and other personal documents, personal oral histories (people telling their own stories about the past).</p> <p>Uncontrolled experiments, like some field experiments, and small-scale case studies of group interaction.</p> <p>Unstructured/semi-structured open-ended questionnaires and interviews, and group interviews and focus groups.</p> <p>Participant observation.</p>	<p>Qualitative methods enable greater understanding of people's meanings, interpretations and motives, and how these influence their behaviour. <i>Verstehen</i> sociology, with researchers putting themselves in the position of the person or group being studied, is the key to understanding social life.</p> <p>The study of these can provide insights into people's personal views and opinions as told by the people themselves. So-called 'social facts' preferred by positivists, like official statistics, are social constructions. For example, official suicide statistics are simply a social construction, and interpretivists prefer to study coroners' decision-making to understand the rules they use to interpret sudden deaths and label them as suicides, and thereby create the official statistics.</p> <p>Field experiments, like those of Garfinkel (see page 385), enable the discovery of the meanings and assumptions people attach to everyday interaction; case studies can provide an in-depth account of social life from the point of view of those being researched.</p> <p>Involvement and closeness of the researcher with the researched help to provide valid, in-depth information. Building trust and empathy (<i>Verstehen</i>) and group interaction through focus groups and group interviews can draw out people's real thoughts and feelings and gain insights into what they really think, as they can express and develop answers in their own words. This helps to avoid the imposition problem in the structured questionnaires and interviews used by positivists. <i>Positivists</i> argue 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 produce distorted, invalid findings generated by factors like interviewer bias.</p> <p>This enables <i>Verstehen</i> by fully immersing the researcher in the world of the researched. This produces highly valid, in-depth and detailed accounts of the world as seen by those being researched. <i>Positivists</i> see this closeness and involvement producing data that are not reliable, as it is hard to check findings, which depend on the researcher's interpretations of what they observe.</p>



Interpretivist methods include

- The use of personal accounts and personal documents like diaries and letters
- Unstructured/semi-structured open-ended questionnaires
- Informal (unstructured/in-depth) interviews, focus groups and group interviews
- Small-scale case studies of group interaction
- Participant and (sometimes) non-participant observation.

### Criticisms of interpretivist approaches

It is worth noting (particularly for exam questions) that just as the main criticisms of positivist methods come from the interpretivists, so the main criticisms of the interpretivists come from the positivists. The strengths of each approach are the weaknesses of the other.

Positivists generally criticize interpretivist research methods for their lack of reliability and the subjective nature of their findings. They suggest interpretivist research depends on the researcher's own interpretations of the meanings people hold, or of the answers they give. The close involvement of the researcher means that findings may be invalid (untruthful) because of interviewer bias, or the Hawthorne effect changing the behaviour of those being researched. 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.

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## Feminist methodology

Feminist theories were considered in Topic 1, and you will recall that the main focus of these theories was the unequal position of women in societies, combined with a commitment to improve the lives of women. Feminist methods flow from these theories, and are concerned with the best methods for capturing the experiences of women.

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### Positivism: male bias and malestream methods

Feminist researchers have generally been critical of much quantitative positivist research in the past for several reasons.

- 1 *It ignored and excluded women and issues of concern to women.* Mies (1983) argues much positivist research has a masculine bias, and produces a male view of social life that ignores the experiences of women. For example, the examination of 'work' all too often refers to paid employment, and ignores the unpaid work that women do in the home. Oakley (1974) found this in her pioneering study of housework, which encountered opposition at first for not being regarded by some (male) sociologists as a serious topic worthy of sociological study.
- 2 *It simply treated women as appendages or insignificant extensions of men.* For example, Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest the findings from research on men are generalized to women, despite the different experiences and inequalities women face.
- 3 *It uses 'malestream methods' to research the experiences of women.* Westmarland (2001) cites the conduct of positivist structured interviews as an example of a 'malestream method'. These are conducted with distance and detachment between the interviewer and interviewee, and researchers do not reveal their feelings or views, and do not share their knowledge with the respondents. Oakley (1981a) regards such positivist methods as an aspect of the power relationships which she sees as a feature of malestream sociology. This is because such methods involve the researcher taking control of the research situation, in the sense of deciding what the important issues are, what questions to ask, what is worth (or not worth) talking about, and limiting the responses that can be given. Oakley argued that such approaches contradicted the aims of feminist research, which are concerned with encouraging women to open up and describe and share their experiences.



Feminists regard many positivist approaches as like smash-and-grab raids, where researchers burst upon the scene, grab the information they want as quickly as possible from their victims (respondents), offer nothing in exchange, and then move on to their next victim. The researcher has as little involvement as possible with those being researched, who probably have little or no idea of what the research is about, and have little opportunity to discuss or explain their answers, and are given little encouragement to open up and describe their experiences and discuss their lives.

### Feminism and interpretivism

Because of the criticisms of positivist methods already described, feminist researchers have generally been more sympathetic to the use of interpretivist methods to research the lives of women, though they are more likely to develop more equal and intimate relationships with the women they are researching than is perhaps associated with the work of male interpretivists. Feminists emphasize the importance of warmth, co-operation, information sharing and empathy – *Verstehen* – to explore women's lives. This means using the more informal, open-ended methods associated with interpretivism, such as informal unstructured interviews, case studies of women's lives, group interviews/discussions, and oral histories in which women tell the story of their lives in their own words. Feminists argue these provide valid, in-depth accounts of women's lives, and may encourage women to open up about aspects of their lives they may otherwise be reluctant to talk about to dominating and detached sociology experts. Such areas might include domestic violence, sexual harassment at work, relationships with their partners or the experience of motherhood. Feminists argue such methods enable feminist theory to emerge from the research itself, rather than being imposed by the theoretical framework of the researcher, and feminist theory is therefore frequently a form of the grounded theory discussed earlier (see page 418).

An example of such an approach was adopted by Oakley (1981b) in her studies of first-time motherhood and the experience of becoming a mother in British society. She used informal, unstructured conversational interviews, involving two-way interaction, with a close and equal relationship with the mothers concerned. Oakley shared her own experiences of motherhood and offered advice to first-time mothers to help them overcome anxieties. By sharing her own experiences and feelings, Oakley was able to establish more equal relations with the mothers, and draw out their feelings, opinions and confidences, and produce valid and detailed information about the lives of women, which could be shared to improve their lives.

### The feminist perspective and value commitment

It would be misleading to suggest that all feminists regard positivist research methods as inappropriate, and that only interpretivist methods can and should be used in feminist research. Westmarland suggests that positivist large-scale surveys and official statistics may be useful to discover the scale of problems. She points out, for example, that it is useful to know, via surveys and official statistics, that women are more likely to be raped by acquaintances and partners (88 per cent of rapes) than by strangers (12 per cent of rapes), and that only 6 per cent of rapes reported to the police result in a prosecution and conviction. However, she suggests statistical information like this is in itself inadequate, as feminists want to know how this affects the lives of women. She argues unstructured interviews are needed to fully understand what lies beneath quantitative statistical data, such as how women experience events and how these affect their lives, and to provide information that can promote social change and improve women's lives.

Westmarland argues that different feminist issues need different research methods, and that both positivist quantitative methods and interpretivist qualitative methods can be used as long as they are applied from a feminist perspective, and that there is no need for an 'us against them', as they are applied from a feminist perspective, and that there is no need for an 'us against them', quantitative versus qualitative divide. Westmarland suggests that many research methods can be adapted for feminist use, and supports the view of Kelly et al. that 'what makes feminist research feminist is less the method used, and more how it is used and what it is used for' (Kelly et al. (1992: 150), cited in Westmarland (2001)).



What really makes feminist approaches different from positivist and much interpretivist research is that there is nearly always a clear value commitment behind the research, and that is to improve the lives of women. For example, many of the interpretivist participant observation studies carried out by men do not seem to be associated with any desire to improve the lives of those they have been participating with. This issue of value commitment is discussed further in the next topic.

## Is theory all that affects methods?

It is easy to get the impression that sociological research is divided into opposing camps, with positivists pursuing methods generating quantitative data, and interpretivists and feminists using methods generating qualitative data. The real world of practical research is somewhat more confused than this. While positivists might prefer more scientific, quantitative techniques, and interpretivists and feminists might prefer more qualitative methods, most sociologists will use a range of methods to collect different kinds of data, regardless of whether they are quantitative or qualitative. They will use whatever methods seem best suited and most practical for producing the fullest possible data to understand the subject being studied.

This use of a variety of methods is known as *methodological pluralism*, and is very useful for increasing sociological understanding of social life. Sociologists will also often use a variety of methods, and different types of data, to check that the results obtained by a particular method are valid and reliable. For example, positivists might conceivably use participant observation to check the accuracy or validity of statistical (quantitative) evidence collected by questionnaires in a survey, or to check whether people act as they said they did in an interview. Interpretivists might well use structured questionnaires to collect background data or to check whether their observations are valid. This approach of using a range of methods (usually two or three) to check findings is called *triangulation*.

The theoretical/methodological issues related to positivism, interpretivism and feminism considered in this 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. 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. Feminists are concerned with issues of gender inequality and to discover women's experiences and to improve their lives, and this will guide their choice of research topic.

While such theoretical and methodological issues are major influences on the choice of research topic and research method(s), there are also practical and ethical considerations.

- *Practical issues* include things 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.
- *Ethical issues* include considerations like whether the research will have any harmful consequences, whether participants have given their *informed consent*, and whether research is reported accurately and honestly.

You should already be familiar with these issues from your first-year studies, but figure 5.6 provides a summary of some of the theoretical, practical and ethical influences on the choice of research topic and the methods used.