

Interpretivism in Aiding Our Understanding of the Contemporary Social World

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically discuss the extent of interpretivism to understand the contemporary social world. This paper firstly highlights the roots of interpretivism which can be traced back in the ancient history of philosophy. It then discusses the concept of interpretivism and gives a critical commentary on the Weber's construction of ideal types to help explore the contemporary social world. The paper then further discusses the concept of "verstehen" and explains how it can add to our understanding of the social world phenomena. Following this analysis and tackling some philosophical debate, finally, this theoretical paper confirms that interpretivism has influenced the development of the social science and has helped our understanding of the contemporary social world to a great extent.

Keywords

Interpretivism, Philosophy, Social Science, Verstehen

1. Introduction

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928).

Recognition of the subjective component in human action has had a long history in understanding the social world, and a far longer history before sociologists arrived on the historical scene (Merton, 1995). Historically, this recognition could be traced back in the thoughts of the ancient Greek stoic philosopher and sociologist Epictetus who stated that, "it is not actions that alarms or disturbs man, but it is their opinions and fancies about actions" (Merton, 1995). This notion has been in continuation since then by the philosophers and sociologists in understanding and interpreting the social world. For instance, in the early eighteenth century, Schopenhauer observed that people became happy or unhappy because of the way they look at things, or for what things were for them; not because of what things objectively and actually were (Payne, 1974). In the early 19th century, through

the establishment of Thomas Theorem quoted above, William Isaac Thomas further validated Schopenhauer's thought. Similarly, Mead (1936) agreed to Thomas Theorem and claimed that if a thing was not recognized as true, then it did not function as true in the community. Thus, this tapestry of studying the social world through a subjective thought and ideas confirms the significance of interpretivism which is to see the world through the eyes of the people being studied, allowing them multiple perspectives of reality, rather than the "one reality" of positivism (Greener, 2008).

2. Understanding Interpretivism

Interpretivism refers to the approaches which emphasise the meaningful nature of people's character and participation in both social and cultural life (Elster, 2007; Walsham, 1995). It denotes that the methods of the research which adopt the position that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors, and so it distinctively rules out the methods of natural science (Eliaeson, 2002; McIntosh, 1997). It has its roots in the philosophical traditions of hermeneutics and phenomenology, and the German sociologist Max Weber is generally credited with being the central influence. Interpretivists look for meanings and motives behind people's actions like: behaviour and interactions with others in the society and culture (Whitley, 1984). Similarly, cultures can be comprehended by studying people's ideas, thinking, and the meanings that are important to them (Boas, 1995). This school of thought of cultural study through human actions was founded by Franz Boas in his modern anthropological conception. Boas viewed culture as an integrated system of symbols, ideas and values that should be studied as a working system, an organic whole where he observed people's mental content as being judgement minded in relation to individuals (Kuper, 1999; Stocking, 1968). Boas's thought is reflected in anti-positivism or interpretivism and understanding *verstehen* sociology in the social science study advocated by Max Weber and Georg Simmel. In the view of interpretivism, it is argued that value free data cannot be obtained, since the enquirers use their own preconceptions in order to guide the process of enquiry, and furthermore, the researcher interacts with the human subjects of the enquiry, changing the perceptions of both parties (Walsham, 1995). However, Lin (1998) explained that interpretivist researchers not only look for the presence or absence of a causal relationship, but also the specific ways in which it is manifested and the context in which it occurs. Thus, these researchers are able to go beyond from what has occurred to see how it has occurred (Kelliher, 2005; Lin, 1998).

3. Sociology and Science

Interestingly, a profound contradiction can be observed among the historians and philosophers in acknowledging or rejecting sociology as a science similar to natural science. Many thinkers remained committed to this view of the unity of these two sciences, since the purpose of any science is to offer causal explanations of social, behavioural, and physical phenomena (Travers, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Durkheim's (1970) phenomenal study of suicide can be mentioned in support of this viewpoint. Although not an absolute positivist, but Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist shares some important features in common with other concurrent sociologists of his time. In his classic work on suicide, he proved how sociology must become a science similar to the natural science and employ quantitative methods in making causal connections between variables in the same way as the natural science. In contrast, considerable level of philosophers and sociologists fiercely argued that there are fundamental differences in nature and purpose of social and natural sciences, and the former should never emulate the later (Travers, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). During the early 19th century, the famous study of Protestant ethics and capitalism by Weber (2002, 2003) illustrated the dominance of interpretive approaches in researching the social world. He believed that sociology is a science which must address the meaningful character of social actions through *verstehen* or understanding, rather than the quantitative techniques used by natural scientists (Weber, 2003).

However, until the present time, the issue of whether there is a critical distinction to be drawn between the social and natural sciences on the basis of *verstehen* [understanding] and "erklären" [explanation] remains unsettled (Tully, 1994; Hiley, Bohman, & Shusterman, 1991). Heath and Devine (1999) explained the distinction between these two aims and said that, positivist ideology aligns itself with a particular view of the mechanisms and assumptions of the natural sciences, underpinned by a belief of only that which is grounded in the observable can count as valid knowledge. The 18th century French philosopher Auguste Comte is generally recognised as the inventor of both positivism and sociology. Comte was concerned about the fact that, accounts of human

mental and social life were languishing in the pre-scientific, metaphysical stage, when astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, all, he argued, arrived at the scientific stage. So, he thought the social sciences should also concentrate on scientific laws rather than contemplation, and for that he wanted to build a methodology based on facts rather than assumption (Benton & Craib, 2001). In contrast, interpretivist tradition stresses the dynamic, constructed and evolving nature of social reality and rejects the positivist notion of knowledge being grounded in the objective and tangible, instead, it seeks to understand social reality through the eyes of those being studied (Heath & Devine, 1999).

As a result, many interpretivists by following Max Weber, adopt a non-competitive, explicatory stance in studying the contemporary social world. On the other side, affirming Durkheim, critical theorists believe their epistemological assumptions are superior and more scientific to understand the social world (Travers, 2008). Interestingly, Whitley (1984) explained that, the inherent meaningfulness of social reality renders actors' descriptions and accounts ontologically and epistemologically prior to those of researchers and the internally related nature of social meanings renders futile any attempts at explaining social events by external causes. Thus, Whitley rejected the arguments that support the possibility of a social science, which is comparable with the natural science.

Accordingly, this discussion leads to another point of access and accommodating "meaning" in the philosophy of the social science. In contemporary time, social research is considered as an important source of knowledge, and in most nations official sources of information are collected on most aspects of the peoples' social and economic life. Social scientists are assigned to analyse and interpret these vast amounts of information as well as to give advice on policy implications. Winch (1958) suggested that, the social science is simply a branch of that part of the philosophy, which is concerned with conceptual clarification. This is because it studies the circumstances which are social actions and these actions are described through the meaning that agents assign to them (Wilson, 1970). Different meanings imply different actions and the use of meanings is guided by rules which are mutually internally related and tied to particular "forms of life" (Whitley, 1984). The description and meaning of an act is the correct application of rules governing the use of concepts; to understand an act is to interpret correctly its meaning in a certain form of life (Whitley, 1984). Therefore, Clegg (1975) commented that, explanation through external causal relations is therefore impossible in the social sciences, and so, laws and theories similar to natural science cannot be formulated in a meaningful way in the social sciences.

4. Interpretivism and Research Methodology

Interpretivism, by its nature promotes the value of qualitative data in pursuit of knowledge (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). In essence, this philosophical and research paradigm is concerned with the uniqueness of a particular situation, contributing to the underlying pursuit of contextual depth (Myers, 1997). However, while interpretive research is recognised for its value in providing contextual depth, results are often criticised in terms of validity, reliability and generalisability (Perry, 1998; Eisenhardt, 1989). So, to avoid this philosophically driven criticism, a different proposition to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, sometimes termed as "triangulation", in researching the social world is suggested by a handful of researchers (Silverman, 2004; Hammersley, 2003). For example, Denzin (1970) stated that multiple and independent methods should, if reaching the same conclusions, have greater reliability than a single methodological approach to a problem. In contrast, Bryman (2006, 2007) examined the rationales given for employing an integration of the two research methods and argued that, the synthesis and triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods do not always correspond and researchers need to be cautious in doing such researches. However, Layder (1994) argued that the humanistic approach, common to interpretivism epistemology, gives primacy to action over structure and therefore it becomes the goal of the qualitative researchers to try and see things from the perspective of the human actors. So, using an inductive strategy, qualitative research purposes to examine the whole scenario in a natural setting, to get the ideas and feelings of those being interviewed or observed (Layder, 1994). Furthermore, in the realm of Weber's interpretive sociology as the science that combines "verstehen" and causal analysis, the history of interpretivist approach in understanding the social world has attracted more and more interest, and Weber's position was of great interest because of his integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Kuckartz, 1991). This integration is shown in his theoretical concept of interpretive sociology as the science that combines verstehen and casual analysis.

5. Understanding “Verstehen”

To understand the contemporary social world from an interpretivist point of view, it is important to explain how *verstehen* distinguishes human/social action from the movement of physical objects. It is similarly necessary to know how can people access and accommodate “meaning”? *Verstehen* is a German term that means to understand, perceive, know, and comprehend the nature and significance of a phenomenon (Elwell, 1996). Interpretivists use this to comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by people. Weber used the term to refer to the social scientist’s attempt to understand both the intention and the context of human action. According to Schwandt (2005), to understand a particular social action the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action, that is to say, what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs (Fay, 1996; Outhwaite, 1975). Dilthey (1991) argued that, to understand the meaning of human action requires grasping the subjective consciousness of the actor from the inside. Accordingly, to say that one understands what a particular action means or to find the meaning in an action requires that one interpret in a particular way what the actors are doing (Schwandt, 2005). This process of understanding or interpreting is considered as achieving *verstehen*, which thus entails a kind of empathic identification with the actor. Similarly, Winch (1958) based on Wittgenstein’s “language game” (cited in Biletzki & Matar, 2014) added that, human action is meaningful by virtue of the system of meanings of the “language game” to which it belongs. So, understanding those systems of meanings is the goal of *verstehen* (Giddens, 1993).

From this discussion, it can be summarised that, *verstehen*, firstly, represents a complex process by which people interpret the meaning of their actions in their everyday life, and those of others with whom they interact (Bernstein, 1976); and secondly, it is a process by which the social scientists seek to understand the primary process, that is, the aim of interpretivists to reconstruct the self-understandings of actors engaged in particular actions (Schutz, 1967). And in doing so, they assume that the inquirer cannot claim that the ways actor make sense to their experiences are irrelevant to social scientific understanding, because actors’ ways of making sense of their actions are constitutive of that action (Giddens, 1993; Outhwaite, 1975).

6. The “Ideal Type”

The advocates of positivism could not justify their definition of real world based on observation. They ignored the fact that, if there are (and there must be) hidden patterns, underlying rule formations, which govern the observed parts of reality, and whose exploration can contribute to explaining these observed parts, then this should also be a legitimate area of social research. It is because of these limitations of positivist approaches to social research, another approach becomes more reasonable. In order to see aspects of the contemporary social world in a clearer and more systematic way, an abstract model was created by Weber to be used as a standard of comparison (Weber, 1949). An “ideal type” is analytical construct that serves as a measuring scale for social observers to determine the extent to which concrete social institutions are similar and how they differ from some defined measure (Coser, 1977; Aron, 1970). Weber aimed to employ ideal-type descriptions in order to investigate social difference. For example, in the early nineteenth century, he explored different types of religion by contrasting the ideal description of the followers of those religions (Weber, 1967, 2007). There can be an ideal religious sect, ideal type dictatorship, and so on, however, none of which may be ideal in the colloquial sense of the term (Gerth & Mills, 1946). This ideal type provides the basic method for historical comparative study. It is not meant to refer to the best or to some moral ideal, but rather to typical or “logically consistent” features of social institution or behaviours (Elwell, 1996). As highlighted by Gerth and Mills (1946: p. 60) “As general concepts, ideal types are tools with which Weber prepares the descriptive materials of world history for comparative analysis.”

Nevertheless, there exist a considerable confusion within the social sciences regarding the nature and purpose of ideal-type constructions and their relationship to the real world. Weber’s ideal type has been widely criticised as incapable of inadequately capturing empirical reality, internally inconsistent and inappropriate juxtaposed to explore the social world (Muzelēs, 2009; Lamond, 1990). Colombo (2006) highlighted that, while an ideal type is created from observations made in the real world, nothing in reality precisely fits that ideal-type construction. For example, Durkheim’s (1970) study found an apparent correlation between a particular religion and a high suicide rate, where he counted the sets of observable social facts to produce statistical data in his study of the suicide rate and membership of different religions. Similarly, many sociologists noted a correlation between social and parenting factors affecting criminal offence rates (Stroud, 2008; Turner, 2007). Here, even though these

research evidences may be used to generate an ideal-type description of the causes of crime, this framework only exists as an abstract, exaggerated “typical” model to help us explain the behaviour of criminals; it is unlikely that individuals found in violation of the criminal law will actually conform to all of these attributes (Colombo, Bendelow, Fulford, & Williams, 2003). Similarly, Colombo et al. (2003) pointed that, an ideal type is an analytical tool and not an ethical ideal. This means, there are no value judgements attached to the elements used to describe a particular phenomenon, Freund (1969), Rogers (1969), and Winch (1958) further highlighted that any ideal-type formations must be subjectively adequate and objectively possible in the sense that even though the formations are not be found to exactly replicate reality, they are at the very least required to approximate what is going on. Accordingly, the elements defined as being ideal must be understandable in terms of the subjective views of the individual (Colombo et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that, some sociologists argued that employing ideal types in this way, that is, to generate a “meaningful understanding” of specific issues, is inappropriate and that they should only be used in the development of general concepts and theories (Winch, 1958).

In contrast, several researchers successfully demonstrated that the construction of ideal types help to explore the social world. Kuckartz (1991) commented that, majority researchers who opposed Weber’s ideal types, actually mislead this model with his sociological methodology, and by doing so they failed to ignore the exceptional aspects of his approach. Lamond (1990) agreed to this and claimed that much of these criticisms can be disregarded as irrelevant insofar, as it has been largely based on a misinterpretation of Weber’s conceptions. Weber was a historical sociologist, concerned with the distinctive features of society, who utilised the comparative method as an aid to the explanation and who developed the ideal type to assist in achieving that end (Albrow 1990; Lomond, 1990). It is, therefore, irrational for organisation theorists to use his means to their ends.

So, from the above discussion, it can be claimed that, interpretivism assumes an epistemological interpretation of “understanding” or *verstehen*. That is, it considers understanding to be an intellectual process whereby a subject—the knower as the inquirer—gains knowledge about the issues of the contemporary social world which constitute the meaning of human actions—an object. Thus, Schwandt (2005) commented that, in interpretivism, the interpreter objectifies that which is to be interpreted, and, in that sense, the interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process.

7. Conclusion

“To understand is always to understand differently” (Gadamer, 1970: p. 87).

Gadamer (1970) claimed that, understanding was not an isolated activity of human beings but a basic structure of people’s experience of life. This means, interpretivist researchers understand and interpret the social world in light of their anticipatory prejudgement and prejudices, which are themselves changing in the course of history (Gadamer, 1970). But, this does not mean that the interpretations are arbitrary and distortive. Bernstein (1983) commented that, interpretivist researchers always aimed at a correct understanding of what the objects of their interpretation said. However, what “things themselves” say will be different in light of the changing research horizons and the different questions researchers learn to ask. So, if it is believed that a text possesses some meaning in itself that can be isolated from human prejudgements, only then the *verstehen* and interpretation of “meaning” can be construed as distortive (Bernstein, 1983).

This paper discusses how interpretivism aids our understanding of the contemporary social world. The paper firstly discusses the concept of interpretivism and then critically analyses interpretivism in light of different philosophical standpoints of social sciences and natural sciences. In order to explore the issues of the contemporary social world, the essay then highlights Weber’s construction of ideal types, and explains *verstehen*, and “meaning”. In conclusion, the paper confirms that, interpretivism is a dominant philosophical approach that helps our understanding of the social world by meaningful interpretations of the world inhabit by people, which they have already interpreted by the meanings they produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together.

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