Approaches in the Social Sciences – A Summary (Students' Version)

Approach	Positivist Social Science (PSS)	Interpretive Social Science (ISS)	Critical Social Science (CSS)
In a nutshell	The approach of the natural sciences: preference for quantitative data, experiments, surveys, statistics. Positivists seek rigorous, exact measures and 'objective' research. The dominant approach in the Western countries, especially in the 60s and 70s (still so in North America but not so in Europe) **"Postivist social science is an organized method for combining deductive logic with precise empirical observations of individual behavior in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity." (95)** There is only one logic of science so social science must be like natural science Example of fields: public health administration, criminal justice, market research, policy analysis, program evaluation	The world of society is not the same as the world of nature. Emphasis on gathering qualitative data to acquire an in-depth understanding of how people create meaning in everyday life and maintain their social worlds. The primary goal for SS according to ISS is empathetic understanding – deep understanding with shared meaning. **"In general, the interpretative approach is *the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds." (101-2)***	Social research must be reflexive: it must criticize itself as well as its subject matter. Combines PSS and ISS to inquire beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world to help people build better lives. **"In general, CSS defines social science as a *critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves." (108)***
Some proponents (Title of Work)	▪ Auguste Comte (The Course of Positive Philosophy) ▪ John Stuart Mill (A System of Logic) ▪ Emile Durkheim (Rules of the Sociological Method) ▪ David Hume	▪ Max Weber (Essays in Sociology) ▪ Wilhem Dilthey (Introduction to the Human Sciences) ▪ Talcott Parson (The Structure of Social Action)	▪ Karl Marx (Capital; Theses on Feuerbach) ▪ Theodor Adorno (Sociology and Empirical Research) ▪ Max Horkheimer (Traditional and Critical Theory) ▪ Sigmund Freud, Herbet Marcuse
Typical process of research	▪ Deduce hypothesis from a general theory; this hypothesis will likely explain complex patterns in terms of a few key variables; ▪ Make predictions based on hypothesis (which must be measurable); ▪ Gather data to precisely measure the factors that the theory identifies; ▪ Use statistics to formally test the predictions to corroborate the hypothesis (where the sample size is usually very large)	▪ Personally talk with and observe specific groups of people (sample size usually small); ▪ Learn what the group feels about certain issues that are of everyday concern to them; ▪ Put what people say into the context of their daily affairs; ▪ Describe findings (of what the specific group of people think) in terms of what other researchers can understand.	▪ Begin with a point of view/agenda/moral standpoint; ▪ Examine larger social and historical context; ▪ Uncover problems in society (eg. racial discrimination) by examining many sources closely and finding an underlying pattern of exploitation; study the effects of these problems on specific people groups; ▪ Find solutions (given her moral standpoint) to help overcome the problem; ▪ Takes actions to overcome that problem (eg. appeal to politicians, involving the press). E.g. of ISS vs CSS approach (110) E.g. of extended case method (115)
Some typical methods used	▪ Collection of data (eg census) ▪ Clinical behavioral studies ▪ Collation of aggregate answers to a questionnaire ▪ Experiments, surveys and statistics – quantitative Interested in collecting and analyzing 'objective' observations.	▪ Examination of conversations ▪ Participant observation in the field ▪ Analysis of nonverbal communication ▪ Bracketing: identifying then setting aside taken-for-granted assumptions used in a social scene. It reveals what "everyone knows": what people assume but rarely say. It makes visible significant features of the social scene that make other events possible and is the underlying scaffolding of understandings on which actions are based (106). Interested not in aggregate answers of many people, but in placing each person's answer in context. Note: such capturing of people's subjective sense of reality is only possible by indirect means: what we experience initially are gestures, sounds, and actions and only in the	▪ Utilizes methods from both PSS (eg. collection of economic data) and ISS (eg. personally examine living conditions). Interested in changing the status quo, getting problems addressed.

		process of understanding do we take the step from external signs to the underlying inner life (102). E.g. of difference in PSS vs ISS methodology (101)	
Associated names	Logical empiricism, post-positivism, naturalism, covering law model, behaviorism, the scientific approach.	Hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, constructionism, ethnomethodology, cognitive, idealist, phenomenological, subjectivist and qualitative sociology.	Dialectical materialism, class analysis, structuralism.
Reason for research (Q1)	Instrumental orientation: To discover natural laws so people can predict and control events (such as to alter social relations, improve policies and predict what happens) These laws of human behaviour are viewed to be universal.	Practical orientation: To understand and describe meaningful social action (not just the external, observable behaviour but actions that have meaning or intent) in everyday life; to share someone else's perspective. (107) Social action "is the action to which people attach subjective meaning and is activity with a purpose or intent" (102). A physical reflex is not a meaningful social action but a deliberate wink directed towards other people would be.	Action orientation: To smash myths and empower people to change society radically; to explain a social order in such a way that it becomes itself the catalyst which leads to the transformation of that social order. In short, to change the world. (108-9) E.g. on racial discrimination (109)
Nature of social reality (Q2)	Stable preexisting patterns or order that can be discovered; it is "waiting to be revealed" (96) Positivists are realists: there is a real world out there that we can discover. People experience it in similar ways. Things are as they appear, created out of a natural order of the world. Thus, race, gender, and measurements of space and time just "are". Implications: for e.g., males commit more crime than females due to "maleness" Cumulative: social reality as stable and regular, the laws we discover today will hold in the future, and we can add more and more knowledge each day. Language is able to accurately reflect reality (103)	Fluid definitions of a situation created by human interaction. (although people often take social reality for granted and behave as if it were natural, objective, part of fixed reality – e.g. of number of days in a week; 102-3) Interpretivists tend to be idealists/nominalists: the social world is what people perceive it to be. People may or may not experience social reality in the same way. Reality is not discovered but constructed. Social reality is somewhat distinct from physical reality but is nonetheless linked to it (e.g. of chair – empirical reality of wooden object that has been interpreted and given meaning as a chair, i.e. something to sit on; 103) Language is a social construction and has little direct connection to essential reality; it influences the way we think and see the world (103).	Conflict filled and governed by hidden underlying structures. (109-110) CSS adopts historical realism: social reality is 'out there' for us to discover (PSS trope), but reality evolves and is shaped by social, political, and cultural factors (ISS trope). But CSS disagrees with the ISS' emphasis on micro-level interpersonal interactions and its acceptance of any meaning system. CSS holds that although subjective meaning is important, there are real objective relations that shape social relations. Social reality is multi-layered: behind the immediately observable surface (often an illusion of false beliefs) lie deep structures of unobservable mechanisms.
Nature of human beings (Q3 and Q4)	1) Mechanical model of man: Self-interested and rational individuals who are shaped by external forces. These forces are as real as physical forces and suggests that researchers only have to study these external social phenomena and not the unseen, internal motivations. (96) 2) People can recognize truth and distinguish it from falsehood by applying reason. 3) People are not 100% predictable, but under certain conditions, they will engage in a specified, predictable behavior, i.e. they are not robots or puppets who must always respond similarly. Laws are merely probabilistic and hold for large groups of people or many situations. (few positivists are absolute determinists) 4) Human behavior is deterministic: determined by causal laws over which humans have little control. It downplays free will and one's internal reasons. Mental processes are less central than the structural forces or conditions that exert influence over choices and behaviour (97)	1) Social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their worlds. 2) People make use of systems of meanings (derived through social interaction) to make sense of their lives. (103) 3) Human behavior may be patterned and regular, but (abstract) laws may not relate to the feelings and experiences of ordinary people. Patterns need to be studied in relation to evolving social conventions that are created, so that we understand individual reasons and motives, even if they are irrational or carry deep emotions. These patterns are not discovered but created 4) ISS assumes voluntarism: people have a large amount of free will to create social meanings. (104) Some ISS say that laws are possible but only after understanding how people create and use meaning systems); some say such laws are not possible (eg 104)	1) Adaptive beings with unrealized potential, trapped by illusion and exploitation. (110-1) 2) People should not reify (i.e. make real) social forces such that they have a life of their own, because once we see them as an outside force, we lose control over our own destiny. We should become aware of the forces that shape us and take action to change them. E.g. capitalism is our creation just as the constitution is. Or law of demand and supply. Or minimum wage is a bad idea. But we treat them as laws that we discovered and have to abide by, instead of questioning them and breaking free of it. 3) Human behavior can be driven by myths and false beliefs (eg sexism, ageism) that need to be broken. 4) CSS takes the middle road between determinism and voluntarism (bounded autonomy): people are limited by material conditions, cultural context, but they are not locked into an inevitable set of social structures, relationships, or laws. Eg on 111 on this bounded free will

Common sense is… (Q5)	Clearly distinct from and less valid than science because it is sloppy, logically inconsistent, unsystematic, full of bias (97). Science is the best way to gain knowledge	A powerful everyday guide used by ordinary people. It is important to understand this common sense as it contains the meanings that people use when they engage in everyday routine social interaction (104). Positivist laws and common sense are distinct meaning systems: neither has all the answers, neither is superior.	Often composed of a set of false beliefs (on the surface of social reality) that hide power and objective conditions. A researcher must use theory to dig beneath these false beliefs to observe periods of crisis and intense conflict. This will uncover the deeper structures of social reality upon which the researcher can act to bring about change. (111-2) e.g. 2 people can view the same room; one sees a murder, the other a suicide (Sherlock, "A Study In Pink")
A social theory is… (Q6)	Nomothetic: A logical deductive system of interconnected definitions, axioms, and laws (*nomos* in Greek). Covering law model of explanation – a PSS principle that a few high-level, very abstract theories cover and allow deducing to many low-level, more concrete situations Someday, SS theories could look similar to those in math and NS Such laws should be universally valid, holding in all times and cultures	Idiographic (study of particular facts as opposed to general law): An in-depth description (or story) of how a group's meaning system is generated and sustained (105) Aim is to provide readers with a deep feeling for another person's social reality by revealing the meanings, values, interpretive schemes and rules of daily living. Eg on 105 about the map and professional gamblers. So there IS some kind of generalization going on but far from the scale of PSS.	Mixes nomothetic and idiographic approaches: A critique that reveals true conditions and helps people see the way to a better world. (112) E.g. people's belief that men are superior to women -> results in the structure of patriarchy ->which feeds back into this belief. The causal mechanism that helps perpetuate this myth is the unequal access to opportunities like education and jobs. The solution is feminism and anti-discriminatory policies.
How to tell whether an explanation or theory is true or false. It must… (Q7)	1) Be logically connected to laws and have no logical contradictions; 2) Be consistent with observed facts; 3) Be replicable so others can check your explanation.	1) Resonate or feel right to those being studied – the closer the secondary account is to the native's primary account, the better; 2) Allow others to understand deeply the reality of those being studied. 3) Prediction is possible, but arises out of close understanding. (106; eg of gambler)	1) Supply people with tools needed to change the world; it must be able to be put into practice (112-3); 2) Accurately describe conditions generated by underlying structures of society; 3) Teach people about their own experiences and help them understand their historical role. Eg on housing discrimination (113)
A good piece of evidence or social fact should be… (Q8)	1) Based on empirical observations (which is theory-neutral); empirical observations are to be privileged over other ways of gaining knowledge (e.g. intuitions, emotions) (98-9) 2) Intersubjective: agreed upon by other independent observers; 3) Falsifiable (Popper): It should make a bold prediction for which it is possible to refused with a piece of negative evidence.	1) Embedded in the context of social interactions; evidence cannot be isolated from context; 2) Fluid: It is not impartial, objective or neutral, but ambiguous. It is context-specific and depends on the interpretations of particular people in a social setting, i.e. facts are almost always subjective (e.g. of holding hand out, palm forward – stop or drying nail polish; 106)	1) Informed by a theory that unveils illusions: Facts of material conditions exist independently of subjective perceptions, but facts are not theory neutral. Facts require an interpretation from within a framework of values, theory, and meaning. Theories are necessary in helping us separate the important from the trivial facts. Theories tell us where to look for facts and how to interpret them, just like in NS (e.g. on healthcare, 113)
Place for values (Q10)	Science is value free, i.e. no room for personal prejudice and biases. Cold, observable facts are distinct from values (dualist doctrine), and values have no place except when a researcher is choosing a topic. (99-100) Hence, SS is objective	Social science should involve close study of personal points of view and feelings. ISS asks if it is even possible to be value free since values are an integral part of social life. No group's values are wrong; they are only different, i.e. relativism. (107)	All science must begin with a value position. It is not possible to be completely value free, and we should not avoid adopting a position on issues (eg racism). Some positions are right, some are wrong. In fact, there is only one, or a very few, correct points of view. (114)
Some common criticisms	1) Reduces people to numbers. Nonhumanistic. (108) 2) Abstract laws not relevant to the actual lives of real people; ignores the social context. 3) Fails to deal with the meanings of real people and their capacity to feel and think (108) 4) Defends the status quo instead of seeing society as continuously changing	1) Not scientific: lacks objective methods. Interpretation is too subjective and relativist. (114) 2) Many theories may not be falsifiable. 3) Passive (does not advocate a moral stand because it only describes and explains, not prescribe) and short-sighted (too focused on personal context) while ignoring the broader and long-term structural conditions.	1) Agenda-driven, value-laden research means researcher may impose his own values on others and assume his position is better than that of the people he is studying. 2) Because research deals with matters of some delicacy, obtaining data (from those in position of power) may be difficult. May have to violate people's trust to obtain necessary data.

Kind of research (usually)	Cost-benefit analysis	Exploratory research	Action-oriented research

Essential Points:
1) Many different approaches to do SS (90)
2) Each has a different stance on what is the best way to do research in SS and what is a dominant approach in one country might not be so somewhere else, i.e. not universal (unlike Math and NS) (90)
3) Interestingly, practitioners aren't always aware of what approach they are using AND they can be using a MIX of approaches (91)
4) i.e. PSS, ISS, CSS are not actual reflections of how SS is practiced in real life but are neat albeit artificial categories to explain a way of doing SS
5) A topic can always be studied from any of these 3 approaches but each approach would go about its research differently (118). E.g. on discrimination and job competition – PSS (hypothetico-deductive testing), ISS (interviews, observations), CSS (starts from moral-critical standpoint, identifies underlying patterns of discrimination, use both qualitative and quantitative methods)
6) Each approach has its own strengths and limitations but each thinks that it is better than the other – the essential differences are "on what phenomena should be attended to, how one is to approach phenomena and how the phenomena are to be analyzed" (91)
7) Our position on the nature of reality affects our epistemology – Realists believe that the world is out there, existing independently of human minds and that we can experience directly while the Nominalists think otherwise; for them, we can never experience directly this world out there but only through a lens of personal biography and cultural worldview. Critical realists are the in-between position. Realists thus believe that we can produce objective knowledge through, basically, the SM (observation, induction to hypothesis, deduction to prediction and testing of theories). Nominalists however believe that observations cannot lead to knowledge about reality because interpretations and subjective views greatly influence all observations such that we can never separate an objective reality from our interpretations; the best we can do is to recognize our own viewpoints and interpretations. For the nominalists, we produce SS knowledge also by induction and observation, but also by interpretation and reflecting on what other people are saying and doing in specific contexts while we simultaneously reflect on our experiences and interpretations (92-3)
8) Unlike NS, SS has several competing paradigms BUT PSS is the predominant one since 1945, excepting a brief period of "epistemological turmoil" (95)
9) Nonetheless, "there is no single, correct approach to social science research"; all 3 are viable choices. (120)
10) Common features across all 3 approaches – empirical, systematic, theoretical (i.e. that there is some order in social reality, even for ISS), public, self-reflective, open-end processes (120)
11) The choice of research method (e.g. surveys vs interviews) is ultimately based on assumptions and ideas from the approaches (e.g. surveys are positivist-influenced, interviews are interpretivist-influenced)