

#40DayChallenge Day 20

Outline and explain two reasons positivist methods are limited in investigating contemporary society (10)

One reason that positivist methods are limited in investigating contemporary society is that they approach society from a structural viewpoint. Positivists suggest that society is influenced by structural forces and take a top-down approach to studying society. Furthermore, positivists study society in order to create cause and effect relationships between social institutions and individuals in society. Their assumption is that individuals in society are passive and that social forces can manipulate the behaviour of individuals in predictable ways. However, interpretivists would argue that in contemporary society this is not the case. They would suggest that individuals are no longer guided by morals passed down from institutions, but instead act upon their own agency, which means that for positivists looking to establish cause and effect relationships, this is incredibly difficult as individuals make their own decisions, or display agency, based upon a multitude of factors, including their past history, interactions with others and their understanding of the world. This means that in contemporary society, with processes such as secularisation and globalisation, the greater diversity in society means that adopting a structural view of society and studying it scientifically is not desirable as people are more unpredictable in contemporary society.

A second reason that positivist methods are limited in understanding contemporary society is that they lack validity. Whilst many researchers and particularly governments use positivist methodology in order to obtain quantitative data on social trends, this evidence does little to explain how social issues can be resolved as it lacks any deeper understanding of why the problem occurs. An example of this is working class underachievement. Official statistics will show that working class boys do worse than their middle-class peers, but there is no suggestion in this data as to why this is the case. Furthermore, statistics can be seen to be a social construction, as the receipt of free school meals is often an indicator of social class, yet many students either do not accept free school meals because of the stigma attached, or many students not in receipt of free school meals feel the effects of material deprivation. For interpretivists, not only do we need to understand why the

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working-class underachieve, but also we need to broaden the definition of working class in order to include people who do not fit into the narrow criteria set out by governments, some of which may be politically motivated. As a consequence, in contemporary society, positivist methods may be seen as too inflexible and not measuring accurately what they are supposed to measure.