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Positivism, Post-Positivism and Interpretivism

<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/09/25/positivism-post-positivism-and-interpretivism/>

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The resources below have been curated by the E-International Relations team to give a broad overview of how distinctions between Positivism, Post-Positivism and Interpretivism shape important decisions on how (and which) methods and approaches are used by researchers. You can find even more resources on our methods homepage.

Positivism is an approach that views the world as 'out there' waiting to be observed and analysed by the researcher. Theories that are built on positivism see the world 'as it is' and base their assumptions upon analysing physical elements such as states and international organisations, which they can account for and ascribe values to. Positivism is therefore based on the study of facts and the gathering of physical evidence. It is related to the scientific view of the natural world as being one that operates via laws (such as gravity) that can be revealed by careful study and observation. Positivists assert that equivalent laws can be revealed about the social world.

Postpositivism rejects the positivist approach that a researcher can be an independent observer of the social world. Postpositivists argue that the ideas, and even the particular identity, of a researcher influences what they observe and therefore impacts upon what they conclude. Postpositivism pursues objective answers by attempting to recognise, and work with, such biases with the theories and knowledge that theorists develop.

Interpretivism (sometimes called 'anti-positivism') takes things yet further by arguing that objectivity is impossible. As an approach, this leads researchers to focus on gaining *subjective* knowledge through approaches where individuals, or smaller groups, are analysed in depth through detailed observations and discussions. This harnesses a broader framework of 'qualitative analysis' in which deeper sets of data are sought from smaller numbers of participants – such as through detailed interviews. This is a different approach to gathering data than the more positivist inclined 'quantitative analysis' where larger datasets are sought to gain broader insights – such as polls of hundreds or thousands of people asking them a small number of questions with only yes/no/maybe-type options for answers.

Text adapted from McGlinchey, Stephen (2022). *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

Richard Ned Lebow introduces Positivism and Interpretivist Knowledge Claims (Youtube)

Research Methods: Positivism and Interpretivism from Tutor2U (Youtube)

Social Knowledge: Interpretivism vs Positivism, by Daniel Davies (Youtube)

Positivist vs Post-positivist IR theory by Andreas Bieler (YouTube)

Empirical and Normative Questions by Dustin Avent-Holt (Youtube)

The Nature of Social Research by Graham R Gibbs (YouTube)

Qualitative research guidelines project: Common Paradigms (Website).

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