

# Researching Torture: Positivist and Interpretist Approaches

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## Researching Torture: Positivist and Interpretist Approaches

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**‘While Qualitative Research Methods Produce Authentic Accounts of Human Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour, they are Unrepresentative and Unreliable and are Therefore of Little use in the Study of Politics and International Relations.’ Discuss.**

### Introduction

For decades, the topic of research in the social sciences has produced arguments relating to which approach is best to follow. The theories presented in this paper have centred around two extremes. At one end, that only research based on scientific method is valid and at the other end that research has to be based on real experiences through methods such as eye witness testimony, participant observations and photographic evidence.

Today, this issue of research method is perhaps at its most relevant. Recent advances in technology have led to increased public access to sources which in turn has led to increased public awareness and interest in events that particularly impact on Human Rights. In his Presidential Campaign, Barack Obama founded a great deal of his promises on rectifying the perceived wrongs of the Bush administration. Arguably the most notable being his pledge to close Guantanamo Bay[1]. This was in response to the growing unrest among American citizens and international pressure relating to war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed. Public awareness of the situation in Guantanamo Bay was not a result of scientific formula but a result of testimony and photographs of the treatment of detainees being held there.

In the Twenty-First Century, it is difficult for governments, particularly in the West, to set an agenda or to implement a policy without extreme scrutiny from the public. Non-governmental Organisations are growing in number and publicity for any cause that can evoke public emotion is used at every opportunity. Consequently, research in the social sciences is under more pressure than ever before to produce solid findings.

The following paper will firstly introduce the arguments for the Positivist approach to research, which focuses on quantitative methods, and for the Interpretist approach, which focuses on qualitative methods. The second part will apply these approaches to the issue of torture and in doing so will identify and discuss the limitations of applying only one theory or approach to research.

### Part One: The Arguments

The arguments for the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches in Politics and International Relations are within two extremes: the Positivist view and the Interpretist view[2]. The fundamental difference between the extremes is the interpretation of the social world. The former interprets the social world as a machine while the latter interprets it as an organism[3]. It is essential to consider this while examining the theories in detail as the manner in which a machine is analysed requires different skills to those required in analysing an organism. It should also be noted that the numerous techniques available to social scientists are not being critiqued in this paper as the nature of the research and approach of the researcher ultimately determines the technique and its usefulness.

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According to the Positivist view, the social world is a solid configuration and the emphasis is placed on the nature of the relationships between the elements that it consists of[4]. This side of the research approach debate argues that facts relating to the social world come from explanations and the plotting of the social configurations[5].

Positivism states that analysis of the relationships between elements should be empirically based on the “precise nature of laws, regularities and relationships”[6]. In other words, the scientific approach to research is favoured due to its exactness and impartiality. The foundation of Positivism is the manner in which an event is deemed to be significant. Significance is only confirmed if it is possible to either reason or surmise from the event in question[7] and confirmation only occurs when the event is verified through observation[8]. Obviously this poses an obvious problem in the verification of past events. To overcome this problem, Positivism allows for the observation of the effects of an event to be sufficient in verification[9]. It should be noted at this point that in the Positivist approach, there is a distinct difference between meaning and significance with the latter being of key importance in empirical research[10].

The manipulation of data through quantitative techniques effectively solidifies the social world and treats human actors and behaviours as nothing more than elements[11]. Only through the examination of the scientifically lawful associations of these elements can the nature of the social relations be explained[12]. In order to successfully analyse the social world and its elements in this manner, information has to be taken out of context and examined through empirical surveys and detailed laboratory experiments[13]. This scientific approach confirms the Positivist priority being the explanation of social behaviour rather than the understanding.

The common methods used in quantitative data are studies with a large number of participants, inferential statistics, descriptive statistics and survey instruments. Typically, they are rigid, unchanging, free from social constraints, and designed to test scientific hypotheses in the same way as they would be in the natural sciences. An example of such methods, a factorial survey, will be introduced in the second part of this paper.

Qualitative research has been the approach favoured by the other social sciences such as Anthropology and Sociology[14]. It has been this dominance that has led to the Interpretist view in the study of Politics and International Relations. This approach views the social world and relationships within it as an expression of individual thoughts[15]. This approach emphasises understanding the processes through which human beings interact with the world[16]. Accordingly, it is impossible for the objective knowledge favoured by Positivism to exist because nothing within the social world and interactions between actors is concrete or certain.

The foundation of the extreme Interpretist approach is the assumption that the social world is open and changing[17]. In order to successfully research a topic, considerations such as the context of the study subject need to be taken into account. In other words, the methods required for collecting information have to be open. The common methods used in qualitative research include interviews, observational research and focus groups[18]. As can be expected, the characteristics of these methods are the polar opposite of those used in quantitative research in that they are soft, supple, based on individual perspective, and exploratory.

As will be demonstrated, both approaches have limitations. This is not necessarily through any fault of the individual theories. Neither claims to be applicable to every issue of research. On the contrary, the difference between the theories is clearly stated by each and lies in their respective fundamental approach to the interpretation of the social world. Before applying either theory to any research, it is worth reinforcing that quantitative methods seek to provide explanation for causal relationships whereas qualitative methods seek to provide understanding at a deeper level.

## Part Two: Research in Politics and International Relations

The differences between the Positivist and Interpretist approaches mean that not all methods are suitable for all study subjects. When planning a study, the researcher should carefully consider which approach will be most appropriate to the study. In the context of Politics and International Relations, this can be a complex issue. The following section will demonstrate such complexities in the specific area of Torture, an increasingly popular area of study within the social sciences. Firstly, a hypothesis will be presented. This will be followed by extreme Positivist

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analysis and extreme Interpretist analysis. Finally, a discussion on the limitations encountered when applying only one approach will take place.

Following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 and the subsequent 'War on Terror', the Bush administration instructed the interrogators at Guantanamo Bay to ignore Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions[19]. This decision was based on the interpretation that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to the detainees for a number of reasons. Firstly, the conflict was not between Nation-states, the enemy was a terrorist organisation and therefore were not Prisoners of War in the traditional sense[20]. Secondly, Guantanamo Bay was in Cuba and not on American Soil[21]. This paved the way for previously outlawed techniques such as the use of dogs in interrogations. When information regarding the use of these techniques was leaked, there was widespread outrage and many in the upper echelons of the US Military feared the repercussions on their troops serving abroad, in particular in regards to those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The decision and its aftermath have brought to the fore the interconnectedness of issues such as domestic and foreign policy, security, human rights and the application of international law. For the sole purpose of demonstrating Positivist and Interpretist theories only, the research hypothesis will be:

*The action of the Government of the United States of America in disregarding Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions in Guantanamo Bay has led human rights elsewhere and has consequently jeopardised the application of International Law by other actors involved in conflicts.*

According to the Positivist approach, verification of a significant event has to occur through observation. In this case, an empirical study from 2004, involving Iraqi judges and the sentencing of guardsmen convicted of torturing terror suspects, will be used. The study consisted of about 10% of the judges from Iraq hypothetically sentencing convicted perpetrators of torture[22]. The method used was a factorial survey[23].

To put this into context of the Positivist approach, the elements being studied were the Judges and their sentencing. In order to ensure accuracy and reduce the possibility of bias, the conditions were isolated from reality in so much as they were applied in a laboratory environment. The participants were informed that the guardsmen were Iraqi members of the Coalition Forces and that the victim of the torture was an Iraqi Al-Qaeda suspect[24]. In addition to this, the experimenters also considered demographic variables including the death rates in the Judges' jurisdiction, their fear of violence and their perceived importance of police protection[25]. These variables were coded to give scientific value.

The multivariate analysis found that there were negative correlations between fear of violence and harsher sentencing and positive correlations between the importance of police protection and harsher sentencing[26]. In other words, the dependent variable (the relationship between the elements) can be explained by concrete independent variables.

When the results are applied to the hypothesis given at the beginning of this section, it can be concluded that the action of the Government of the United States of America in disregarding Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions has not jeopardised the application of International Law by other actors involved in conflicts. The study did not observe any effects suggesting this and so according to Positivism, this is not the case.

Using information from the same study, the Interpretist approach will now be considered. Centre to this theory is the necessity of context. The study took place throughout 2004. Therefore it is necessary to consider the events influencing issues applicable to Iraq at that time. The choice of what to consider is important. The hypothesis is referring directly to Article 3 of the Geneva Convention which prohibits "murder, mutilation, torture, cruel, humiliating and degrading treatment, the taking of hostages and unfair trial." [27] A possible avenue for research then could relate to allegations of such treatment in Iraq.

At the beginning of 2004, allegations of abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib Prison began to surface[28]. The alleged abusers were members of the 800<sup>th</sup> MP Brigade of the United States Military[29]. The results of the allegations led to

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convictions and have been well documented in the public domain. The focus of this paper however is not the convictions, but rather possible influences on behaviour. In particular, would the events and accusations arising from Abu Ghraib have influenced the decision of sentencing by Iraqi judges? Open interview techniques could be applied when using the Interpretist approach and this may have provided more information in regards to understanding the relationship between the Judges and their sentencing than the factorial survey applied in the Positivist approach.

Additional research could have ascertained whether the events in Abu Ghraib were the result of the decision by the US Government that the Geneva Conventions did not apply to the detention of suspected terrorists. This may have proven to be the case and the conclusion of such a study would have been the opposite of what the quantitative study had concluded.

In addition to the events in Abu Ghraib Prison, civil unrest in Iraq in 2004 was reaching unprecedented levels with crime rates rocketing as a result[30]. In a similar way, this could have affected the decisions of the Judges. It may at least go some way to explaining the correlation between the fear of violence and sentencing.

This leads on to the main problem of using only one method in research and the main criticism of any theory that relies on only one method. Both Positivism and Interpretism have merits. The former allows for empirical research to establish the existence of relationships and the latter aims at understanding these relationships. Using the previous example study, the findings may have been enhanced by considering a mixed approach. For example, to support the finding of a relationship being influenced by external factors, which was identified using quantitative methods, qualitative methods could have provided further relevant information.

At this point it is worth recalling that Positivism focuses on explanation whereas Interpretism focuses on understanding. With this in mind, the meanings of explanation and understanding should be considered. The term 'explanation' refers to "a statement made to clarify something and make it understandable"[31] and the term 'understanding' refers to "knowledge of or familiarity with a particular thing"[32]. These meanings are not conflicting with one another. To use one would not cancel out the relevance of the other. This could also be said in regards to quantitative and qualitative research methods. One does not have to compete with the other but should instead be used to complement the other.

As has been previously mentioned, each theory has its limitations but in addition to this, so does the researcher. Limited resources in terms of finances and time can decrease the attraction of qualitative methods. The techniques used in many of the qualitative methods also require a level of expertise that not every researcher will have. For example, in-depth interviews require rapport between the interviewer and interviewee. A person who has difficulty building rapport with strangers would not glean any fruitful responses from using such a technique.

On the other hand, the quantitative approach can ignore potentially significant information, especially if it does not correlate with what is being analysed. This was demonstrated in the study at the beginning of this section.

A final, yet pivotal, consideration is the interpretation of results. All research is carried out for a reason and the motivation may unwittingly or wittingly bias the findings. These concerns should always be remembered when presented with not only research, but also with a theory itself.

## Conclusion

Politics and International Relations provide complex areas of investigation for researchers, perhaps more so than in any of the other social sciences. The actors involved are not only individuals, but also organisations, institutions, armed forces and numerous others. The issues involved include power, economics, sovereignty and law, both domestic and international. It is therefore difficult to prescribe a definitive theory of research as methods which are applicable to people may not be applicable to structures.

However, explanation and understanding out with of theory are complementary. It is rare to find one or to even look for one without the other. Research should not be any different. Although the theories in this paper are the extremes

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of the positions, the debates between them and the levels in between are very much apparent. To the observer and student in the subject however the reason for such a high-fuelled debate may not be so transparent. Both theories aim to improve the areas of studies but rather than compromising, the aim has been somewhat misplaced in the battle for supremacy.

Ultimately it is the choice of the researcher which theory to use as the basis of research and in most cases one theory will fit the cause better than the other. That is not to say that the other approach is null and void. It is possible to use qualitative research that is supported by quantitative research and vice versa. Quantitative research serves to either prove or disprove something but considering the complexity of issues within the discipline of Politics and International Relations, it is often necessary to consider more than this.

Perhaps even more importantly, it is impossible to look at one approach research without the other. The motivation behind carrying out quantitative research may be influenced by a qualitative factor such as a controversial photograph. Similarly, trends that are apparent in statistical research may influence further investigation in order to understand the cause of the trends on a social rather than scientific level. The result of combining approaches would be enhancing rather than conflicting and would only serve to improve the overall approach to the discipline.

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