

# Theory and Methods

## Worksheet 5.2: Positivism and Interpretivism ANSWERS

Classify each of the following statements as primarily related to either positivist or interpretivist approaches in sociology

1. 'Matter' lacks consciousness and simply responds to external stimuli, but human action is meaningful. INTERPRETIVIST
2. Human action is meaningful and human beings define situations according to the meanings they give them. This means it is not possible to establish general cause and effect relationships as we need to understand individuals' motivations and meanings. INTERPRETIVIST
3. Individual action is determined by social forces external to the individual (e.g. economic forces, or roles prescribed by the social system). POSITIVIST
4. Individual and social behaviour is governed by the principles of cause and effect which exist outside the individual, and which can be objectively measured, enabling the production of statements and theories of cause and effect. POSITIVIST
5. Individuals are active creators of their own society: they don't simply respond and react to external stimuli. INTERPRETIVIST
6. Individuals are conscious beings with thoughts, feelings and interpretations, and the potential to change and re-create their social environment. INTERPRETIVIST
7. Involves broadly micro or interactionist approaches. INTERPRETIVIST
8. Macro or structuralist approaches are generally involved. POSITIVIST
9. Methods and explanations in sociology cannot be the same as those in the natural sciences, as the subject matter of the social and natural sciences is different, and therefore they can't be studied in the same way. INTERPRETIVIST
10. People are formed by forces rooted in society. POSITIVIST
11. People are free agents making choices. INTERPRETIVIST
12. People give meaning to both their own actions and those of others. Meanings are constantly negotiated in on-going interactions between people. INTERPRETIVIST
13. Qualitative research is needed, and attempts to 'measure' will lead to the imposition of observers' definitions of a situation where these may not be shared by the actors under study. INTERPRETIVIST

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14. Quantitative and other scientific techniques can be adapted to collect empirical (observable) quantitative evidence to 'measure' and explain social facts.

POSITIVIST

15. Social order is negotiated and constructed through human interaction.

INTERPRETIVIST

16. Social phenomena are essentially different to natural ones as they are made up of the meanings and interpretations of individuals in a society. INTERPRETIVIST

17. Social theories can be built up on the basis of behaviour that can be directly observed: factors which are not directly observable (e.g. intentions, feelings, meanings) are unimportant and misleading. POSITIVIST

18. Societies can be viewed as objective facts in much the same way as objects in the natural world. POSITIVIST

19. Society has an existence outside of the individuals who make up a society or social group.

POSITIVIST

20. Sociological research should concentrate on grasping the meaning of an individual's experiences and perceptions of the social world. INTERPRETIVIST

21. Sociologists can't understand society and individual behaviour by simply observing it or collecting empirical data. It is necessary to discover and interpret the meanings given to situations to understand and explain human society. INTERPRETIVIST

22. Sociology can adopt research methodologies similar to these used in the natural sciences, forming hypotheses about 'cause and effect' relationships and testing them.

POSITIVIST

23. Sociology must develop alternative (qualitative) methods for studying society different from those used in the natural sciences, as studying society poses problems not faced by natural scientists. INTERPRETIVIST

24. The attempt to explain social phenomena without reference to actors' motives and meanings misrepresents/distorts the nature of social reality.

INTERPRETIVIST

25. The individual is seen as a puppet, with society controlling and constraining the individual.

POSITIVIST

26. The individual is the passive responder to external social forces.

POSITIVIST