

Sociology Shortcuts

M5. Approaches: Realism

Although superficially similar to positivism - there are 'real features' of social behaviour to be explained - realist approaches, unlike positivism, make reference to social processes that are **not directly observable**.

1. Beliefs

Searle (1995) argues social reality is **multi-layered** through two types of fact:

1. **Brute facts** - the things we experience as *real*, such as social inequality. Brute facts **objective** features of social reality: they are true whether or not we believe them to be true.

2. **Mental facts** reflect the meaning of brute facts - what different people understand by their experience of such facts: social inequality means different things to different people and they act on these different *meanings* accordingly. These facts - though real to people - are subjective and socially constructed.

2. Proof

Empirical evidence is *desirable*, but not in itself *sufficient*. Structures we experience '*as real*' are themselves the product of 'hidden mechanisms and forces' that may *not* be directly observable. Realist proof goes beyond 'simple descriptions' of **causal relationships** to discover how such relationships are initially created.

Trochim (2002)

Realism is sometimes described as '**post-positivism**', although the two approaches share some basic beliefs:

- societies have **objective features**.
- these can be studied scientifically.
- social structures are 'real forces'.
- the social and natural worlds can be studied in similar ways.
- it's possible to establish **causal relationships**

However, a significant break with positivism - one that touches on interpretivism - involves the idea social structures can be modified through individual experiences, meanings and interpretations.

The social world 'as we see and experience it' is governed by *social processes* we must understand in order to explain the *observable* world (something, realists suggest, that is true for *both* the social and natural sciences).

Soothill and Grover (1995)

Argue 'sex crime' (such as rape or paedophilia) is both *real* - it's possible to empirically identify perpetrators and victims - but also *socially constructed* (through agencies like the media who help to define the meaning of "sex crime").

- **Positivism** focuses on the observable features of a situation, such as the relationship between the perpetrator and victim.

- **Realism** seeks to reveal the underlying structures in society that support the "observable features of sex crime" - by examining *hidden* factors (such as cultural attitudes to gender, power differences between the genders and so forth).

A 'real explanation' of sex crime, therefore, is found by examining the *unobservable* aspects of social life (the interplay between power and gender relationships, for example) than by simply focusing on directly observable aspects of behaviour.

3. Methodology

To generate reliable and valid knowledge the social world has to be understood in its *totality*. While it's possible to study particular 'events' (such as social inequality), to validly explain *why* people are unequal we have to think more widely in terms of how the interconnected parts of a social system impact on each other.

Reliability and **validity** are two dimensions of the same problem:

1. How to construct an in-depth understanding of social behaviour in different contexts: a concern with **social actions** shared with *interpretivists*.

2. How to produce specific, causal-type, explanations for behaviour: a concern with **social structures** shared with *positivists*.

Realist methodology, therefore, reflects the belief we must understand the social world in terms of both:

- structures - how institutions affect our thinking and behaviour - and
- actions; **consciousness** can't be ignored or explained away.

Trochim (2002)

All research methods contain the capacity for *error*, so it makes sense to combine methods so that one type of error cancels out another.

Methodological triangulation, for example, can be used in a number of ways:

- To collect **different types of data**.
- To check **reliability** and **validity**
- For **comparisons** - different researchers using the same method can compare data to identify similarities and differences
- For **confirmations**: verifying the accuracy of different types of data.

4. Methods

Realists frequently use combinations of both **quantitative** and **qualitative** methods and data to get the fullest possible research picture.

Realists see people as both "**objects**" and "**subjects**" - hence the idea of studying both **objective** and **subjective** behaviour, using a mixture of methods.

In this respect research methods are applied to investigate "three levels of social reality":

1. **Objective and observable** structural relationships: we need to examine how a system, such as a school or family, is institutionally organised. This reflects the belief social structures have an existence independent of the people who create them .

2. **Subjective** relationships: we need to understand how people make sense of, define, accept and even reject their roles and relationships.

3. **Unobservable objective** relationships: we must understand how the relationship between observable structures and subjective relationships is held together in ways that we can't directly observe, but whose influence we can **theorise** (just as natural scientists theorised the logical existence of atoms before they were ever observed).

For realism "method doesn't matter" in the sense that *what* is discovered is more important than *how* its discovered through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Research methods are not an end in themselves - a means to "uncover reality", whether that reality be objective (positivism) or subjective (interpretivism).

Rather, methods are used to uncover *evidence* that can then be used to demonstrate the existence of hidden, underlying, causal mechanisms that can be theorised to explain the evidence uncovered.