

Positivism and phenomenology

Psychology



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This essay shall begin by defining what positivism is, and how it could be used to approach the study of poverty and what problems there might be with this quantitative method. It will then move on to discuss phenomenology, a qualitative method, to come to a conclusion on which method (if any) is more useful than the other. The basic philosophy of positivism is that our social world is similar to the natural world in that both are governed by particular ‘laws’; for example, just as ‘cause and effect’ relationships can be established in nature, so too can they be in our social world, (sociology. rg).

Positivism favours an empiricist approach, which is the idea that we should only deal with phenomena that can be systematically observed, measured and involved in repeatable experiments, (McIntosh and Punch, 2005). This objective method would in turn give any data collected from research a good degree of reliability. Applying positivism to the study of poverty would then mean that it could be measured and its causes explained. If poverty is the ‘effect’, then it’s ‘cause’ would be the ‘structures’ that govern our lives and behaviour.

Such structures in our social world include the wealth of the family we are born in to, the education we receive, the employment we are able to take up, and the quality of housing we are then able to afford. A problem with assigning this method to individuals in poverty would be that it would not take account of their feelings towards their situation; unlike the un-thinking subject matter of the natural world, people have consciousness, and are aware of themselves and their surroundings, (sociology. org).

In contrast, phenomenology is primarily concerned with consciousness, and the ways in which phenomena appear to us from a first person perspective, (reference. com). It would look to obtain a subjective understanding of those in poverty, by studying individuals' experiences of it. This qualitative method would take in to account whether people 'consider' themselves to be in poverty or not; and also look at 'human agency', the choices people make, and how they react to their interpretation of whether they are in poverty or not.

Phenomenology would therefore be very useful in researching why some people 'feel' poorer than others, as well as why some people are able to manage the situation of being in poverty better than others. In conclusion, the objective positivist approach would seem the better option for gaining statistical data on the amounts of poverty, in what locations and at what points in time. However, if one were researching how poverty might affect individuals emotionally, then phenomenology would be the more useful option.