

Interpretivism

Interpretivists deny what positivists assert, that humans can be studied using the same philosophical base as used in studying physical objects or other animals. Interpretivists assert that there is a difference between the subject matter of sociology and natural science. Humans are active, conscious beings, they make choices. What makes a social event social is that those involved in it give it broadly the same meaning, Weber's account of the growth of capitalism is a good example, it showed not only that Calvinism was the independent variable (cause), only present in Europe, but also how a belief in Calvinism would make someone behave in the way he described.

It follows that if we want to understand peoples' actions we have first to understand them in the way that the participants do. Social reality is not out there waiting to be discovered. **The approach emphasizes validity, possibly at some cost in terms of reliability and representativeness.**

Interactionist approaches then are based on action theory - that human behaviour is meaningful and directed towards the achievement of a purpose. It is because human behaviour is taken to be meaningful that interpretivists argue that human actions cannot be understood in the same way as natural phenomena and that consequently the methods of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of social life. Social behaviour cannot, it is argued, be explained simply in terms of external stimuli. Humans have a consciousness, we actively experience and interpret the world and behave according to this interpretation. Social reality is seen as a subjective construction based on interpretation and interaction; all human actions have meaning and cannot be understood separately from this meaning.

Accordingly, there is no way of objectively measuring social reality. Statistics, for example, are not objective reality but simply the meanings given by social actors to events, which they have perceived and interpreted in particular ways. This viewpoint is seen at its most graphic in **W. I. Thomas's** dictum, '**If men define situations as real they are real in their consequences**'. What this means is that it does not matter what is objectively 'real', what is important for understanding human behaviour is what they think is real. It is subjective (experienced) reality that shapes behaviour. In a way, positivists assert that 'seeing is believing' while humanists assert that believing is seeing.

The claims

Subjectivity at its best has a link to creativity-to new ways of thinking and understanding.

The traditional scientific cannon involves following rules, but sometimes progress is made by abandoning rules and relying on inspiration.

Science can describe people's actions but sociologists don't just want descriptions they want reasons.

Data have to be interpreted; it does not 'speak for itself'. Interpretation is the ability to extract meaning from observation and this is not simply a process of following scientific method.

Interpretivists argue, therefore, that positivist ontology (the philosophy concerned with the nature of being) is a sort of stimulus response model of human behaviour. People do not simply respond to external stimuli but actively interpret the world.