

Ontology: What Do We Believe Exists?

Positivism	Interpretivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social world is similar to the natural world in terms of the way in which it can be studied. • The self-consciousness of human beings is not a significant factor in our ability to understand social behaviour. • It is possible to establish clear cause and effect relationships when studying social behaviour. • The social world has an objective existence over and above human (subjective) consciousness. In this sense, reliable and valid knowledge is discovered in the same way that natural scientists are able to discover knowledge about the physical world. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social world is very different to the natural world. • Human consciousness is highly significant. People act consciously in order to create their social existence. • It is not possible to make cause and effect statements about the social world that are "true for all time". Limited - and very specific - causal statements can be made. • The social world is experienced subjectively and has no objective existence that is independent of people's everyday behaviour. Knowledge about the social world is created, not simply discovered.

Epistemology: What Proof Will We Accept Of Valid Knowledge?

Positivism	Interpretivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of the social world is based upon <i>empirical</i> principles (that is, the evidence of our senses). All evidence must be capable of being tested scientifically and being shown to be "not false". • The task of science is to demonstrate causal relationships. That is, to quantify the nature of patterns / regularities that exist in human behaviour. • The main objective of positivism is to discover causal relationships between observable phenomena. Anything that is not directly observable cannot be considered as either valid knowledge or part of a valid explanation of social phenomena. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge about the social world is based upon our ability to experience the world as others experience it. "Reality", in this sense, is created by people experiencing and interpreting the world subjectively. • The task of science is not to try to establish causal relationships / laws (something considered to be almost impossible in the social world). Rather, it is to understand how and why people interpret the world in various ways. • The main objective of interpretivism is to understand the ways in which people create and experience the social world subjectively.

Methodology: How Can We Produce Reliable And Valid Knowledge?

Positivism	Interpretivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The basic model of research is the <i>Hypothetico-deductive</i> model. This model argues that reliable and valid knowledge can be produced by developing hypotheses that can be later tested against empirical observations. • It is possible to measure and quantify human behaviour objectively and statistically. This involves breaking down the world into a series of smaller "events"; variables can be isolated and manipulated. • Personal objectivity is necessary in the research process. Value-freedom is an important consideration that is desirable (if not always possible). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If social reality is created by people going about their lives, the best we can do is to say that at a certain time and under certain conditions, this or that reality is evident. The researcher tries to understand the subjective experiences and interpretations of people. • It is not possible to make meaningful empirical statements about the social world, since observable phenomena are simply the product of human meaning and interpretation. • Personal objectivity is necessary, but it is only possible to understand subjective interpretations by becoming personally involved in the behaviour being studied. Value freedom is considered impossible

Methods: How Can We Collect Reliable And Valid Data?

Positivism	Interpretivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collection of empirical data is the primary objective. Any method that can be shown to be reliable (not influenced by the values and interpretations of the researcher) can be used. • <i>Main methods</i> used include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questionnaires. - Structured Interviews. - Experiments. - Non-participant Observation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collection of non-empirical data is stressed. Any method used must attempt to understand a social phenomenon from the point of view of the social actors involved. The attempt to capture the quality of people's experiences, meanings and interpretations is stressed. • <i>Main methods</i> used include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unstructured interviews. - Participant Observation (both overt and covert).

Adapted from Livesey, C. available www.sociology.org.uk