

# Interpretivism



## Philosophy of Social Science

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# Interpretivism

“a methodological approach to social scientific study informed by such philosophies as phenomenology and hermeneutics, which **focuses on how humans make meaning of their worlds**”

# A brief history

## Foundational thinking

### Hermeneutics

Rules/method of interpretation

### Phenomenology

How humans make meaning of situations interactions and things

## Influential thinkers

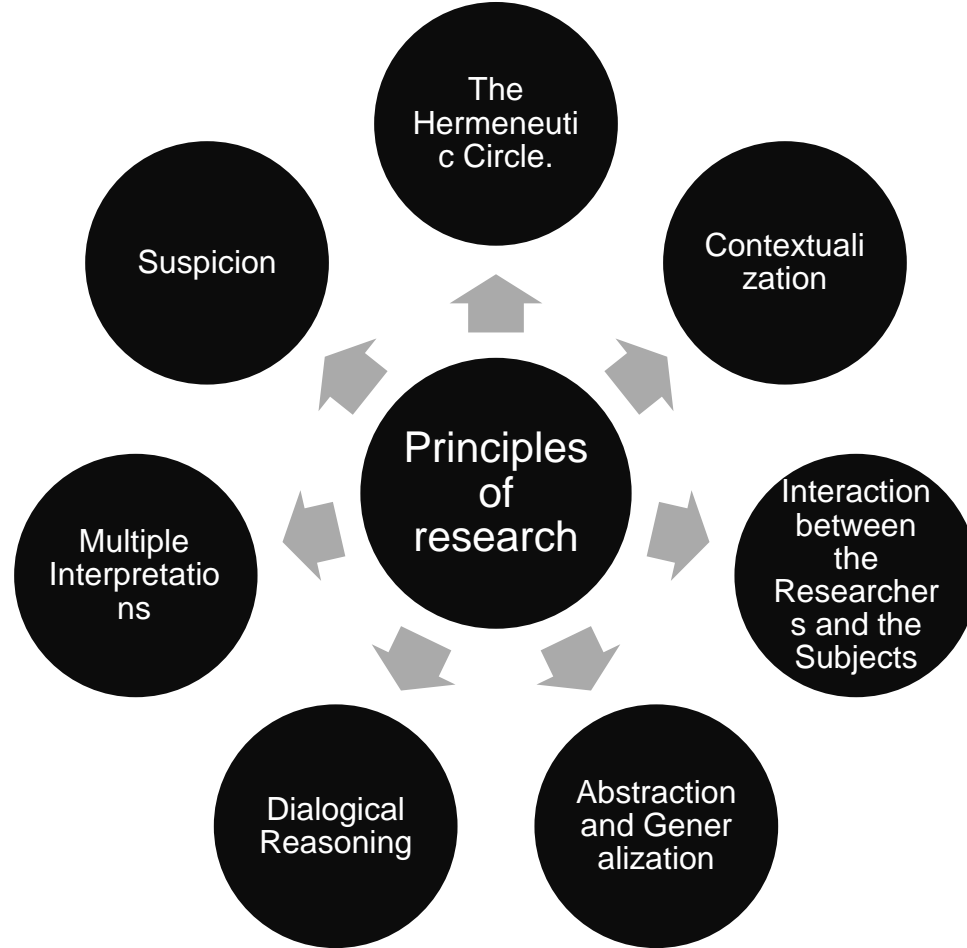
### Max Weber (1864–1920)

- Social phenomena can be understood by typical models of human actions in typical situations
- The model can be tested using hypothesis

Lewis-Beck, M. S., Bryman, A., & Futing Liao, T. (2004). Interpretivism. In *The SAGE encyclopedia of social science research methods* (pp. 509-510). Sage Publications, Inc., <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n442>

# Assumptions

- Knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors
- Inquiry is value-laden, and findings are subjective



**Interpretivism is not a unified  
and unequivocal tradition**

# Interpretivism groups together several, diverse approaches

## Hermeneutics

- The philosophy of interpretation and understanding

## Phenomenology

- Seeks to understand the world through directly experiencing the phenomena within it

## Constructivism

- People actively construct or make their own knowledge and reality is determined by learners experience

# Phenomenology

- Edmund Husserl: The Idea of Phenomenology
- Other important philosophers: Jean-Paul Sartre, Max Scheler, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Alfred Schutz, Edith Stein
- The primary objective is direct investigation and description of phenomena
  - How the world is experienced pre-reflectively so that we don't conceptualize, theorize, categorize or reflect on world
- Phenomenological reduction
- Ethnography falls into this category
  - Studying a phenomenon within the context of its culture



# Hermeneutics

- Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*
  - Interpretation essential to the human condition
- Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*
  - A dialog to understand a cultural practice rather than unearthing of a pre-existing meaning
- **Now used to understand human action in a context**
  - Language: language can both limit and make possible what people can say
  - Context: human behavior and ideas must be understood in context, rather than in isolation

# Constructivism

## A theory in education

- Jean Piaget often seen as the one who formalized constructivism
  - Knowledge constructed through accommodation and assimilation
- Knowledge is constructed, personal and unique
- Learning (how knowledge is formed) is also a process
- Contextual refers to how our beliefs, existing knowledge, current situation effects how we understand knowledge (or learn)
- Interaction (discussions) and activities, being active is essential

**All approaches agree on the  
rejection of objectivism**

# *Investigate, interpret and describe social realities*

## **Interpretivism**

Subjective

Focus on validity

Predictions not important

Qualitative methods

Small sample-size

High time and resource cost

Individual point of view



# Criticism and external competition

# The positivist critique

*“Social science is an example of a science which is not a science. They follow the forms. You gather data, you do so and so and so forth, but they don’t get any laws, they haven’t found out anything.”*

Richard Feynman



# Comparison between Positivism and Interpretivism

<b>CRITERION</b>	<b>POSITIVISM</b>	<b>INTERPRETIVISM</b>
<b>Essence</b>	Confirmation	Generation
<b>Conception of reality</b>	External reality	Contextual reality
<b>Conception of knowledge</b>	Absolutism	Subjectivism
<b>Conception of truth</b>	Reductionism	Holistic and emancipatory view
<b>Conception of cognition</b>	Empiricism, rationalism	Interactive knowledge creation
<b>Methodology</b>	Quantitative method Hypothesis driver	Qualitative method Research-question driven
<b>Concept of rigor</b>	Reproducibility	Transferability

# The paradigm war

## Positivism

- Objective
- Focus on reliability
- Predictive
- Large sample-size
- Often more cost-effective
- Societal point of view

## Interpretivism

- Subjective
- Focus on validity
- Predictions not important
- Small sample-size
- High time and resource cost
- Individual point of view



# Somewhere in between?



# Combined methods

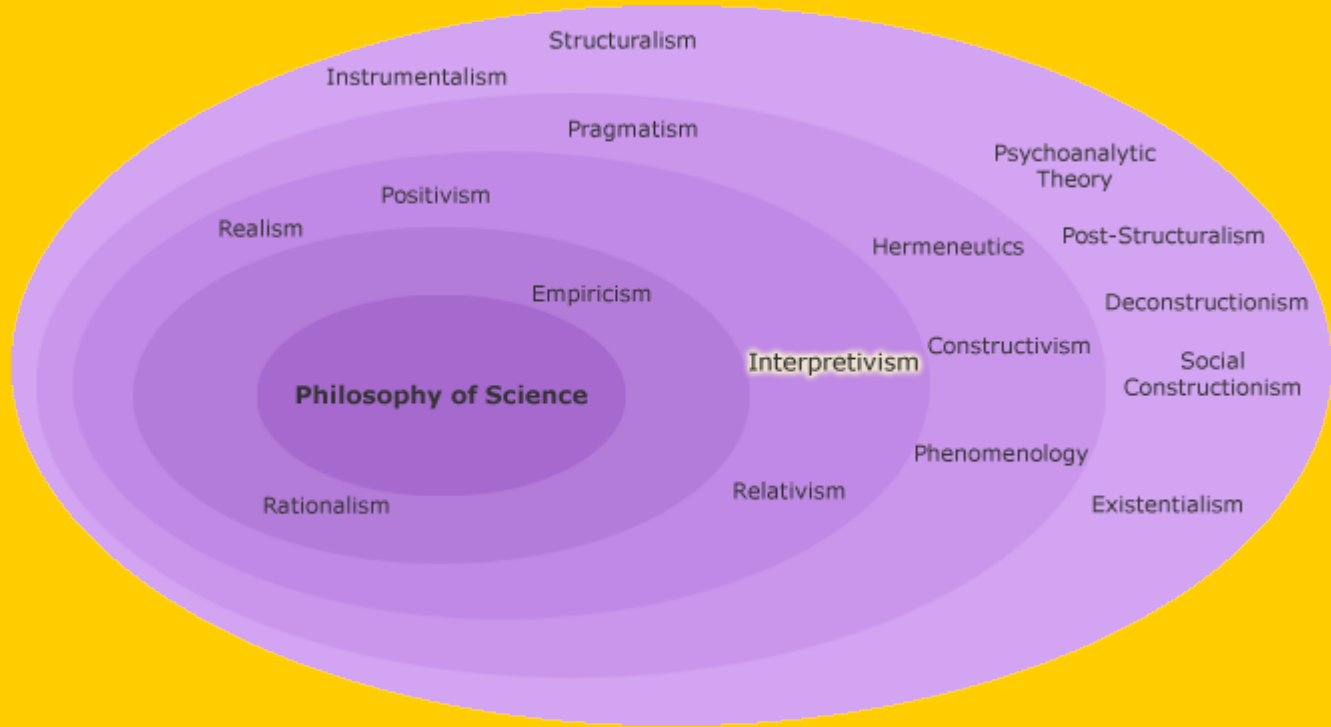
- Considering the low predictive power of interpretivism, managers often see the method as irrelevant. However, a positivist approach might also fail to generate insight as it often only describes the problem without offering solutions. Therefore, a combination of the two is needed. (Uduma & Waribugo, 2015)
- At the same time, the “pragmatic philosophy” of combined methods research gives a conflicting suggestion that research can be objective without an objective reality. (Nudzor, 2009)

# Critical theory & Frankfurt school

- Focus on blaming and changing the society rather than understanding subjective experiences.
- Theory is critical when it seeks “*to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.*”  
Max Horkheimer
- Concerned about the rise of “mass culture”.



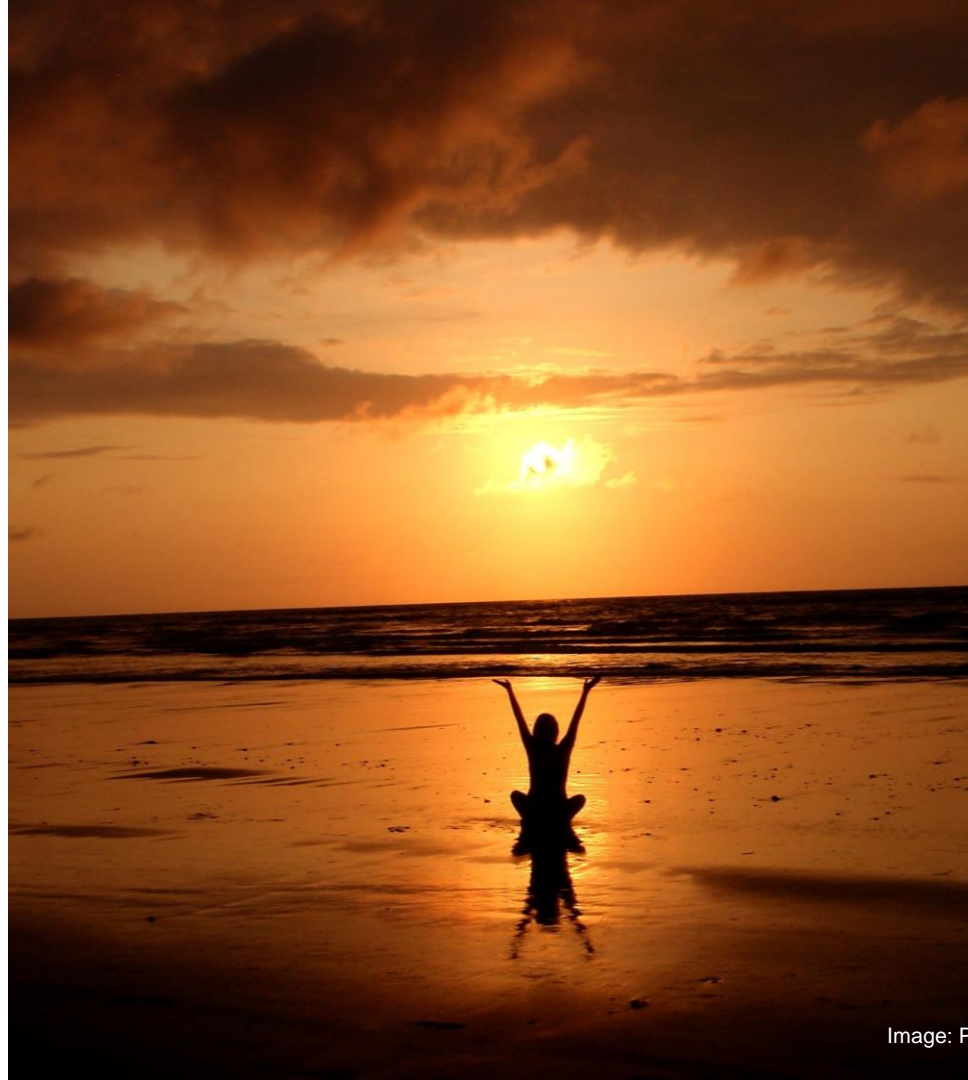
# Big picture



# Integrating subjective experience to research

*“Rather than seeking to determine law-like regularities, the interpretivists seek to determine motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time- and context-bound.”*

Hudson and Ozanne (1988), Alternative Ways of Seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research



# Bigger picture

*“It is concluded that an appropriate methodological approach to researching social life is one which gives pre-eminence first and foremost to the research purpose”*

Nudzor (2009), A critical commentary on combined methods approach to researching educational and social issues



# Discussion

Could you be affected by bias?

Pros and cons of interpretive research for a PhD student?

Are you aware of any principles of interpretivism in your research? Which one and how does it affect your research?

# Thank you



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