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THREE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES
FOR QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism

◆ Thomas A. Schwandt

Labels in philosophy and cultural discourse have the character that Derrida ascribes to Plato's pharmakon: they can poison and kill, and they can remedy and cure. We need them to help identify a style, a temperament, a set of common concerns and emphases, or a vision that has determinate shape. But we must also be wary of the ways in which they can blind us or can reify what is fluid and changing.

Richard J. Bernstein, "What Is the Difference That Makes a Difference?" 1986

Qualitative inquiry is the name for a reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy.¹ The movement encompassed multiple epistemological, methodological, political, and ethical criticisms of social scientific research in fields and disciplines that favored experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, and survey research strategies. Immanent criticism of these methodologies within these disciplines and fields as well

as insights from external debates in philosophy of science and social science fueled the opposition.² Over the years, the movement has acquired a political as well as an intellectual place in the academy. It has its own journals, academic associations, conferences, and university positions, as well as the support of publishers, all of which have both sustained and, to some extent, created the movement. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to claim, given the influence that

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publishers exercise through the promotion and sales of ever more allegedly new and improved accounts of what qualitative inquiry is, that the movement at times looks more like an "industry."

Not surprisingly, considerable academic and professional politics are also entailed in the movement, particularly as it has drawn on intellectual developments in feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Current struggles over departmental organization, interdisciplinary alliances, what constitutes "legitimate" research, who controls the editorship of key journals, and so forth (compare, for example, Denzin, 1997, and Prus, 1996; see also Shea, 1998), in part, reflect the turmoil over what constitute the appropriate goals and means of human inquiry. Quarrels in university departments over the meaning and value of qualitative inquiry often reflect broader controversies in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, feminist studies, history, and literature about the purpose, values, and ethics of intellectual labor.

Thus qualitative inquiry is more comprehensible as a site or arena for social scientific criticism than as any particular kind of social theory, methodology, or philosophy. That site is a "home" for a wide variety of scholars who often are seriously at odds with one another but who share a general rejection of the blend of scientism, foundationalist epistemology, instrumental reasoning, and the philosophical anthropology of disengagement that has marked "mainstream" social science. Yet how one further characterizes the site depends, in part, on what one finds of interest there.³ For some researchers, the site is a place where a particular set of laudable virtues for social research are championed, such as fidelity to phenomena, respect for the life world, and attention to the fine-grained details of daily life. They are thus attracted to the fact that long-standing traditions of fieldwork research in sociology and anthropology have been revitalized and appropriated under the banner of "qualitative inquiry" while at the same time immanent criticism of those traditions has inspired new ways of thinking about the field-worker's interests, motivations, aims, obli-

gations, and texts. Others are attracted to the site as a place where debates about aims of the human sciences unfold and where issues of what it means to know the social world are explored. Still others may find social theory of greatest interest and hence look to the site for knowledge of the debate over the merits of symbolic interactionism, social systems theory, critical theory of society, feminist theory, and so forth. Finally, many current researchers seem to view the site as a place for experimentation with empirical methodologies and textual strategies inspired by postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking.

In this chapter, I focus on the site as an arena in which different epistemologies vie for attention as potential justifications for doing qualitative inquiry. I examine three of the philosophies that in various forms are assumed in the many books that explain the aims and methods of qualitative inquiry. Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism embrace different perspectives on the aim and practice of understanding human action, different ethical commitments, and different stances on methodological and epistemological issues of representation, validity, objectivity, and so forth.⁴ The chapter begins with an overview of each philosophy, and I indicate ways in which they are related to and at odds with one another. I then discuss several epistemological and ethical-political issues that arise from these philosophies and that characterize contemporary concerns about the purpose and justification of qualitative inquiry.

There is no denying that what follows is a Cook's tour of complicated philosophies that demand more detailed attention in their own right as well as in interaction. I apologize in advance for leaving the philosophically minded aghast at the incompleteness of the treatment and for encouraging the methodologically inclined to scurry to later chapters on tools. But I would be remiss were I not to add that the practice of social inquiry cannot be adequately defined as an atheoretical making that requires only methodological prowess. Social inquiry is a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity (like teaching) that in the doing transforms the very theory and aims that guide it. In other words, as one engages in the "practical" activities of generating

and interpreting data to answer questions about the meaning of what others are doing and saying and then transforming that understanding into public knowledge, one inevitably takes up "theoretical" concerns about what constitutes knowledge and how it is to be justified, about the nature and aim of social theorizing, and so forth. In sum, acting and thinking, practice and theory, are linked in a continuous process of critical reflection and transformation.

♦ Background: Part 1

Interpretivism and hermeneutics, generally characterized as the *Geisteswissenschaftliche* or *Verstehen* tradition in the human sciences, arose in the reactions of neo-Kantian German historians and sociologists (i.e., Dilthey, Rickert, Windleband, Simmel, Weber) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the then-dominant philosophy of positivism (and later, logical positivism). At the heart of the dispute was the claim that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) were fundamentally different in nature and purpose from the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Defenders of interpretivism argued that the human sciences aim to understand human action. Defenders of positivism and proponents of the unity of the sciences held the view that the purpose of any science (if it is indeed to be called a science) is to offer causal explanations of social, behavioral, and physical phenomena.

There was, of course, considerable debate among the neo-Kantians about the precise nature of the difference between the sciences. And to the present day, the issue of whether there is a critical distinction to be drawn between the natural and the human sciences on the basis of different aims—explanation (*Erklären*) versus understanding (*Verstehen*)—remains more or less unsettled.⁵ Although it is important to understand how apologists for the uniqueness of the human sciences link their respective philosophies to this issue, in the interest of space, I will forgo that examination here and focus directly on key features of the philosophies themselves.

I begin with a sketch of the interpretivist theory of human action and meaning and then show how philosophical hermeneutics offers a critique of this view and a different understanding of human inquiry.

♦ Interpretivist Philosophies

From an interpretivist point of view, what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful. Thus, to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action. To say that human action is meaningful is to claim either that it has a certain intentional content that indicates the kind of action it is and/or that what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs (Fay, 1996; Outhwaite, 1975). Because human action is understood in this way, one can determine that a wink is not a wink (to use Ryle's example popularized by Geertz), or that a smile can be interpreted as wry or loving, or that very different physical movements can all be interpreted as acts of supplication, or that the same physical movement of raising one's arm can be variously interpreted as voting, hailing a taxi, or asking for permission to speak, depending on the context and intentions of the actor.

To find meaning in an action, or to say one understands what a particular action means, requires that one interpret in a particular way what the actors are doing. This process of interpreting or understanding (of achieving *Verstehen*) is differentially represented, and therein lie some important differences in philosophies of interpretivism and between interpretivism and philosophical hermeneutics. These differences can perhaps be most easily grasped through a consideration of four ways of defining (theorizing) the notion of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*), three that constitute the interpretive tradition and a fourth that marks the distinction of philosophical hermeneutics from that tradition.

Preview

Empathic Identification

One way of defining the notion first appears in the earlier work of Wilhelm Dilthey and the *Lebensphilosophers*. Dilthey argued that to understand the meaning of human action requires grasping the subjective consciousness or intent of the actor from the inside (*Verstehen*) thus entails a kind of empathic identification with the actor. It is an act of psychological reenactment—getting inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on. This interpretivist stance (also called intentionalism) is explained in Collingwood's (1946/1961) account of what constitutes historical knowledge, and it lies at the heart of what is known as objectivist or conservative hermeneutics (e.g., Hirsch, 1976). Both approaches share the general idea that it is possible for the interpreter to transcend or break out of her or his historical circumstances in order to reproduce the meaning or intention of the actor. (I realize that introducing the term *hermeneutics* here is a bit confusing, given that I stated above that I wish to draw a distinction between interpretivist and hermeneutic philosophies. But *objectivist* hermeneutics shares the same epistemology as interpretivism, whereas *philosophical* hermeneutics, as I explain below, rejects this epistemology.)⁷

Whether it is possible to achieve interpretive understanding through a process of grasping an actors' intent is widely debated. Geertz (1976/1979), for example, argues that understanding comes more from the act of looking over the shoulders of actors and trying to figure out (both by observing and by conversing) what the actors think they are up to. Nonetheless, the idea of acquiring an "inside" understanding—the actors' definitions of the situation—is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry.

Phenomenological Sociology

A second way of making sense of the notion of interpretive understanding is found in the

work of phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists, including Cicourel and Garfinkel (I will address more recent developments in conversation analysis later). Influenced by the work of Alfred Schutz (1962, 1932/1967), phenomenological analysis is principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (the life world, or *Lebenswelt*) is constituted. The aim is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others' action as meaningful and to "reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social life-world" (Outhwaite, 1975, p. 91). Two conceptual tools often used in that reconstruction are indexicality and reflexivity (Potter, 1996). The former signifies that the meaning of a word or utterance is dependent on its context of use. The latter directs our attention to the fact that utterances are not just about something but are also doing something; an utterance is in part constitutive of a speech act. These two notions are part of the means whereby phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists come to understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted in conversation and interaction. (For a fuller discussion of this perspective, see Gubrium & Holstein, Chapter 18, this volume.)

Language Games

A third definition of interpretive understanding is represented in analysis of language approaches that take their inspiration from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, especially the work of Peter Winch (1958). From Wittgenstein, Winch borrowed the notion that there are many games played with language (testing hypotheses, giving orders, greeting, and so on), and he extended this idea to language games as constituted in different cultures. Each of these games has its own rules or criteria that make the game meaningful to its participants. Reasoning by analogy, we can say that human action, like speech, is an element in communication governed by rules. More simply, human action is meaningful by virtue of the system of meanings (in Wittgenstein's terms, the "lan-

impossible

