

Qualitative Research Methods
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Lecture – 8
Verstehen

Welcome back to the course titled qualitative research methods, offered through the National Program on Technology, enhanced learning ministry, is sponsored by the Ministry of Human Resource Development Government of India, my name is Aradhna Malik, I am helping you with this course and we have talked about various things in the previous lecture, we discussed what interpretivist and constructivist paradigms were, we actually very briefly touched upon what interpretivism and constructivism is and what are the challenges to interpretivist philosophy and what are the responses to these challenges.

In this particular lecture we will discuss, specifically we will discuss interpretivism and we will discuss the concept of Verstehen, it's a German word I hope I'm pronouncing it right, I took the pronunciation from a link and I provided that link in the slides, so I hope I'm pronouncing it right it pronounced as Verstehen and as far as I know let's go through this.

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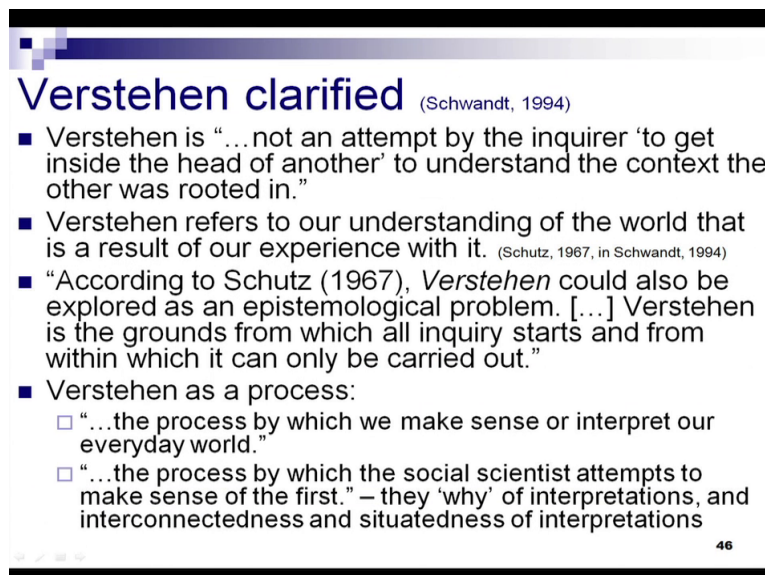
Verstehen, what is Verstehen? “Verstehen is a German term that means to understand, perceive, know, and comprehend the nature and significance of a phenomenon. To grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by another. Weber used the term to refer to

go to the social scientist's attempt to understand both the intention and the context of human action.”

Why human beings behave the way they behave and what is the context that governs, how human beings behave the way they behave, what do human beings aim to achieve, when we talk about intentions, we are talking about the ultimate desired output of an action, we are talking about what we want to get out of our actions.

Why do we behave the way we behave and what the context that govern our decision or our rational for behaving the way we behave. So we are going one step back, we are also studying the context that determines why we behave the way we behave, okay and the context can help us gain an understanding of various of the reasons, for various actions.

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Verstehen clarified (Schwandt, 1994)

- Verstehen is “...not an attempt by the inquirer ‘to get inside the head of another’ to understand the context the other was rooted in.”
- Verstehen refers to our understanding of the world that is a result of our experience with it. (Schutz, 1967, in Schwandt, 1994)
- “According to Schutz (1967), *Verstehen* could also be explored as an epistemological problem. [...] Verstehen is the grounds from which all inquiry starts and from within which it can only be carried out.”
- Verstehen as a process:
 - “...the process by which we make sense or interpret our everyday world.”
 - “...the process by which the social scientist attempts to make sense of the first.” – they ‘why’ of interpretations, and interconnectedness and situatedness of interpretations

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Verstehen clarified, what is Verstehen? Verstehen is “not an attempt by the inquirer ‘to get inside the head of another’ to understand the context otherwise rooted in,” so when we talk about Verstehen, we are not talking about thinking like the person who was engaged in a or who acted in a particular manner, we don't need to get inside the head of a person. Verstehen refers to our understanding of the world that is a result of our experience with it.

So verstehen is our understanding, how we understand the world that is, the world is also been created the history like we discussed in the previous lecture, history is a result of our interaction with our environment. Verstehen is also, it refers to our understanding of the world that we are in and our understanding of the world we are in, contributes to the way the

world we are in response to us and contributes to how the world we are in, shapes up as a result of how we understand it. But it sounds very complicated.

But it's really if we think about these different steps in on it, it's not so complex it's very logical, I am who I am as a result of,

1. What I believe what I bring to the table, what I was born with.
2. What I believe about myself.
3. What I give to the world, what I believe about the world that I am living in.
4. How, what I give to the world and what I give to the world, is dependent on what I believe the world wants from me, then what the world, how the world receives what I give to it and how the world responds to me as a result of what I give to it. Okay.

So it's a combination of various things, so we are also contributing to the environment that we are studying, just by virtue of being in it. We have a perception of the context we are in, we understand the context we are in a particular manner, we communicate our understanding of the context we are in and through our actions with in that context. So that intern sends out signals into the environment that are received by the environment and then the matter is out of our hands.

How the environment perceives what we give to it? How much of what we give to the environment is actually received by the environment? How the environment responds to us as a result of what we give to it? is not in our hands and that intern comes back to us and that feeds into our understanding of the environment we are in, it's a very complex process. And that is this whole process of understanding all these different steps that I laid out in front of you is called Verstehen. Okay.

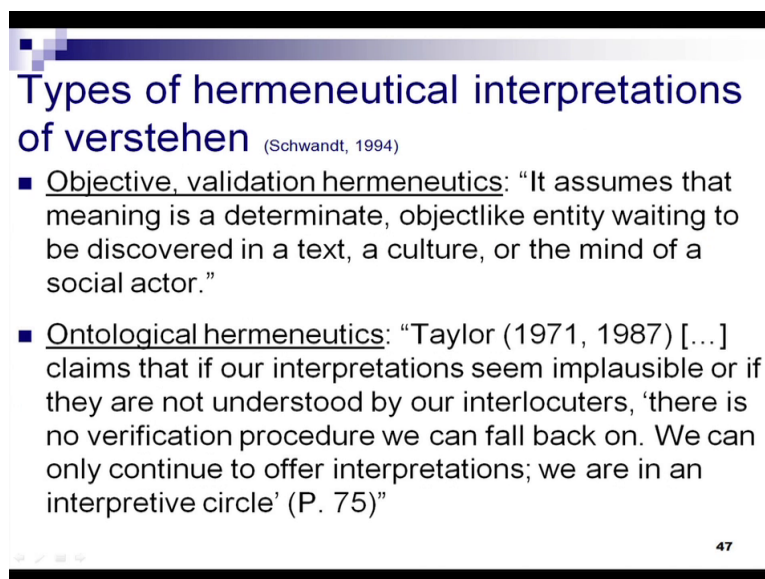
According to Schutz 1967, Verstehen could also be explored as an epistemological problem. Verstehen is the grounds from which all inquiry starts and from within which it can only be carried out. We need to understand the context, we need to situate whatever we are studying within a context and only then can we start any kind of inquiry regarding the context that you want to study, regarding the phenomenon that we want to study.

Because phenomenon do not occur in isolation. Phenomena occur within specific contexts and unless we understand how phenomena are situated in the context and how they are

affecting the context and how the context is responding to the phenomena that we are studying, we are not going to be able to understand what is really going on.

Verstehen as a process, “the process by which we make sense or interpret our everyday world.” Verstehen is “the process by which the social scientist attempts to make sense of the first,” so the process by which we attempt to make sense, of the process, by which we understand the world. We go one step, the ‘why’ of interpretations, and the interconnectedness and situatedness of interpretations is called Verstehen. The statements are just repetitive, if you think about it. Okay.

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Types of hermeneutical interpretations of verstehen (Schwandt, 1994)

- **Objective, validation hermeneutics:** “It assumes that meaning is a determinate, objectlike entity waiting to be discovered in a text, a culture, or the mind of a social actor.”
- **Ontological hermeneutics:** “Taylor (1971, 1987) [...] claims that if our interpretations seem implausible or if they are not understood by our interlocutors, ‘there is no verification procedure we can fall back on. We can only continue to offer interpretations; we are in an interpretive circle’ (P. 75)”

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Types of hermeneutical interpretations of Verstehen, where is hermeneutical interpretations are the first one is objective, validation hermeneutics: “Objective validation hermeneutics assume that meaning is a determinate, object like entity waiting to be discovered in a text, a culture, or the mind of a social actor.”

So when we look at, when we try and understand the world we feel, that the meaning is already there, all we need to do is discover it it's hidden somewhere and there is one meaning that hidden and as we start feeling the layers of the context that we are studying, eventually the one true single interpretation meaning will emerge, that is one way of understanding the world around us.

That there is only one meaning and its covered in layer after layer of the layer of context and various interpretations, so if we really want to understand the one true meaning, all we have

to do is of course you know take all the necessary steps, to peel away these additional layers and only then till we are getting more than one interpretation, that means we have not arrived at the true meaning.

So as long as the interpretations keep changing the true meaning has not revealed itself, there is one meaning that is hidden somewhere and only we can be sure of that one meaning, only when this meaning has only one interpretation, irrespective of the person who is studying, irrespective of how it is studied, how it is revealed, okay that is called objective, validation hermeneutics.

The second type of hermeneutical interpretation is Ontological hermeneutics, it claims that if our interpretations seem implausible or if they are not understood by our interlocutors, 'there is no verification procedure we can fall back on. We can only continue to offer interpretations; till those interpretations are accepted until many people, still many of the receivers of our interpretations, keep you know till they acknowledge that the interpretation that has been received, is really the true interpretation.

So we cannot keep digging to find the true meaning that is what ontological hermeneutics does, it claims that is our interpretations seem unbelievable, if they are not accepted, if they are not understood, if they are not acknowledged, all we can do is we can look every can keep looking at the phenomenon from different angles and we can keep offering different interpretations, till we come to an interpretation that becomes acceptable and it's all a complex game of different interpretations and the most acceptable interpretation is, what we should hope to arrive at, that is one way of looking at it. Okay.

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Examples of Interpretivist Persuasions

(Schwandt, 1994)

- Clifford Geertz – Interpretive theory of culture.
 - “The structuralist program is firmly rooted in the logical empiricists’ bid to find the ‘real’ meaning of myth, ceremony, and other cultural artifacts.
 - For the structuralist, the categories and structures of culture provide powerful explanatory devices accounting for the behaviours of members of a group or society.
 - Structural – functional research frameworks are reductionist in that they claim to discover the one true interpretation lying behind or beneath the complexity of appearances.”
 - e.g. ‘What makes Indians happy?’ or ‘How are Indian households structured?’, etc.

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Examples of Interpretivist Persuasion, Clifford Geertz says talks about the integrative theory of culture and he says that, “The structuralist program is firmly rooted in the logical empiricist’ bit to find the ‘real’ meaning of myth, ceremony, and other cultural artifacts.” so he says that every culture has these myths, they have ceremonies, they have cultural artifacts and it is the responsibility of the empirical researcher, to find out the real, the one true meaning, of behind each of these cultural artifacts.

For the structuralist, the categories and structures of culture provide powerful explanatory devices accounting for the behaviors of the members of a group or society. So the meaning is rooted in the explanatory devices, the categories of cultural, the structures of culture are the ones that help us, explain the behaviors of members within that society or group.

The structural functional research frameworks are reductionist in that they claim to discover the one true interpretation lying behind or beneath the complexity of appearances. So we are talking about the objective validation hermeneutics, okay, so there is one true interpretation and the structural functional research frameworks, reduce the number of interpretations to one.

They came to discover the one true single interpretation, for example what makes Indians happy or how are Indian household structured? Now if you are an Indian listening to this or a person from any community, it could be Indians, it could be Sri Lankans, It could be Bangladeshi’s, it could be Nepali’s, it could be anyone, what makes Bengali’s happy? What makes Himachali’s happy?

So is it only one thing, we all follow the same cultural pattern but we are all we belong to the same culture, but can, what we do, be boiled down to 1,2,3,4,5,6, one single list of things that make us happy, maybe, maybe not, I choose to disagree, you can make your own decisions. Okay.

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Examples of Interpretivist Persuasions (Contd.)
(Schwandt, 1994)

- **George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer: Symbolic Interactionism**

Premises:

- "... human beings act toward the physical objects and other beings in their environment on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them."
- "... these meanings derive from the social interaction (communication, broadly understood) between and among individuals. Communication is symbolic because we communicate via languages and other symbols; further in communicating we create or produce significant symbols."
- "... these meanings are established and modified through an interpretive process: 'The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action ... meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action.' [Blumer, 1969, in Schwandt, 1994]"

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Now George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, etc talked about symbolic interactionism, the premises behind symbolic interactionism are that “human beings act towards the physical objects and other beings in their environment on the basis of the meaning that these things have for them.”

So we as human beings assign different meanings, to different things in our environments, we see like I told you a little while ago, we see the environment in a certain way, how we respond to the environment depends on, how we save environment. Okay. It depends on what we see in the environment, it depends on what meaning, the environment has for.

“These meaning derived from the social interaction between and among individuals, communication is symbolic because we communicate via languages and other symbols, further in communicating we create or produce significant symbols.”

So how we assign meanings to the different objects in our environment, depends on our interactions with them, it depends on the feeling of comfort or discomfort we have with them,

it depends on what our experience with these object has been and that is what contributes, to our meaning making, okay. Now and these are derived in an through social interaction.

“These meaning established and modified through an interpretive process. The actor or the person within the context selects, checks, suspends, regroup and transforms the meaning in light of the situation in which he or she is placed and the direction of his action, meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action.”

So we select what we want to respond to, we select the stimuli that you want to respond to, we check them, we spend our meaning making, we may regroup things, we want to see a whole picture of bombardment to stimulus, we have been bombarded by all kinds of stimuli from our environment and we filter out the meaning making, the sense making stimuli from the environment.

We group them, we check them, we may suspend our checking, we may regroup them because the picture that is emerging is not so meaningful, then once the picture that is emerging from the stimuli that we have initially filtered out becomes more meaningful, then we are we may go back to the original database of stimuli that we had received and pull out some more stimuli, send some more or filter out some more stimulus, so that the picture we receive is makes some sense to us in the light of what we know, what we can understand, what we can express.

Meanings are used and revised as instruments for the guidance and formation of action, so once we understand, once we know what the context that we are in, means to us, based on our understanding of the context we are in, we decide to act in certain way, which is it which means that we decide to send out signals we decide to respond to the meaning that we derived from the environment that we are in from the environment that we are situated in or from the context that we are in and the context that we are trying to study. And then we send out some signals, we behave in a certain way, we act in a certain way. Okay.

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What do symbolic interactionists do?

(Blumer, 1969, in Schwandt, 1994)

- They "...[regard] human beings as purposive agents. [who] engage in 'minded', self-reflexive behaviour (Blumer, 1969, p. 81); [who] confront a world that they must interpret in order to act rather than a set of environmental stimuli to which they are forced to respond."
- They pay "...careful attention to the overt behaviours and behaviour settings of actors and their interaction."
- "Symbolic interactionism requires that the inquirer actively enter the worlds of people being studied in order to 'see the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how he interprets what is taken into account' (p. 56)"

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What do symbolic interactionists do? They "regard human beings as purposive agents. Who engage in 'minded', self-reflexive behavior who confront a world that they must interpret in order to act rather than a set of environmental stimuli to which they are forced to respond." So symbolic interaction is believe that human beings are purposive agents, we have intentions, we do something with the intention of achieving a particular goal.

It may be very small, it may just be removing the disturbance from my environment, it may just be you know if I'm sitting here in this fly on my head, I will do this, to get the fly to go away or I may, you know move my shoulders in order to feel more comfortable. I may say something to ward off more discomfort from my environment, I may decide not to respond to certain stimuli because I am not comfortable with the response I may expect as a result of my response.

So silence is also purposive but there is an intention behind it, now Mikhail Bakunin, a noted Russian philosopher, I have not mentioned his name here, talked about the emotional, volitional aspect of a human utterance and the credit for introducing us to Bakunin goes to Professor Roy Wood of Denver University, who introduced me to and many more like me to qualitative research methods.

And Bakunin talked about the basic utterance and he said that everything that we say has an intention behind it and there are feelings associated with it and that is what we are trying to say here, symbolic interaction is perspective, symbolic interaction is talk from the perspective they have a purpose, you know they believe that human beings are purposive agents, who

engage in minded, so they filter out signals, they don't respond to anything and everything, but they select, carefully select what they want to respond.

The self-reflexive behavior they learn from every interaction and they learn from every response they get, to every action they have, self-reflective behavior who confront a world that they must interpret in order to act rather than a set of environmental stimuli to which they are force to response. They constantly evaluating, the impact of their actions that's what symbolic interaction is to.

They constantly evaluate the impact of their interactions on the environment that they are in and every one of their interactions is goal driven, it has a purpose behind it. The second point is they pay “careful attention to the over behaviors and behaviors settings of actors and their interaction.” So not only are we evaluating, what we, what, how our actions are impacting our environment, we are also constantly evaluating how the actions of the other people in our environment, are impacting the environment that we coexist in.

“Symbolic interactionism requires that the inquirer actively enter the worlds of people being studied in order to see the situation as it is seen by the actor, observing what the actor takes into account, observing how we interprets what is taken into account.” So when we talk about symbolic interactionism, we are talking about not getting into the heads of people.

We are studying or into the heads of the people who are part of the phenomena that we are studying, but we talk about some amount of perspective, familiarity with the perspective that is driving the actions of the people we are studying.

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Examples of Interpretivist Persuasions (Contd.)

(Schwandt, 1994)

■ Interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1992):

“... interpretive interactionism must explicitly engage in cultural criticism.”

- (a) ‘aims to always subvert the meaning of a text, to show how its dominant and negotiated meanings can be opposed’,
- (b) ‘expose[s] the ideological and political meanings that circulate within the text, particularly those which hide or displace racial, class, ethnic and gender biases’; and
- (c) ‘analyze[s] how texts address the problems of presence, lived experience, the real and its representations, and the issues of subjects, authors, and their intentionalities’ (p. 151).”

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Another example of interpretivist Persuasions is the interpretive interactionism. “Interpretive interactionism must explicitly engage in cultural criticism.” Interpretive interactionism is, it talks about cultural criticism, it aims to always subvert the meaning of a text to show how its dominant and negotiated meanings can be opposed. It must look at the or it must interactive interaction, interpretive interactionism explicitly engages in critics,' in cultural critics, critics based on the culture that the phenomenon that is being studied is situated in.

Its aims to subvert the meaning of a text, to see how the dominant and the negotiated meanings can be opposed, what is there in the meaning of the text that, dominant meanings how the dominant meanings can be opposed is what it tries to study. It exposes the ideological and political meanings that circulate within the text, particularly those which hide or displays racial, class, ethnic and gender biases.

So it exposes the ideological meanings, it shows how different meaning acquire positions of power within the text, how different meanings within the text highlight certain things and hide certain things and at the expense of being politically correct. I will take a very small example of how News items are portrayed, for example a News item talks about you know a newspaper is trying to sell, of course the purpose of any business is to make money.

And newspapers need to say, so let's take the example of a natural calamity, earthquake, so an earthquake occurs and the news item does not talk about how many people died, men, women, children, elderly, all of us are people, but the news item says fifteen children dead in

a building collapse due to an earthquake, the total number of people who died was probably a hundred, but certain things are highlighted.

Fifteen children died, Twenty three women died, Fifty six or sorry I hope I'm getting the numbers right, say fifty elderly died, so these kinds of things what do we highlight, what do we hide, what do we focus our attention on, what do we choose to not attend to, is what interpretive interactionism studies. It also analyses how texts address the problems of presence, lived experience, the real and its representation and the issues of subjects, authors and their intentionalities.

So it analyses how, what is written, addresses real life experience and what the intentionality, what the intention of the person writing about this, was. So it's all about exposing these different bases this different place of power in and through words that is what interpretive interactionism does. That is all we have time for in this lecture we will continue with construction constructivism in the next class, thank you very much for listening.