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Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry

Thomas A. Schwandt

◆ *Constructivist, constructivism, interpretivist, and interpretivism* are terms that routinely appear in the lexicon of social science methodologists and philosophers. Yet, their particular meanings are shaped by the intent of their users. As general descriptors for a loosely coupled family of methodological and philosophical persuasions, these terms are best regarded as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954). They steer the interested reader in the general direction of where instances of a particular kind of inquiry can be found. However, they “merely suggest directions along which to look” rather than “provide descriptions of what to see” (p. 7).¹

Proponents of these persuasions share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for *Verstehen*. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors. That is, particular

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actors, in particular places, at particular times, fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action.

The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies.

Although they share this general framework for human inquiry, constructivist and interpretivist persuasions are unique in the manner in which each answers these questions: What is the purpose and aim of human inquiry (as distinct from inquiry into the physical world)? How can we know about the world of human action? Each particular persuasion offers a somewhat different conceptualization of what we are about when we inquire into the world of social agents and historical actors.

Furthermore, what is unusual about these approaches cannot be explained through an examination of their methods.² They are principally concerned with matters of knowing and being, not method per se. As Harry Wolcott (1988, 1992) and Frederick Erickson (1986) have noted, not only are methods the most unremarkable aspect of interpretive work, but a focus on methods (techniques for gathering and analyzing data) often masks a full understanding of the relationship between method and inquiry purpose. The aim of attending carefully to the details, complexity, and situated meanings of the everyday life world can be achieved through a variety of methods. Although we may feel professionally compelled to use a special language for these procedures (e.g., participant observation, informant interviewing, archival research), at base, all interpretive inquirers watch, listen, ask, record, and examine. How those activities might best be defined and employed depends on the inquirer's purpose for doing the inquiry. Purpose, in turn, is shaped by epistemological and methodological commitments.³

Mindful of the risk of drawing too fine a distinction between interpretivist and constructivist perspectives that share a common intellectual heritage, I have nonetheless chosen to discuss the two separately. In the first section of this chapter I examine interpretivism, beginning with a general sketch of some critical issues in social science epistemology that shape this family of persuasions. I then single out several particular interpretivist approaches for a closer look at how each defines the purpose

of human inquiry. These include Clifford Geertz's view of interpretive anthropology, the Herbert Blumer-G. H. Mead version of symbolic interactionism, and Norman Denzin's reformulation of interpretive interactionism.

In the second section, I introduce constructivist thinking through the work of Nelson Goodman. I then discuss Ernst von Glasersfeld's radical constructivism, Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism, feminist standpoint epistemologies, Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln's constructivist paradigm, and Elliot Eisner's aesthetic approach to educational inquiry as illustrations of constructivist thinking.⁴ I conclude the chapter with an overview of several kinds of criticisms often made of both constructivist and interpretivist approaches.

◆ Interpretivist Thinking

Overview

Painted in broad strokes, the canvas of interpretivism is layered with ideas stemming from the German intellectual tradition of hermeneutics and the *Verstehen* tradition in sociology, the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, and critiques of scientism and positivism in the social sciences influenced by the writings of ordinary language philosophers critical of logical empiricism (e.g., Peter Winch, A. R. Louch, Isaiah Berlin).⁵ Historically, at least, interpretivists argued for the uniqueness of human inquiry. They crafted various refutations of the naturalistic interpretation of the social sciences (roughly the view that the aims and methods of the social sciences are identical to those of the natural sciences). They held that the mental sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) or cultural sciences (*Kulturwissenschaften*) were different in kind than the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*): The goal of the latter is scientific explanation (*Erklären*), whereas the goal of the former is the grasping or understanding (*Verstehen*) of the "meaning" of social phenomena.⁶

Owing in part to unresolved tensions between their rationalist and romanticist roots, interpretivists wrestle with maintaining the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity, engagement and objectification (Denzin, 1992; Hammersley, 1989). They celebrate the permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience. Yet, in true Cartesian fashion, they seek to disengage from that experience and objectify it.⁷ They struggle with drawing a line between the object of investigation and the

investigator. The paradox of how to develop an objective interpretive science of subjective human experience thus arises. This grappling with a synthesis of phenomenological subjectivity and scientific objectivity is evident in Wilhelm Dilthey's bid to find a basis for the *scientific* investigation of meaning, in Max Weber's struggles with the relationship between the interpretation of meaning and causal explanations and the separation of facts and values in social inquiry, and in Alfred Schutz's analysis of the operation of *Verstehen*.

Contemporary theoretical descendants of these interpretivist founders have addressed this paradox in several ways. Hammersley (1992a, 1992b) is representative of interpretivists who pursue a synthesis between social realism and constructivism. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) and Kirk and Miller (1986) seek refuge in methods as error-elimination strategies. John K. Smith (1989, p. 158) calls this the "middle ground" of methodology: It rejects certain negative characteristics of empiricist thinking but simultaneously holds that inquirers must avoid the subjectivity and error of naive inquiry through the judicious use of method.⁸

A third response is to deny the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity and overcome it by fully accepting the hermeneutical character of existence. Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan (1987) endorse this view, following a line of argument advanced by Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Taylor. They claim that the activity of interpretation is not simply a methodological option open to the social scientist, but rather the very condition of human inquiry itself: "The interpretive turn is not simply a new methodology, but rather a challenge to the very idea that inquiry into the social world and the value of the understanding that results is to be determined by methodology" (p. 20).

This third interpretivist position assumes that the defining characteristic of an *ontological* hermeneutics is that linguisticity (*Sprachlichkeit*) and historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) are constitutive of being human (Wachterhauser, 1986). In other words, we do not simply live out our lives *in* time and *through* language; rather, we *are* our history. The fact that language and history are both the condition and the limit of understanding is what makes the process of meaning construction hermeneutical.

Philosophical Anthropology

Viewed from the perspective of philosophical anthropology (the study of the basic categories in which humans and human behavior are to be

described and explained) interpretivism holds that human behavior is purposive (Bruner, 1990; Magoon, 1977). Interpretivists repudiate mechanistic, neobehaviorist, associationist (i.e., acquisition of associated connections between stimuli and responses) explanations of behavior in favor of teleological explanations. Social agents are considered autonomous, intentional, active, goal directed; they construe, construct, and interpret their own behavior and that of their fellow agents.⁹

Not surprisingly, given that they reject the unity of the sciences argument, interpretivists, in general, disavow much of the empiricist epistemology and methodology that is intimately associated with a neobehaviorist psychology and philosophical anthropology. For example, they reject the notions of a theory-neutral data language, operationism, and the covering law model of explanation.

Because they focus on meaning as primary, interpretivists construe the nature of social reality quite differently from those who support empiricist social science frameworks. As Taylor (1971/1987) explains, for the empiricist, social reality comprises a set of social facts that include the overt acts (behaviors) of individuals that can be defined physically or institutionally and the beliefs, affective states, and so forth that describe the motivations for behavior. Both of these kinds of facts are thought to be brute data—data that are identifiable and verifiable in such a way so as not to be subject to further interpretation. In this way, the empiricist accounts for both human behaviors and the meanings of those behaviors for the agents involved.

Interpretivist persuasions are predicated on the assumption that the empiricist's picture of social reality omits something most important, namely, intersubjective, common meanings—"ways of experiencing action in society which are expressed in the language and descriptions constitutive of institutions and practices" (Taylor, 1971/1987, p. 75). Accordingly, constructivists and interpretivists in general focus on the processes by which these meanings are created, negotiated, sustained, and modified within a specific context of human action. The means or process by which the inquirer arrives at this kind of interpretation of human action (as well as the ends or aim of the process) is called *Verstehen* (understanding).¹⁰

Phenomenological Interpretation of *Verstehen*

Although Weber is credited with elevating the importance of *Verstehen* as a process of sociological interpretation, his (and Dilthey's) conceptualization of *Verstehen* as a subjective process led to much confusion.

Neopositivists (e.g., Abel, 1948; Rudner, 1966) seized on the subjective nature of *Verstehen*. They argued that it must mean an act of sympathetic imagination or empathic identification on the part of inquirers that allowed them to grasp the psychological state (i.e., motivation, belief, intention, or the like) of an individual actor. By getting inside the head of another, so to speak, the inquirer could hazard a guess as to the meaning of the actor's behavior; this hypothesis could then be subject to a more rigorous empirical test. In this way, the neopositivists identified *Verstehen* as (at best) a prescientific, heuristic device useful in the context of discovery but without value in the context of justification.

Defenders of the process of *Verstehen* as the key to understanding what is unique about the human sciences countered the latent psychologism of this neopositivist understanding. They claimed that *Verstehen* is less like a process of getting inside the actor's head than it is a matter of grasping intersubjective meanings and symbolizing activities that are constitutive of social life.¹¹ For example, Schutz (1967) sought to clear up confusion surrounding Weber's notion of *Verstehen* by distinguishing among three senses of the term. In the first sense, *Verstehen* refers to "the experiential form of common-sense knowledge of human affairs" (p. 57). It has nothing to do with introspection or pointing to the subjective states of actors; rather, it refers to the intersubjective character of the world and the complex process by which we come to recognize our own actions and those of our fellow actors as meaningful.

According to Schutz, *Verstehen* could also be explored as an epistemological problem. The central issue here is how *Verstehen* is possible. Schutz's analysis drew on Husserl's notion of the *Lebenswelt* (life world) as ontologically prior or as the grounds from which all inquiry starts and from within which it can only be carried out. Finally, *Verstehen* could be viewed as a method peculiar to the human sciences. Here, Schutz distinguished between two senses of the term. A first-order sense refers to *Verstehen* as the process by which we make sense of or interpret our everyday world. Schutz (1967) argued that, unlike the world of nature, which does not "mean" anything to molecules, electrons, and atoms that inhabit it, "the observational field of the social scientist—social reality—has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, acting, and thinking within it. . . . It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behavior by motivating it" (p. 59). A second-order sense refers to the process by which the social scientist attempts to make sense of the first:

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within their social world. Thus the constructs of the social sciences are constructs of the second degree . . . constructs of the constructs made by actors on the social scene. (p. 59)

Hermeneutical Interpretation of *Verstehen*

These efforts to give a phenomenological interpretation to *Verstehen* must be sharply distinguished from the hermeneutical position noted earlier. Taylor (1971/1987), for example, defined the activity of interpretation (and the human sciences more generally) as a hermeneutical undertaking analogous to the interpretation of a text. He argued that interpretive inquirers attempt to establish a certain reading or interpretation of the meaning of social action, and that what they appeal to as the warrant for this interpretation can only be other interpretations. Stated somewhat differently, inquirers not only have no “transcendental ground from which to contemplate the process of which [they are] irretrievably a part” (Bauman, 1978, p. 17), but they participate in the very production of meaning via participation in the circle of readings or interpretations (Gadamer, 1989; Taylor, 1971/1987).

This hermeneutical understanding of *Verstehen* in some interpretivist persuasions draws on a distinction between two kinds of hermeneutics (Bauman, 1978; Bleicher, 1980; Madison, 1988). The objective, validation hermeneutics of (the early) Dilthey, Betti, and Hirsch is an epistemology or methodology (with realist pretensions) for understanding the objectifications (e.g., arts, language, institutions, religions) of the human mind. It assumes that meaning is a determinate, objectlike entity waiting to be discovered in a text, a culture, or the mind of a social actor. In this view, hermeneutics is a particular exegetical method for identifying and explicating these objective meanings. The hermeneutical circle is a *methodological* device (in which one considers the whole in relation to its parts and vice versa) that provides a means for inquiry in the human sciences.

In contrast, the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Taylor is concerned with ontology (being). The hermeneutical condition is a fact of human existence, and philosophical hermeneutics is concerned with a phenomenological (i.e., existential) explication of *Dasein* (condition

of existence or being-in-the-world). The hermeneutical circle here is an “*ontological* condition of understanding; [it] proceeds from a communality that binds us to tradition in general and that of our object of interpretation in particular; [it] provides the link between finality and universality, and between theory and praxis” (Bleicher, 1980, p. 267; emphasis added).

Interpretivist persuasions aligned with ontological hermeneutics transcend the phenomenologist’s concern with “capturing” the actors’ point of view, with verification, with discriminating between emic and etic perspectives. Taylor (1971/1987) points to the bid to go beyond dualisms of this kind: He claims that if our interpretations seem implausible or if they are not understood by our interlocutors, “there is no verification procedure we can fall back on. We can only continue to offer interpretations; we are in an interpretative circle” (p. 75).¹²

Method Redefined

But what then of method and procedure in interpretivist persuasions of this kind? Although ontological hermeneutics is not a methodology per se, it does suggest an understanding of method that is at odds with the conception of scientific method associated with logical empiricist social science. G. B. Madison (1988, pp. 28-29) explains that *scientific* method is best characterized as an abstract, formal sense of method. In this sense, method is predicated on the elimination of personal, subjective judgment. As Madison explains “one has only to learn the method itself, in and for itself; it is an intellectual technique. Having done so, one has only to apply it to whatever subject matter one chooses; the only criterion in applying the method is *correctness* of application. . . . one’s guide is the method itself, not the subject matter to which it is applied” (p. 28). This sense of method supports a belief in the power of demonstrative reasoning and the value of instrumental rationality and aims at achieving exactitude.

In sharp contrast, ontological hermeneutics supports a *normative* sense of method. This conceptualization reflects a belief in persuasive or practical reasoning (where *practical* is understood in the classic sense of involving both contemplation of the good and means of achieving same). A normative sense of method, according to Madison “far from supplanting personal, subjective judgment, or eliminating the need for it, is meant as an aid to good judgment” (1988, p. 28).

Madison argues that the understanding of method here is less like the application of rules and more like the casuistic activity of using ethical

principles to guide the making of an ethical decision (interpretation) in a concrete situation (Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988). One seeks to make a responsible decision and to give good reasons for one's action, but the application of ethical principles does not permit the elimination of judgment on the part of the decision maker. In fact, to be rational in this situation demands or *requires* the exercise of judgment (not the following of procedures or rules) and the making of an interpretation. The interpretation or decision one makes cannot properly be said to be verifiable or testable. Rather, at best, we can appraise the interpretation by applying norms or criteria that are compatible with the very condition that demands we interpret in the first place. Hence to judge an interpretation we might use criteria such as thoroughness, coherence, comprehensiveness, and so forth, and ask whether the interpretation is useful, worthy of adoption, and so on.¹³

Conceiving of the activity of interpretation in terms of an ontological condition (i.e., as a fundamental grounds of our being-in-the-world) rather than as a methodological device is what puts the inquirer on the same plane of understanding, so to speak, as those he or she inquires into. To understand through interpretation is to accept a particular model of being or way of life (Shapiro, 1981). That way of being-in-the-world requires a redefinition of method along the lines suggested by Madison. In this way, the earlier comment by Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) about the significance of interpretive work comes into full relief: "For the human sciences both the object of investigation—the web of language, symbol, and institutions that constitutes signification—and the tools by which the investigation is carried out share inescapably the same pervasive context that is the human world" (p. 6).

◆ Two Examples of Interpretivist Persuasions

Interpretivist alternatives to logical empiricist epistemology abound. Three in particular are described here. Geertz's version of interpretive anthropology blends both phenomenological and hermeneutical perspectives on interpretivism. The form of *Verstehende Soziologie* known as symbolic interactionism as represented by Blumer and Mead reflects a tough-minded respect for the reality of the world of experience. Denzin's reconceptualization of interpretive interactionism draws on insights from both critical hermeneutics and poststructuralism to repudiate what

he regards as a soft positivism inherent in the Blumer-Mead version of symbolic interactionism.

Interpretive Anthropology

Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology is an interpretive theory of culture. It arises in direct opposition to the program of cultural analysis defined by a set of theoretical models known as structuralism or, more specifically, ethnoscience or cognitive anthropology. The structuralist program is firmly rooted in the logical empiricists' bid to find the "real" meaning of myth, ceremony, and other cultural artifacts. For the structuralist, the categories and structures of culture provide powerful explanatory devices accounting for the behaviors of members of a group or society. Structural-functional research frameworks are reductionist in that they claim to discover the one true interpretation lying behind or beneath the complexity of appearances. Geertz (1973) objects to this understanding of the goal of anthropology, preferring to define the analysis of human action as an "interpretive science in search of meaning, not an experimental science in search of laws" (p. 5).

He rejects the philosophical anthropology assumed by ethnoscientific models. He objects to a methodology that aims to reify the world of lived experience in a specialized language of science. For example, his assessment of the literary features of the works of the structuralist Lévi-Strauss reveal more than a critique of that author's prose:

The marking characteristic of all of Levi-Strauss's work, one upon which almost everyone who deals with it sooner or later remarks [is] its extraordinary air of abstracted self-containment. "Aloof," "closed," "cold," "airless," "cerebral"—all the epithets that collect around any sort of literary absolutism collect around it. Neither picturing lives nor evoking them, neither interpreting them nor explaining them, but rather arranging and rearranging the materials the lives have somehow left behind into formal systems of correspondences—his books seem to exist behind glass, self-sealing disclosures into which jaguars, semen, and rotting meat are admitted to become oppositions, inversions, isomorphisms. (Geertz, 1988, p. 48)

Culture, for Geertz, is a more complicated, less bloodless, more ideational, and, fundamentally, an irreducibly interactive, hermeneutical phenomenon that begs for interpretation, not causal explanation. *Pace* the

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structuralists, Geertz (1973) argues: "As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is *thickly*—described" (p. 14).

A distinguishing feature of Geertz's understanding of both the object of the anthropologist's gaze and the method of his or her gazing is that both are semiotic and hermeneutical phenomena. The language and other symbols in a culture do not simply refer to objects but are constitutive of them, hence, Geertz (1973) claims, "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (p. 5). The actions of members of a culture (and the actions and writing of the anthropologist qua ethnographer) both construct and signify meaning. Following Ricoeur (1971), Geertz argues that the ways in which meanings are constituted in a culture must be read or interpreted by the ethnographer in much the same manner as one would read or interpret a complicated text.

Geertz further explains *what* it is that the ethnographer reads and *how* this activity of reading should be construed. For Geertz (1973), there is no world of social facts "out there" waiting to be observed, recorded, described, and analyzed by the inquirer. Rather, the inquirer constructs a reading of the meaning-making process of the people he or she studies. What the ethnographer does is "trace the curve of social discourse; fixing it into respectable form" (p. 19). What the activity of writing "fixes" is the "said" of an event the ethnographer observes—the meaning, the gist, the thought of a speech event—not the event itself. In so doing, the inquirer rescues the activity of participants' meaning making, changing it "from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be consulted" (p. 19).

Access to the meaning of an event is not to be had through some process of empathic identification with an informant or respondent, getting inside the person's head, so to speak. Geertz (1983) rejects this neopositivist interpretation of *Verstehen*, arguing that ethnographers cannot claim "some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects" (p. 56). Rather, the activity of understanding (*Verstehen*) unfolds as one looks over one's respondents' shoulders at what they are doing: "The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such

an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to" (p. 58).

For example, Geertz (1983) explains that in his study of selfhood in Javanese, Moroccan, and Balinese societies, "I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions not by imagining myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheikh, and then seeing what I thought, but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" (p. 58). The task of ethnography is not observation and description, but the inscription or thick description of these meanings of human action.

Because the activity of ethnographic analysis is not a matter of discovering the "Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape" (Geertz, 1973, p. 20) but rather one of "inscribing," writing, fashioning meaning, Geertz blurs the distinction between science and literature in anthropology. Echoing Schutz's understanding of *Verstehen*, Geertz argues that the anthropologist inscribes a text that is itself a second- or third-order interpretation of respondents' interpretations.

This text is built upon the delicate interplay of experience-near and experience-distant concepts: "Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon" (Geertz, 1983, p. 57).¹⁴ Finally, this text offers a theoretical formulation or interpretation, a statement of what the "meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are . . . demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such" (Geertz, 1973, p. 27). Yet, Geertz understands theory (interpretation) to be always grounded and local, not speculative and abstract. He explains that "theoretical formulations hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them" (1973, p. 25).

Symbolic Interactionism

Another interpretive science in search of portraying and understanding the process of meaning making is the social psychological theory of symbolic interactionism. This approach to the study of human action is difficult to summarize briefly because of the many theoretical and methodological variants of the position (for summaries, see Denzin, 1992;

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Hammersley, 1989; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975; Plummer, 1991). I offer a characterization of the Blumer-Mead model of symbolic interactionism, followed by an outline of a postmodern version of the approach, namely, Norman Denzin's interpretive interactionism.

Drawing on the work of G. H. Mead, Herbert Blumer (1969, p. 2) claims that symbolic interactionism rests on three premises: First, human beings act toward the physical objects and other beings in their environment on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them. Second, these meanings derive from the social interaction (communication, broadly understood) between and among individuals. Communication is symbolic because we communicate via languages and other symbols; further, in communicating we create or produce significant symbols. Third, these meanings are established and modified through an interpretive process: "The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. . . . meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action" (p. 5).

The Blumer-Mead version of symbolic interactionism regards human beings as purposive agents. They engage in "minded," self-reflexive behavior (Blumer, 1969, p. 81); they confront a world that they must interpret in order to act rather than a set of environmental stimuli to which they are forced to respond. Despite disavowing a substantive or philosophical behaviorism, symbolic interactionism does endorse a kind of methodological behaviorism (Denzin, 1971, p. 173).¹⁵ In other words, the symbolic interactionist holds that a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the study of social interaction is careful attention to the overt behaviors and behavior settings of actors and their interaction (i.e., "behavior specimens"; see Denzin, 1989c, pp. 79ff.). Thus symbolic interactionists evince a profound respect for the empirical world. Whether they overestimate the obduracy of that world or imagine that it can be directly apprehended is a matter of some dispute (Blumer, 1980; Denzin, 1989c; Hammersley, 1989).

In much the same way that Geertz rejects a structural-functional approach to the study of human action, Blumer (1969) objects to methodologies in which "participants in . . . a societal organization are logically merely media for the play and expression of the forces or mechanisms of the system itself; [in which] one turns to such forces or mechanisms to account for what takes place" (pp. 57-58). On the contrary, symbolic interactionism requires that the inquirer actively enter the worlds of people

being studied in order to “see the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he interprets what is taken into account” (p. 56). The process of actors’ interpretation is rendered intelligible not merely through the description of word and deed, but by taking that rich description as a point of departure for formulating an interpretation of what actors are up to.

As Denzin (1971) explains, symbolic interactionists begin with a “sensitizing image of the interaction process” (p. 168) built around such concepts as self, language, social setting, social object, and joint act. The inquirer then “moves from sensitizing concepts to the immediate world of social experience and permits that world to shape and modify his conceptual framework [and, in this way, the inquirer] moves continually between the realm of the more general social theory and the worlds of native people” (p. 168). Symbolic interactionists seek explanations of that world, although, like Geertz, they view explanatory theories as interpretive, grounded, and hovering low over the data (Denzin, 1989c).

Pragmatism informs the philosophical anthropology, epistemology, and social philosophy of the Blumer-Mead version of symbolic interactionism. Like Dewey, Mead and Blumer criticize associationist theories of cognition that reduce action to environmentally determined conduct. They view human beings as acting (not responding) organisms who construct social action (Blumer, 1969). Consequently, such epistemological terms as *truth* and *meaning* are not expressions of relationships of correspondence to reality, but refer to the consequences of a purposeful action. Mead’s political pragmatism also shaped the symbolic interactionist persuasion. Denzin (1992), for one, claims that Mead’s political philosophy was more culturally conservative and less critical than Dewey’s and often issued in a “conservative cultural romanticism which turned the modern self and its interactional experiences into a moral hero” (p. 6).¹⁶

Interpretive Interactionism

Denzin finds several faults with the Blumer-Mead version of symbolic interactionism: a naive empirical realism, a romantic conception of the “other,” and a conservative social philosophy.¹⁷ He thinks it important that Blumer’s respect for the empirical world—his call for “close and reasonably full familiarity with area[s] of life under study” (Blumer, 1969, p. 37)—remain at the heart of symbolic interactionism. However, he is keen on developing a postmodern politics of “interpretive interactionism” (Denzin,

1989a, 1989b) that does not offer inscription in the place of description; present a romantic realist picture of human actors; or obscure, decontextualize, or overtheorize the presentation of the voices, emotions, and actions—that is, the lived experience—of respondents.¹⁸

To become more self-consciously “interpretive,” symbolic interactionism must, in Denzin’s view, shed its pretensions to ethnographic realism and adopt insights from poststructural philosophy, principally work in cultural and feminist studies. The former facilitates connecting the study of meaning making in social interaction to the communication process and the communication industry “that produce and shape the meanings that circulate in everyday life” (Denzin, 1992, p. 96). Cultural studies directs the interpretive interactionist toward a critical appraisal of “how interacting individuals connect their lived experiences to the cultural representations of those experiences” (p. 74). From feminist studies, the interactionist learns that the language and activity of both inquirer and respondent must be read in gendered, existential, biographical, and classed ways. As a result, a “phenomenologically, existentially driven view of humans and society positions self, emotionality, power, ideology, violence, and sexuality at the center of the interactionist’s interpretive problems [and] [t]hese are the topics that an interactionist cultural studies aims to address” (p. 161).

Finally, in Denzin’s (1992) reformulation, interpretive interactionism must explicitly engage in cultural criticism. He argues that this can be accomplished through the development of an “oppositional cultural aesthetic” (p. 151) crafted through a rereading of the pragmatic tradition and an appropriation of insights from critical theory. In true deconstructionist fashion, this approach (a) “aims to always subvert the meaning of a text, to show how its dominant and negotiated meanings can be opposed”; (b) “expose[s] the ideological and political meanings that circulate within the text, particularly those which hide or displace racial, class, ethnic and gender biases”; and (c) “analyze[s] how texts address the problems of presence, lived experience, the real and its representations, and the issues of subjects, authors, and their intentionalities” (p. 151).

◆ Constructivist Thinking

Constructivism, at least in the social sciences, is of more recent vintage than interpretivist thinking, although its roots reach back to the earliest philo-

sophical arguments over a rational foundation for knowledge. Constructivists are preoccupied with related but somewhat different concerns from those of their interpretivist counterparts. As described earlier, interpretivism was conceived in reaction to the effort to develop a natural science of the social. Its foil was largely logical empiricist methodology and the bid to apply that framework to human inquiry.

Constructivists share this concern, and they resonate with the interpretivists' emphasis on the world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors. Yet, their particular foils are the notions of objectivism, empirical realism, objective truth, and essentialism. Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981) explains that "to the objectivist, the world is composed of facts and the goal of knowledge is to provide a literal account of what the world is like" (p. 1). And Kenneth Gergen (1991) adds: "Modernism was deeply committed to the view that the facts of the world are essentially *there* for study. They exist independently of us as observers, and if we are rational we will come to know the facts as they are" (p. 91).

Constructivists are deeply committed to the contrary view that what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind. They emphasize the pluralistic and plastic character of reality—pluralistic in the sense that reality is expressible in a variety of symbol and language systems; plastic in the sense that reality is stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents. They endorse the claim that, "contrary to common-sense, there is no unique 'real world' that preexists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language" (Bruner, 1986, p. 95). In place of a realist view of theories and knowledge, constructivists emphasize the instrumental and practical function of theory construction and knowing.

Constructivists are antiessentialists. They assume that what we take to be self-evident kinds (e.g., man, woman, truth, self) are actually the product of complicated discursive practices. Accordingly, as Diana Fuss (1989) explains,

what is at stake for the constructionist are systems of representations, social and material practices, laws of discourses, and ideological effects. In short, constructionists are concerned above all with the *production* and *organization* of differences, and they therefore reject the idea that any essential or natural givens precede the process of social determination. (p. 3)

Everyday Constructivist Thinking

In a fairly unremarkable sense, we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge. Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive—a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind—but active; mind does something with these impressions, at the very least forms abstractions or concepts. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience and, further, we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience.

However, as Kenneth Strike (1987) points out, “the claim that people are active in learning or knowledge construction is rather uninteresting. It is uninteresting because no one, beyond a few aberrant behaviorists, denies it” (p. 483). Even the logical positivists, the favorite target of many who currently claim the label “constructivist,” were themselves constructivists in the sense sketched above. They held that theoretical terms were in fact abstractions, human inventions that were simply convenient devices for managing and expressing the relations among observables.

Further, one need not be an antirealist to be a constructivist. One can reasonably hold that concepts and ideas are invented (rather than discovered) yet maintain that these inventions correspond to something in the real world. The logical empiricist picture of theory described by Herbert Feigl—a set of human constructs that have meaning by virtue of their relation to the “soil of experience”—is just such a view.¹⁹ Likewise, the notion that knowledge is invented and error-prone (epistemological fallibilism) cohabits quite comfortably with a belief in a real world independent of human knowledge of same (ontological realism) in the evolutionary epistemology of Donald Campbell and in the Popperian philosophy of social science characteristic of D. C. Phillips.

Given that, by their own admission, the constructivists discussed below would indeed make odd bedfellows with the likes of Feigl, Campbell, Phillips, and the ghosts of the logical empiricists, the former group must be staking a claim to something more than this trivial sense of constructivism. Yet the terrain of constructivist approaches is marked by multiple uses of the term. The sketch of constructivist persuasions that follows can at least alert the reader to the kind of intellectual spadework necessary to come to terms with this concept.

Defining the Contours of Constructivist Philosophy

The philosopher most responsible for defining the contours of a constructivist theory of reality and cognition is Nelson Goodman (1984).²⁰ He characterizes his view as "irrealism," a kind of rigorously constrained radical relativism that "does not hold that everything or even anything is unreal, but sees the world melting into versions and versions making worlds, finds ontology evanescent, and inquires into what makes a version right and a world well-built" (p. 29). Irrealism is not a doctrine that seeks to take its place alongside realist and idealist accounts of the world, but rather "an attitude of unconcern with most issues between such doctrines" (p. 43). Goodman (1978) quotes the worldly philosopher Woody Allen to make this point:

Can we actually "know" the universe? My God, it's hard enough finding your way around Chinatown. The point, however, is: Is there anything out there? And why? And must they be so noisy? Finally, there can be no doubt that the one characteristic of "reality" is that it lacks essence. That is not to say it has no essence, but merely lacks it. (The reality I speak of here is the same one Hobbes described, but a little smaller.) (p. 97)

Or, in Goodman's words, the point is "never mind mind, essence is not essential, and matter doesn't matter" (p. 97). Goodman seeks to transcend the debates of realism versus idealism by reconceptualizing philosophy.

Goodman's constructivist philosophy is pluralistic and pragmatic.²¹ Through our nonverbal and verbal symbol systems we create many versions of the world in the sciences, the arts, and the humanities. Our process of inquiry is not a matter of somehow getting in touch with the ready-made world; rather, "worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking" (Goodman, 1978, p. 6). These "remakings" are not simply different interpretations of the same world, but literally different world versions. Stated somewhat differently, our frames of interpretation (versions) belong both to what is interpreted (worlds) and to a system of interpretation. How we go about the business of making and judging world versions is Goodman's principal concern.

We are inclined to judge claims, interpretations, statements, and world versions for their "truth" (usually understood as correspondence between a claim and some ready-made world) and "certainty." But, in Goodman's

view, these are excessively restricted concepts beset with trouble (see Goodman & Elgin, 1988). He proposes that we adopt the more pragmatic notion of “rightness,” a term with “greater reach” than truth. *Rightness* is defined as an act of fitting and working but “not a fitting *onto*—a correspondence or matching or mirroring of independent Reality—but a fitting *into* a context or discourse or standing complex of other symbols” (p. 158). He claims that the notion of certainty—“a pretentious muddle of the psychological and the pseudological—is unsalvageable” and proposes instead that we use the term *adoption*: “We can adopt habits, strategies, vocabularies, styles, as well as statements” (p. 159).

Accordingly, the cognitive endeavor is not to be taken as the pursuit of knowledge that seeks “to arrive at an accurate and comprehensive description of ‘the real’ readymade world” (p. 163). Rather, cognition is reconceptualized as the advancement of understanding wherein we begin “from what happens to be currently adopted and proceed to integrate and organize, weed out and supplement, not in order to arrive at truth about something already made but in order to make something right—to construct something that works cognitively, that fits together and handles new cases, that may implement further inquiry and invention” (p. 163).

Radical Constructivism

The contrast between a view of mind as the vessel for the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information and an instrumentalist notion of mind as an active creator and manipulator of symbols is taken up in a version of constructivist thinking called “radical constructivism” as defined by the psychologist Ernst von Glasersfeld,²² who is concerned with the nature of knowledge and what it means to know. He argues that radical constructivism signals a particular relationship between mind and world. Following the arguments advanced by the skeptics, von Glasersfeld claims that we cannot know such a thing as an independent, objective world that stands apart from our experience of it. Hence we cannot speak of knowledge as somehow corresponding to, mirroring, or representing that world.

Radical constructivism rejects the notion that “knowledge ought to be a veridical ‘representation’ of a world as it ‘exists’ prior to being experienced” (von Glasersfeld, 1991, p. 16). In von Glasersfeld’s view, knowledge is not a particular kind of product (i.e., a representation) that exists independent of the knower, but an activity or process. He believes that this process is best understood in Piagetian terms of adaptation and

equilibration (von Glasersfeld, 1989, 1991). Correspondingly, criteria for evaluating knowledge claims are revised: The validity of a knowledge claim is not to be found in the relationship of reference or correspondence to an independently existing world; rather, a claim is thought to be valid if it is viable or if it provides functional fit, that is, if it works to achieve a goal. The relationship between knowledge and reality is instrumental, not verificative: To know is "to possess ways and means of acting and thinking that allow one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen" (von Glasersfeld, 1991, p. 16).²³

Social Constructionism

Kenneth and Mary Gergen also challenge the idea of some objective basis for knowledge claims and examine the process of knowledge construction. But, instead of focusing on the matter of individual minds and cognitive processes, they turn their attention outward to the world of intersubjectively shared, social constructions of meaning and knowledge. Acknowledging a debt to the phenomenology of Peter Berger and Alfred Schutz, Kenneth Gergen (1985) labels his approach "social constructionism" because it more adequately reflects the notion that the world that people create in the process of social exchange is a reality *sui generis*.

The social constructionist approach is predicated on the assumption that "the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). Knowledge is one of the many coordinated activities of individuals and as such is subject to the same processes that characterize any human interaction (e.g., communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric). As Gergen and Gergen (1991) explain: "Accounts of the world . . . take place within shared systems of intelligibility—usually a spoken or written language. These accounts are not viewed as the external expression of the speaker's internal processes (such as cognition, intention), but as an expression of relationships among persons" (p. 78). Contrary to the emphasis in radical constructivism, the focus here is not on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind but on the collective generation of meaning as shaped by conventions of language and other social processes.

Although both von Glasersfeld and Gergen emphasize that their versions of constructivist philosophy are concerned with epistemology (knowing) not ontology (being), each also takes a stand on the latter. Von Glasersfeld (1991) does not deny that there is an ontological reality, but claims that we

cannot in any sense know a "real" world. He sounds very much like an ontological idealist when he says, "I claim that we cannot even imagine what the word 'to exist' might mean in an ontological context, because we cannot conceive of 'being' without the notions of space and time, and these two notions are among the first of our conceptual constructs" (p. 17).

Gergen's theory of reality is both idealist and relative. He claims that "there are no independently identifiable, real-world referents to which the language of social description [or explanation, for that matter] are cemented" (1986, p. 143). Further, he at least implies that language is the only reality we can know, hence his view borders on the radical linguistic relativism or contextualist theory of reality characteristic of Stanley Fish (1989).²⁴ According to Fish, reality is the result of the social processes accepted as normal in a specific context, and knowledge claims are intelligible and debatable only within a particular context or community.

Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies

These constructivist persuasions blend the phenomenological interpretive perspective with critical hermeneutics.²⁵ They are concerned with portraying the lived reality of women's lives. As Riger (1992) explains, "Giving voice to women's perspectives means identifying ways women create meaning and experience life from their particular position in the social hierarchy" (p. 734). Feminist standpoint persuasions argue that women's life experiences are not captured in existing conceptual schemes (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; D. Smith, 1987), and thus they focus in particular on the ways in which gender is socially constructed, treating it as an analytic category in its own right.²⁶

In her review of perspectives in feminist anthropology, Micaela di Leonardo (1991) explains that social constructionists regard language seriously as more than a transparent representational medium. Studies by Susan Gal (1991) on women's speech and silence, Emily Martin (1987) on women's discourse about their own reproductive processes compared with the dominant discourse of medical science, and Jane Radway (1984) on the social event of reading popular romance novels are examples of sociolinguistic analyses of how verbal practices in social interaction construct gender. However, discourse analysis does not replace social analysis. Reflecting the influence of critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, feminist social constructionists evince profound concern for the material

conditions of women's lives. Analysis of discourse is thus often combined with political economic research.²⁷

Another feature of these persuasions that they share, in part, with recent developments in postmodern ethnography is the careful, public scrutiny of the inquirer's history, values, and assumptions. Although there is a vast fieldwork literature on researcher-respondent relations, feminist standpoint epistemologies are particularly keen on exploring the social construction of the research encounter (e.g., Mies, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Stacey, 1988).

The social, dialogic nature of inquiry is central to the constructivist thinking of Gergen and Gergen (1991) and Guba and Lincoln (1989) (discussed below) as well. For them, inquiry methodology requires attending both to the inquirer's own self-reflective awareness of his or her own constructions and to the *social* construction of individual constructions (including that of the inquirer). For example, Gergen and Gergen (1991) sketch an interactive approach to inquiry called the "reflexive elaboration of the event," in which the researcher and participants open a sociopsychological phenomenon to inspection and through dialogue generate a process of continuous reflexivity, thereby "enabling new forms of linguistic reality to emerge" (p. 88). The overall aim of this approach is "to expand and enrich the vocabulary of understanding."

Guba and Lincoln (1989) echo a similar view. They believe that the best means of developing joint constructions is the "hermeneutic-dialectic" process, so called because it is interpretive and fosters comparing and contrasting divergent constructions in an effort to achieve a synthesis of same. They strongly emphasize that the goal of constructivist inquiry is to achieve a consensus (or, failing that, an agenda for negotiation) on issues and concerns that define the nature of the inquiry.

A "Constructivist Paradigm"

Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln's "constructivist paradigm" is a wide-ranging eclectic framework. They originally discussed their approach under the heading of "naturalistic inquiry" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, recently they have begun using the term *constructivism* to characterize their methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 19), although they acknowledge that constructivist, interpretive, naturalistic, and hermeneutical are all similar notions. They propose their constructivist paradigm as a replacement for what they label the conventional, scientific, or

positivist paradigm of inquiry, and they have spelled out in detail the epistemological and ontological assumptions, aims, procedures, and criteria of their approach.

Their constructivist philosophy is idealist; that is, they assume that what is real is a construction in the minds of individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 83).²⁸ It is also pluralist and relativist: There are multiple, often conflicting, constructions, and all (at least potentially) are meaningful. For Guba and Lincoln, the question of which or whether constructions are true is sociohistorically relative. Truth is a matter of the best-informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus at a given time.

Like those who espouse the feminist standpoint epistemologies noted above, Guba and Lincoln assume that the observer cannot (should not) be neatly disentangled from the observed in the activity of inquiring into constructions. Hence the findings or outcomes of an inquiry are themselves a literal creation or construction of the inquiry process. Constructions, in turn, are resident in the minds of individuals: "They do not exist outside of the persons who create and hold them; they are not part of some 'objective' world that exists apart from their constructors" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 143).

The act of inquiry begins with issues and/or concerns of participants and unfolds through a "dialectic" of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration, reanalysis, and so on that leads eventually to a joint (among inquirer and respondents) construction of a case (i.e., findings or outcomes). The joint constructions that issue from the activity of inquiry can be evaluated for their "fit" with the data and information they encompass; the extent to which they "work," that is, provide a credible level of understanding; and the extent to which they have "relevance" and are "modifiable" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 179).

The properties of constructions can be further elaborated as follows (Guba & Lincoln, 1989):

1. Constructions are attempts to make sense of or to interpret experience, and most are self-sustaining and self-renewing.
2. The nature or quality of a construction that can be held depends upon "the range or scope of information available to a constructor, and the constructor's sophistication in dealing with that information" (p. 71).
3. Constructions are extensively shared, and some of those shared are "disciplined constructions," that is, collective and systematic attempts to come to common agreements about a state of affairs, for example, science (p. 71).

4. Although all constructions must be considered meaningful, some are rightly labeled "malconstruction" because they are "incomplete, simplistic, uninformed, internally inconsistent, or derived by an inadequate methodology" (p. 143).
5. The judgment of whether a given construction is malformed can be made only with reference to the "paradigm out of which the constructor operates" (p. 143); in other words, criteria or standards are framework specific, "so for instance a religious construction can only be judged adequate or inadequate utilizing the particular theological paradigm from which it is derived" (p. 143).
6. One's constructions are challenged when one becomes aware that new information conflicts with the held construction or when one senses a lack of intellectual sophistication needed to make sense of new information.

Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism

Elliot Eisner's version of constructivism is grounded in the work of Suzanne Langer and Michael Polanyi, and in John Dewey's aesthetic theory. It is proposed as an alternative to qualitative approaches to educational studies stemming from ethnographic traditions in social science. Acknowledging a partial debt to Goodman's philosophy of cognition and his philosophy of art, Eisner assumes that perception is framework or theory dependent and that knowledge is a constructed (versus discovered) form of experience. His methodology is concerned with how inquirers develop an enhanced capacity to perceive the qualities that comprise the educational experience and, further, how they can develop the skills to render those perceptions in representational forms that portray, interpret, and appraise educational phenomena. The selection of representational forms is critical because, in Eisner's (1991) view, "the selection of a form through which the world is to be represented not only influences what we can say, it also influences what we are likely to experience" (p. 8).

Connoisseurship is the art of apperception. It is grounded in the "consummatory function" of aesthetic knowing—"the developed ability to experience the subtleties of form" (Eisner, 1985, p. 28). What the connoisseur perceives or experiences are qualities—the sensory features of a phenomenon. Yet perception of qualities is not mere impression of sense data on the mind; rather, the act of perception is a framework- or schema-dependent cognitive act. For the connoisseur, perceiving or experiencing is a kind of heightened awareness or educated perception—a

particular kind of attention to nuance and detail, to multiple dimensions or aspects—that comes from intimate familiarity with the phenomenon being examined. The connoisseur's eye (as metaphor for all the senses) is in a state of enlightenment.

What the connoisseur “sees” he or she must eventually “say,” and the act of rendering apperception in some publicly available form is the task of criticism. Here, Eisner (1985, p. 28) draws on what he calls the “referential function” of aesthetic knowing—its function of pointing to some aspect of the world beyond our immediate ken, thereby allowing us to experience some phenomenon via vicarious participation. The inquirer as connoisseur-turned-critic reconstructs or transforms his or her perceptions into some representational form that “illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced” (Eisner, 1991, p. 86). This form is most typically some kind of narrative that is presentational rather than representational. In other words, the narrative is not an iconic image or mirror of reality but a poetic, expressive form that is a reconstrual or reconstitution of the experience from which it originates. The critic describes, interprets, and appraises the phenomenon and thereby aids in the reeducation of the reader's perception. This narrative, storied mode of re-presenting the connoisseur's experience is particularly significant because it points to the importance of an aesthetic (versus scientific or propositional) form of knowing in human inquiry. These narrative accounts can themselves be evaluated or appraised for their “rightness” through the judgment of their coherence, referential adequacy, and instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991, pp. 53ff.).

◆ On Common Criticisms and Future Directions

Interpretivist and constructivist persuasions have been somewhat artificially disentangled here to afford a closer look at salient aspects of each. Yet it should be apparent that current work in these methodologies reflects the synthetic impulse of the postmodern zeitgeist. Decades from its origins in challenges to scientism and efforts to restore to human inquiry a principal focus on the everyday world of lived experience, the phenomenological-interpretive perspective is now being blended with insights from constructivist epistemology, feminist methodologies, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and critical hermeneutics.²⁹ This bid to redescribe and reconceptualize makes for an often bewildering array of conflicting

considerations, yet it also signals that in-house controversies are now far more intellectually vital and exciting than the simplistic debates between so-called quantitative and qualitative methodologies that continue to be waged in some quarters of the academy. These challenges from within that demand our attention are principally centered on four issues in interpretive work—the perdurable problems of criteria and objectivity, the lack of a critical purchase, the problem of inquirer authority and privilege, and the confusion of psychological and epistemological claims.

The Problem of Criteria

The issue is deceptively simple: What is an adequate warrant for a subjectively mediated account of intersubjective meaning?³⁰ In the absence of some set of criteria, such accounts are subject to the charges of solipsism (they are only *my* accounts) and relativism (all accounts are equally good or bad, worthy or unworthy, true or false, and so on). Contemporary interpretivists and constructivists are not likely to hold that there are unquestioned *foundations* for any interpretation. They are nonfoundationalists who have given up the quest for objectivism (Bernstein, 1976), hence a solution to the problem of criteria is not likely to be found in this venue.

Nonfoundational resolutions to the problem have arisen in the following ways. One is to claim the middle ground of methodology, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. The notion of an appeal to procedural criteria as grounds for judging the goodness of interpretations is strong. It is evident in the painstaking attention to goodness criteria in the otherwise constructivist frame of reference of Guba and Lincoln.

A second effort issues from arguments for subtle realism. This resolution stems from a bid to rescue an important realist intuition from otherwise incoherent correspondence theories of truth (Matthews, 1992). The intuition is that the truth, worth, or value of a claim, theory, interpretation, construction, and so forth is ultimately determined by something *beyond* the claim, theory, interpretation, construction. Hammersley (1992b), for example, argues that interpretivists investigate independent, knowable, actor-constructed phenomena, but denies that we have an unmediated grasp of or access to those phenomena. He maintains that there can be “multiple, non-contradictory descriptive and explanatory claims about any phenomenon” (Hammersley, 1989, p. 135), “without denying that if those interpretations are accurate they must correspond in relevant aspects to the phenomena described” (p. 194).

A third resolution is to give up the worry about a separation of mind and world and focus instead on intentional, meaningful behavior that is by definition historically, socially, and culturally relative. It acknowledges that a human inquirer is permanently engaged in a discourse with his or her own object, "a discourse in which the object and subject of study employ essentially the same resources" (Bauman, 1978, p. 234; see also Giddens, 1976). Interpretive accounts (efforts to make clear what seems to be confused, unclear) are to be judged on the pragmatic grounds of whether they are useful, fitting, generative of further inquiry, and so forth.

The Lack of a Critical Purchase

This problem is variously identified as one of descriptivism, of the lack of a critical purchase, and of privileging the views of actors. The principal objection here is that interpretive accounts lack any critical interest or the ability to critique the very accounts they produce. Burrell and Morgan (1979), for example, note that interpretive theoretical frameworks reflect a politics that they call the "sociology of regulation" as opposed to a "sociology of radical change" (p. 254). In their view, these frameworks "present a perspective in which individual actors negotiate, regulate, and live their lives within the context of the *status quo*" (p. 254). A similar kind of concern underlies Denzin's critique of the Blumer-Mead version of symbolic interactionism. Also, as noted above, some feminist social constructionists address this challenge by drawing on the critical theory tradition.

This criticism is, in part, traceable to the origins of the image of the social inquirer as disinterested theorist—one whose practice is defined by the careful separation of empirical from normative concerns, descriptive theory from prescriptive theory (see Berger & Kellner, 1981; Bernstein, 1976; Clifford, 1983). Weber's insistence on the separation of facts and values (the ethics of responsibility versus the ethics of conviction) in interpretive sociology, and Schutz's distinction between the fundamental interests of the individual as ordinary citizen and the individual as scientist are central sources of this idea.

For example, Schutz (1967) held that the world of social scientific investigation constituted a particular finite province of meaning (one of many such finite provinces or multiple realities) that demanded a particular relevance structure, cognitive style, and attitude.³¹ The individual-as-social-scientist operates with the attitude of the disinterested observer and

abides by the rules for evidence and objectivity within the scientific community. Whereas the individual-as-citizen legitimately has a practical (in a classic sense), pragmatic, interested attitude, the individual-turned-social-scientist brackets out that attitude and adopts the posture of objective, disinterested, empirical theorist. This disinterested attitude is readily evident, for example, in traditional ethnography, where the inquirer is warned not to become more than a marginal native and to discipline his or her subjectivity. Critics hold that it is precisely because of this distancing of oneself as inquirer that interpretivists cannot engage in an explicitly critical evaluation of the social reality they seek to portray.

The Problem of Authority

A third set of criticisms is directed at what might be called the “dangers of high interpretive science” and the “overly sovereign” authoritative stance of the interpreter as inscriber (Rabinow, 1986, p. 258).³² Postmodern ethnographers (e.g., Clifford, 1983, 1990; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Rabinow, 1977) argue that defining interpretation as act of inscription vests authority and control in the anthropologist as inscriber and suppresses the dialogic dimension of constructing interpretations of human action. A related worry expressed by some critics of this linguistic, textualist turn, particularly in anthropology (e.g., Jackson, 1989), is that quarrels over whether anthropology is best viewed as an analytic or interpretive science are making for both a bad science and a bad art of anthropological investigation.

The Making of Epistemological Claims

A special set of criticisms is directed at the constructivists’ bid to argue from a psychological claim to an epistemological conclusion (Matthews, 1992; Strike, 1987). Recall that the constructivist makes the claim, in Eisner’s (1991) words, that there is no “pristine, unmediated grasp of the world as it is” (p. 46) and, further, that no sharp distinction can be drawn between knower and known, between accounts of the world and those doing the accounting. Taken as a *psychological* claim, this is not particularly problematic, even for those who call themselves empiricists. It is a belief that knowledge is not simply the impression of sense data on the mind, but instead is actively constructed.

Yet many constructivists are not making simply a psychological claim, they are making an *epistemological* claim as well. That is, they argue that knowledge does not discover a preexisting, independent, real world outside the mind of the knower, that the process of making or constructing meaning cannot be connected to an “independent world ‘out there,’ but [only] to our own constructing processes” (Steier, 1991, p. 2).

The difficulty here is how to account for the fact of knowledge as a form of theoretical production, the fact that knowledge is somehow available to individuals, and the fact that knowledge is shared and transmitted. To borrow some language from Guba and Lincoln (1989), if constructions “are resident in the minds of individuals” (p. 143)—that is, they cannot be said to exist outside the self-reflective capacity of an individual mind—then how is it possible that they can be “extensively shared” (p. 71), and that “a range [and] scope of information [knowledge] is available to a constructor” (p. 71) such that constructions can be modified, changed, or abandoned?

One way in which this problem has been addressed, as we have seen, is to emphasize the *social* construction of knowledge. Yet the tension between claiming that knowledge is the property of individual minds and the view that knowledge can be publicly shared is evident.³³

Future Directions

Having surveyed the contemporary scene and appraised the arguments for nonfoundationalist, antiessentialist thinking, Richard Rorty (1982) concludes that we stand at the head of two paths. One is the path of Dewey, with his liberal social hope; the other is the path of Foucault, with his despair over the prison house of language. I for one can find little comfort in a form of interpretivism that degenerates into nihilism, where we do nothing but engage in endless parasitical deconstruction and deny the existence of social order and our very selves.

To be sure, the future of interpretivist and constructivist persuasions rests on the acceptance of the implications of dissolving long-standing dichotomies such as subject/object, knower/known, fact/value. It rests on individuals being comfortable with the blurring of lines between the science and art of interpretation, the social scientific and the literary account (Geertz, 1980). Yet, in rejecting these rigid distinctions, we need not, as Michael Jackson (1989) argues, dissolve the lived *experience* of inquirer or respondents into the anonymous field of discourse.

We can reject dichotomous thinking on pragmatic grounds: Such distinctions simply are not very useful anymore. We can continue to respect the bid to make sense of the conditions of our lives without claiming that either inquirer or actor is the final arbiter of understanding. The interpretive undertaking thus becomes, in Jackson's (1989) words, the practice of "actively debating and exchanging points of view with our informants. It means placing our ideas on a par with theirs, testing them not against predetermined standards of rationality but against the immediate exigencies of life" (p. 14).

I read this union of the interpretive turn and the tradition of practical philosophy, with its defense of the Socratic virtues and its emphasis on our fundamental character as dialogic, conversational, questioning beings, to be a most promising and hopeful development. The interpretivists' profound respect for and interest in socially constructed meaning and practice is consonant with the turn toward the moral-practical (*phronesis*) and away from *theoria* (as explored, although in very different ways, by Bernstein, 1986, 1992; Rorty, 1982; Sullivan, 1986).³⁴

The thesis of this chapter is that what marks constructivist or interpretivist work as a unique form of human inquiry is a set of theoretical commitments and philosophical assumptions about the way the world must be in order that we can know it. In reviewing the philosophical roots of this work and in summarizing the kinds of epistemological problems it raises, my intent has not been to make all those who claim the title "constructivist" or "interpretivist" inquirer into philosophers. Rather, my goal has been to enhance the level of awareness of the kind of philosophical investigation that is entailed in proposing alternatives to an empiricist social science. My purpose has been at least partially accomplished if the reader has been drawn to further investigation of the issues raised here.

Notes

1. Following a distinction developed by Stake (1991), I prefer the term *persuasions* or *approaches* to *models*. *Models* overpromises because it suggests that the student of interpretive inquiry would find guidance in the discussions of these methodologies for answering the question of what a completed inquiry should look like. It suggests that these statements are blueprints that should be followed. Yet models are not found in discussions of methodology but in the published accounts of various forms of interpretive inquiry. The term *persuasions*, on the contrary, connotes that what we are dealing with here are statements of particular commitments, purviews, and concerns.

2. A comparison with feminist methodologies is instructive here. In some cases, differences in method *do* help explain what is different about feminist approaches to human inquiry; however, this claim is contested (see, for example, Harding, 1987; Reinharz, 1992; Riger, 1992).

3. This caveat drawing attention to the distinction between methodological commitments and methods is warranted in view of the persistent mistaken belief that making the interpretive turn in the social sciences is principally a matter of employing different means of collecting and analyzing data. Understanding constructivist or interpretivist approaches to the study of human action (or any of the other approaches examined in this volume) is not simply a matter of mastering technique, copying a method, or following a model. Rather, understanding is to be had through an examination of the epistemological assumptions and claims of a methodology, through study of its conceptualization of what we are about when we inquire. This is a philosophical inquiry.

4. Other interpretive and constructivist persuasions are explained elsewhere in this series: Holstein and Gubrium discuss ethnomethodology in Volume 2, Chapter 6; Greene explores constructivist thinking in evaluation in Volume 3, Chapter 13; Stake, in Volume 2, Chapter 4, notes the influence of interpretivist and constructivist thinking in shaping notions of case study strategies; and Atkinson and Hammersley, in Volume 2, Chapter 5, discuss how the interpretivist's goal for human inquiry is manifest in ethnography.

5. For different accounts of these roots, see Bauman (1978), Bernstein (1976), and Bleicher (1980).

6. See Richard J. Bernstein's (1976) discussion of the definition of scientific explanation in mainstream social science.

7. See Taylor (1989, pp. 159ff.) for a thorough discussion of the tensions between Romanticist and Cartesian notions of the self. Although his work is an exercise in moral philosophy, much of his argument is relevant to understanding the tension referred to here. See also Gergen (1991, chap. 2).

8. According to Smith (1989), advocates of this solution hold that "although the ideas of objectivity, detachment, and methodological constraints as defined by empiricists are a fiction, interpretive inquiry must be made more systematic and rigorous. The claim here is that methods cannot eliminate researcher subjectivity but that they can certainly minimize it; they are thereby the criteria against which to judge that some results are more objective than others" (p. 157).

9. See Taylor (1964) for an account of both kinds of explanations. Interpretivists typically use the term *human action* (as opposed to *behavior*) to signal not only that intentions of the actor are relevant but that these intentions and the behavior itself are socially, temporally, and culturally situated and constituted. See also Bruner (1990, p. 19) and Erickson (1990, p. 98).

10. The bid to explicate the nature of interpretation is directed, in part, at the naturalists' claim that the aim (and form) of causal explanation in the natural sciences applies equally well to the social sciences. To argue that we "understand" human action *by means of interpretation* is to argue for an altogether different aim of the social sciences. Erickson (1990) explains this shift as follows: "If people take action on the grounds of their interpretations of the actions of others, then meaning-interpretations themselves are causal for humans. This is not true in nature. . . . The billiard ball does not make sense of its environment. But the human actor in society does, and different humans make sense

differently. They impute symbolic meaning to other's actions and take their own actions in accord with the meaning interpretations they have made" (p. 98).

11. For an example of the difference this interpretation of *Verstehen* makes in humanistic and hermeneutical psychology, see Sass (1988).

12. Critical hermeneutics (e.g., Abel and Habermas) challenges the idealist assumptions of this commitment to interpretation as ontological hermeneutics and points to its failure to consider the extralinguistic considerations that constitute the world of thought and action. In the discussion of feminist standpoint epistemologies that appears later in this chapter these concerns are revisited. See also Chapter 9, by Olesen, and Chapter 10, by Stanfield, in this volume.

13. This reconceptualization of criteria for appraisal is evident in constructionist thinking. See below and Eisner (1991, pp. 53ff.), Goodman and Elgin (1988, pp. 153ff.), and Gergen (1991, pp. 226ff.)

14. Experience-near and experience-distant concepts are roughly analogous to emic and etic perspectives, respectively.

15. For a brief discussion of the difference between philosophical and methodological behaviorism, see Nagel (1961, p. 480).

16. Joas (1987) argues that the Chicago school of symbolic interactionism only partially realized the full promise of a social philosophy of pragmatism.

17. Denzin's (1989a, 1989b, 1992) recent work is in the main a deconstruction of the texts that form the tradition of symbolic interactionism. It is a highly synthetic, complex reformulation of the interactionist project that draws on insights from postmodern ethnography, feminist critiques of positivism, hermeneutical and existential phenomenology, cultural studies, and poststructuralist thought of Foucault and Derrida, as well as a recovery of a critically engaged social pragmatism.

18. For an examination of the ways in which realism is inscribed in a fieldwork text, see Clifford (1983), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Van Maanen (1988).

19. Furthermore, as Stephen Toulmin (1982) has argued, natural scientists are also in the business of construing reality, and the regulative ideals of objectivity and rationality are not necessarily at odds with a constructivist point of view.

20. Goodman is not principally concerned with applying his insights to social science, and furthermore, understanding Goodman is not easy going; by his own admission he disdains writing "flatfooted philosophy." Hence few who label their methodologies constructivist (with the notable exception of Eisner and Bruner) make any reference to Goodman's work. Eisner is discussed below. Bruner (1986, 1990) acknowledges Goodman's influence on his own account of cultural psychology, which takes seriously the activity of meaning making and the intentional states of social agents. Bruner's recent work is a redescription of the cognitive enterprise grounded in the examination of how meaning is constructed. It stands as a corrective to accounts of cognitive science shaped by the metaphors of computation and information processing.

21. See Cornel West (1989) for a brief discussion of Goodman's contribution to the philosophy of American pragmatism.

22. Radical constructivist thinking informs much current work in curriculum inquiry in mathematics and science education (e.g., Bodner, 1986; Cobb & Steffe, 1983; Cobb, Yackel, & Wood, 1992; Davis, Maher, & Noddings, 1990; Driver & Oldham, 1986; Novak, 1987). It is becoming something of a rallying cry for reformulating theories of teaching and

learning among instructional technologists and educational psychologists (e.g., Duffy & Jonassen, 1991). As Matthews (1992) has noted, the emphasis here is not on knowledge as something that tells us about the world, but knowledge as something that tells us about our experiences and the best ways to organize them. Learning is redefined as a process of experiencing and developing the knowledge construction process, and teaching becomes less a matter of communicating content (i.e., a transmission model) and more a matter of facilitating a process.

23. Of course, an instrumentalist view of theory and knowledge was also characteristic of the logical empiricists' view. They would no doubt have taken great delight in von Glasersfeld's (1991) choice of the title "Knowing Without Metaphysics."

24. Gergen (1991) claims that "words are not maps of reality. Rather, words gain their meaning through their use in social interchange, within the 'language games' of the culture. We don't use words like *perception*, *thought*, and *memory* because they accurately map a world we call mental. Rather, such terms gain their meaning from the way they are used in social life" (p. 102).

25. See Harding (1986) and Riger (1992) for an overview of different feminist epistemologies.

26. See also the chapters in this volume by Olesen (Chapter 9), Stanfield (Chapter 10), and Fiske (Chapter 11).

27. Di Leonardo (1991) argues that social constructionism need not degenerate into the nihilist stance of poststructuralism that denies the existence of social order, declares the death of the subject, and levels the distinctions between truth and falsehood.

28. It should be noted that Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 83-87) are somewhat equivocal on this issue. They claim to be drawn to the position that all reality is created by mind, yet are willing to settle for a less radical view of "constructed realities." They hold that constructions are invented or created, yet those constructions are related to "tangible entities"—events, persons, objects. If these tangible entities are not solely creations of mind, then they must be ontically "real." The distinction they draw here seems to be one of a difference between experiential reality (constructions) and ontological reality (tangible entities).

29. See di Leonardo (1991) and Rosenau (1992) for discussions of the difference between postmodernism and poststructuralism.

30. See also J. K. Smith (1989, chap. 7) for an extended discussion of this issue.

31. Schutz's (1967) idea of multiple realities is often wrongly interpreted. He describes the world of science, the world of mythology, the world of religion, the world of dreams, and so forth as multiple realities, or more specifically as "finite provinces of meaning" (p. 230). Yet he does not claim that these are literally different realities: "We speak of provinces of *meaning* . . . because it is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects [in a given province] which constitutes reality." He views these multiple realities as "merely names for different tensions in one and the same life, unbroken from birth to death, which is attended to in different modifications" (p. 258).

32. See, for example, Crapanzano's (1986) unmasking of Geertz's authority as ethnographer in the study of the Balinese cockfight.

33. Following Matthews (1992), we might hazard the explanation that this tension arises from the fact that constructivism rightly criticizes empiricist assumptions yet clings to an empiricist epistemological paradigm. One alternative is a nonempiricist, objectivist

epistemology of Matthews (1992) and Chalmers (1982). Another is the analysis of practices wherein the epistemology of hermeneutics is not detached from the sociology of communication (see, e.g., Giddens, 1976, 1984; Habermas, 1972).

34. This development is also supported by the growing interest in narrative and storytelling as a means of shaping, organizing, and understanding human experience (see MacIntyre, 1977, 1981; Sarbin, 1986).

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