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THREE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES
FOR QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism

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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-

guage game") to which it belongs. Understanding those systems of meanings (institutional and cultural norms, action-constituting rules, and so on) is the goal of *Verstehen* (Giddens, 1993; Habermas, 1967/1988; Outhwaite, 1975).

Shared Features

These first three ways of conceiving of the notion of interpretive understanding constitute the tradition of interpretivism. All three share the following features: (a) They view human action as meaningful; (b) they evince an ethical commitment in the form of respect for and fidelity to the life world; and (c) from an epistemological point of view, they share the neo-Kantian desire to emphasize the contribution of human subjectivity (i.e., intention) to knowledge without thereby sacrificing the objectivity of knowledge. In other words, interpretivists argue that it is possible to understand the subjective meaning of action (grasping the actor's beliefs, desires, and so on) yet do so in an objective manner. The meaning that the interpreter reproduces or reconstructs is considered the original meaning of the action. So as not to misinterpret the original meaning, interpreters must employ some kind of method that allows them to step outside their historical frames of reference. Method, correctly employed, is a means that enables interpreters to claim a purely theoretical attitude as observers (Outhwaite, 1975). The theoretical attitude or the act of scientific contemplation at a distance requires the cognitive style of the disinterested observer (Schutz, 1962). This, of course, does not necessarily deny the fact that in order to understand the intersubjective meanings of human action, the inquirer may have to, as a methodological requirement, "participate" in the life worlds of others.

Interpretivism generally embraces two dimensions of *Verstehen* as explicated by Schutz (1962, 1932/1967). *Verstehen* is, on a primary level, "the name of a complex process by which all of us in our everyday life interpret the meaning of our own actions and those of others with whom we interact" (Bernstein, 1976, p. 139). Yet *Verstehen* is also "a method peculiar to the

social sciences" (Schutz, 1962, p. 57), a process by which the social scientist seeks to understand the primary process. Hence interpretivists aim to reconstruct the self-understandings of actors engaged in particular actions. And in so doing, they assume that the inquirer cannot claim that the ways actors make sense of their experience are irrelevant to social scientific understanding because actors' ways of making sense of their actions are constitutive of that action (Giddens, 1993; Outhwaite, 1975).

Interpretivist epistemologies can in one sense be characterized as hermeneutic because they emphasize that one must grasp the situation in which human actions make (or acquire) meaning in order to say one has an understanding of the particular action (Outhwaite, 1975). This view draws upon the familiar notion of the hermeneutic circle as a method or procedure unique to the human sciences: In order to understand the part (the specific sentence, utterance, or act), the inquirer must grasp the whole (the complex of intentions, beliefs, and desires or the text, institutional context, practice, form of life, language game, and so on), and vice versa. Geertz's (1976/1979) oft-cited description of the process of ethnographic understanding portrays this conception of the hermeneutic circle as

a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously. . . . Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another. (p. 239)

Garfinkel's (1967) claim about understanding how people make sense of their worlds is similar: "Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other" (p. 78).

Finally, interpretivism assumes an epistemological understanding of understanding (*Verstehen*). That is, it considers understanding to be

an intellectual process whereby a knower (the inquirer as subject) gains knowledge about an object (the meaning of human action). Accordingly, the notion of a hermeneutic circle of understanding is, as Bernstein (1983) explains,

"object" oriented, in the sense that it directs us to the texts, institutions, practices, or forms of life that we are seeking to understand. . . . No essential reference is made to the interpreter, to the individual who is engaged in the process of understanding and questioning, except insofar as he or she must have the insight, imagination, openness, and patience to acquire this art—an art achieved through practice. (p. 135)⁸

Thus, in interpretive traditions, the interpreter objectifies (i.e., stands over and against) that which is to be interpreted. And, in that sense, the interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process.

◆ Philosophical Hermeneutics

A fourth, and radically different, way of representing the notion of interpretive understanding is found in the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (1975, 1977, 1981, 1996) and Taylor (1985a, 1985b, 1995) inspired by the work of Heidegger.⁹ Let us begin with the premise that interpretivist philosophies, in general, define the role of the interpreter on the model of the exegete, that is, one who is engaged in a critical analysis or explanation of a text (or some human action) using the method of the hermeneutic circle.¹⁰ Echoing the point made by Bernstein, Kerdeman (1998) explains that

exegetical methodology plays the strange parts of a narrative [or some social action] off against the integrity of the narrative as whole until its strange passages are worked out or accounted for. An interpreter's self-understanding neither affects nor is affected by the negotiation of understanding. Indeed, insofar as interpreters and linguistic objects are presumed to be distinct, self-understanding is believed to bias and distort successful interpretation. (p. 251; see also Gadamer, 1981, pp. 98-101)

Both the phenomenological observer and the linguistic analyst generally claim this role of uninvolved observer.¹¹ The understanding that they acquire of some particular social action (or text) is exclusively reproductive and ought to be judged on the grounds of whether or not it is an accurate, correct, valid representation of that action and its meaning.

In several ways, philosophical hermeneutics challenges this classic epistemological (or, more generally, Cartesian) picture of the interpreter's task and the kind of understanding that he or she "produces." First, broadly conceived as a philosophical program, the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Taylor rejects the interpretivist view "that hermeneutics is an art or technique of understanding, the purpose of which is to construct a methodological foundation for the human sciences" (Grondin, 1994, p. 109). Philosophical hermeneutics argues that understanding is not, in the first instance, a procedure- or rule-governed undertaking; rather, it is a very condition of being human. Understanding is interpretation. As Gadamer (1970) explains, understanding is not "an isolated activity of human beings but a basic structure of our experience of life. We are always taking something as something. That is the primordial givenness of our world orientation, and we cannot reduce it to anything simpler or more immediate" (p. 87).

Second, in the act of interpreting (of "taking something as something"), sociohistorically inherited bias or prejudice is not regarded as a characteristic or attribute that an interpreter must strive to get rid of or manage in order to come to a "clear" understanding. To believe this is possible is to assume that the traditions and associated prejudgments that shape our efforts to understand are easily under our control and can be set aside at will. But philosophical hermeneutics argues that tradition is not something that is external, objective, and past—something from which we can free and distance ourselves (Gadamer, 1975). Rather, as Gallagher (1992) explains, tradition is "a living force that enters into all understanding" (p. 87), and, "despite the fact that traditions operate for the most part behind our backs, they are already there, ahead of us, conditioning our interpretations" (p. 91).

Define for class

Great

wonderful

Furthermore, because traditions "shape what we are and how we understand the world, the attempt to step outside of the process of tradition would be like trying to step outside of our own skins" (p. 87).

Thus reaching an understanding is not a matter of setting aside, escaping, managing, or tracking one's own standpoint, prejudgments, biases, or prejudices. On the contrary, understanding requires the engagement of one's biases.¹² As Garrison (1996) explains, prejudices are the very kinds of prejudgments "necessary to make our way, however tentatively, in everyday thought, conversation, and action. . . . The point is not to free ourselves of all prejudice, but to examine our historically inherited and unreflectively held prejudices and alter those that disable our efforts to understand others, and ourselves" (p. 434). The fact that we "belong" to tradition and that tradition in some sense governs interpretation does not mean that we merely reenact the biases of tradition in our interpretation. Although preconceptions, prejudices, or prejudgments suggest the initial conceptions that an interpreter brings to the interpretation of an object or another person, the interpreter risks those prejudices in the encounter with what is to be interpreted.

(Third) only in a dialogical encounter with what is not understood, with what is alien, with what makes a claim upon us, can we open ourselves to risking and testing our preconceptions and prejudices (Bernstein, 1983). Understanding is participative, conversational, and dialogic. It is always bound up with language and is achieved only through a logic of question and answer (Bernstein, 1983; Grondin, 1994; Taylor, 1991).¹³ Moreover, understanding is something that is produced in that dialogue, not something reproduced by an interpreter through an analysis of that which he or she seeks to understand. The meaning one seeks in "making sense" of a social action or text is temporal and processive and always coming into being in the specific occasion of understanding (Aylesworth, 1991; Bernstein, 1983; Gadamer, 1975, p. 419).

This different conception of meaning signifies a radical departure from the interpretivist

idea that human action has meaning and that that meaning is in principle determinable or decidable by the interpreter. Philosophical hermeneutics has a nonobjectivist view of meaning: "The text [or human action] is not an 'object out there' independent of its interpretations and capable of serving as an arbiter of their correctness" (Connolly & Keutner, 1998, p. 17). Grondin (1994) notes that "in terms of its form, understanding is less like grasping a content, a noetic meaning, than like engaging in a dialogue" (p. 117).¹⁴ In other words, meaning is negotiated mutually in the act of interpretation; it is not simply discovered.

In this sense, philosophical hermeneutics opposes a naïve realism or objectivism with respect to meaning and can be said to endorse the conclusion that there is never a finally correct interpretation. This is a view held by some constructivists as well, yet philosophical hermeneutics sees meaning not necessarily as constructed (i.e., created, assembled) but as negotiated (i.e., a matter of coming to terms). Bernstein (1983) summarizes Gadamer's notion of the processive, open, anticipatory character of the coming into being of meaning:

We are always understanding and interpreting in light of our anticipatory prejudgments and prejudices, which are themselves changing in the course of history. That is why Gadamer tells us that to understand is always to understand differently. But this does not mean that our interpretations are arbitrary and distortive. We should always aim at a correct understanding of what the "things themselves" [the objects of our interpretation] say. But what the "things themselves" say will be different in light of our changing horizons and the different questions we learn to ask. Such analysis of the ongoing and open character of all understanding and interpretation can be construed as distortive only if we assume that a text possesses some meaning in itself that can be isolated from our prejudgments. (p. 139)

Finally, as is suggested in what has been said above, the kind of understanding that results from the encounter is always at once a kind of "application." In other words, in the act of understanding there are not two separate steps—first, acquiring understanding; second, applying that

Great

So, what to do?

'Risks'?

Great idea

Nice

More Eva

Great

understanding. Rather, understanding is itself a kind of practical experience in and of the world that, in part, constitutes the kinds of persons that we are in the world. Understanding is "lived" or existential. Gadamer (1981) explains this in the following way:

Understanding, like action, always remains a risk and never leaves room for the simple application of a general knowledge of rules to the statements or texts to be understood. Furthermore where it is successful, understanding means a growth in inner awareness, which as a new experience enters into the texture of our own mental experience. Understanding is an adventure and, like any other adventure is dangerous. . . . But . . . [i]t is capable of contributing in a special way to the broadening of our human experiences, our self-knowledge, and our horizon, for everything understanding mediates is mediated along with ourselves. (pp. 109-110)

A focus on understanding as a kind of moral-political knowledge that is at once embodied, engaged (and hence "interested"), and concerned with practical choice is a central element in the hermeneutic philosophies that draw, at least in part, on Gadamer and Heidegger (e.g., Dunne, Gallagher, Smith, and Taylor).¹⁵

Philosophical hermeneutics is not a methodology for "solving problems" of misunderstanding or problems concerned with the correct meaning of human action. Gadamer (1975) has repeatedly emphasized that the work of hermeneutics "is not to develop a procedure of understanding but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But these conditions are not of the nature of a 'procedure' or a method which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text" (p. 263). The goal of philosophical hermeneutics is philosophical—that is, to understand what is involved in the process of understanding itself (Madison, 1991).

Not a
Method,
but a
Description
of how
we
I-Step.

◆ Background: Part 2

Philosophical hermeneutics and social constructionist philosophies (like deconstructionist, crit-

ical theory, some feminist, and neopragmatic approaches) have their antecedents in the broad movement away from an empiricist, logical atomistic, designative, representational account of meaning and knowledge.¹⁶ The philosophies of logical positivism and logical empiricism were principally concerned with the rational reconstruction of scientific knowledge by means of the semantic and syntactic analysis of two kinds of scientific statements (statements that explain, i.e., theories and hypotheses, and statements that describe, i.e., observations). In this analysis, social, cultural, and historical dimensions of understanding were regarded as extrascientific and hence irrelevant to any valid epistemological account of what constitutes genuine scientific knowledge and its justification. Logical empiricism worked from a conception of knowledge as correct representation of an independent reality and was (is) almost exclusively interested in the issue of establishing the validity of scientific knowledge claims.

In his essay "Overcoming Epistemology," Taylor (1987) argues that logical empiricism (or, more generally, any foundationalist epistemology) draws its strength from an interlocking set of assumptions about meaning, knowledge, language, and self. It embraces a philosophy of language that can be characterized broadly as empiricist and atomistic in that it assumes (a) that the meanings of words or sentences are explained by their relations to things or states of affairs in the world (in short, a designative view of language), (b) that language must exhibit a logical structure (syntax) that prescribes permissible relations among terms and sentences, and (c) that we ought not conflate or confuse the descriptive and evaluative functions of language, lest we "allow language that is really just the expression of a particular cultural or moral code to gain the appearance of objectively describing the world" (Smith, 1997, pp. 11-12).

The epistemology supported by this philosophy of language is that of pictorial description or conceptual representation of an external reality. Language and reason are understood as instruments of control in discovering and ordering the reality of the world (Taylor, 1985a). Further, the locus of representation is the autonomous, dis-

