

Links between theory and method

Source: Best, Griffiths and Hope (2000) *Active Sociology*

Sociologists want to gain a better understanding of social life, and empirical research (empirical meaning 'based on Objective observations') coupled with a theoretical base usually allows this aim to be met. A theoretical base is useful for interpreting the 'facts' obtained by the research. A theory is a general explanation of how social 'facts' are related to one another. Therefore, a theoretical base allows the data collected from sociological research to be interpreted and given meaning in a social context.

There are various sociological theories that can be used as the basis for a research methodology and/or applied to the data collected from sociological research. The theoretical perspective of a sociologist will usually have a direct effect on the type of methodology used. A structural sociologist, for example, will approach social issues from a macro perspective and therefore will use a research methodology, such as social surveys, to investigate large-scale issues which have their cause in the social structure, effectively. The theoretical perspective also affects the way in which sociologists apply data that has already been collected. Interpretivist sociologists, for example, would interpret the meaning of expressive documents, such as diaries, for a social issue, but will find no meaning in statistics.

Sometimes, however, sociologists will use a variety of research methods that fit loosely with their theoretical base, usually because that base reflects a combination of theoretical approaches. A Marxist feminist, for example may use structured questionnaires to support the structuralist nature of her theoretical base, i.e. she can make universal claims about their research, but conduct unstructured interviews to discover in-depth information about female inequality which can be used only in that context. Applying a variety of research methods to one piece of social research is known as triangulation.

1. What are the meanings of the following terms: empirical, triangulation, macro-perspective, interpretivism, data, expressive documents?
2. What is the purpose of a sociological theory?
3. Why must sociological data be considered in its social context?
4. What is the difference between macro- and micro-sociology?
5. Suggest documentary sources which could be used by an interpretive sociologist.
6. Why do interpretivists tend to reject statistical data?
7. What dangers are there in rejecting statistical data completely?
8. Why are some Marxists attracted to interpretive techniques of study or realism as an approach?
9. Feminists tend to use feminist techniques which reject empiricism. Suggest what reason they offer for this view.

Evaluate the usefulness of feminist approaches to sociological research.