

section explores the major paradigms and philosophical perspectives of social science, examining how they differ and how they have evolved, as well as the ethical and reflexive considerations that accompany these paradigmatic choices.

Philosophical Foundations: Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Before delving into specific paradigms, it is important to clarify the core philosophical foundations that underlie them. As noted, ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of reality: whether there is a single, objective reality “out there” to be discovered, or multiple realities constructed by human minds and social contexts. A researcher with a *realist ontology* assumes an external reality exists independent of our perceptions, whereas a *relativist* or *constructivist ontology* holds that reality is subjective or socially constructed (Pretorius, 2024). Epistemology concerns how knowledge is created and what counts as valid knowledge. For instance, an *objectivist epistemology* aligns with the idea that through the right methods (such as scientific measurement), we can obtain true knowledge about an objective reality. In contrast, a *subjectivist* or *interpretivist epistemology* posits that knowledge is interwoven with the knower’s perspectives – reality can only be known through interpretations, which are influenced by context and the researcher’s own standpoint. Some epistemologies (especially in critical and pragmatist paradigms) also acknowledge that knowledge is *partial* and evolving: no single study can grasp all facets of a phenomenon, especially one involving human society, and what we know is often contingent on cultural or historical contexts. Axiology deals with the role of values in research. Traditional scientific doctrine often strove for value-neutrality, suggesting research should be *value-free*. However, many paradigms (and contemporary scholars) argue that research is inherently *value-laden*, meaning the researcher’s values, and the values of the society, inevitably influence what is studied and how (Halperin & Heath, 2020). For example, choices about research topics, the interpretation of data, or the application of findings reflect ethical and value considerations. Axiology prompts researchers to ask whether and how they should incorporate their values or the values of participants into the research process, and whether research should aim not just to understand the world but also to change it in line with moral or social justice goals.

Each social science paradigm can be characterized by a particular combination of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. By articulating these philosophical foundations, researchers clarify their stance: Are they seeking objective, generalizable truths or contextual, nuanced understandings? Do they believe the social world can be studied with the same detachment as the natural world, or is the researcher an integral part of the knowledge co-creation? Answering these questions situates one’s work within a paradigmatic tradition. Below, we explore the major paradigms in social science, highlighting their philosophical assumptions and how they inform research practice.

Positivism: Objective Reality and Empirical Inquiry

Positivism has historically been the dominant paradigm in social science, especially during the 19th and much of the 20th century. Grounded in a *realist ontology* and *objectivist epistemology*, positivism asserts that there is a single, tangible social reality that can be observed, measured, and known through empirical inquiry and logical reasoning. In the positivist view, the role of the researcher is analogous to that of a natural scientist: to