

Realist approaches to research

Realism is an approach which tries to reconcile the differences between positivist and interpretivist research. It is an approach which also has many differences between those who espouse it.

Realists argue that aspects of any reality will remain hidden from the observation/s of the researcher, whether they are the scientific observations of the positivist seeking causal explanations for behaviour/actions, or the observations of interpretivists looking for the meanings and motives people attach to their actions. They argue that we observe events and actions, but we cannot draw conclusions about the causes of these events and actions or why people behave as they do, without considering the underlying processes, mechanisms and structures which are not possible to observe.

They use aspects of both positivist and interpretivist approaches to research and in doing so, try to improve on them.

Similarity of realism in relation to positivism

Concerned with: objectivity

Realists want to know, for example, what causes social processes and events. For example, pupils on free school meals tend to do less well than pupils who are not in receipt of free school meals. This can be measured. But they go further than simply measuring the observable social facts. They ask why the result has been found, why pupils on free school meals do less well. They suggest the result covers a much deeper and unobservable reality/set of structures. Easton (1999) argues there is a 'dark veil' that hides these structures.

Key similarities between realism in relation to interpretivism

- Human beings are not objects and therefore cannot be studied as if they were.
- People are conscious beings who create and recreate the social world.

What do realists want to do?

1. They want to start with causes and motivations but then ask why. What are the underlying reasons for underachievement? Poverty? The class system? Capitalism?
2. They want to examine the causes of behaviour beyond the will of the individual.
3. They want to understand the views of the individuals involved in social processes and events.
4. They want to suggest that just because males and females do not overtly engage in conflict, a conflict that can be measured, that does not mean sexism in society does not exist.
5. They want to be as objective as possible, but are realistic that it is difficult to be value-free.

How do they do this?

1. By examining the wider social world in all its dimensions.
2. By considering the underlying ideologies and social structures which underpin actions and events, for example, sexism, racism, discrimination, capitalism. Understanding this will help to understand, for example, sexist comments in the workplace. Understanding the nature of capitalism will help to understand why twelve lads in Birmingham in the 1970s were disaffected by school.

Realists assume that the way people behave is always influenced by the wider institutional structures of society. Resisting sexism at an individual level will not on its own change the sexist ideology of a society.

3. By using a range of methods and breaking down the division between the collection of quantitative and qualitative data.
4. By undertaking research in at least two stages – the first will then inform the second stage.
5. Developing layers or peeling off layers – the analogy of an onion could be used, as each layer is removed, another slightly different one is exposed.