

Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Eighth Edition



Chapter 4

The Meanings of Methodology

Learning Objectives

4.1 Describe the two philosophical areas that guide social research.

4.2 Summarize the three major approaches to social research.

4.3 Describe the positivist approach.

4.4 Describe the interpretive approach.

4.5 Describe the critical approach.

4.6 Summarize the characteristics of feminist research and postmodern research.

4.1 Philosophical Foundations of Social Science Methods

Objective: Describe the two philosophical areas that guide social research.

- The growth of science started in the Renaissance.
- Two areas of philosophy related to competing approaches to social science research
 - Ontology—the fundamental nature of reality
 - Epistemology—how we know the world around us

4.2 The Three Major Approaches

Objective: Summarize the three major approaches to social research.

- There is no single definition of "science."
- Three approaches
 - Positivist Social Science
 - Interpretive Social Science
 - Critical Social Science

4.3 Positivist Social Science (PSS)

Objective: Describe the positivist approach.

- Also known as logical empiricism, accepted or conventional view, naturalism, the covering law model, and behaviorism
- Associated with the structural-functional, rational choice, and exchange-theory frameworks.
- PSS researchers prefer precise quantitative data.
- They seek rigorous, exact measures and “objective” research.

4.4 Interpretive Social Science (ISS)

Objective: Describe the interpretive approach.

- Interpretive social science is closely related to hermeneutics.
- There are several varieties.
- Interpretive science concerns itself with how people interact and get along with each other.

4.5 Critical Social Science (CSS)

Objective: Describe the critical approach.

- Versions of the critical approach include dialectical materialism, class analysis, and critical structuralism.
- CSS is often associated with conflict theory, feminist analysis, and radical psychotherapy.
- Criticizes the positivist approach as narrow, antidemocratic, and nonhumanist.
- CSS criticized ISS as being too subjective and relativist.

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (1 of 9)

Objective: Summarize the characteristics of feminist research and postmodern research.

- Both the feminist and postmodern approaches criticize PSS and offer alternatives that build on ideas within ISS and CSS.

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (2 of 9)

- Feminist Research
 - Conducted by people who hold a feminist-self-identity and consciously adopt a value-based feminist perspective
 - Adopts a Situated Knowledge Thesis
 - Assumes the subjective experiences of women are different from those of men
 - Emphasizes accommodation and developing human bonds
 - Interact and collaborate with the people they study

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (3 of 9)

Chart 4.5 Summary of Feminist Social Research

1. Advocates a feminist-value perspective and rejects sexist assumptions, concepts, and research questions
2. Adopts the Situated Knowledge Thesis—that a researcher's social location (especially gender) influences his/her access to knowledge
3. Allows a researcher's personal feelings and experiences to be part of the research process
4. Encourages empathic connections between the researcher and those he or she studies
5. Advocates flexibility in choosing research techniques and crossing boundaries between academic fields
6. Recognizes the emotional and mutual-dependence dimensions in human experience
7. Favors action-oriented research and praxis to facilitate personal and societal change

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (4 of 9)

- Postmodern Research
 - Postmodern researchers see no separation between the arts, humanities, or social sciences.
 - Share the CSS goal of demystifying the social world.
 - Object to presenting research in a detached or neutral way
 - Postmodern research reports may be presented in the form of a work of fiction, movie, or play.
 - Anti-elitist and rejects the use of science to predict and make policy decisions

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (5 of 9)

Chart 4.6 Summary of Postmodern Social Research

1. It rejects all “grand narratives,” ideologies, and organized belief systems, including all systematic social theory.
2. It prioritizes discourse, intuition, fantasy, imagination, personal experience, and emotion over reason, logic, consistency, or empirical evidence.
3. It promotes a sense of stagnation, meaninglessness, and pessimism while rejecting ideals of improvement, evolution, or development over time.
4. It adopts a strong nominalist ontology that elevates subjectivity over the possibility of knowing understanding empirical reality.
5. It is highly relativistic; there is no “truth” or “right and wrong,” only an infinite number of interpretations, none superior to another.
6. It sees great fragmentation, chaos, and complexity in a rapidly changing world that makes accurately representing it a futile task.

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (6 of 9)

Table 4.1 A Summary of Differences among the Three Approaches to Social Research

	Positivism	Interpretive Social Science	Critical Social Science	Feminist	Postmodern
1. Reason for research	To discover natural laws so people can predict and control events	To understand and describe meaningful social action	To smash myths and empower people to change society	To empower people to advance values of nurturing others and equality	To express the subjective self, to be playful, and to entertain and stimulate
2. Nature of social reality	Stable pre-existing patterns or order that can be discovered	Fluid definitions of a situation created by human interaction	Multiple layers and governed by hidden, underlying structures	Gender-structured power relations that keep people oppressed	Chaotic and fluid without real patterns or master plan
3. Human nature	Self-interested and rational individuals who are shaped by external forces	Social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds	Creative, adaptive people with unrealized potential, trapped by illusion	Gendered beings with unrealized potential often trapped by unseen forces	Creative, dynamic beings with unrealized potential

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (7 of 9)

Table 4.1 [continued]

	Positivism	Interpretive Social Science	Critical Social Science	Feminist	Postmodern
4. Human agency	Powerful external social pressures shape people's actions; free will is largely illusion	People have significant volition; they develop meanings and have freedom to make choices	Bounded autonomy and free choice structurally limited, but the limits can be moved	Structural limits based on gender confines choices, but new thinking and action can breach the limits	People have great volition, and all structures are Illusionary
5. Role of common sense	Clearly distinct from and less valid than science	Powerful everyday theories used by ordinary people	False beliefs that hide power and objective conditions	False beliefs that hide power and objective conditions	The essence of social reality that is superior to scientific or bureaucratic forms of reasoning

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (8 of 9)

Table 4.1 [continued]

	Positivism	Interpretive Social Science	Critical Social Science	Feminist	Postmodern
6. Theory looks like	A logical, deductive system of interconnected definitions, axioms, and laws	A description of how a group's meaning system is generated and sustained	A critique that reveals true conditions and helps people take action	A critique that reveals true conditions and helps people see the way to a better world	A performance or work of artistic expression that can amuse, shock, or stimulate others
7. An explanation that is true	Is logically connected to laws and based on facts	Resonates or feels right to those who are being studied	Supplies people with tools needed to change the world	Supplies ideas/tools to help liberate people from oppressive relations	No one explanation is more true; all are true for those who accept them
8. Good evidence	Is based on precise observations that others can repeat	Is embedded in the context of fluid social interactions	Is informed by a theory that penetrates the surface level	Is informed by theory that reveals gender structures	Has aesthetic properties and resonates with people's inner feelings

4.6 Two Alternative Approaches (9 of 9)

Table 4.1 [continued]

	Positivism	Interpretive Social Science	Critical Social Science	Feminist	Postmodern
9. Relevance of knowledge	An instrumental orientation is used; knowledge enables people to master and control events	A practical orientation is used; knowledge helps us embrace/share empathetically others' life worlds and experiences	A dialectical orientation is used; knowledge lets people see and alter deeper structures	Knowledge raises awareness and empowers people to make change	Formal knowledge has no special value; it can amuse or bring personal enjoyment
10. Place for values	Science is value free, and values have no place except when choosing a topic	Values are an integral part of social life: no group's values are wrong, only different	All science must begin with a value position; some positions are right, some are wrong	Values are essential to research, and feminist ones are clearly preferred	Values are integral to research, but all value positions are equal

Conclusion

- There are competing approaches to social research based on the philosophical assumptions about the purpose of science and the nature of social reality.
- Ideal-type approaches answer basic questions about research differently.
- Most researchers use one approach, but many researchers use elements from multiple approaches.
- There is no single, correct approach to social science research.

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