

Positivism

Introduction

Positivism is a logical system based on direct, systematic observation. This approach was influenced by the scientific discoveries made during the 18th and 19th centuries. This research tradition leads to the development of methods that concentrate on producing supposedly objective data, usually in the form of statistics. This is based on the belief that behaviour in the social world follows certain laws that are discoverable using empirical quantitative methods as used by the natural sciences. So positivism is the method of science.

This method particularly impressed 19th and early 20th century sociologists such as Comte and Durkheim. They witnessed the growing ability of the natural sciences to understand and predict the workings of the natural world and believed that if there were basic laws or relationships between phenomena in the natural world similar laws and relationships must be discoverable in the social world.

The approach

The essence of the positivist approach to social life is expressed in Durkheim's idea:

'The first and most fundamental rule is to consider social facts as things.'

What this means is that people's behaviour is governed by external stimuli (their ideas and feelings are irrelevant) and therefore such behaviour can be objectively observed and measured. Sociology can develop theories based on direct observation of human behaviour. Durkheim also provides what one was considered to be the classic example of this approach in his study of suicide. The act of suicide was claimed as a product of social forces, external to the Durkheimian individual.

So sociologists following this positivist approach use scientific methods to gather empirical data.

Objectivity

To do this they try to achieve objectivity. Objectivity is sought in order to produce unbiased results. Such objectivity has to be an ideal, as clearly it cannot be obtained. The British sociologist, **Ray Pawson**, in trying to explain the usefulness but unattainability of objectivity likens it to personal hygiene. Perfect personal hygiene is unattainable but that does not mean we should not wash. We attempt to be as clean as we can!

It should be made clear that the location of objectivity is in the carrying out of research. Clearly in selecting what to research any researcher is following a personal interest, or the interest of the person or organisation paying for the research. **Max Weber (1958; orig. 1918)** made the distinction between selecting a research topic that is value-relevant, and conducting research that should be value-free.

One way of reducing the distortion produced by personal values is replication and repetition of the research by other investigators. To this extent objectivity is sought at the level of the academic community rather than in an individual piece of research. Despite this, there are serious doubts as to whether the scientific approach is a useful or even sensible way of studying humans.

The claims

Knowledge exists independently of whether people knew it or not.

The scientific task was to discover (find) this knowledge.

It is assumed that there are laws that govern the operation of the social world and that these can be discovered.

Social behaviour is seen as a result of external pressure acting on relatively passive people.

That it is possible, and desirable to study humans in approximately the same way that natural science investigates the physical world.

It is assumed that there was such a thing as absolute truth and that it can be used (once obtained) to create a better society.