

Approaches to Research

Philosophy and Methodology

Enquiry

Ontology

The fundamental beliefs each person holds about the world, as in:

Objectivism - social phenomena and their meanings have an existence independent of social actors

Constructivism - social phenomena and their meanings are constructed through social interaction and therefore are in a constant state of revision

Enquiry

Epistemology

The theory and study of knowledge.

There is a distinction between 'true' and 'false' knowledge - what standard of evidence is sufficient to make a judgement? Also encompasses issues of validity and reliability.

Enquiry

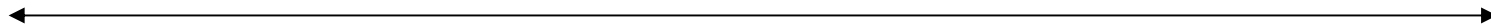
Epistemology

The types of evidence can include faith, trust, experience, logic, empiricism, depending on which philosophy you subscribe to.

Philosophy of Social Science

Positivism

Interpretivism



Are at different ends of the continuum

Positivism

A positivist ontology is derived from the natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry, and is based on 3 principles:

- Laws of cause and effect, which are always true
- Seeking to discover these laws
- A systematic and repeated testing of these laws

*The social world is governed by social laws
independent of individual emotions*

Positivism

This leads to a positivist epistemology:

- Social laws have to be repeatedly measured and tested through empirical study
- Repeatable hypotheses have to be devised to test these laws.

Positivist Methodology

The approach is that empirical data can be collected, which is free from interpretation and not influenced by individual values.

Data can be measured and quantified objectively and statistically

Positivist Research Methods

- Quantitative - mainly
- Social experiments which can be repeated
- Structured interviews
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Census data

Validity and Reliability

- Data reliability has to be consistent and replicable
- Internal validity - cause and effect
- External validity
 - Population (ability to extrapolate to the wider population)
 - Ecological (whether the research design has affected behaviour)

Interpretivism

Has a constructivist ontology whereby:

- No objective view of human behaviour exists
- Social reality is what people believe it to be
- The social world is different to the natural world

Criticisms

- People think and are self-aware, unlike animals and inanimate objects
- It is absolutist, and judgemental, so some ideas are bound to be incorrect

Interpretivism

This leads to an interpretivist epistemology whereby:

- The task of social science is to describe people's perceptions of reality
- Valid knowledge requires accurate documentation of meanings, beliefs and experience
- The aim is not to establish cause and effect but to understand how people ***interpret*** the world

Interpretivist Methodology

The approach is to seek understanding of how people interpret the social world through personal involvement.

Personal biases and the culture-involved nature of the research are recognised and acknowledged

Interpretivist Research Methods

Mainly qualitative and includes:

- Autoethnography
- Ethnography
- Non-participant observation
- Unstructured or semi-structured interviews
- Questionnaires
- Case studies

Comparisons - Validity Criteria

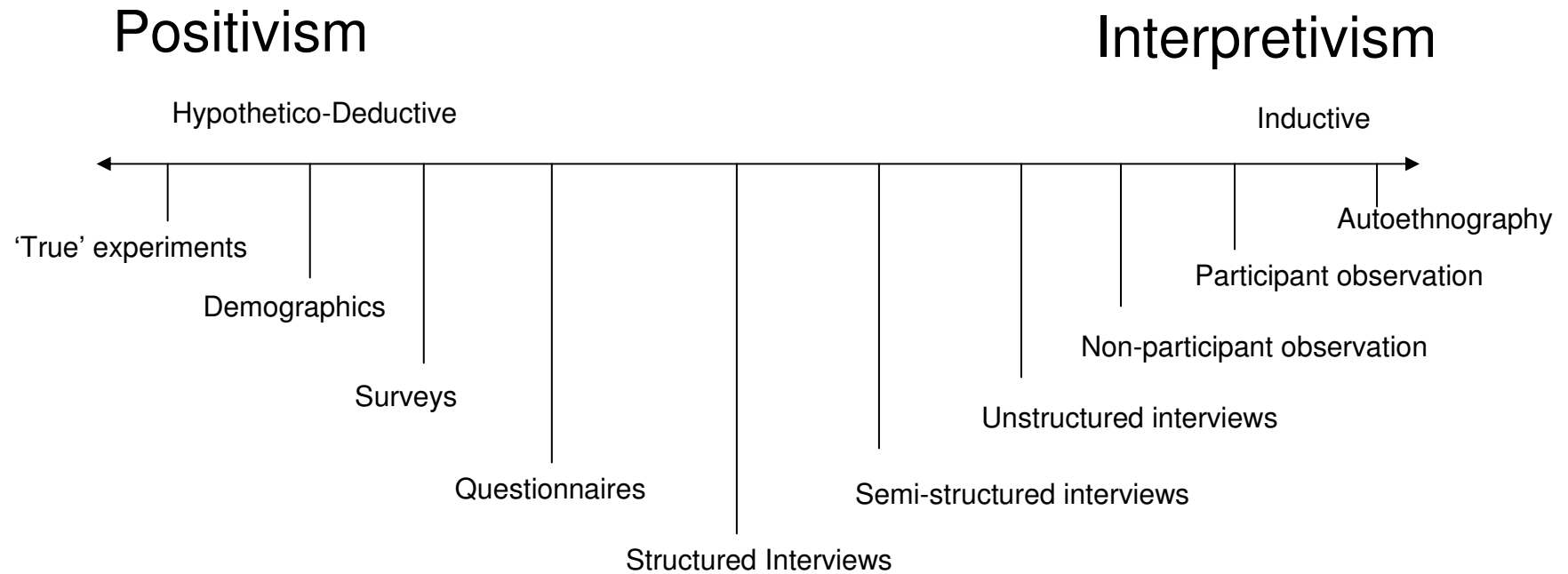
Qualitative

- Credibility
- Transferability
- Dependability
- Confirmability

Quantitative

- Internal validity
- External validity
- Reliability
- Objectivity

Methods



Deductive and Inductive

Deductive:

You have a theory and then test it

Inductive:

You have data and work towards a theory. The question you would ask is 'why...'

Comparisons

Positivist Methods	Interpretivist Methods
Explanation by way of analysis of causal relationships and explanation by governing laws	Explanation by way of subjective meaning and explanation by understanding
Generation and use of qualitative data	Generation and use of quantitative data
Use of various controls (physical or statistical) to allow the testing of hypotheses	Commitment to research in everyday settings to minimise reactivity amongst research subjects
Highly structured methodology	Less structured methodology