



Approaches To Social Science Research: Why Does The Interpretive Approach Score?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a brief overview of the positivist, interpretive and critical research approaches and explains the reasons regarding why the interpretive approach is most suited for social sciences. This approach finds a middle ground between the positivist and critical approaches and uses objective and subjective methods to study social phenomena and constructs.

KEYWORDS

Interpretative approach, research, theory

Introduction

There has for long been a debate about which research approach is the most appropriate for studying social reality. The objective of this paper is to understand the significance of the interpretative approach to social sciences.

Researchers and theorists have often debated the use of the positivist, interpretive and critical approaches to studying social sciences. Here is a brief explanation of the three.

The positivist approach: This approach was propounded by Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim among others. The positivist approach aims to measure and predict social phenomena. There is an emphasis on the logical cause and the effect of things. This approach is value-neutral and attempts to make generalisations. The positivists use laboratory and field experiments and surveys.

The interpretive approach: Sociologist Max Weber strongly opposed the positivist school of thought and highlighted the importance of a subjective approach to research. The interpretive approach recognises that it is impossible to perfectly quantify social phenomena. This school promotes inductive logic. The interpretive researchers use in-depth case studies, ethnographic studies etc.

Critical approach: This approach was introduced by Max Horkheimer in his 1937 essay titled 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in 1937. It draws from both the positivist and interpretive schools. It aims to study the layers beneath the surface reality. The ultimate purpose of this approach is to criticise society and bring about changes and improvements in the social system. The critical researchers combine personal interviews, personal observation, surveys and other methods that suit the research problem.

The research approach that one chooses depends upon the purpose of the study. While comparing the three approaches, one may be able to list many advantages and limitations of each, but even the limitations hold no value if the research approach is appropriate to the area of study. The interpretive approach to social sciences gains points over the positivist and critical approaches as this approach explores the blurred boundaries between social and natural sciences.

The researcher, the object and the values

The positivist school believes that the researcher is separate from the social phenomenon that he studies. Research is assumed to be value-free.

Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p. 157) state that critical social sci-

ence requires the researcher to mix moral, political and social engagement and concern with objectivity. Baran and Davis (2010, p. 14) state that critical theorists start with the assumption that some aspects of the social world are deeply flawed and in need of transformation. The critical researchers have an activist approach, which is a slanted approach.

Interpretive researchers also readily accept the role of values in research. These values are recognised but bracketed, or put aside. Therefore, they find a middle ground between the positivists and the critical researchers (Baran and Davis, 2010, p. 15). Instead of complete separation of the researcher from the object of study, objectivity with regard to the social reality is more important. Weber (2004, p. v) argues that all theories, frameworks and constructs are socially constructed. This means that human beings attach meanings to everything. Crotty (1989, p.43) gives an example about trees and states, "We need to remind ourselves here that it is human beings who have constructed it as a tree, given it the name, and attributed to it the associations we make with trees."

The interpretive approach emphasises an empathetic understanding (Verstehen) of social reality. Two things are important here – 'empathy' and 'social reality'. Considering the latter, it can be said that individuals behave in the manner that they do when they are in their natural setting, rather than a laboratory. The interpretive researcher also has the unique chance to exercise objectivity and subjectivity with regard to the same study. He can use his human (rather than the robotic and perfect) understanding of the subject to dig beneath the surface and discover hidden meanings, contexts and explanations. But when it comes to selecting variables, building scales to measure them and studying the associations and correlations, he can bring forth the positivist in him.

Ercan and Marsh (n.d.) explain that to study the relationship between demographics and political participation, a positivist may study the causal links between demographics and various types of political participation (voting, party or group membership, participation in demonstrations etc.) using statistical analysis. The interpretive researcher may focus on young people's understanding of politics and how that understanding affects their behaviour. Taking the example one step further, one can say that the critical researcher may wish to study the reasons for the lack of political participation and how it brings about a weak political system. He may suggest ways to improve voting statistics.

Questions about prediction, generalisation, reliability and validity

The positivists believe that their research approach provides society accurate predictions of human behaviour and social

phenomena. But, they state that causal laws will be able to predict the behaviour of a group, but not that of a specific person. This is a disadvantage as at the root of every situation is the individual; at the core of every group is its basic unit, that is, the individual. Therefore, it becomes extremely important that research begins with the individual and moves outward to the group and the society.

Since the goal of interpretive research is the 'understanding' of social phenomenon, it is often argued that their predictions are weak and generalisations cannot be made, and therefore the data is not reliable. In fact, since research has its origin in the scientific method, there is too much emphasis on the general or the abstract. There is a constant effort to find what is common among individuals and their behaviour so that patterns can be understood and predictions can be made. Though these predictions can be useful for society, they might nullify the fact that society itself is made of individuals and social phenomena that are, if not starkly, to a significant extent, at variation with each other. An in-depth understanding of cultures, ethnography and individual behaviour can be efficiently arrived at through qualitative research methods. The drawbacks of the interpretive methods can be overcome. Eisenhardt (1989, p. 535) suggests that a researcher should use multiple data collection methods for triangulation of evidence. This will ensure reliability and validity of the study. A well-trained and experienced researcher, clear operational definitions, detailed methodology and appropriate analysis techniques can help overcome a number of issues (Ercan and Marsh, n.d.).

Conclusion and Discussion

Research today is increasingly becoming multidisciplinary. Researchers are exploring the middle ground between disciplines. Studies are exploring both qualitative and quantitative aspects of social phenomena. Researchers wish to study both what is above and beneath the surface.

In an era when our social structures and technologies are being displaced and revised at a very fast pace, there is great scope for interpretive research. The society today is heavily networked by the new media that has a significant influence on the lives of the individuals. The social information processing model by Fulk et al. (1987) points out that communication technologies and media are socially constructed and affected by how individual users interact with each other. This may also be applied to the new media technologies, their adoption and uses, production and distribution of content and policy issues. Communication is no longer linear and simplistic. Therefore, new concepts, relationships and structures have emerged that need to be researched. Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988, p. 45) argue that "communication research should describe the content, context and the process of change as part of an ongoing process, background or structure." At present, interpretation of social reality is required to make sense of the world we live in.

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