Sociological Research Methods

Interpretivism and Positivism

Today I want you to look at three approaches to sociological research. These approaches often shape how a researcher decides upon doing research. They amount to philosophies of research and can be used much like you use theories to support your essays for the Foundations of Sociology sections. It's really valuable to know these approaches, and incorporating them into your essays and responses will help elevate your grade.

Interpretivism and positivism can be understood as "paradigms". In other words, they are the models for understanding the world. In this case, they are models that researchers have as to the best way to understand and to study the social world. As such, they shape the bias by which a researcher chooses a research strategy.

Interpretivism

Let's start with Interpretivism. Interpretivism is a paradigm that starts from the premise that society is subjective. You guys use the interpretivist model all the time when you point out that "everyone is different" "it depends on the person." Whether you know it or not, you are using an interpretivist model to make this claim. What you are saying is that society is composed of individuals and each of these individuals are "subject" to different influences. Some people go to church and are inspired. Some out of a sense of continuity and connection to their culture. Others go because they are coerced. They are not inspired in any way. So, it is unreasonable to think that these three people will, say, interpret going to work in the same way, or being married the same way, or going fishing the same way. There are just too many influences on human beings to make studying society a hard science.

Flashback, Interpretivists draw from the approach introduced by Max Weber he called *Verstehen*. That is an empathic or emotional understanding of the social world through the eyes of those living it.

Interpretivists believe that the best way to study society is through observing and even participating in the social setting to understand the social world from the point of view of the people living in it. Interpretivists want to get the stories or narratives of those in a particular research setting at a particular time. So, interpretivists are most likely to use qualitative methods.

Interpretivists will almost certainly take what is called an Inductive Approach to conducting the research. In other words, the Interpretivist believes that the best, least biased approach to studying society is to go into a research setting without pre-conceived notions. The role of the researcher in the research setting is to observe and take notes. The researcher should not try to control or to manipulate the environment in any way. As the observation process comes to an end, (optimally, after the observation process, but researchers

often will start the process a bit sooner), the researcher organizes her notes and looks for patterns in the data.

At this point, the Interpretivist researcher has to find a way to understand what they observed. Note: She should not be doing this during the actual observation...but then sometimes the patterns start to emerge and it becomes difficult not to. How do scientists understand the world? They use theories. It is at this point that the Interpretivist applies a theory to understand what she just witnessed. This process is a great way to see the strengths and weaknesses of a theory, by witnessing it in action.

Sometimes, none of the available theories work, or really don't work well enough to really explain what the researcher observed. In this case, the researcher might just formulate her own theory, or suggest changes to existing theory. These new theories or addendums to theories are then subject to further investigation and validation.

Consequently, a strength of the Interpretivist approach is that it offers a way of evaluating social theory in a real world way, as experienced by individuals. It also offers an opportunity to formulate new theories and to advanced our understanding of the real world. If a theory, like say "Social Darwinism" offers no explanation of the lived experience of poverty or racial/ethnic subordination, then it is not a theory that should be used. Early sociologists embraced Social Darwinism. Researchers in the field, however, discovered that there was no scientific validity to the theory. Today, almost no sociologists accept Social Darwinism as a valid social theory.

Positivism

Positivists point out the weaknesses in the Interpretivist paradigm. For instance, you can't assume that a researcher can walk into a research setting with no preconceived notions. The very fact that a researcher chose a particular field demonstrates a bias right from the top. So using an inductive method does not necessarily control for bias. Secondly, the patterns that a researcher may recognize from the data may also be a reflection of that researcher's bias. For instance, if a Marxist studies gangs, they are likely to see patterns of class divisions involved. If they are a functionalist, they may see patterns of anomic breakdown. Also, participating in a social arrangement may create its own biases. Researchers will inevitably form bonds and empathy for the people they are studying. Also, if the individuals know they are being studied, they may change their behaviors accordingly according to the **Hawthorne Effect** or the **Interviewer Effect**. Covert observation, however, carries some ethical issues.

Positivists believe that the best approach to understanding the social world is to use standard scientific method. The positivist starts with a theory that they want to test. Using the theory, they formulate hypotheses and then construct means by which to gather the data to test the hypotheses. This is called the Deductive Method.

Positivists will almost always use quantitative methods to evaluate their research. They will apply statistical approaches to controlling the biases and for determining how much of the theory can be explained by the data that they are looking at, how much is "noise" or results likely

associated with other variables. There are a bunch of statistical tools to help determine if the data is "significant". These tools will help control for bias.

Positivists point out that though each individual may be shaped by different influences in slightly different ways, there is a great deal of overlap in human experience, and in how human beings interpret those experiences. If we were all just autonomous individuals with our own distinct subjective realities, then society wouldn't really be possible. So, for the positivists, it is important to understand the Object reality of society by looking at the causes and consequences of human interaction writ large.

Positivism is a really powerful means for creating reliable tools to test sociological theories. However, positivists are often not involved in developing new theories. Also, most positivist approaches require looking at larger populations in order to assure the significance of their data. They have powerful tools for understanding the big picture. Unfortunately, in doing so, the positivist may lose the details of understanding the lived experience. I can study poverty in Southwest Florida and get some really valuable data. This data, however, doesn't tell me much about what it means to be a poor person in Southwest Florida.

Also, positivism is not entirely free of bias. The positivist has made decisions about what to study, an immediate bias. The positivist has selected a theory based on his own interests and approaches. This is also a bias. Further, even data collected and analyzed according to quantitative principles must be interpreted, and that process may incorporate the bias of the researcher.

It's often argued that Qualitative/Interpretive research is the best way to gather valid data. In other words, you know the data you are getting is real, because you are looking at it in action. However, it's very hard to replicate Interpretivist research. Interpretivists are ethically bound to protect their research subjects, which means details have to be hidden that might reveal a subject's identity. Quantitative/Positivist approaches, however, are better at providing reliable data, because the methods are clear, mathematical, and can be used in numerous research settings. So, Interpretivists give us the valid data, Positivists give us the reliable data. I, personally, don't like this assumption, but you will see it in your studies.

A good way to practice this is to take a look at the research that I shared with you, or dig up your own research and decide whether it is using an Interpretivist Approach or a Positivist Approach. Read the data and look at the differences. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses in each (all research is explicit about its own limits).

Realism

The debate between Interpretivism and Positivism isn't exactly an knock-down, drag-out fight! Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. To a certain extent, those strengths and weaknesses are complementary. In other words, the strengths of one approach compensates for the weaknesses of the other. That means that sociology benefits from Interpretivist and Positivist approaches. We can model it this way.

We can start with the Interpretivist who goes into the field and conducts inductive, qualitative research. This researcher develops a theory to understand their observations.
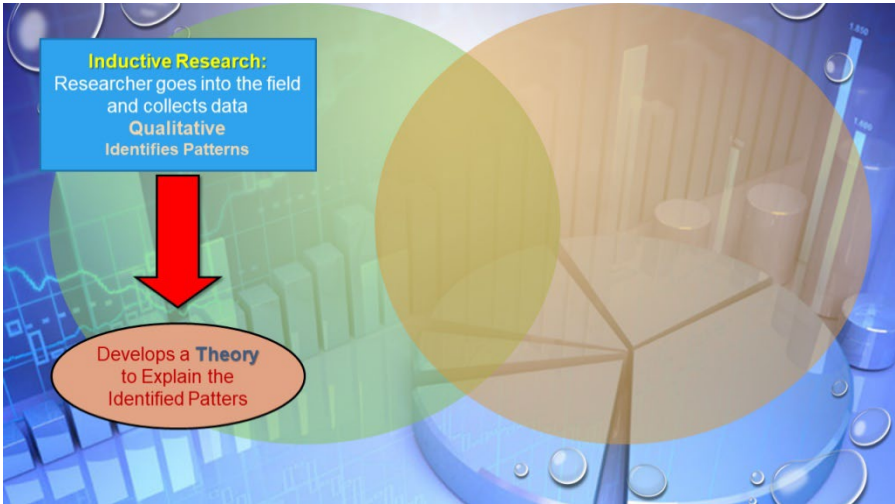

The theory is then picked up by a quantitative researcher who formulates an hypothesis based on that theory.
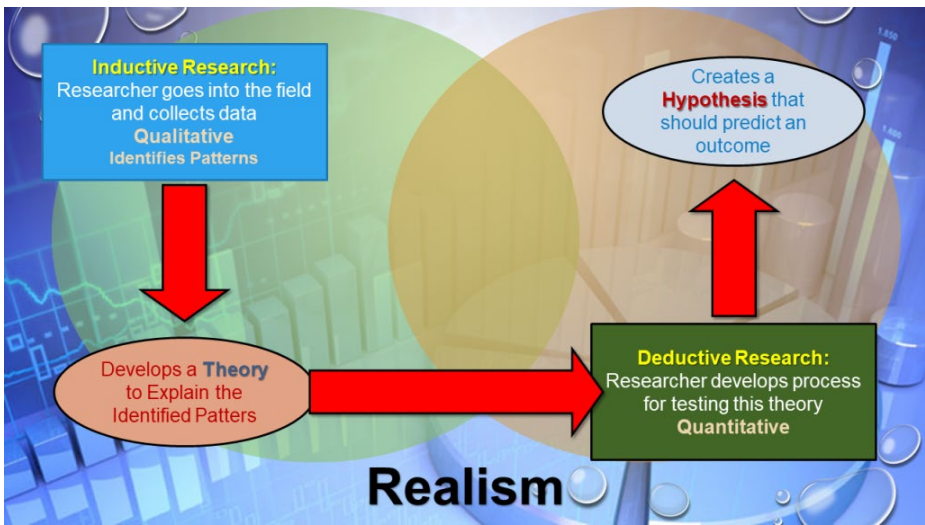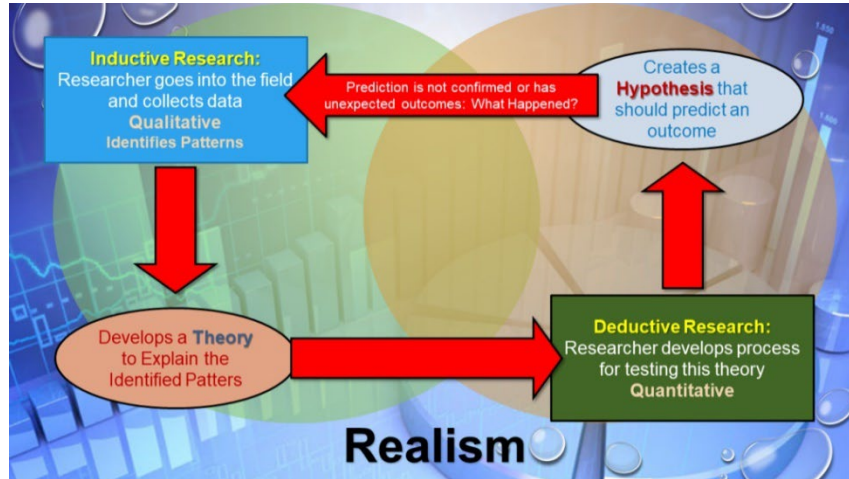
The hypothesis is often not confirmed or validated. Either the results showed no impact (the Null Hypothesis), contradictory impact, or there were some unexpected outcomes not predicted by the hypothesis. Gotta go back to the field!

Or...HAPPY DAY!...the hypothesis confirms the theory! Now let's choose another setting and see if the theory still holds...
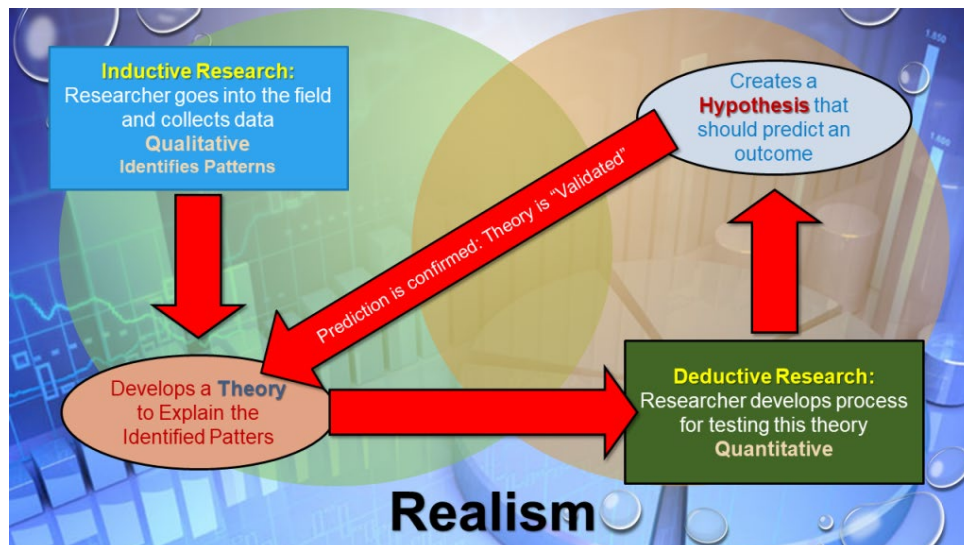
The approach that combines Interpretivism and Positivism is called **Realism**. Realists approach sociological research from the perspective that both Interpretivist and Positivist elements should be involved in data collection. You may have seen this in action. For instance, you may have taken surveys that go through the quantitative multiple choice options, then at the end you are given some space to answer open ended questions. You may also see a lot of quantitative research that references qualitative or vice versa.

Realists will often agregate all of the valid research they can find on a given subject, distill the information, and then publish what is called a [Meta-analysis](#). Using this method, a researcher can take a look at the most compelling research on a given topic, both quantitative and qualitative, and distill what we know to be valid or not valid. The areas where there are holes and gaps need to be explored more, and the stuff we just flat out don't know needs new methods of study. This form of reasearch is very powerful and very important.

Of course, just like Interpretivism and Positivism, Realism has its limits. For instance, it's very difficult to go into the field and do a realistic analysis, or to design a realistic quantitative study. By virtue of the nature of these studies, they must be limited to clear parameters. They are looking at a specific thing in context. Attempting to do a Realistic study of Poverty in real time would be overwhelmingly daunting. There's just too many variables involved. So, in order for a Realist to ply their trade, Interpretivists and Positivists must have already gone out and developed a significant body of research from which to draw. Realists will mostly be using Secondary Data.

A good example of a meta-analysis in sociology was a study completed in 2006, *What Works in Corrections:*

So What do I do with these paradigms

Well, I'm glad you asked?

The research questions on your papers are often not the most interesting, but in some ways they are easier than the Foundations of Sociology questions. Mostly, that's because most of your responses can be organized according to these three paradigms.

What you will be doing with the research prompts is similar to how you are going to use theory in your foundations questions. For instance, if you had the following prompt:

Evaluate the view that gender is the most important influence on identity.

For this prompt you might ask yourself, "how might a feminist answer this question? What about a Marxist? How might a symbolic interactionist answer? Or a postmodernist?

You might set up your magic box like this

Feminism: Gender discrimination Wage discrimination Glass ceiling Kate Millet Sexual Politics or Simone DeBouvoir Second Sex <center>**Yes**</center>	Marxism Class is more important than gender Economics Women often exploited more than men, but class is underlying Karl Marx Dialectical Materialism <center>**No**</center>
<center>**Ish**</center>**Postmodernism** Identity is a story (Judith Butler Performativity) Individual stories are shaped by the media Media presentations of women Social Media and the internet are allowing women to tell more diverse stories about gender Traditional stories are breaking down	<center>**No**</center>**Symbolic Interactionism** Identity is a symbolic representation of self. Gender is only one of many variables influencing identity in any particular context. Blumer: Negotiated interactions

But there are so many theories to choose from, and keeping them all straight in your head may be difficult.

For research prompts, however, the magic box becomes much simpler. Let's take the following prompt:

Evaluate the view that qualitative methods are unsuitable for sociological research because they lack reliability.

This is a very common kind of prompt. You will do pretty much the same thing. The only difference is, instead of having dozens of theories to pull from, you only have three paradigms: Interpretivist, Positivist, Realist.

The Magic Box makes itself:

Interpretivist	Positivist
Realist	Examples or Added info

So here's an idea as an exercise...run this by the sub, of course, Address the prompt above using the paradigms from the last couple of days. Tomorrow I will post the mark scheme and a sample response. Then you can compare your response to the mark scheme and the sample.

Choosing Your Research

A really popular prompt for the research question has to do with whether or not sociologists focus on theoretical or practical concerns when choosing a research topic.

For example, students who took the Paper 1 exam back in November saw this essay prompt:

Evaluate the view that the main influence on choice of research method is the theoretical perspective of the sociologist.

This should prompt you to ask, what are the main influence on choice of research method? Basically, there are three factors when considering what a researcher studies: Practical Concerns, Theoretical Concerns, Ethical Concerns

PRactical	Theoretical	Ethical
What will it take to complete this research adequately	What is my scholarly focus? What am I interested in?	Will my research satisfy the ASA Code of Ethics?
Time Money (Grants? Funding) Setting: Getting access Risk: Myself and others	Marxist--> Class Feminists --> Gender Postmodernist--> Media/Tech, etc.	Professional Competence Integrity Responsibility Respect for Rights, Dignity, and Diversity Social Responsibility

When it comes to ethics, all sociological research must take ethics into account. As far as sociologists, when it comes to this triad, Ethics is the most important one. If the research is unethical...it's out. PERIOD. There is no discussion.

So that leaves a debate between the Practical and the Theoretical. Obviously, both practical and theoretical considerations must be taken into account, but which one is the most important? That's for you to decide.

Time and money are huge considerations...especially if you are doing a Masters Thesis or Doctoral Dissertation...you will have to pay for everything. When it comes to you as a student, quantitative studies are usually cheaper and faster to do. Qualitative, however, if you have access to the field, can be rewarding. One reason why my research was qualitative was that I had access to a level six residence full of delinquent teenage boys. You can't pass that up!

Theoretical concerns are pretty clear. Often, your theoretical concerns align with your personal interests. If it is not something you are interested in, you will be hard pressed to spend six months to multiple years immersed in the research. Theoretical concerns, however, are more important to quantitative researchers, however, as they must develop their hypotheses based on established theories. They have to start with the theory. Qualitative researchers, using inductive
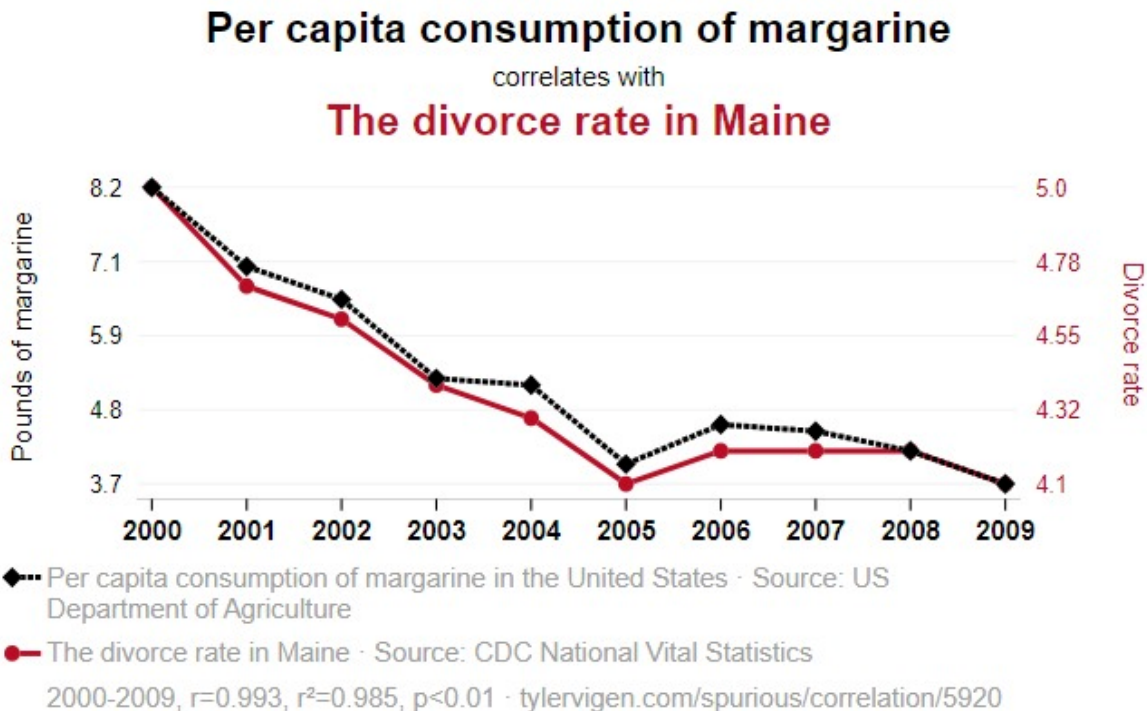
methods, however, often don't know their theoretical approach when they enter the field. They apply the methods based on the patterns they see emerge from the data.

My research was qualitative. When I first started gathering data I became interested in Goffman's presentation of self to explain what I was seeing. As I started to sort my notecards, however, I realized that there was more going on. That what I was witnessing had more to do with power than presentation. My theoretical grounding turned out to be Foucault's power/knowledge. Which sucked! because Goffman was a much easier read than Foucault! But it was the better theory. Ultimately, I could have done both...if I weren't pressed to complete my degree.

Here's an exercise. Look up some sociological research. You can use the samples that I posted on Classroom, and make a list of the practical, theoretical, and ethical concerns the researcher must have had to deal with.

Concerns Regarding Your Research

The stuff from yesterday and today is what I teach you by walking you through the research process. Obviously, I won't have the opportunity to do that. You can scroll down and see the research process. Concerns regarding your research has to do with questions that you must answer in your research design. We can cover them just by going through your vocabulary list.

Per capita consumption of margarine
correlates with
The divorce rate in Maine

◆··· Per capita consumption of margarine in the United States · Source: US Department of Agriculture

●— The divorce rate in Maine · Source: CDC National Vital Statistics

2000-2009, r=0.993, r²=0.985, p<0.01 · tylervigen.com/spurious/correlation/5920

Do you suppose there really is a postive relationship between the Per Capital Consumption of Margarine and the Divorce Rate in Maine? Probably not. This is called a **spurious correlation**...and there are lots of examples.

For instances, I might ask, "Does my **correlation** equate to **causation**?" Correlation means that that two variables are related in some way. A positive correlation means that as one variable increases, the other increases. A negative means as one variable increases the other decreases. Either way they are related. But does that mean that one variable causes the other. Remember, correlation does not equal causation. It's the most important rule in research. These terms are quantitative. There are ways to calculate each. When calculating for causation, however, the best you can do is say that there is a probability of x that variable 1 causes variable 2. When they test for causation, they test at over 95%. If there's less than a 95% chance that thing 1 causes thing 2, researchers assume that the numbers are not significant enought to draw a conclusion.

"Is my research **generalizable** and **representative**? Generalizable means that the outcomes hold for the larger population. If I study 100 people, is that generalizable to the population of the whole country...maybe to an extent, but not much. What about 1000 people. That's better. You'll

get robust (or reliable) data with 1000. Better is 10,000. Obviously, the best would be to study all 340 million...but that's a bit daunting. You have to sacrifice some validity for practical reasons.

The best way to ensure that your study is generalizable is to make sure that your sample is representative. In other words, your sample is a mini-picture of the population as a whole. So, if you are doing research, you want your sample to be about half women, about 12% black, 16% hispanic, etc. Obviously, there are extenuating circumstances. If you are studying rituals regarding menstruation...having men in your sample doesn't make it more representative. One tool for ensuring representativeness is through using random sampling techniques. In other words, you randomly pull subjects into your research. A large enough random sample should look like the population as a whole (unless it doesn't...which can happen). You can read about different types of sampling here. Any sample, however, is going to have a particular **Sampling Error**. If I get two samples of identical populations, I'll likely get some variance between the two. That's the sampling error. Obviously, the smaller the groups, the larger the error will be.

A huge issue is **objectivity**. In other words, to what extent are you as the researcher influencing the outcome of the research. The most obvious question is, "how am I controlling for bias?" This is why we use theories to ground our research. The theory defines the parameters within which we are doing the research. In essence, you are defining the bias going in. Quantitative methods are also designed to control for bias. Qualitative veil of ignorance, going into a research setting "blind" without pre-conceived notions, is another tool.

Of course all of these tools are limited. There's no way to be completely objective, but researchers can get pretty close. And when studies are reproduced using different methods, it's a pretty good bet that the reliable data is fairly objective. This can be done within studies by using a method called **Triangulation**. Triangulation uses approaches from different perspectives to look at the same phenomenon.

- **Method Triangulation:** Looks at a single phenomenon using different methods of research. Maybe quantitative surveys and then qualitative interviews.
- **Investigator Triangulation:** Is a method by which at least three researchers study the same phenomenon at the same time and then check their results. Optimally, we want to have diversity among the researchers.
- **Theory Triangulation:** Is a process by which the same phenomenon is looked at using different theories (again, I like three). Clearly, if a Marxist looks at poverty and a functionalist looks at poverty and they get similar results, that's a good sign that what you are looking at is objectively true.
- **Data Source Triangulation**: Looks at the same phenomenon using different populations, different times, different locations
- **Data Analysis Triangulation:** Is a process by which we can look at the same phenomenon using different analytical techniques.

Another concern might be how the researcher is influencing the research by their presence. So you are familiar with the Hawthorne Effect. This happens when people change their behavior because they know they are being observed. This is similar to, but not the same as the researcher or investigator effect. This happens when the researcher unintentionally influences the subject's

response. Maybe you are conducting an interview. During the interview you smile and that encourages the respondent to give you more of what made you smile. This is also referred to as interviewer effect. People being interviewed tend to want to please the interviewer, and are more likely to give responses they think the interviewer wants rather than what they really think.

Again, you can take a look at the research samples that I gave and look at how the researchers controlled for these concerns.

Review and Assessment

This theme was intended to culminate in a research project. Obviously, I'm not in a position to help you with that. I find that actually doing the research is the best way to learn some of the processes and concerns about research methods.

Without the research project, we've come to the end of what you need to know for this theme. So below I will ask some study review questions. I then include sample paper questions. Part A uses actual AICE questions from three different examples to create a worst case scenario in which all of the Part A questions are research questions. You will never actually encounter that, but...

I then shared four essay prompts that are representative of the kinds of prompts you will get on the paper. It's a good idea to at least set up a magic box for each so you have a study guide.

Review Questions

1. What are the basic kinds of research? What are the main differences?
2. Why might a researcher choose quantitative methods? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this method in general?
3. Why might a researcher choose qualitative methods? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this method in general?
4. Explain the argument between Positivist and Interpretivist approaches to sociological research? Address each argument and counteragument respectively.
5. What is the difference between using Inductive vs. Deductive methods of research?
6. How do Realists try to bridge the gaps between Positivist and Interpretivist approach to sociological research? What are some limits to this approach?
7. Explain the concerns a researcher must consider before starting their research?
8. Explain some things that a researcher must consider when interpreting their data.

Research Process

Purdue University has a great, online writing lab. Sociologists use ASA style references, citation and format. It's pretty user friendly. No frills or complications. If you are interested you can use this link to learn how to format your paper using ASA Formatting.

Below is a summary of the research process. This is what I would have led you through during this theme. Unfortunately, high schools today do not do a good job teaching research papers.

This puts you at a disadvantage when it comes to college where most of the work you will do is research papers. So, this is an important process to know, even if it is not part of your third quarter grade.