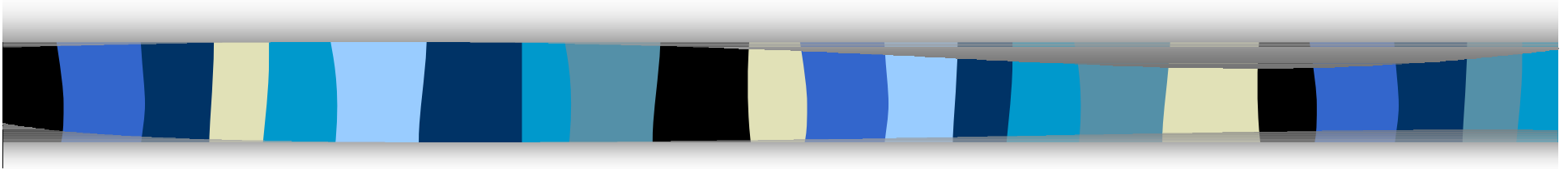


Theory and Research

Chapter three



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Aims of the chapter

- To develop the idea of methodology introduced in chapter 2
- To introduce you to ontological and epistemological issues in sociology
- Outline the key aspects of positivism
- Outline the key aspects of interpretivism
- Outline the key aspects of realism



Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter you should have a clear idea of

1. How research is underpinned by theoretical ideas
2. What is meant by an ontology / epistemology problem in sociology
3. The key aspects of positivist theory
4. The interpretivist critique of positivism and the key aspects of interpretivist approaches in sociology
5. What is meant by realism in sociology and how realism is different from both positivism and interpretivism.



My objectives

- To highlight the importance of sociological theory as the basis of research.
- Help you understand the distinction between ontology and epistemology
- To guide you through the three most influential theories of knowledge in sociology – positivism, interpretivism, realism



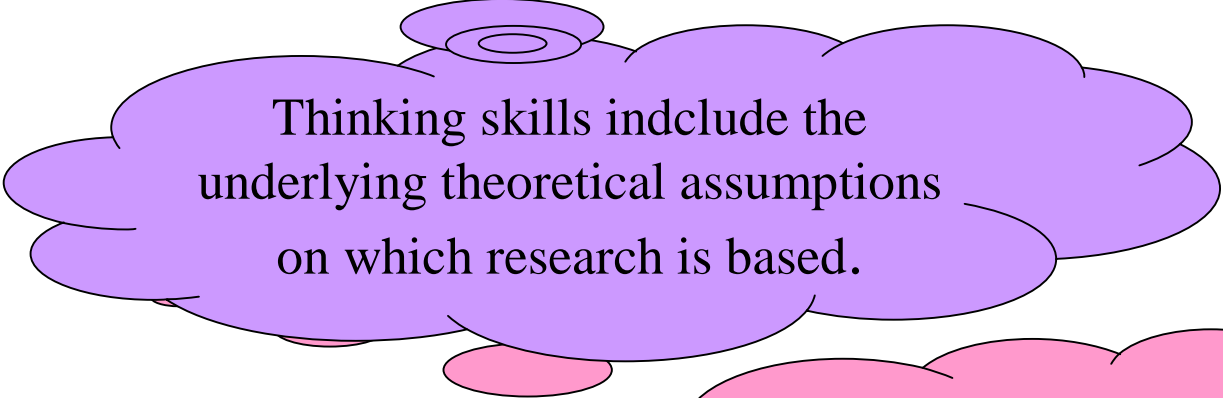
Student's objectives

- Read chapter 3 of subject guide – This is not an easy chapter to understand. Therefore it is of utmost importance that you also refer to your textbook such as Giddens or Fulcher and Scott.
- Make sure you do understand the basic concepts and the difference between each theory. It is important that you also write down a list of examples for every theory so it will help you remember all this information in the exam and also to explain yourself better when answering questions.

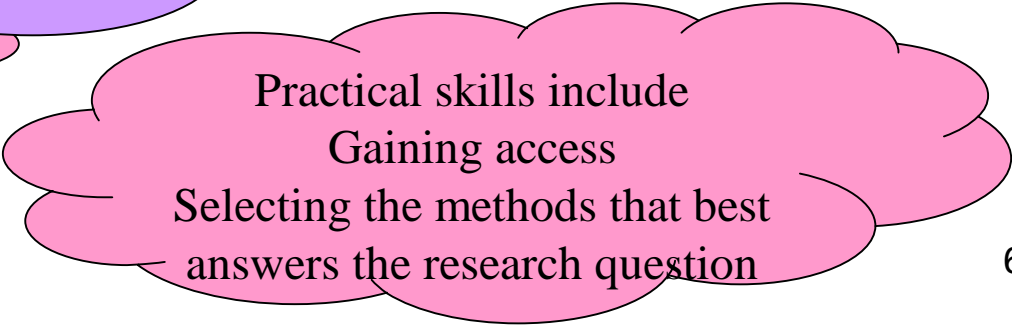


Special tools of inquiry

- Sociological research is based on the use of some ‘special tools of inquiry’ which include the thinking skills and practical skills (Pawson).



Thinking skills include the underlying theoretical assumptions on which research is based.



Practical skills include
Gaining access
Selecting the methods that best answers the research question

METHODOLOGY

Methodology = principles + methods

Ontology

Epistemology

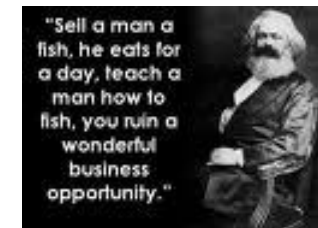


ONTOLOGY

- Concerned with what societies are – what units make up societies and how they relate to each other.
- Also concerned with analysing the social structures and how each social institution engages in networking and shape the behaviour of the individuals forming part of these social institutions (on a macro level).

Different ontological approaches

- Marx, studied economic structures because he believed that they are the basis of society. Social change therefore occurred because there were certain changes in the economic structures which in turn brought an amount of tension. This theory is referred to as the materialist theory.



- Durkheim believed that morals and values of a society represented a social force that told people how to behave and stick together as members of social institutions. Those that, like Durkheim believe that values and beliefs are the core elements of societies are referred to as 'idealists'



ONTOLOGY

- Action theorists, in contrast to social structures theorists believe that society is formed by the actions carried out by different people or categories of people.
- Action theorists criticise structural theorists by saying that the latter look at people as puppets.
- Weber was an action theorist – he tried to see how different people perceived things and have found that there were other causes for capitalism. By focusing more on the actions of individuals, he was able to identify a relationship between religion and the rise of modern capitalism.



EPISTEMOLOGY

- Explores the basis for knowledge – how we know what we know i.e. How sociologists justify the knowledge they are providing of social life.
- The epistemology debate refers to the argument between sociological knowledge and scientific knowledge.

The naturalists are in favour of scientific measures to sociological research, similar to those used in natural science.

Anti-naturalists are those who believe that nature and society cannot be studied in the same way. People are reflective and try to make sense of the world around them. So the best research approach is to get in touch with the social reality of the people studied and interpret how they view the world.

Subjectivity / Objectivity

- Epistemologists are also concerned about the **subjectivity/objectivity** of the research carried out by sociologists.
- Some sociologists believe that sociologists should detach themselves from the subjects studied. Others believe that researchers should immerse themselves in the subject's shoes to understand how they see and interpret the world around them. At its best, such sociologists would want researchers to become a member of the social group being studied – to be one of them.
 - What if you are studying suicide???





THREE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING RESEARCH

- The following are three of the most influential theories of knowledge.

positivism

interpretivism

realism

- These terms do not suggest that researchers need to be one or the other in absolute terms; few sociologists view themselves as purely positivists for example. Many use a combination of the three theoretical assumptions. These are also general terms; overlapping is possible.

POSITIVISM



- Positivists apply the exact principles and practices used by natural scientists.
- Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) believed that this is best approach to studying the laws underlying how societies work and change.
- Modern sociologists, however, are less ambitious and talk about trends or probabilities rather than laws governing society.

Saint-Simon & Comte

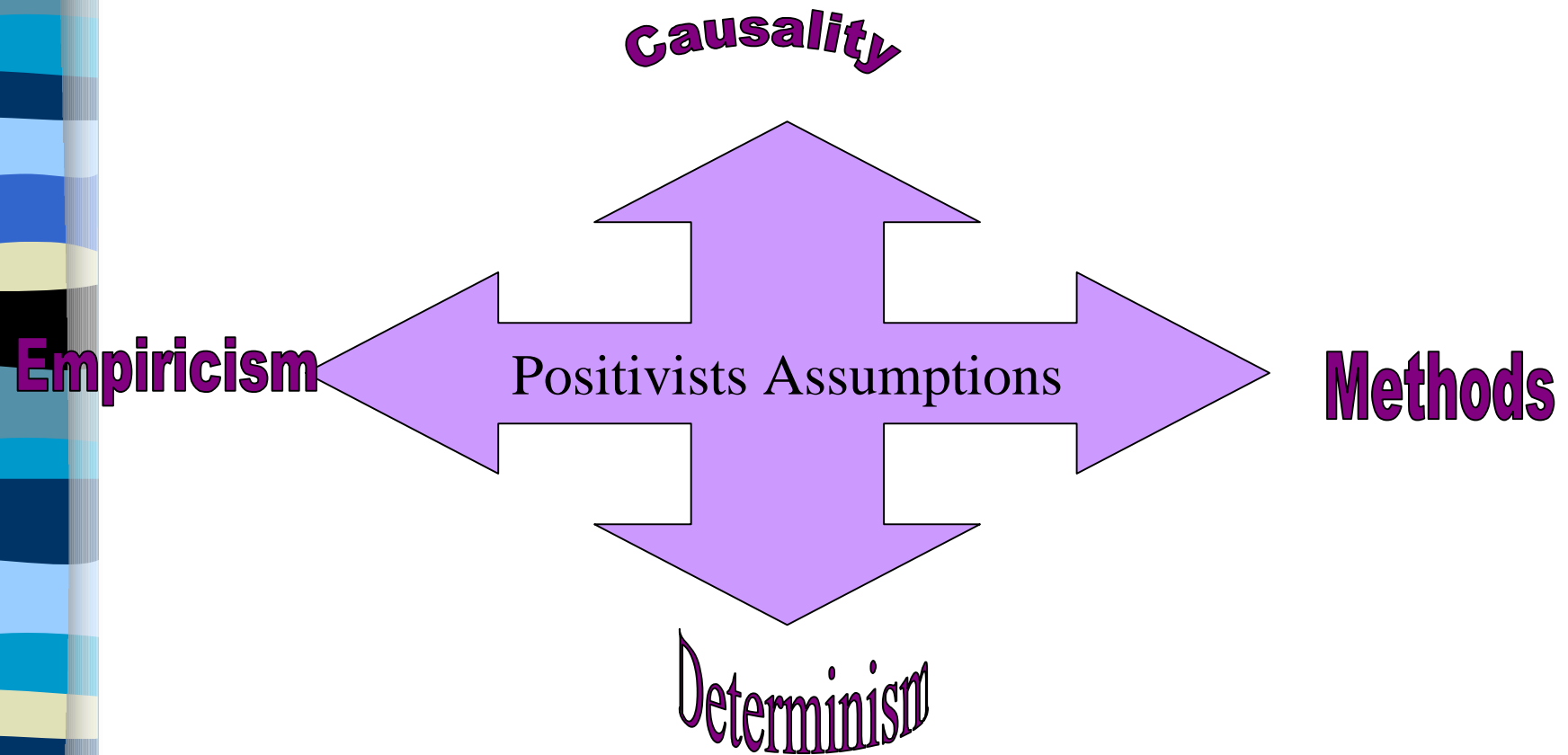


Saint-Simon coined the term positive science, meaning definite and unquestionable. He worked to create 'a positive science of man'. He said that once this was achieved we would be on the way to possess complete knowledge of everything that exists.

- Comte's positivism presented science as the study of observable phenomena. The scientist must observe those things that are of interest. These observations had then to be explained by theoretical laws which stated casual relationships between observed events. Consequently the scientists can then predict the occurrence of events.



Positivists Assumptions

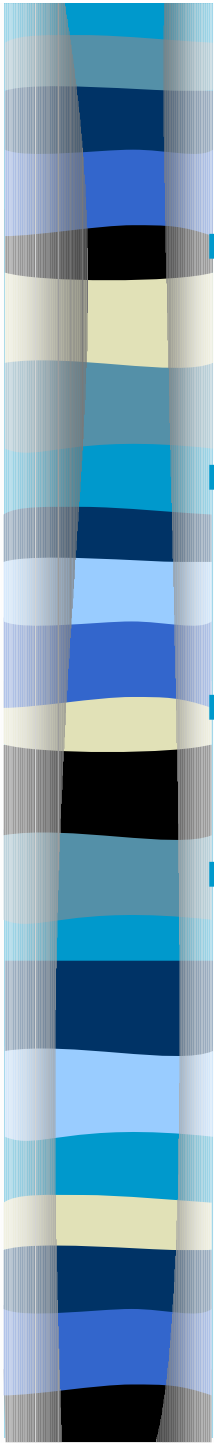




POSITIVISTS ASSUMPTIONS

Causality	what causes what (economic recession may cause increased unemployment and economic deprivation, which will in turn increase crime).
Determinism	researchers are interested in finding out about people's subjective views – why people behave in the way they do?
Empiricism	refers to the factual knowledge that can be achieved i.e. Based on experience (I know it is a chair because I sit on it).
Methods	the positivists' methods are those that produce the most objective, quantitative, systematic collection of data, reliability and transparent.

INTERPRETIVISM

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- Interpretivists question the applicability of logic and methods of natural science to sociological research. They believe that the social world is meaningful
 - Max Weber (1864-1920) was the founder of interpretivism. He believed that natural science and sociology are two distinct enterprises and require different logic and methods.
 - Schutz (1899-1959) argued that the social reality, for human beings, has a specific meaning and relevance. Human beings are therefore subjective.
 - Human beings actively interpret the situations they find themselves in an act on the basis of these interpretations. People might react and interpret things differently from one another. So it is difficult to say what causes what as positivists try to do.



INTERPRETIVISTS' ASSUMPTIONS

- **Verstehen** – a German word meaning understanding; the ability of the researcher to put him/herself in the shoe of the participants and see the worlds from their eyes.
- Phenomenology – another concept in interpretivist epistemology (Alfred Schutz) studies everyday life, focusing on people's states of consciousness and then judging about what may be causing their behaviour.
- What causes criminal behaviour → interpret criminal behaviour from their point of view → understand crime. The meaning attributed and the causes of crime might be different for different criminals – some might steal for the fun of it, for personal use, because of severe poverty...



INTERPRETIVISM

- Methods – “The aim of interpretivist approach is to understand the subjective experiences of those being studied, how they think and feel and how they act in their natural contexts (Gosling 2005:77)”.
- Interpretivists are mainly concerned with validity more than taking an objective and systematic research.
- The favoured research design is ethnography and the methods used are usually participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents.



INTERPRETIVISM

Criticisms:

- Interpretivists question the assumptions underlying positivism.
- Interpretivists made it possible for sociologists to provide knowledge on people's everyday life experiences.
- Interpretivists do not provide testable hypothesis. So they cannot be evaluated. This brings about the concept of relativism – where one theory, or study, is seen as good as any other because the evidence is relative (seen differently by different researchers).

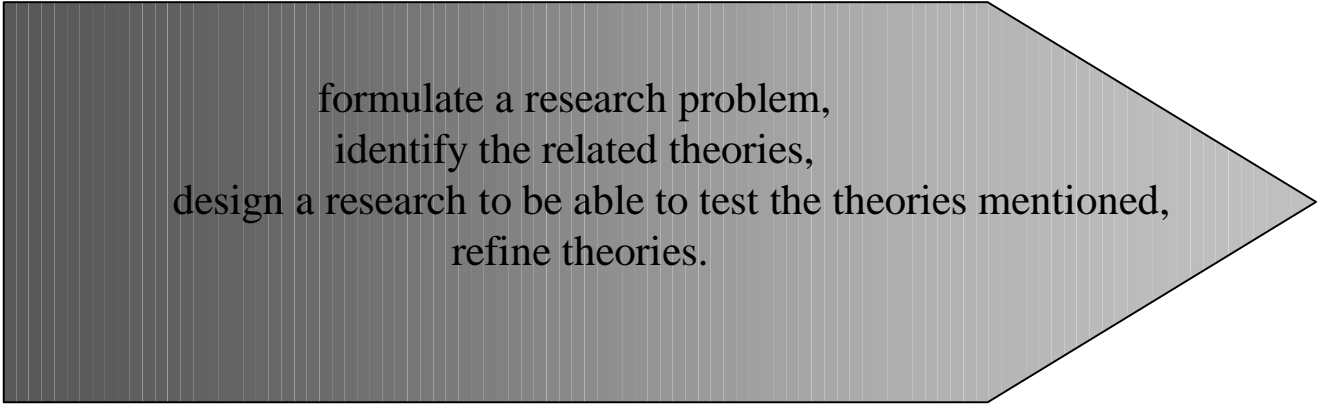


REALISM

- Sociology can and should follow the logical and methods of the natural sciences. But the interpretation of science varies between realists and positivists.
- Not everything can be observable; there are hidden facts which cannot be seen or measured.
- The aim of sociologists should be to uncover these underlying causal mechanisms – bring uncovered issues to observation.
- Very much in use today. Karl Marx was a realist because he believed that in order to understand how capitalism worked, you had to look beneath the surface and study the mode of production which cannot be easily observed.

Realism

- Realists follow these steps to develop, refine and compare theories –



formulate a research problem,
identify the related theories,
design a research to be able to test the theories mentioned,
refine theories.

- The main difference between the social world and the natural world is that the social world is unpredictable and cannot be generalised from one situation to a similar one. The second difference is that people intentions are very subjective and may differ from one person to another.



REALISM

- Methods – use scientific criteria – the systematic collection of evidence, reliability and transparency.
- Research design used is experimental and comparative; the methods used may be quantitative or qualitative.
- The focus of research is on theory.



REALISM

■ Criticisms:

- Provides a good interpretation of science.
- Provided a go in between positivism and interpretivism.
- Provided a non-empiricist epistemology in social science.
- Exaggerates the dependence of science and social science on theory
- Offers very limited truths about the social world.
- Studies theories against theories not theories against facts.



Theory, design and methods

Theory	Research design (most common)	Research methods (most common)
Positivism	Social Surveys Experimental Comparative	Structural interviews Structural observations Official Statistics
Interpretivism	Ethnography	Participant observation Unstructural interviews Personal documents
Realism	Experimental Comparative	Non-specific, but methods are Theory-focused



Summary of major points

- All sociological research designs and methods make certain assumptions about the nature of the social world and how knowledge is generated. One of the ways that research can be evaluated and improved is to make these assumptions more explicit.
- For example, one of the questions we have addressed here is about the nature of scientific knowledge and whether or not it is applicable to societies. As we have seen, positivism, interpretivism and realism give different answers to this question.
- However, while these theories have been separated out here in order to explain them more clearly, it is important to repeat a point made earlier in this section: that a great deal of sociological research contains elements of all three.



Past papers (2010 zone A)

- Name one interpretivist sociologist (1 mark)
- What are the major assumptions of interpretivism in sociology ? (4 marks)
- What research strategies and designs do interpretivist sociologists recommend to study society? (2 marks)
- Discuss the choice of sociological perspective in one major study and explain how this perspective influenced the research design? (6 marks)
- Critically discuss the proposition that “the idea and the logic and methods of the natural sciences cannot be imported into the study of societies” (5 marks)



Past Papers (2010 Zone B)

- What are the arguments for the statement that sociology is scientific? (5 marks)
- What is meant by the phrase “the social construction of reality?” (3 marks)
- Taking one study that you are familiar with, by taking a sociological perspective and the way that the research was carried out. (6 marks)



Past papers

- What is meant by the social construction of reality?
- Using crime or suicide as an example, show how statistics are said to be socially constructed ? (6 marks) (2008 zone a)
- Give two examples of sociological theories which have been described as deterministic? (2 marks)
- What is meant by term verstehen? (2 marks)
- What is the relationship between theory and method in social research? (5 marks) (2008 zone b)



Past papers

- Explain and illustrate what sociologists mean by any one of the following
 - 1) Ontology, 2) Epistemology, 3) causality 4) Determinism? (8 marks)
- Positivism developed as a consequence of the Enlightenment (2 marks) (2009 zone a)
- What are the key differences between the study of nature and the study of society? (4 marks) (2009 zone b)