

*In what ways and to what extent are the positivist and interpretive approaches to sociological research different?*

The sociological ideals followed by the positivist are the antithesis of those chosen by the interpretivist. The positivist expects to always find that, as Condorcet described, “everywhere one must reach the same results with the same methods for the truth is one for everybody, because nature is everywhere subject to the same laws” [1]. Whereas for the interpretivist “reality really is in the eye of the beholder”. [2]

The Positivist standpoint is really that of the early sociologists who tried to attach social laws to humanity in the same way Newton’s experiments gave us the theory of gravity. As Auguste Comte claimed in 1842, “instead of systems of belief in which the destiny of an individual was in the unintelligible hands of God or rulers, scientific knowledge would make it possible for an individual to understand nature and society, and with this knowledge to determine, in freedom, their own future.” [7] These newly formed social scientists tried to use statistics and precise measurements to answer the problems of society. Karl Popper saw that a very precise hypothesis must be made<sup>1</sup>, that can be tested and re-tested to “make precise predictions on the basis of the theory.” However, Popper also stated it would not be possible to produce laws that would always stand true, as there would be the possibility of future falsification. [15]

But, the interpretivist, or phenomenologist, could see that the laws of natural science would be an inappropriate way of studying human behaviour. They, instead study social action to enable an understanding of *verstehen*<sup>2</sup>, a term coined by Max Weber. This can best be done, in the view of the interpretive theorist, by observation of, and interaction with the subject. This can be seen in Weber’s research into the relationship between the Protestant work ethic and Capitalism. [17]

People having no choice in how they behave because external objective

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<sup>1</sup> To Popper the hypothesis that Marx put forward of a future world-wide Revolution of the Proletariat cannot be disproved just because it has not happened so far, as the original theory was not precise in giving a time frame for the event.

<sup>2</sup> Verstehen = “imagining yourself to be in the position of the person whose behaviour you are seeking to explain.” [16]

forces cause their behaviour, seems to be the mainstay of the positivist theory, such as when Emile Durkheim tried to prove a causal relationship within the reasons behind suicide by using the official statistics available. His findings were to be argued against by J.D. Douglas, as having taken the statistics too much at face value<sup>3</sup>.

The phenomenologist, on the other hand, argues that human consciousness means “that we decide what to do in the light of our interpretation of the world around us”.<sup>[3]</sup> This is seen in the work of Jean Baechler, who used case studies to determine “suicidal behaviour as a way of responding to and trying to solve a problem.”<sup>[10]</sup>

The Positivist takes the “macro” approach to society. He studies the institutions within society, such as church, family, and education, to see how they manage “to maintain the equilibrium and consensus.”<sup>[5]</sup> G.P. Murdoch used a sample of 250 societies, a typically positivist methodology, to attempt to establish that the Family was universal, however this was later argued against by Kathleen Gough, who took the interpretivist attitude of involving herself in the lives of the people when she discovered the Nayar of Kerala<sup>4</sup>.<sup>[9]</sup>

For phenomenologists the “micro” approach is taken. They see that the individual has his own perspective on any situation, that he, therefore creates his society and so each person must be handled and treated in their own way. This was the approach taken by Max Weber, who claimed that “action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Such differing approaches to the people/society relationship must have different priorities when it comes to research. The Positivist will rely

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<sup>3</sup> Durkheim managed to establish his hypothesis that one was too integrated into one’s society, or not integrated enough, or that the institution of society one found oneself in had too many, or too few rules, as the main causes because he used the available statistics on suicide to make his determinations, but did not take into consideration that the coroners may have taken their own interpretation, or that of the deceased person’s family, too much into account. This was later the argument put forward by J.D. Douglas.<sup>[8]</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Nayar of Kerala = From Southern India pre-1792. Women could have up to 12 husbands who visited but did not live with them, and men could have as many wives as they liked.

heavily on scientific data, statistics, and representative samples. His data is quantitative. He will involve large numbers of people in his research and imitate the methods of the natural scientist. He strives for reliability and generalisation. The methods he employs include social surveys, questionnaires, and structured interviews. He also prefers to keep to laboratory conditions, feeling that these factors are less likely to cause his own personal influence on the respondents, as was done by Stanley Milgram<sup>5</sup> in 1963 to demonstrate people's obedience to authority.[11]

For the Phenomenologist qualitative data is more appropriate. They will use peoples words and expressions of feelings without generalisation or representation. They work with small numbers of people and hope to achieve validity<sup>6</sup> in their data. The Interpretivists prefer to ingratiate themselves into their subject's society and allow members to tell their own story in their own way, such as when "Karen Sharpe studied the lives of prostitutes by acting as a "secretary" for them." [21] By gradually befriending these women and putting herself in a position where they would learn to trust her she assumed she would have had more success in finding what she wanted to know than by approaching her research in a more structured manner.

It is, perhaps, strange that when the two methodologies are so different, their main criticism should be the same: that both forms are subjective. The surveys and questionnaires of the Positivist fall foul of the mind-set of the writer. The questions set will not always have a relevance to all who take part in the research and the multiple choice answers cannot possibly take into account that which is appropriate to every individual, therefore the researcher's view of social reality has influenced the outcome of the research. The very choice of subject has to have been influenced by the researcher's viewpoints. Even within laboratory conditions people are influenced by those around them, as was proven at the Hawthorne Works in

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<sup>5</sup> Milgram's experiment consisted of a number of teachers and 1 learner. The teachers were told that the learner knew the answers to their questions but refused to give them, and was to be shocked by anything from 15 - 450 volts. The learner was an actor and no real shocks were given, but most subjects gave what they thought was a 450 volt shock, without hesitation as they had been told to do so by an authority figure.

<sup>6</sup> Validity = "The ability of a test or research method to measure what it sets out to measure. For example, IQ tests are often contested with regard to their validity, as there is no consensus over what IQ tests are actually measuring." [20]

Chicago<sup>7</sup>, when Mayo showed that it was the appearance of a researcher that caused productivity to rise, rather than the changes in environmental conditions that were being experimented with.[19]

The Phenomenologist's interpretation of the interviews they have held and the diaries, letters and dossiers they have studied are individual to the researcher, not the subject. And so it is that their methods are not wholly objective. As stated by Dr. K. A. Menninger<sup>8</sup>, "One of the most untruthful things possible, you know, is a collection of facts, because they can be made to appear in so many different ways." [22]

When Eileen Barker sought to "establish by close observation how in general people became Moonies." [12] she did not follow a strictly interpretive or positivist methodology, in that she also distributed questionnaires to people within the cult and their families outside the cult. This form of triangulation "illustrates the way these approaches are complimentary and overlap such that they are incomplete without each other." [13] However, not all sociologists see the joining of the two approaches as complimentary. Giddens<sup>9</sup> said of Positivism, "Those who still wait for a social scientific Newton are not only waiting for a train that won't arrive. They are in the wrong station." [14]

"For the structuralist, the character of a society - its social structure - is not in doubt. It is a "real" thing which exists outside of its members. For the interpretivist however, it is much more difficult to describe a society which is the outcome of interpretation as somehow "true" or "real" in the way social theorists conceive of their social structures." [4]

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<sup>7</sup> Elton Mayo analysed the results of an experiment at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company in 1933. Worker Productivity was being tested by the manipulation of variables such as lighting, temperature and length of breaks. However, it appeared that, as productivity increased in all cases, it was the employees knowledge that such tests were taking place that was the main catalyst.

<sup>8</sup> Psychiatrist, Topeka Kansas, 1893-1990. He argued that crime was preventable through psychiatric treatment. [23]

<sup>9</sup> "British social theorist, born 1938. Theory of "saturation" solved problem of whether individual acts, or major social forces, shape society, by asserting that it is human agency which continuously reproduces social structure." [18]

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