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7

THREE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES FOR QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Constructionism

◆ Thomas A. Schwandt

Labels in philosophy and cultural discourse have the character that Derrida ascribes to Plato's pharmakon: they can poison and kill, and they can remedy and cure. We need them to help identify a style, a temperament, a set of common concerns and emphases, or a vision that has determinate shape. But we must also be wary of the ways in which they can blind us or can reify what is fluid and changing.

Richard J. Bernstein, "What Is the Difference That Makes a Difference?" 1986

Qualitative inquiry is the name for a reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy.¹ The movement encompassed multiple epistemological, methodological, political, and ethical criticisms of social scientific research in fields and disciplines that favored experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, and survey research strategies. Immanent criticism of these methodologies within these disciplines and fields as well

as insights from external debates in philosophy of science and social science fueled the opposition.² Over the years, the movement has acquired a political as well as an intellectual place in the academy. It has its own journals, academic associations, conferences, and university positions, as well as the support of publishers, all of which have both sustained and, to some extent, created the movement. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to claim, given the influence that

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publishers exercise through the promotion and sales of ever more allegedly new and improved accounts of what qualitative inquiry is, that the movement at times looks more like an “industry.”

Not surprisingly, considerable academic and professional politics are also entailed in the movement, particularly as it has drawn on intellectual developments in feminism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Current struggles over departmental organization, interdisciplinary alliances, what constitutes “legitimate” research, who controls the editorship of key journals, and so forth (compare, for example, Denzin, 1997, and Prus, 1996; see also Shea, 1998), in part, reflect the turmoil over what constitute the appropriate goals and means of human inquiry. Quarrels in university departments over the meaning and value of qualitative inquiry often reflect broader controversies in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology, feminist studies, history, and literature about the purpose, values, and ethics of intellectual labor.

Thus qualitative inquiry is more comprehensible as a site or arena for social scientific criticism than as any particular kind of social theory, methodology, or philosophy. That site is a “home” for a wide variety of scholars who often are seriously at odds with one another but who share a general rejection of the blend of scientism, foundationalist epistemology, instrumental reasoning, and philosophical anthropology of disengagement that has marked “mainstream” social science. Yet how one further characterizes the site depends, in part, on what one finds of interest there.³ For some researchers, the site is a place where a particular set of laudable virtues for social research are championed, such as fidelity to phenomena, respect for the life world, and attention to the fine-grained details of daily life. They are thus attracted to the fact that long-standing traditions of fieldwork research in sociology and anthropology have been revitalized and appropriated under the banner of “qualitative inquiry” while at the same time immanent criticism of those traditions has inspired new ways of thinking about the field-worker’s interests, motivations, aims, obligations, and

texts. Others are attracted to the site as a place where debates about aims of the human sciences unfold and where issues of what it means to know the social world are explored. Still others may find social theory of greatest interest and hence look to the site for knowledge of the debate over the merits of symbolic interactionism, social systems theory, critical theory of society, feminist theory, and so forth. Finally, many current researchers seem to view the site as a place for experimentation with empirical methodologies and textual strategies inspired by postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking.

In this chapter, I focus on the site as an arena in which different epistemologies vie for attention as potential justifications for doing qualitative inquiry. I examine three of the philosophies that in various forms are assumed in the many books that explain the aims and methods of qualitative inquiry. Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism embrace different perspectives on the aim and practice of understanding human action, different ethical commitments, and different stances on methodological and epistemological issues of representation, validity, objectivity, and so forth.⁴ The chapter begins with an overview of each philosophy, and I indicate ways in which they are related to and at odds with one another. I then discuss several epistemological and ethical-political issues that arise from these philosophies and that characterize contemporary concerns about the purpose and justification of qualitative inquiry.

There is no denying that what follows is a Cook’s tour of complicated philosophies that demand more detailed attention in their own right as well as in interaction. I apologize in advance for leaving the philosophically minded aghast at the incompleteness of the treatment and for encouraging the methodologically inclined to scurry to later chapters on tools. But I would be remiss were I not to add that the practice of social inquiry cannot be adequately defined as an atheoretical making that requires only methodological prowess. Social inquiry is a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity (like teaching) that in the doing transforms the very theory and aims that guide it. In other words, as one engages in the “practical” activities of generating

and interpreting data to answer questions about the meaning of what others are doing and saying and then transforming that understanding into public knowledge, one inevitably takes up “theoretical” concerns about what constitutes knowledge and how it is to be justified, about the nature and aim of social theorizing, and so forth. In sum, acting and thinking, practice and theory, are linked in a continuous process of critical reflection and transformation.

◆ *Background: Part 1*

Interpretivism and hermeneutics, generally characterized as the *Geisteswissenschaftliche* or *Verstehen* tradition in the human sciences, arose in the reactions of neo-Kantian German historians and sociologists (i.e., Dilthey, Rickert, Windleband, Simmel, Weber) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the then-dominant philosophy of positivism (and later, logical positivism). At the heart of the dispute was the claim that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) were fundamentally different in nature and purpose from the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*). Defenders of interpretivism argued that the human sciences aim to understand human action. Defenders of positivism and proponents of the unity of the sciences held the view that the purpose of any science (if it is indeed to be called a science) is to offer causal explanations of social, behavioral, and physical phenomena.

There was, of course, considerable debate among the neo-Kantians about the precise nature of the difference between the sciences. And to the present day, the issue of whether there is a critical distinction to be drawn between the natural and the human sciences on the basis of different aims—explanation (*Erklären*) versus understanding (*Verstehen*)—remains more or less unsettled.⁵ Although it is important to understand how apologists for the uniqueness of the human sciences link their respective philosophies to this issue, in the interest of space, I will forgo that examination here and focus directly on key features of the philosophies themselves.

I begin with a sketch of the interpretivist theory of human action and meaning and then show how philosophical hermeneutics offers a critique of this view and a different understanding of human inquiry.

◆ *Interpretivist Philosophies*

From an interpretivist point of view, what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful. Thus, to understand a particular social action (e.g., friendship, voting, marrying, teaching), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that constitute that action. To say that human action is meaningful is to claim either that it has a certain intentional content that indicates the kind of action it is and/or that what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs (Fay, 1996; Outhwaite, 1975). Because human action is understood in this way, one can determine that a wink is not a wink (to use Ryle’s example popularized by Geertz), or that a smile can be interpreted as wry or loving, or that very different physical movements can all be interpreted as acts of supplication, or that the same physical movement of raising one’s arm can be variously interpreted as voting, hailing a taxi, or asking for permission to speak, depending on the context and intentions of the actor.

To find meaning in an action, or to say one understands what a particular action means, requires that one interpret in a particular way what the actors are doing. This process of interpreting or understanding (of achieving *Verstehen*) is differentially represented, and therein lie some important differences in philosophies of interpretivism and between interpretivism and philosophical hermeneutics. These differences can perhaps be most easily grasped through a consideration of four ways of defining (theorizing) the notion of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*), three that constitute the interpretive tradition and a fourth that marks the distinction of philosophical hermeneutics from that tradition.

Empathic Identification

One way of defining the notion first appears in the earlier work of Wilhelm Dilthey and the *Lebensphilosophers*. Dilthey argued that to understand the meaning of human action requires grasping the subjective consciousness or intent of the actor from the inside.⁶ *Verstehen* thus entails a kind of empathic identification with the actor. It is an act of psychological reenactment—getting inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on. This interpretivist stance (also called intentionalism) is explained in Collingwood's (1946/1961) account of what constitutes historical knowledge, and it lies at the heart of what is known as objectivist or conservative hermeneutics (e.g., Hirsch, 1976). Both approaches share the general idea that it is possible for the interpreter to transcend or break out of her or his historical circumstances in order to reproduce the meaning or intention of the actor. (I realize that introducing the term *hermeneutics* here is a bit confusing, given that I stated above that I wish to draw a distinction *between* interpretivist and hermeneutic philosophies. But *objectivist* hermeneutics shares the same epistemology as interpretivism, whereas *philosophical* hermeneutics, as I explain below, rejects this epistemology.)⁷

Whether it is possible to achieve interpretive understanding through a process of grasping an actors' intent is widely debated. Geertz (1976/1979), for example, argues that understanding comes more from the act of looking over the shoulders of actors and trying to figure out (both by observing and by conversing) what the actors think they are up to. Nonetheless, the idea of acquiring an "inside" understanding—the actors' definitions of the situation—is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry.

Phenomenological Sociology

A second way of making sense of the notion of interpretive understanding is found in the

work of phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists, including Cicourel and Garfinkel (I will address more recent developments in conversation analysis later). Influenced by the work of Alfred Schutz (1962, 1932/1967), phenomenological analysis is principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (the life world, or *Lebenswelt*) is constituted. The aim is to grasp how we come to interpret our own and others' action as meaningful and to "reconstruct the genesis of the objective meanings of action in the intersubjective communication of individuals in the social life-world" (Outhwaite, 1975, p. 91). Two conceptual tools often used in that reconstruction are indexicality and reflexivity (Potter, 1996). The former signifies that the meaning of a word or utterance is dependent on its context of use. The latter directs our attention to the fact that utterances are not just about something but are also doing something; an utterance is in part constitutive of a speech act. These two notions are part of the means whereby phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists come to understand how social reality, everyday life, is constituted in conversation and interaction. (For a fuller discussion of this perspective, see Gubrium & Holstein, Chapter 18, this volume.)

Language Games

A third definition of interpretive understanding is represented in analysis of language approaches that take their inspiration from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, especially the work of Peter Winch (1958). From Wittgenstein, Winch borrowed the notion that there are many games played with language (testing hypotheses, giving orders, greeting, and so on), and he extended this idea to language games as constituted in different cultures. Each of these games has its own rules or criteria that make the game meaningful to its participants. Reasoning by analogy, we can say that human action, like speech, is an element in communication governed by rules. More simply, human action is meaningful by virtue of the system of meanings (in Wittgenstein's terms, the "lan-

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

Shared Features

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

◆ *Philosophical Hermeneutics*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

◆ *Background: Part 2*

Philosophical hermeneutics and social constructionist philosophies (like decon-

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

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

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

locus of representation is the autonomous, disengaged, cognizing agent, or what Bernstein (1983) characterizes as the Cartesian knower.¹⁷ To be sure, there is considerable variation in the ways theories of inquiry and theories of knowledge draw on this concatenation of an empiricist theory of language, an atomistic theory of self, and a representational epistemology. Yet much contemporary social science practice, at least implicitly, continues to be informed by the idea that meaning and knowledge are best explicated by means of some kind of epistemology of representation (Shapiro, 1981; Taylor, 1995), although few social scientists are wedded to a crude correspondence theory of representation or naively accept that representation is mimesis.

◆ *Social Constructionism*

Social constructionist epistemologies aim to “overcome” representationalist epistemologies in a variety of ways.¹⁸ They typically begin by drawing on an everyday, uncontroversial, garden-variety constructivism that might be described in the following way: 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; that is, mind does something with these impressions, at the very least forming abstractions or concepts. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it. We invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experience. Furthermore, there is an inevitable historical and sociocultural dimension to this construction. We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth.

This ordinary sense of constructionism is also called *perspectivism* in contemporary epistemology (e.g., Fay, 1996). It is the view that all knowledge claims and their evaluation take place within a conceptual framework through which the world is described and explained. Perspectivism opposes a naive realist and empiricist epistemology that holds that there can be some kind of unmediated, direct grasp of the empirical world and that knowledge (i.e., the mind) simply reflects or mirrors what is “out there.”

Philosophies of social constructionism also reject this naive realist view of representation. But they often go much further in denying any interest whatsoever in an ontology of the real. Consider, for example, Potter’s (1996) recent work explicating constructionism in the tradition of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. He grounds his view in a critique of a representational theory of language and knowledge. He argues that “the world . . . is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it” (p. 98), yet he holds that social constructionism is not an ontological doctrine at all and thus takes no position on what sorts of things exist and what their status is. His primary concern is with how it is that a descriptive utterance is socially (i.e., interactionally) made to appear stable, factual, neutral, independent of the speaker, and merely mirroring some aspect of the world. For example, Potter states that “like money on the international markets, truth can be treated as a commodity which is worked up, can fluctuate, and can be strengthened or weakened by various procedures of representation” (p. 5). For Potter, social construction is interested in how utterances “work,” and how they work is neither a matter of the cognitive analysis of how mental versions of the world are built nor a matter of the empirical analysis of semantic content and logical analysis of syntactical relations of words and sentences. Rather, how utterances work is a matter of understanding social practices and analyzing the rhetorical strategies in play in particular kinds of discourse.¹⁹

Like Potter, Denzin (1997) argues that discourse is the material practice that constitutes representation and description. He cites approvingly Stuart Hall’s claim that “there is no way of

experiencing the ‘real relations’ of a particular society outside of its cultural and ideological categories” (p. 245). Gergen (1985, 1994a, 1994b, 1995) is equally skeptical of the “real.” He claims that social constructionism is mute or agnostic on matters of ontology: Social constructionism neither affirms nor denies the “world out there.” For Gergen (1994a), constructionism is nothing more or less than a “form of intelligibility—an array of propositions, arguments, metaphors, narratives, and the like—that welcome inhabitation” (p. 78). Gergen subscribes to a relational theory of social meaning—“It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern” (1994a, pp. 263-264)—and claims that social constructionism simply invites one to play with the possibilities and practices that are made coherent by various forms of relations.

All of these views take issue with what might be called *meaning realism*—the view that meanings are fixed entities that can be discovered and that exist independent of the interpreter. In this respect, these social constructionist views share with philosophical hermeneutics the broad critique of meaning as an object, and they display an affinity with the notion of the coming into being of meaning. Both philosophies endorse an expressivist-constructivist theory of language, in which, broadly conceived, language is understood as a range of activities in which we express and realize a certain way of being in the world. Language is seen neither as primarily a tool for gaining knowledge of the world as an objective process nor “as an instrument whereby we order the things in our world, but as what allows us to have the world we have. Language makes possible the disclosure of the human world” (Taylor, 1995, p. ix). Hence advocates for social constructionism and philosophical hermeneutics might agree on the claim that we are self-interpreting beings and that language constitutes this being (or that we dwell in language, as Gadamer and Heidegger have explained).

However, the similarity ends there. Although “constructionist” in its disavowal of an objectivist theory of meaning, philosophical hermeneutics trusts in the potential of language

(conversation, dialogue) to disclose meaning and truth (Gallagher, 1992; Smith, 1997). For both Gadamer and Taylor, there is a “truth to the matter” of interpretation, but it is conceived in terms of disclosure that transpires in actual interpretive practices “rather than as a relation of correspondence between an object and some external means of representation” as conceived in traditional epistemology (Smith, 1997, p. 22). In sharp contrast to the views of Gadamer and Taylor, many (but not all) constructionist accounts hold that there is no truth to the matter of interpretation.

“Weak” and “Strong” Constructionism

A general assumption of social constructionism is that knowledge is not disinterested, apolitical, and exclusive of affective and embodied aspects of human experience, but is in some sense ideological, political, and permeated with values (Rouse, 1996). This assumption is amenable to both weak and strong interpretations. A weak or moderate interpretation of the role that social factors play in what constitutes legitimate, warranted, or true interpretation may well reject definitions of such notions as knowledge, justification, objectivity, and evidence as developed within the representationalist-empiricist-foundationalist nexus. But the perspective will attempt to recast these notions in a different epistemological framework and thereby preserve some way of distinguishing better or worse interpretations. A strong or radical interpretation of the role that social factors play in what constitutes legitimate knowledge results in a more radically skeptical and even nihilistic stance.

“Weak” Constructionism: An Illustration

A moderate version of social constructionism, developed in the context of feminist philosophy of science, is provided by Longino (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1996). Her aim is to develop “a theory of inquiry that reveals the ideological dimension of knowledge construc-

tion while at the same time offering criteria for the comparative evaluation of scientific theories and research programs” (1993a, p. 257). Longino argues that many feminist critiques of science, including both standpoint epistemologies and psychodynamic perspectives, rightly criticize traditional epistemology for focusing exclusively on the logic of justification of scientific claims while ignoring methods of discovery or heuristic biases. She provides examples of how heuristics (e.g., androcentrism, sexism, and gender ideology) “limit the hypotheses in play in specific areas of inquiry” and how different heuristics put different hypotheses into play (1993b, p. 102). Although they are successful critiques of empiricism to the extent that they help “redescribe the process of knowledge acquisition” (by introducing different heuristics), these feminist epistemologies stop short of offering an adequate account of how we are to decide or to justify decisions between what seem to be conflicting knowledge claims. In sum, Longino claims that many feminist epistemologies are descriptively adequate but normatively (or prescriptively) inadequate.

Longino’s (1993a) solution to the problem of uniting the descriptive and the normative is something she calls “contextual empiricism.” She defends a modest empiricism—one in which the real world constrains our knowledge construction—by claiming that experiential or observational data are the least easily dismissed bases of hypothesis and theory validation. At the same time, she argues that the methods employed to generate, analyze, and organize data and to link evidence to hypotheses are not under the control of an autonomous, disengaged, disembodied subject, knower, or ideal epistemic agent. Rather, such matters are “contextual” in that they are constituted by a context of intersubjectively determined background assumptions that are “the vehicles by which social values and ideology are expressed in inquiry and become subtly inscribed in theories, hypotheses, and models defining research programs” (1993a, p. 263).

Consequently, these background assumptions must be submitted to conceptual and evi-

dential criticism that is not possible as long as we cling to the view that knowledge is a production of an individual cognitive process. But, according to Longino (1993b), if we conceive of the practices of inquiry and knowledge production as *social* and accept the thesis that objectivity is a function of social interactions, then we can begin to explore how to criticize background assumptions effectively. Longino goes on to explain that “effective criticism of background assumptions requires the presence and expression of alternative points of view . . . [which] allows us to see how social values and interests can become enshrined in otherwise acceptable research programs” (p. 112). She offers a set of criteria necessary for a given scientific community to “achieve the transformative dimension of critical discourse” that include recognized avenues/forums for criticism; community response to criticism, not merely tolerance of it; shared standards of evaluation; and equality of intellectual authority (p. 112).

Longino argues for a social epistemology in which ideological and value issues tied to sociocultural practices are interwoven with empirical ones in scientific inquiry.²⁰ She appears to steer a middle ground by acknowledging that scientific knowledge is in part the product of processes of social negotiation without claiming that such knowledge is *only* a matter of social negotiation. And, in endorsing objectivity and strongly defending the normative aspects of a theory of inquiry, she clearly avoids the relativist view that any interpretation is as good as another. Finally, as is characteristic of many feminist epistemologists, Longino both assumes and builds on an ontology of knowing that is concretely situated and more interactive, relational, and dialogic than representational (Rouse, 1996).

“Strong” Constructionism

One way in which this stance develops is as follows: Taking their cue from Wittgenstein’s notion of language games (as elaborated by Winch, 1958), some radical social constructionists begin with the premise that language is embedded in social practices or forms of life.²¹ Moreover, the rules that govern a form of life circumscribe and

close that form of life off to others. Hence it is only within and with reference to a particular form of life that the meaning of an action can be described and deciphered (Giddens, 1993). Standards for rationally evaluating beliefs are completely dependent on the language games or forms of life in which those beliefs arise. Thus the meanings of different language games or different forms of life are incommensurable. When this view is coupled with an insistence on radical conceptual difference, as it often is in many standpoint epistemologies, it readily leads to epistemological relativism. As Fay (1996) explains, in epistemological relativism, “no cross-framework judgments are permissible [for] the content, meaning, truth, rightness, and reasonableness of cognitive, ethical, or aesthetic beliefs, claims, experiences or actions can only be determined from within a particular conceptual scheme” (p. 77).²²

Curiously, radical social constructionists such as Gergen and Denzin apparently endorse this idea of the incommensurability of language games or forms of life yet simultaneously claim that social constructionist philosophy somehow leads to an improvement of the human condition. Gergen (1994a) argues that knowledge is the product of a social processes and that all statements of the true, the rational, and the good are the products of various particular communities of interpreters and thus to be regarded with suspicion. Yet he links his social constructionist philosophy to an agenda of democratization, possibility, and reconstruction. Above all else, Gergen looks to social constructionism as a means of broadening and democratizing the conversation about human practices and of submitting these practices to a continuous process of reflection.

Likewise, in his defense of a postmodernist interpretive ethnography, Denzin (1997) adamantly rejects what he calls a realist epistemology, one that “asserts that accurate representations of the world can be produced, and [that] these representations truthfully map the worlds of real experience” (p. 265). He defends standpoint epistemologies that study the world of experience from the point of view of the historically and culturally situated individual. But he

simultaneously endorses an ethnographic practice given to writing moral and allegorical tales that are not mere records of human experience intended simply to celebrate cultural differences or bring other cultures to our awareness. In Denzin’s view, these moral tales are a method of empowerment for readers and a means for readers to discover moral truths about themselves.

A similar paradox is evident in each of these two strong constructionist views. Of Gergen we might ask, Absent any criteria for deciding across various frameworks which is the better (the more just, more democratic, and so on) practice and if there is no epistemic gain or loss resulting from this comparison, why would we bother to engage in the conversation?²³ And of Denzin we might inquire, Does not the creation of moral tales assume that there is a (moral) truth to the matter of interpretation that arises from the comparison of historically and culturally situated experience? Does not such a move speak to the need for some criteria whereby we clarify and justify genuine moral truths, thereby distinguishing them from mere illusion or belief?

◆ *Summary: Enduring Issues*

The qualitative inquiry movement is built on a profound concern with understanding what other human beings are doing or saying. The philosophies of interpretivism, philosophical hermeneutics, and social constructionism provide different ways of addressing this concern. Yet cutting across these three philosophies are several perdurable issues that every qualitative inquirer must come to terms with using the resources of these (and other) philosophies. Three of the most salient issues are (a) how to define what “understanding” actually means and how to justify claims “to understand”; (b) how to frame the interpretive project, broadly conceived; and (c) how to envision and occupy the ethical space where researchers and researched (subjects, informants, respondents, participants, coresearchers) relate to one another on the sociotemporal occasion or event that is “re-

search,” and, consequently, how to determine the role, status, responsibility, and obligations the researcher has in and to the society he or she researches. These cognitive, social, and moral issues are obviously intertwined, but I distinguish them here for analytic purposes.

*Understanding and Justifying Understanding*²⁴

All qualitative inquirers who have made the interpretive turn (Hiley et al., 1991; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979) share a set of commitments.²⁵ They are highly critical of scientism and reject an anthropology of a disengaged, controlling, instrumental self (Smith, 1997; Taylor, 1995). They hold that the cognitive requirements involved in understanding others cannot be met through the use of foundationalist epistemological assumptions characteristic of logical empiricism (e.g., neutrality of observation, primordial “givenness” of experience, independence of empirical data from theoretical frameworks). Interpretivism, all varieties of social constructionism (including Nietzschean perspectivism, neopragmatism, and deconstructionism), and Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics all “insist on rejecting the very idea of any foundational, mind-independent, and permanently fixed reality that could be grasped or even sensibly thought of without the mediation of human structuring” (Shusterman, 1991, p. 103), at least in the realm of human studies. Stated somewhat differently, knowledge of what others are doing and saying always depends upon some background or context of other meanings, beliefs, values, practices, and so forth. Hence, for virtually all postempiricist philosophies of the human sciences, understanding is interpretation all the way down.

But the cognitive requirements of understanding in qualitative methodologies are not exhausted by this claim of the inevitability of interpretation. It is necessary to spell out the consequences of this interpretive turn for our efforts to understand.²⁶ Broadly speaking, two different sets of consequences characterize the contemporary debate.

Strong Holism

On the one hand, there are strong holists who argue that from the fact that we always *see* (make sense of, know) everything through interpretation, we must conclude that everything in fact *is constituted* by interpretation. From the fact that knowledge is perspectival and contextual, they draw the strong skeptical conclusion that it is impossible to distinguish any particular interpretation as more correct, or better or worse, than any other.

In this scenario, the question of justifying an interpretation of what others are doing or saying is irrelevant. How or why justification is irrelevant depends on the particular kind of strong holism in question. Justification may be irrelevant because interpretations are always regarded as “our” interpretations and hence ethnocentric (Hoy, 1991). Justification may not matter because interpretations are thought to be always nothing more than an expression of personal or political subjectivity. Or justification may be a nonissue because it is assumed that an interpretation never goes beyond itself; it is not about justification, disclosure, or clarification of meaning, but “textualistic,” caught up in the larger game called the play of signifiers.²⁷ A good deal of contemporary writing about qualitative inquiry (e.g., Clough, 1998; Denzin, 1994, 1997; Lather, 1993; Richardson, 1997), influenced by postmodern ethnography and other related intellectual currents, appears to be committed to some version of strong holism. Likewise, the radical social constructionists engaged in the social studies of science—Latour, Woolgar, Knorr-Cetina, Barnes, and Bloor—develop strong holistic theses about scientific knowledge.

The issue of evaluating and choosing among competing (different, contradictory, and so on) interpretations raises the question of what constitutes rational behavior. What does it mean to make a reasonable choice from among alternative interpretations? Often a common assumption in strong or skeptical holism is that “if we cannot come up with universal fixed criteria to measure the plausibility of competing interpretations, then this means that we have no *rational* basis for distinguishing better and worse, more

plausible or less plausible interpretations, whether these be interpretations of texts, actions, or historical epochs” (Bernstein, 1986, p. 358). Given the impossibility of *foundational* criteria, strong holists, typically, reach one of several conclusions: (a) They hold that the very idea of being rational requires deconstruction; (b) they endorse a noncritical pluralism of views (i.e., “multiple realities,” many equally acceptable interpretations, and so on) that requires no comparative evaluation; or (c) they claim that rhetorical criteria—whether an interpretation invites, persuades, compels, entertains, evokes, or delights—are the only proper ones for judging whether one interpretation is better than another.²⁸

Weak Holism

Weak or nonskeptical holism argues that it is neither necessary nor desirable to draw such relativistic, suspicious (or, worse, nihilistic) conclusions from the fact that knowledge of others is always dependent on a background of understanding. Weak holists claim that the background (the “mediation” of all understanding) is “not strong enough to act as a fixed limit or to make it impossible to decide normatively between interpretations on the basis of evidence. Indeed such evaluation will always be comparative, fallibilistic, and revisable, in that yet a better interpretation could come along, encompassing the strengths and overcoming the weaknesses of previous interpretations” (Bohman, 1991a, p. 146).

Weak holism seeks to explicate a rational basis for deciding whether an interpretation is “valid” or justified. But there are variety of ways in which justification is attempted. For example, Bohman (1991b), Fay (1996), and to some extent Longino, as explained above, appear committed to the view that justification of an interpretation is subject to epistemic norms of internal coherence as well as correctness based on empirical constraints. Other weak holists look to redefine rationality on the basis of practical reasoning, that is, how “we can and do make comparative judgments and seek to support them with arguments and the appeal to

good reasons” (Bernstein, 1986, p. 358). For example, Bernstein’s (1983, 1986, 1991) “nonfoundational pragmatic humanism” (which he also finds as a common theme in Rorty, Habermas, and Gadamer) illustrates a case for weak holism built on themes of praxis, practice, discourse, and practical truth. Gadamer (1975) argues that although the act of understanding cannot be modeled as a determinate analysis of an object yielding a final, complete, or definitive interpretation, nonetheless understanding has a normative dimension manifest in the fact that understanding is a kind of practical-moral knowledge. In his explanation of choosing between competing interpretations, Taylor (1985a, 1989) denies that there can be any appeal to empirical evidence or any fixed criterion that would *decisively* determine the correctness of an interpretation. Yet he develops an argument for the comparative superiority of interpretations grounded in a narrative form of practical reason and linked to his particular explication of how it is that we are human beings for whom things matter. For Taylor, what counts as better interpretation is understood as the justified movement from one interpretation to another.²⁹

Locating the Interpretive Project

There is little agreement among qualitative inquirers on the social and scientific goals or purposes of their shared interpretive project. Many qualitative inquirers locate the project squarely within an emancipatory and transformative agenda. Some neopragmatists, critical theorists, and feminists are committed to the task of interpretation for purposes of criticizing and dismantling unjust and undemocratic educational and social practices and transforming them (Howe, 1998).

Other neopragmatists and some defenders of philosophical hermeneutics share this general Enlightenment belief in the power of critical reflection to improve our lot, but connect the interpretive project less directly to political transformation and more closely to dialogue, conversation, and education understood as an interpretational interchange that is self-

transformative. They see understanding that results from interpretation less as something that is at our disposal for us subsequently to do something with by “applying” it and more as participation in meaning, in a tradition, and ultimately in a dialogue (Grondin, 1994). In their view, critical emancipation—release (or escape) from reproductive, hegemonic, authoritarian structures—never quite fully happens. Critical reflection is always characterized by both autonomy and authority. As Gallagher (1992) explains, this way of conceiving of the interpretive project does not deny the possibility of emancipation and subsequent transformation, but only the possibility of absolute emancipation: “Emancipation is an ongoing process within educational experience, rather than the end result of critical reflection” (p. 272).

Many postmodernists are deeply suspicious of either the emancipatory or the conversational framing of the interpretive project. They opt instead for interpretation as a kind of spontaneous play or an incessant deciphering that unravels the multiple meanings of such notions as self, identity, objectivity, subjectivity, presence, truth, and being.

These different ways of framing the interpretive project reveal that, internally at least, qualitative inquiry is a broadly contentious movement. It is a loose coalition of inquirers seemingly united only in their general opposition to what was earlier called the foundationalist-empiricist-representationalist nexus of beliefs.

Ethical and Political Considerations

Social inquiry is a practice, not simply a way of knowing, and understanding what others are doing or saying and transforming that knowledge into public form involves moral-political commitments. Moral issues arise from the fact that a theory of knowledge is supported by a particular view of human agency. For example, Taylor, Dunne, and others argue that the foundationalist-empiricist-representationalist nexus is built upon a stance of disengagement

and objectification: The subject (knower) stands over and against the object of understanding. Moreover, the political dimension of the practice of social inquiry is wedded to the growth of what Bauman (1992) describes as the politics of legislative reason central to the rise of the modern state. Hence the practice of social research (including, but not limited to, qualitative inquiry) is not immune to effects of the central forces of the culture of modernity—technologization, institutionalization, bureaucratization, and professionalization.³⁰

A good deal of current criticism of ethnographic realism, or what is more generally called the crisis of representation in ethnography, is directed at the moral and political requirements of social research practices, not just (or even) their cognitive demands. At issue is how to answer the fundamental question, How should I *be* toward these people I am studying? There are at least two sharply different answers to this question. Firmly in line with the interpretivist tradition of disengagement, Prus (1996) defends what some qualitative researchers would perhaps criticize as a conventional, modernist, and dangerous view of the inquirer as one who “attempts to minimize the obtrusiveness of the researcher in the field and in the text eventually produced . . . an image of a researcher who is more chameleon-like . . . who fits into the situation with a minimum of disruption, and whose work allows the life-worlds of the other to surface in as complete and unencumbered a manner as possible” (p. 196). In sharp contrast, Denzin (1994) aims

to create a form of gazing and understanding fitted to the contemporary, mass-mediated, cinematic societies called postmodern. Such a gaze would undermine from within the cold, analytic, abstract, voyeuristic, disciplinary gaze of Foucault’s panopticon. This will be a newer, gentler, compassionate gaze which looks, and desires, not technical instrumental knowledge, but in-depth existential understandings. (p. 64)

How one understands the differences in the ethical-political stances of the researcher illustrated by Prus and Denzin, and how one decides what to do about one’s own ethical-political commitments as a researcher depend in part on the

ethical framework one draws on to make sense of these kinds of situations.³¹ This observation takes us into the realm of ethics and moral philosophy, a topic beyond the scope of this chapter. For present purposes, it will to have suffice simply to point out that at present there is a rather lively ongoing dialogue and debate surrounding the standard framework for moral epistemology.

Very briefly, the standard framework embraces a common core of ideas: (a) that morality is deontological (primarily concerned with moral obligations and commitments), (b) that the moral point of view is marked by its impartiality and universalizability, and (c) that conflicts of rights and obligations are open to argumentative resolution. Taken collectively, these ideas constitute a largely formalistic understanding of morality. *Formalistic* here does not mean the well-known quarrel over which is the superior formal theory of ethics. Rather, it means that within the standard framework the moral point of view is defined in terms of formal criteria. Form is privileged over content, as Vetlesen (1997) explains:

Universalizability, impartiality, and impersonality—the formal criteria instrumental in defining the “moral point of view”—now function as the features a given item must possess in order to qualify as actually having moral content. In other words, only issues, questions, problems, and dilemmas lending themselves to adjudication and consensual resolution by means of [these] formal criteria . . . are allowed to qualify as “moral” in content. (p. 4)

Although they display considerable differences in their views, thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Levinas, Løgstrup, Nussbaum, Bauman, and Noddings oppose the way morality is defined in the standard framework. They all argue for an ethic of closeness, of care, of proximity, or of relatedness, and hold that morality must be theorized from an *experiential* basis, specifically in the experience of the I-thou relationship. Benhabib contrasts this orientation with the orientation of the standard way of theorizing morality in the following way: “The moral issues which preoccupy us most and which touch us

most deeply derive not from problems of justice in the economy and the polity, but precisely from the quality of our relations with others in the ‘spheres of kinship, love, friendship, and sex’ ” (quoted in Vetlesen, 1997, p. 4). These relations demand what Nussbaum (1990) characterizes as attentiveness—“an openness to being moved by the plight of others,” the willingness “to be touched by another’s life” (p. 162). Normative attention, in turn, requires a way of knowing that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. *Context* refers both to each individual’s specific history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution and to the relationship between parties in the encounter with *its* history, identity, and affective definition. These two elements are linked by narrative.

Moreover, because these relations are highly contingent and contextual, the moral act itself, as Bauman (1993) observes, “is endemically ambivalent, forever threading precariously the thin lines dividing care from domination and tolerance from indifference” (p. 181). The inherent fragility, precariousness, and incurable ambivalence of morality means that the moral life is not about decision making, calculation, or procedures. Rather, it is “that unfounded, non-rational, unarguable, no excuses given and non-calculable urge to stretch towards the other, to caress, to be for, to live for, happen what may” (p. 247). Bauman (1995) adds that what the moral life amounts to in this view is a “never-ending string of settlements between mildly attractive or unattractive eventualities” (p. 66). Here, the notion of settlement differs from a calculating decision; it is a not a conclusion one reaches based on applying principles; it has no fixed procedure.

Completely absent in this way of thinking of the moral life is the notion that morality is about argumentative resolution of competing moral claims. The moral encounter does not mean rule following but expression and communication. Furthermore, in this framework, there is no teleological, liberalist idea of moral progress driven by a vision, albeit imperfect, of social utopia, or a belief that our values and our moral abilities are evolving to some better form.

In this alternative framework, ethical relationship is grounded in the notion of being-for

the Other. The relationship of being-for is prior to intentionality, prior to choice. Morality in this alternative framework is not voluntary. Moral orientation comes prior to any calculating action on the part of the moral agent; it is prior to purposefulness, reciprocity, and contractuality. Morality, in the first instance, is not about a kind of moral decision making that precedes moral action. Morality is not optional. Noddings refers to this notion of morality as caring. But caring is not a method for doing ethics or a particular principle on which to form a professional service ethic. It is an ethical orientation, a particular ground of meaning and value with its own internal logic of relational work (Thompson, 1997).

Caring or being-for is a kind of responsibility that is prevoluntary, unremovable, noncontractual, nonreciprocal, and asymmetrical. As Vetlesen (1997) explains, “The core of being-for is neither right nor rights, neither the happiness nor the good of those concerned. Its core is responsibility. Responsibility not as freely assumed, not as socially or politically or legally sanctioned; and yet as coming from outside rather than inside, as originating from what is exterior not interior to the agent” (p. 9). He adds that matters of justice, goodness, happiness all matter, but come later, and they do not “taken together or singly, define morality the phenomenon, responsibility the task” (p. 9).

It would be both incorrect and naive to argue that a formalistic theory of ethics and morality as sketched above maps directly onto some set of “quantitative” methodologies, whereas the alternative maps onto some set of “qualitative” methodologies. Linking this work in moral phenomenology and moral epistemology to thinking about the ethics and politics of qualitative (and, more generally, all social) research is a complex matter. Yet this work does suggest that how a researcher ought to relate to and consequently represent others can be framed in at least two ways. On the one hand, ethical-moral relations can be defined as a kind of “problem” that must be solved by adopting the right kind of research ethics for “gazing,” or by using the right kind of textual form, or by employing the right kind of methodology. The

problem-solving approach assumes that we can draw on some resources for criticism and direction of our choices that somehow lie outside the particular occasion that demands a practical choice. It reduces the dilemmas of human existence to objective problems in need of solutions. On the other hand, the question of relations and representation can also be understood as a mystery about the union of knowing and being to be faced anew in each situation in which the researcher finds her- or himself. This approach understands the situation of “How shall I be toward these people I am studying?” as one that demands a particular kind of understanding noted above as practical-moral knowledge.

◆ *Final Note*

In outlining these philosophies it has not been my intention to offer a template or typology with which to sort current expressions of qualitative inquiry. (Moreover, the topics discussed here go well beyond any conception of qualitative studies to a concern with all current social inquiry.) It seems to be a uniquely American tendency to categorize and label complicated theoretical perspectives as either this or that.³² Such labeling is dangerous, for it blinds us to enduring issues, shared concerns, and points of tension that cut across the landscape of the movement, issues that each inquirer must come to terms with in developing an identity as a social inquirer. In wrestling with the ways in which these philosophies restructure our efforts to understand what it means to “do” qualitative inquiry, what we face is not a choice of which label—interpretivist, constructivist, hermeneuticist, or something else—best suits us. Rather, we are confronted with choices about how each of us wants to live the life of a social inquirer.

■ *Notes*

1. Of course, anthropologists and fieldwork sociologists had been doing “qualitative inquiry” for decades earlier. But methods for generating

and interpreting qualitative data acquired a particular currency in a variety of other human science fields in the 1970s. This is not the place to develop this historical account, but it seems reasonable to say that several developments in the disciplines converged in the 1970s, thereby providing fertile ground for the recovery of interest in fieldwork methodologies. These developments included the critique of statistical hypothesis testing and experimentation and the growing interest in “naturalistic” methods that was unfolding in psychology, the emergence of humanistic psychology, the renewed attention paid by some sociologists to explaining fieldwork methods, the critique of structural-functionalism and the concomitant development of interpretivist anthropology, and the widening awareness outside the community of philosophers of science of criticisms of the received view.

2. It is not coincidental that the movement in the United States began to flourish as more and more of the European philosophers’ broad attack on scientism (Cooper, 1996) became available in English. For example, the first book-length treatment of *Verstehen* appeared in English in 1975 (Outhwaite, 1975); Schutz’s *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*), first published in German in 1932, appeared in an English translation in 1967; Habermas’s monograph *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (*On the Logic of the Social Sciences*), first published in German in 1967, did not appear in English until 1988; and so on.

3. Sadly, some researchers seem drawn to qualitative inquiry for the simple fact that they do not wish to “deal with numbers.” This is doubly tragic. First, it is based on faulty reasoning—there is nothing inherent in the epistemologies of qualitative inquiry that prohibits the use of numbers as data. Second, such a stance can be based in the illusion that so-called qualitative inquiry is somehow “easier” to do than so-called quantitative inquiry. But it is hard to imagine what criteria might be employed to determine that the level of effort and thought required for writing field notes, conducting and transcribing interviews, interpreting different kinds of qualitative data, and so on is somehow lower (or higher, for that matter) than that required for designing and executing a careful and meaningful test of a statistical hypothesis. These

inquiry tasks simply require different kinds of awareness, knowledge, and skills.

4. These are by no means the only philosophies that attract the attention of qualitative inquirers. For example, much contemporary “qualitative” work is firmly built on a postempiricist philosophy of science. That is, its methodology takes seriously the implications of the underdetermination of theory by data, the theory-ladenness of observation, the fallibility of all claims to know, and so on, without being drawn into the Continental philosophers’ critique of instrumental reason and scientism, Heideggerian concerns about “being,” deconstructionism (whether that of Gadamer or Derrida), feminist critiques of objectivity, and so forth. Feminist, neopragmatic, ethnic, and critical theory philosophies are discussed elsewhere in this handbook. Some claim phenomenology as a founding epistemology for qualitative inquiry, but it is virtually impossible to discuss the relevance for qualitative inquiry of this complex, multifaceted philosophy in general terms without reducing the notion of phenomenology to a caricature. Phenomenology means something far more complicated than a romanticized notion of seeing the world of actors “as it really is.” Moreover, simple formulations in introductory methods books (e.g., “Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations”; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 34) are misleading because such definitions gloss the crucial difference for epistemologies of qualitative inquiry, namely, defining what *meaning* is. The complexity of the influence of phenomenology on qualitative inquiry is evident when we consider that the phenomenology of Heidegger, for example, figures prominently but in very different ways in both philosophical hermeneutics and deconstructionist approaches; Husserl’s phenomenology considerably influenced the work of Alfred Schutz, who, in turn, served as a source of ideas for ethnomethodologists and other sociologists. Gubrium and Holstein take up issues in the tradition of phenomenological sociology in Chapter 18 of this volume.

5. However, this issue appears to be more of a concern among defenders of interpretivist/hermeneutic approaches to social science than it is between this group and the logical empiricists (Hiley, Bohman, & Shusterman,

1991). See, for example, the exchange between Geertz and Taylor on this issue in Tully (1994); see also Rouse (1991).

6. Dilthey (1958) emphasized the importance of the psychological reenactment (*Nacherleben*) of the experience of the other. Weber (1949) endorsed a similar notion of *Verstehen* as a “rational understanding of motivation” (p. 95). In his later writings, Dilthey de-emphasized the notion of empathic identification and spoke more of hermeneutic interpretation of cultural products.

7. See Bleicher (1980) and Gallagher (1992) for overviews of these distinctions in types of hermeneutics.

8. Bernstein (1983) adds that “there is no determinate method for acquiring or pursuing this art [of understanding], in the sense of explicit rules that are to be followed” (p. 135). Yet, within the interpretivist tradition, the epistemic status of rules, procedures, or methods is controversial. The work of Geertz, Wolcott, and Stake, I would argue, exemplifies a more artistic interpretation of how one achieves understanding. On the other hand, the work of Hammersley, Goffman, Lofland and Lofland, Miles and Huberman, Prus, Silverman, and Strauss and Corbin illustrates a more social scientific approach to the method of understanding. These scholars emphasize ways of generating and interpreting “understanding” that place a premium on the validity, relevance, and importance of both question and findings. Their methodologies are concerned with asking questions about the type, frequency, magnitude, structure, processes, causes, consequences, and meanings of sociopolitical phenomena and developing defensible answers to those questions. Answers typically take the form of substantive or middle-range theory that explains or accounts for the phenomena. Yet a “third way” of understanding the significance of method in achieving understanding is offered by Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists who claim that both actors and observers (i.e., social scientists) are to be treated as “members” who produce and manage (i.e., accomplish) the social activity of organized everyday life. Thus sociological methods, for example, are nothing more or less than evidence of the practical sociological reasoning of sociologists.

9. I focus almost exclusively on philosophical or ontological hermeneutics here because

the contours of both critical hermeneutics and radical hermeneutics are discussed elsewhere in this volume.

10. I use text and human action interchangeably here, following Ricoeur’s (1981) argument for their analogous relationship in hermeneutic interpretation.

11. Again, it must be emphasized that *uninvolved observer* here does not mean that the interpretivist observes literally at a distance or from behind some kind of one-way mirror. What the term signifies is an epistemological relationship between subject (interpreter) and object of interpretation (text, human action) in which the interpreter is unaffected by (and, in this sense, external to) the act of interpretation. At issue here is the theoretical attitude noted above: the idea that the knower is not (or must not be) somehow bound up with the domain of the object he or she seeks to understand. Concerns for managing and tracking bias, inventorying subjectivities, keeping a reflexive journal, peer debriefing, and so forth (familiar procedures in the qualitative methodological literature) are all related to this bid to maintain the theoretical attitude.

12. Not to put too fine a point on it, but this notion of engagement entails more than a confession of positionality or simply inventorying “where one stands” relative to that which is being interpreted. Engagement means risking one’s stance and acknowledging the ongoing liminal experience of living between familiarity and strangeness (see Kerdeman, 1998).

13. Grondin (1994) defends Gadamer’s hermeneutics against the charge that it is a kind of linguistic idealism. According to Grondin, Gadamer maintains that understanding is *in principle* linguistic “because language embodies the sole means for carrying out the conversation that we are and that we hope to convey to each other. It is for this reason that hermeneutics permits itself an aphorism such as ‘Being that can be understood is language.’ The emphasis should be on the ‘can.’ Understanding, itself always linguistically formed and dealing with things verbal, must be capable of engaging the whole content of language in order to arrive at the being that language helps to bring to expression. The essential linguisticity of understanding expresses itself less in our statements than in our search for the language to say what we have on our minds and hearts. For hermeneutics, it is less constitutive that understanding is expressed in lan-

guage—which is true but trivial—than that it lives in the unending process of ‘summoning the word’ and the search for a sharable language. Indeed, understanding is to be conceived *as* this process” (p. 120). See also the exchange between Davey (1991) and Smith (1991) on whether Gadamer’s critique of the statement, propositional language, and logic is justified.

14. See also Hekman’s (1986, pp. 145ff.) argument that a fixed meaning of human action is the fundamental unit of social scientific analysis in Wittgensteinian social science (e.g., Winch, 1958), Schutz’s phenomenology, and ethnomethodology.

15. In the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Taylor, understanding is linked both to the Aristotelian notion of *praxis* and to its distinct form of personal, experiential knowledge and reasoning called *phronesis* or practical wisdom. The latter (*allo eidos gnoseos*, that “other form of cognition”) requires “responsiveness, flexibility, and perceptiveness in discerning what is needed” and sharply contrasts to the form of practical knowledge called *techne* (Dunne, 1993, p. 56). Gadamer connects understanding, interpretation, and application by modeling the activity of understanding on the notion of *phronesis* and by modeling the theory of understanding (hermeneutics) on practical philosophy (Bernstein, 1983, pp. 114-150; Dunne, 1993, pp. 154ff.; Gadamer, 1981).

16. This “movement” takes up an incredible variety of related developments in pragmatism (e.g., Mead’s theory of the social self and the sociality of language, Dewey’s epistemological behaviorism), theory of science (e.g., the Quine-Duhem thesis, Hanson, Kuhn), philosophy of language (e.g., Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, the work of Austin and Louch in ordinary language philosophy), philosophy of social science (e.g., Winch), sociology of knowledge (e.g., Berger and Luckmann), phenomenology (e.g., Heidegger’s ideas about language in *Being and Time*), ethnomethodology’s concern for situated actions as publicly interpreted linguistic forms (e.g., Garfinkel), and so on. Bernstein (1991, pp. 326ff.) identifies a set of substantive pragmatic themes that characterize in a very general way many different postempiricist philosophies: antifoundationalism, thoroughgoing fallibilism, primary emphasis on the social character of the

self, the need to cultivate a community of inquirers, awareness and sensitivity to radical contingency, and recognition that there is no escape from the plurality of traditions.

17. Taylor (1995) refers to this as the “first-person-singular self”; “the human agent as primarily a subject of representations, first, about the world outside; [and] second, about depictions of ends desired or feared. This subject is a monological one. We are in contact with an ‘outside’ world, including other agents, the objects we and they deal with, our own and others’ bodies, but this contact is through representations we have ‘within.’ The subject is first of all an inner space, a ‘mind’ to use the old terminology, or a mechanism capable of processing representations, if we follow the more fashionable computer-inspired models of today” (p. 169).

18. Given limited space, I have chosen to focus on social versus psychological forms of constructionism. My primary concern here is with those philosophies that wrestle with joining social-political factors with epistemic concerns in their account of what constitutes a public body of knowledge. Of course, psychological constructionists also wrestle with the significance of social factors in knowledge construction, but their primary interest is in understanding how these play a role in individual acts of cognition. There is considerable within-group as well as between-group difference in psychological constructivist and social constructivist perspectives in social science, psychology, and education (Gergen, 1994a, 1994b; Phillips, 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Potter, 1996) that simply cannot be surveyed here. Moreover, there is a difference in terminology that can get rather confusing. Phillips, for example, divides social constructivists from psychological constructivists; Gergen calls the former group social constructionists and the latter constructivists. I use the terms *constructionist* and *constructionism* here in discussing the “social” end of the continuum.

19. In this emphasis on how language is used to accomplish something, we can find some parallels to issues taken up in informal logic, such as describing and evaluating reasoning and argumentation not in terms of deductive logic but in terms of criteria appropriate to different argument schemes or types of dialogue (Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Blair, & Willard, 1987; Walton, 1989). Of course, for social construc-

tionists persuaded of radical perspectivalism or the infinite play of signifiers, there would not be much point to studying argumentation.

20. Dorothy Smith (1996) offers another example of this effort to interweave the social and the empirical that preserves the notion that our knowledge claims refer or are “about” something and not merely the infinite play of signifiers.

21. My concern here is with strong interpretations that continue to accord primacy to the role of social factors in knowledge construction, not with views that see the social as something to be undone. For example, references to Nietzsche’s radical perspectivalism and Derrida’s deconstructionism often appear in texts championing a radical social constructionist view. Yet they offer little support for *social* constructionism. Nietzsche (1979) holds that meaning (truth, knowledge) is nothing more than the product of processes of social negotiation: “What therefore is true? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, . . . which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people; truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions” (p. 174). But for him, the *social* construction of value has to be acknowledged and carefully criticized in order to make way for and justify the *individual* construction of value. These so-called social truths are, as Smith (1997) explains, “antagonistic to life, where ‘life’ connotes a vital force of creative energy, a flux of sensuous particularity which resists the conceptual categorization conditioning claims to truth” (p. 17). *Self*-creation and *self*-transformation are Nietzsche’s goals. Derrida (1976, 1978) appears to hold a similar view, although of this I am not completely certain. On the one hand, Derrida is highly critical (and suspicious) of any interpretation that appeals to or seeks to reproduce some larger, more encompassing framework. He argues that the *individual* reader has a responsibility to open up or activate the textuality of the text, but this means the reader must open him- or herself to the text because any new reading of the text is not simply the reader’s own doing. Meaning is constructed in the play of signifiers within the field of textuality that encompasses text and interpreter. Yet Derrida claims that there is no subjective and reflective control over this inter-

pretation process. Hence he seems to endorse individual construction of meaning, but simultaneously holds that there is no subjective locus of meaning or interpretation (Derrida, 1976, 1978). To be sure, there is an affinity in the view I describe here with Nietzsche’s and Derrida’s views. All three assume more or less that everything we encounter is an interpretation in terms of our own subjective values and perspectives (or the values and perspectives of our group, community, culture, and the like). Hence the epistemological stance for all three views can be summarized as follows: “All knowledge is interpretation; interpretations are always value-laden; values are ultimately expressions of some heterogeneous non-cognitive faculty, process or event (such as the mechanics of desire, history, or the will to power); therefore truth claims are ultimately expressions of that non-cognitive faculty, process or event” (Smith, 1997, p. 16).

22. It is but a short step from epistemological relativism to ontological relativism: If all we can know about reality depends on our particular conceptual scheme, is it not the case that reality itself can only be how it seems in our conceptual scheme (Fay, 1996; Smith, 1997)?

23. In an exchange with Taylor (1988), Gergen (1988) disputes the idea of strong evaluation or the possibility of sorting out whether some interpretations are better than others. Moreover, Gergen (1994a) (wrongly) interprets the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer as endorsing some kind of “essence” of meaning. In my view, Gergen does not adequately come to terms with either Gadamer’s or Taylor’s view that interpretation as practical reason (*phronesis*) is not exhausted by tradition.

24. See Smith and Deemer (Chapter 34, this volume) for more extensive discussion of criteria and cognitive requirements for judging whether understanding has been accomplished.

25. Admittedly, what constitutes having made the “turn,” so to speak, is not particularly easy to discern. In general, it means rejecting an epistemology of representation. But that can be wrongly interpreted as abandoning all interest in “traditional” social scientific concerns about validity, objectivity, and generalizability.

26. The argument developed here draws heavily on Bohman (1991a, 1991b), who develops this distinction between strong and weak holism and defends the latter. I do not necessarily

agree with the way in which he labels the various positions of Gadamer, Rorty, Derrida, Habermas, and so on in terms of these two kinds of holism, but that sorting and classifying is largely irrelevant to the point I am making here.

27. Gallagher (1992) explains Derrida's view as follows: "Interpretation occurs only within the diacritical system of signifiers and without recourse to a metaphysical reality of the referent. . . . Derrida's radical principle of play is an attempt (from the inside) to unravel the metaphysical belief in the reality and the identity of the referent—objectivity, subjectivity, presence, being, truth, or any other metaphysical concept operative in the Western tradition" (p. 283).

28. Deconstructionism or radical social constructionism (and Rortyan pragmatism) does not regard the absence of foundational criteria as a problem in need of correction. Smith (1997) explains: "On the contrary, the demand for foundations drives the ambition of the philosophical tradition weak hermeneutics [deconstructionism] aspires to overcome. The foundationalism of previous philosophy, it is alleged, encourages an intolerance of 'otherness' and the 'incommensurable.' Weak hermeneutics can take the form of strategies for circumventing or subverting that demand for answerability to reason through which, it is believed, power and control are exercised. The goal of these postmodern strategies is to make space in thought for that which is allegedly non-assimilable to reason: diversity, heterogeneity and difference" (p. 18).

29. Smith (1997) summarizes Taylor's notion of evaluation: "The correctness of a particular practical deliberation is determined by the comparative superiority of the interpretive positions on either side of a move. To be favored by reason is therefore not to be judged positively according to some fixed *criterion*, one that is applicable to *any* practical deliberation independent of context or horizon of self-interpretation. . . . practical reasoning works well when it perspicuously displays epistemic gains or loses in particular concrete cases. Typical ways of achieving this goal are through identifying and resolving a contradiction in the original interpretation, pointing to a confusion that interpretation relied on, or by acknowledging the importance of some factor which it screened out" (p. 61). Note that these *ways* in which perspicuous articulation can occur are not *criteria* for judging whether the inter-

pretation per se is a good or bad one. What counts as an "epistemic gain" cannot be determined independently or in advance of the actual occasion of interpretation. I have drawn on this idea of a criterionless weak holism to elaborate evaluative judgment (see Schwandt, 1996, 1997).

30. See Carr's (1997) discussion of how the 20-century transformation of education into schooling was accompanied by a modern "methodical" approach to educational inquiry.

31. Understanding how to face the situation of knowing others also has a great deal to do with how researcher role and responsibility are shaped by discourses that dominate universities (Derrida, 1983). That topic is taken up by Greenwood and Levin in Chapter 3 of this volume.

32. The very idea of qualitative inquiry as a category distinct from quantitative inquiry is, of course, part of the origin of the movement portrayed in various ways in this *Handbook*. In the view of many, myself and many of my students included, it is highly questionable whether such a distinction is any longer meaningful for helping us understand the purpose and means of human inquiry. One of my students recently commented that we think we become researchers by learning methodologies, by developing some kind of allegiance to qualitative or quantitative approaches to inquiry. But, she continued, *all* research is interpretive, and we face a multiplicity of methods that are suitable for different kinds of understandings. So the traditional means of coming to grips with one's identity as a researcher by aligning oneself with a particular set of methods (or by being defined in one's department as a student of "qualitative" or "quantitative" methods) is no longer very useful. If we are to go forward, we need to get rid of that distinction.

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