

## **The Approach of the 'Positivist' School and the 'Interpretative' School to the Relationship between Theory and Method, using examples from Criminological Research**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this paper is to attempt the analysis of the 'Positivist' School and the 'Interpretative' School to the Relationship between Theory and Method, Using examples from Criminological Research.*

*The differences between approach of the positivist school and interpretative school are often made very difficult to make an approach. What are more to focus on are the relationships between quantitative research and positivism and qualitative research and interpretative paradigms are often presented as essential connections.*

*Therefore, it is a lot more difficult to imply an appropriate research method and process depends on the subject and field of the research topic. The differences between types of research and also the connections which are made between types of research and theoretical paradigms portray a very simple picture. The danger of this is that two readily available set of research methods and assuming that positivist and interpretative research style represent competing approaches and also that they present 'either-or' alternatives as to strategies of research.*

*For example, in some instances positivist and interpretative's methods do represent alternatives but in some case, positivist and interpretativist each other can complement about each other's defects in terms of use of methodology. Though depending according to the specialist of the topic, it needs sensitivity to the potentials and the contributions of different styles of data and different methods of information collection and analysis to the criminological issues under test and to the theoretical questions being asked of them.*

**Key-word:** *Theory, Method, The Positivist School, The Interpretative School, Criminological Research.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are surrounded by social research. Social research can be used to raise children, reduce crime, improve public health, sell products or just understand one's life. Different social researchers select approach of social research for various reasons and intentions, but the bottom-line is a search for satisfaction that goes with one's research purpose.

There are a variety of methodological approaches in the social research that one could take while doing social research. However, in this paper, I would discuss the concept and method of positivism and interpretivism and contrast these research approaches.

Positivism of the positivist school is one group of the approaches that questions about the actual world, how we can experience the actual world? Besides, understand about its actual nature. Therefore, the method is looked as totally a quantitative research method. The results of quantitative research are presented as quantities or numbers like statistics.

On the other hand interpretivism of the interpretative school is another group of approaches which also distinguish between observers and the world that they observe. Therefore, the method is largely used to qualitative research methods. In qualitative research, the results are presented as discussions of trends and/or themes based on words, not statistics. In addition, methods are used depending on to the difference in how results are presented in the research. There are a number of characteristics that distinguish the two types of research depending on the outcome that a researcher planned for.

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the approaches of the 'Positivist' school and the 'Interpretative' school to the relationship between theory and method, using examples from criminological research to illustrate the argument.

### **2. THE POSITIVIST SCHOOL AND THE INTERPRETATIVE SCHOOL**

As a method of research, Positivism of the positivist school is one group of the approaches that questions about the actual world, how we can feel it, and how well the ideas and situations we use to understand it express its actual nature [7].

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In its earlier form, positivism regards the actual world as being external to the observer, and consisting of 'phenomena' that can be observed. The observer builds on to 'theories' that describe, define and illustrate the phenomena, particularly describing the order in which cases take place and making testable predictions about how that order will display itself in the future [3]. During the process, theories of actual world's phenomena gets strengthened or improved and rebuilt while repeatedly testing against evidence.

'Knowledge' in the positivism is our mental consciousness to make and interpret what our senses tell us. We try to make our interpretations by systematically collecting more information through our feelings. [5].

We may accept the existence of god through religion or anything else. But we cannot feel 'God' through our normal senses of using science; not literally see, hear or touch God, knowledge statements about the world must be consistent with our senses' experience of it [5].

Here one can identify three main aspects of positivism of the positivist school. First of it is phenomenological, because it differentiates between an external world and the observer who experiences it. Second, it is empirical; uses observable evidence to make 'knowledge' [12]. While doing so it looks for objectivity; therefore, it separates out 'scientific' knowledge acquired under specific practical procedures, from belief, values or feelings [12].

It could be argued that positivism also favours regularity, measurement, abstraction, indifference to what is being observed and conservatism.

On the other hand, interpretivism of the interpretative school is another group of approaches which also differentiates between observers and the world that they observe. However, rather than seeing observable phenomena as being the totality of the real world, it accepts that less observable forces hide behind the phenomena [12]. In contrary, in positivism of the positivist school, the purpose of the theory is to describe or predict the phenomena. However in scientific interpretivism the purpose is to represent the underlying real order that we only observe as the phenomena [6].

Thus interpretivism is also phenomenological. [3] argued that it is less fixated on the empirical. It does not define the 'truth' of a theory to predict accurately. It is less exclusive of beliefs. [9] insisted that Critical interpretivism challenges the idea that scientific knowledge is the sole route to truth.

In this tradition, what matters is to empathise with those we study: 'apprehension' or 'knowledge' is more to do with interpreting other meanings that predicting or generalising [2]. In more extreme forms of the argument such as social constructivism [8], emphasis is given on the way 'reality' is constructed and re-negotiated through social interaction.

Positivists as natural scientists want to see their idea of reality as a more reflection of the real world. Consequently, positivists and interpretivists are often depicted as advocating

"the primacy of the external world" rather than the actor's interpretation of it [3].

Thus it could be argued that positivists focused on the basic methods of the natural sciences to study social actions and situations for reliable knowledge. The natural science methods are generally quantitative, involve testing of hypotheses, the search for explanations and causes which connect observations, and identification of 'principles of never change' or regular patterns from those observations [3].

The perfection to scientific method in the social sciences depends on the nature of social life. Unlike inanimate objects studied by physical scientists, human beings lead sentient existences outside by physical scientists, and lead sentient existences outside the controlled conditions of the laboratory [12].

If there are social regularities, they are subtle and dependent on circumstances, we can not predict about something in the social actual state [1]. On the other hand, social scientists start with already accepted knowledge. Although, in statistical analysis we may set up 'null hypotheses', we generally tend to generalize on hypothesis to what Hempel calls confirmation [3]. The absence of demonstrative falsification is difficult to prove, but it is clear that our core hypothesis continues to be acceptable or should be acceptable.

### 3. COMPARE AND CONTRAST BETWEEN 'POSITIVIST SCHOOL' AND INTERPRETATIVE SCHOOL USING EXAMPLES FROM CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH

#### 3.1. Introduction of Two Studies

##### 3.1.1. Hirschi's Study of the Causes of Delinquency

Hirschi's research of delinquency as a quantitative research is a natural science approach to the study of social reality [11]. Hirschi insisted that in social control theory delinquent acts occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. Also to make the questions of survey papers, Hirschi thought about both social background of delinquents and the extent of each child's involvement in delinquent activities.

Firstly, Hirschi discusses social background and tries to make a several questions designed to tap the extent to which children were committed or attached to the school, and to the family, in order to test the social control theory. Secondly, he intervenes in the extent of each child's involvement in delinquent activities. Some questions of Hirschi's survey papers designed to gauge the extent of each child's involvement in delinquent activities [11].

Hence, it could be argued that Hirschi claims that none of the three theories of delinquency emerges totally un-scattered through this research. For example, the control theory seems to neglect the role of delinquent friends which his data suggest has considerable importance [2].

### 3.1.2. Adler's Study of Upper-Level Drug Dealers

Adler and her husband researched about Upper-Level Drug Dealers. They came up with the understanding that for some people it was not a small 'pusher' of drugs who was trying to provide funds for his own habit, but someone who dealt in vast quantities and who received huge sums of money in exchange, what they call is an 'upper-level' drug dealer [10].

Alder focuses on the processes of understanding of how drug dealer live, feel, think and act. She also contends to understand the world from their thinking. Adler insisted that the way in which the people being studied, understood, and interpreted depends on their social reality what is one of the most central motifs of the qualitative approach [9].

Through this perspective Adler shows that the views of drug dealing that are often presented in the literature do not fully correspond to the dealers' own perceptions [6]. She goes on to argue that they are motivated by a quest for the fun and pleasure which are the products of involvement in the world of upper-level drug dealing.

### 3.2. A Compare and contact to two studies

These are the two highly contrasting studies in the field of deviance and delinquency. The aims of these studies are to understand both about deviance and reflect sociological concerns in social sciences. But in the construction of social knowledge these two different types of approaches gauge very differently.

Firstly, if a researcher with positivist orientation stressing on quantitative measurement of fact finding like Hirschi would retain with quantitative method. He or she would probably begin with a review of the research literature about the causes of delinquency. Form the review, the researcher would attempt to develop hypotheses to be tested by in the process of research. This is a deductive approach to planning the research. That implies that the researcher is deducing from the literature and possible explanations to be tested [6]. Because of this, Hirschi sets out to test the validity of theories and chooses a representative sample of school children in such a way that the research is remaining highly defined at the outset.

In contrast, a qualitative researcher of the interpretative school styles like Adler would tend to use an inductive approach to planning the research. He or she for example might begin to gather data on the specific upper-level drug dealers in question by making preliminary observations and conducting informal interviews. The resulting preliminary findings might be used as a basis for planning what additional types of information to collect and how to collect them. Thus, rather than approaching the research task with preconceived notions based on published theory and research, an interpretative school styles researcher would emphasize on induction from the preliminary data that were collected [3]. Here, Adler allows letting her subjects form the focal concerns of the project. In this form sample is determined by whom she meets during the course of the fieldwork. Also, Adler uses a much less

standardised approach, because of undefined subjects at the outset. At this point one may note that Adler's research typically examine previously published literature and include reviews of it in their research reports. However, Hirschi's research uses literature as the basis for planning research while qualitative researchers do not.

When deciding what types of instruments to use, Hirschi insisted that those who produce data using quantitative method have advantage to easily reduced to numbers, such as structured questionnaires or interview schedules with objective formats, such as multiple-choice questions. In contrast, Adler insisted that instruments used in qualitative mode of data collection yield words strongly, such as unstructured interviews or direct, unstructured observations of drug dealers.

When deciding which members of the school children to use as participants, Hirschi selected a large number of samples that was possible within a limited research budget by objective instruments such as an anonymous, objective questionnaire and felt easy to administer the data within limited time period.

Generally, with an orientation of interpretative school styles research, researcher would tend to select a small sample for the reverse reason [10]. When conducting the research, Hirschi as positivism researcher spent a small amount of time directly interacting with the participants. Adler, on the other hand, might spend a considerable amount of time interviewing and observing various members of the force over an extended period.

While working with the participants, Alder as a researcher using qualitative method would be open to the possibility of making adjustments in the instrumentation, such as rewording questions or adding questions based on earlier responses by participants. In contrary, Hirschi would seldom make such adjustments during the course of a research project. Instead, Hirschi would plan his research in detail in advance and follow the plan closely throughout the study because mid-stream deviations might be viewed as introducing subjectivity into the study. In addition it is important to note that while Hirschi emphasize "objectivity," qualitative researchers believe all observational processes are inherently subjective and open to interpretation. Because of this, Adler sometime mentions relevant details of their personal backgrounds in order to inform readers of their research on possible sources of bias in collecting and interpreting the data.

On the other hand, Hirschi as quantitative researcher summarized all responses with statistics and seldom report on the responses of individual participants. Moreover, Alder, on the other hand, tend to cite individuals' drug dealers responses in the results section of a research report.

Finally, Hirschi as quantitative researcher generalized the results to the population that was studied and beyond the researched populations, while Alder as qualitative researcher tend to limit their conclusions to only the individuals who were directly studied.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to compare and contrast the approach of the 'Positivist' school and the 'Interpretative' school to the relationship between theory and method, using examples from criminological research to illustrate my argument.

The differences between approach of the positivist school and interpretative school are often made very difficult to make an approach. What are more to focus on are the relationships between quantitative research and positivism and qualitative research and interpretative paradigms are often presented as essential connections.

Therefore, it is a lot more difficult to imply an appropriate research method and process depends on the subject and field of the research topic. However, as [1] correctly insists, the differences between types of research and also the connections which are made between types of research and theoretical paradigms portray a very simple picture. Therefore, [11] argued that the danger of this is that two readily available set of research methods and assuming that positivist and interpretative research style represent competing approaches and also that they present 'either-or' alternatives as to strategies of research.

For example, in some instances positivist and interpretative's methods do represent alternatives but in some case, positivist and interpretative each other can complement about each other's defects in terms of use of methodology. Though depending according to the specialist of the topic, it needs sensitivity to the potentials and the contributions of different styles of data and different methods of information collection and analysis to the criminological issues under test and to the theoretical questions being asked of them.

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