

**EPISTEMOLOGY** means the theory of the nature of knowledge. Epistemology is thus about *knowing*. Epistemological statements are statements about what we accept as knowledge.

We have defined three epistemological positions that can be found in sociological research. These are *positivism*, *phenomenology* and *critical approaches*.

For example, suppose you were researching domestic violence. As a *positivist* you would want to identify the *causes* of domestic violence (such as money problems, drunkenness, unemployment, and so on). The presumption is that appropriate knowledge in such circumstances would be an *explanation* that would allow you to *predict* the likely occurrence of domestic violence and thus be able to intervene to stop it.

As a *phenomenologist* you might want to try and get some idea of what the people involved in domestic violence make of it. Do they regard it as normal? Do they think of it as wrong but cannot get out of violent situations? In short, you may want to try and grasp the *meaning* that domestic violence has for the people involved. Only then can you begin to understand how and why people get mixed up in it. You are not interested in causes that fail to take account of what people think.

As a *critical sociologist* you want to understand domestic violence as part of a wider process of oppression. A *feminist* approach to critical social research would see domestic violence as part of *patriarchal control of women* and would thus look at how 'wife battering' is a rarely reported crime, with even fewer convictions. Such an approach might look at how the police avoid being involved in 'domestic' incidents that involve violence. How patriarchal ideology condones the dominance of men over women. How women's primary role is seen as being within the home caring for the family, and so on. In short, a feminist critical approach would set domestic violence within a broader framework in which men have power over women.

For critical social researchers, specific *causes* of domestic violence such as 'poverty' or 'drugs' only conceal the real *structural* processes by which women are oppressed by men. Similarly, trying to understand the *meanings* of domestic violence only partly deals with the issue. Why is it, for example, that women feel that they are the problem if they are attacked violently by their husbands. For critical social researchers, it is only when these feelings are related to the wider ideology that supports male dominance that they make sense.

## Epistemology

Doing sociology involves three interrelated aspects. First, you need to look at the *theoretical* issues surrounding your particular area of enquiry. Second, you need to consider different *techniques* for data collection. Third, you need to think about the *kind of knowledge* you are producing. This last aspect is known as *epistemology*. As this is a slightly complex idea we will say a little more about it.

Epistemology means the theory of the nature of knowledge. Put another way, epistemology is concerned with what does and does not count as knowledge. Without going into a detailed philosophical discussion we will outline the epistemological *perspectives* that underlie the three main approaches to social research.

### Positivism

Our taken-for-granted view of scientific knowledge is that science should be able to *explain* the world in terms of what *causes* the things and events that we observe. In other words, this view of knowledge assumes that we only know about something if we can explain what caused it. This epistemological perspective is usually known as *positivism*. The notion of cause and effect is thus at the heart of positivist methodology.

### Phenomenology

However, this is not the only way of knowing. There are other views of what constitutes knowledge in the social world. Another epistemological perspective is that we know social processes if we can *interpret* what they *mean*. People are not things, they think and reflect on what they do. The social world has meaning for social actors. Thus, to know the social world, it is necessary to discover these meanings. This epistemological perspective is usually known as *phenomenology*. Phenomenological methodology is thus more concerned with interpreting the world than explaining it.

### Critical

A third epistemological perspective argues that while it is important to see the social world as made up of reflective people it is also important to remember that they are constrained in what they do and how they think. To know the world we must look at how people are limited in what they do and think by the nature of the social world in which they live. To know the world we thus have to relate observable social phenomena to the wider *social context*. We can only know what something means if we understand how it has come about historically or how it relates to social structures.

For example, to understand a strike, it is necessary to do more than look for the cause of the strike or to explore the meanings of those on strike. It is necessary to relate the strike to the history of industrial relations, employment prospects, government policy, legal constraints, media campaigns and so on.

Marxists, for example, see the constraints on people as a result of class oppression which results from the capitalist process of production. The