

Positivist Approach to Research

A Positivist approach to research is based on knowledge gained from 'positive' verification of observable experience rather than, for example, introspection or intuition. Scientific methods or experimental testing are the best way of achieving this knowledge. The broader context for this approach is the Modernist movement.

Presuppositions

- there is an objective reality.
- people can know this reality.
- symbols can accurately describe and explain this objective reality.

Beliefs

This approach holds certain beliefs:

- Prediction and control
 - that there are general patterns of cause-and-effect that can be used as a basis for *predicting* and *controlling* natural phenomena. The goal is to discover these patterns.
- Empirical verification
 - that we can rely on our perceptions (*observations* or *measurements*) of the world to provide us with accurate data.
- Research is value-free
 - provided a strict methodological protocol is followed, research will be free of subjective bias and *objectivity* will be achieved.

Methodology

Positivist approaches rely heavily on experimental and manipulative methods. These methods ensure that there is a distance between the subjective biases of the researcher and the objective reality she or he studies. This generally involves hypothesis generation and testing: proving or refuting. Typically, quantitative methods are used.

Criteria for 'Good' Research

The positivist position is grounded in the theoretical belief that there is an objective reality that can be known to the researcher, if she or he uses the correct methods and applies those methods in a correct manner. Research is evaluated using three criteria:

- Validity - the extent to which a measurement approach or procedure gives the *correct answer* (allowing the researcher to measure or evaluate an objective reality)
- Reliability - the extent to which a measurement approach or procedure gives the *same answer* whenever it is carried out
- Generalizability - extent to which the findings of a study can be *applied externally* or more broadly outside of the study context

References

Cohen D and Crabtree B, 2006, Qualitative Research Guidelines Project.
<http://www.qualres.org/>
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