

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Theory and Methods

Unit M3: Methodologies [2]

What Do We Believe Exists? (Ontology)

Positivism

1. The social world is similar to the natural world in terms of the way in which it can be studied.
2. The self-consciousness of human beings is not a significant factor in our ability to understand social behaviour.
3. It is possible to establish clear cause and effect relationships when studying social behaviour.
4. 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. The task of sociology is to uncover this knowledge.
5. Human behaviour is determined by the nature of institutional relationships in society. Individual behaviour is determined by the needs of institutions - the problems they must solve in order to exist.

Realism

1. The social and natural worlds are different, but it is possible that the basic principles involved in the study of each are similar.
2. Human consciousness is only a significant factor when people act collectively (not individually) to change the social world.
3. Causal relationships can be established in relation to human behaviour, but such causality tends to be limited in time and space.
4. The social world has an objective existence over and above individual consciousness (we experience it as something real). However, through collective social action it is possible to produce structural change.
5. Individual behaviour is determined by the nature of structural relationships in society. Only collective social action can alter the structure of these relationships.

Interpretivism

1. The social world is very different to the natural world.
2. Human consciousness is highly significant. People act consciously in order to create and recreate their social existence.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. Human behaviour is the product of the way in which people interpret the social world. It is not determined by social structures.

What Proof Will We Accept Of Valid Knowledge? (Epistemology)

Positivism

1. Knowledge of the social world is based upon empirical principles (that is, the evidence of our senses). All evidence must be capable of being tested scientifically and being shown to be "not false".
2. The task of science is to demonstrate (prove) cause relationships. That is, to quantify the nature of patterns / regularities that exist in human behaviour.
3. 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.

Realism

1. Empirical evidence is desirable, but not in itself sufficient. Scientific knowledge can be produced by understanding the (non-empirical) relationships that underpin the observable social world.
2. The task of science is to uncover the non-observable mechanisms ("hidden social processes") that govern the ways in which people behave.
3. The main objective of realism is to go beyond the simple description of causal relationships to discover how such relationships are initially created. The social world "as we see and experience it" is governed by the operation of discernible social processes which we need to understand if we are to explain the observable world. This is true for both the social and natural sciences.

Interpretivism

1. 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.
2. 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. This is a very different form of science to that advanced by positivists - mainly because of the difference in subject matter between the two worlds.
3. The main objective of interpretivism is to understand the ways in which people create and experience the social world subjectively.

How Can We Produce Reliable And Valid Knowledge? (Methodology)

Positivism

1. The basic model of research is the Hypothetico-deductive model. This model argues that reliable and valid knowledge can be produced by developing hypotheses that can be later tested against empirical observations.
2. 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.
3. Personal objectivity is necessary in the research process. Value-freedom is an important consideration that is desirable (if not always possible).

Realism

1. The social world has to be understood in its totality. Studying "parts" of the social world ("events" such as crime, domestic labour and the like), while possible, is not particularly useful since all aspects of the social world are connected to and affected by all other parts.
2. It is possible to measure and quantify human behaviour, but this is not necessarily desirable, nor is it an end in itself. The main objective is to examine underlying social mechanisms that produce observable social phenomena (for example, "mode of production" as an underlying mechanism in relation to social class creation).
3. Personal objectivity is important, but value freedom is neither possible nor desirable. This is because it is impossible to act without the influence of values and to pretend otherwise is either self-deceit or simply support for the existing status quo in society.

Interpretivism

1. The Hypothetico-deductive model can be used, up to a point (since "reality" does not exist waiting to be discovered). 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 (which in itself is similar to the way in which natural scientists tend to qualify their work). The testing of hypotheses can be done using a particular form of observation (participant observation). In this respect the researcher tries to understand the subjective experiences and interpretations of people.
2. 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.
3. 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.

How Can We Collect Reliable And Valid Data? (Methods)

Positivism

1. 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.

2. **Main methods** used include:

Questionnaires.
Structured Interviews.
Experiments.
Non-participant Observation.

Realism

1. The development of theoretical knowledge about how the social world is constructed is stressed. Empirical data may aid this process, but it is not an end in itself (since such data is evidence of the effect of an underlying, non-observable, causality).

2. **Main methods** used include:

Observation - of any type.
Focused (in-depth) interviews

The development of **theoretical models** of the underlying structures and processes in society (for example, understanding the nature of Capitalist Modes of Production, the significance of concepts like alienation, etc.).

Interpretivism

1. 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.

2. **Main methods** used include:

Unstructured interviews.
Participant Observation (both overt and covert).