



# Philosophical Approaches in the Social Sciences

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The Importance of Philosophy in  
Understanding/Conducting  
Educational Research

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# Objectives

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To enable participants to:

Review core concepts of the philosophies of social science and consider their importance and relevance to educational research

Understand the need to map this landscape in their own research journeys

Consider critically the role of values in educational research



# Is Philosophy Important?

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- Why is it important to position oneself, philosophically, when conducting educational research?
- What does our philosophical positioning enable the reader to do when reading our research?
- What can happen – during the research process and afterwards -if we are not clear about our philosophical perspective (s)?



# Educational Research

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- „...research is **systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry** which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom“. (Bassegy, 1999)
- „... educational research is not just a rule-driven means of „finding out“ ... but an approach to skillful and intellectual inquiry that is rooted in ... multiple ways of viewing the educational worlds we inhabit“ (Morrison, 2007)



# (Philosophical) Assumptions

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‘...at every point in our research – in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers – we inject a host of assumptions. ...

Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying’ (Crotty 1998:17)



# Philosophical Assumptions

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„Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, give rise to methodological considerations; and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection. This view moves us beyond regarding research methods as simply a technical exercise and is concerned with understanding the world; this is informed by how we view our world (s), what we take understanding to be, and what we see as the purposes of understanding“



# Starting to be Clearer...

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„Well, apart from the fact that it's necessary to include this in a Master's dissertation, I see the point being that since I learned about these perspectives, it has impacted how I understand people. I guess it underpins your perception of the social world. Therefore, telling the reader how you perceive the social world is important as it underpins the interpretations and meanings that you make of research data you are handling I suppose! What do you think?“



# What is Social and Educational Research?

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- “All social research sets out with specific *purposes* from a particular *position*, and aims to *persuade* readers of the significance of its claims: these claims are always broadly *political*” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; 4)
- “Rather must it (educational research) seek to articulate and examine the relationship between the educational realities it purports to explain and the educational values it unavoidably defends and promotes” (Carr, 1995; 99)





# The Four Ps of Social/Educational Research

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- **Purposive** – what is often forgotten (as too obvious) is that any piece of research in the social sciences emerges from a distinct purpose (whether or not this is apparent to the reader)
- **Positional** – since research is carried out by people, it is inevitable that the standpoint of the researcher is a fundamental platform on which enquiry is developed. All social research is saturated (however disguised) with positionality



# The Four Ps of Social/Educational Research

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- **Persuasive** – those who carry out social research aim to persuade readers of the significance of their claims
- **Political** – research which changes nothing – not even the researcher - is not research at all. And since all social research takes place in policy contexts of one form or another, research itself must therefore be seen as inevitably political



# The Research Process

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- Not just a technical process and the application of techniques (methods).
- Involves philosophical assumptions, beliefs about the nature of the world (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), values and decisions.
- Research is a human activity – a „social practice“ (Usher 1996).
- Different people have come to look at the world differently – across time and across cultures.
- We can, therefore, study how ideas about the nature of research have changed over time.



# Key Points to Remember...

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Ontological Assumptions  
give rise to  
Epistemological Assumptions  
which will have  
Methodological Implications  
for the choice of particular  
Research Methods  
and  
Methods of Analysing Data



# The Rise of Positivism

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- Metaphysics, tradition and theology increasingly questioned in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, given the Enlightenment challenge in Europe.
- Development of reason: rational, empirical, scientific thinking – and the growth of 19<sup>th</sup> century positivism.
- Early 20<sup>th</sup> century dominance of the natural sciences (the traditional period). Observable, measurable, social reality. Disciplined, rigorous, scientific and systematic research.
- Search for objectivity, validity and reliability. A quantitative, empirical and predictive emphasis. A natural science model (empirical/analytic)?
- A universalising discourse prioritising generalisable theory?



# Phases in the Development of Western Social Science and Educational Research

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- The rise of Positivism (19<sup>th</sup> century)
- Hermeneutic Interpretive Epistemology (19<sup>th</sup> - mid 20<sup>th</sup> century)
- Critical Theory (post-war - 1970s)
- Post-modern Approaches (1980s)/Post-colonial
- Contemporary Diversity?



## Positivist/Empiricist (Usher, 1996)

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- Determinancy (a certain truth that can be known)
- Rationality (convergence on a single explanation)
- Impersonality (objectivity)
- Prediction (generalisations) - generating laws of the social world/social facts
- Unreflexive (focus on methods and outcomes)

# Positivism

Ontology	Reality exists
Social science is ...	identifying laws and regularities of human behaviour
The researcher ...	is detached value-free observer
People are ...	objects of study
Methodology	quasi-experimental or large scale
Research methods e.g.	Questionnaire survey, statistical analysis



# Post-Positivism

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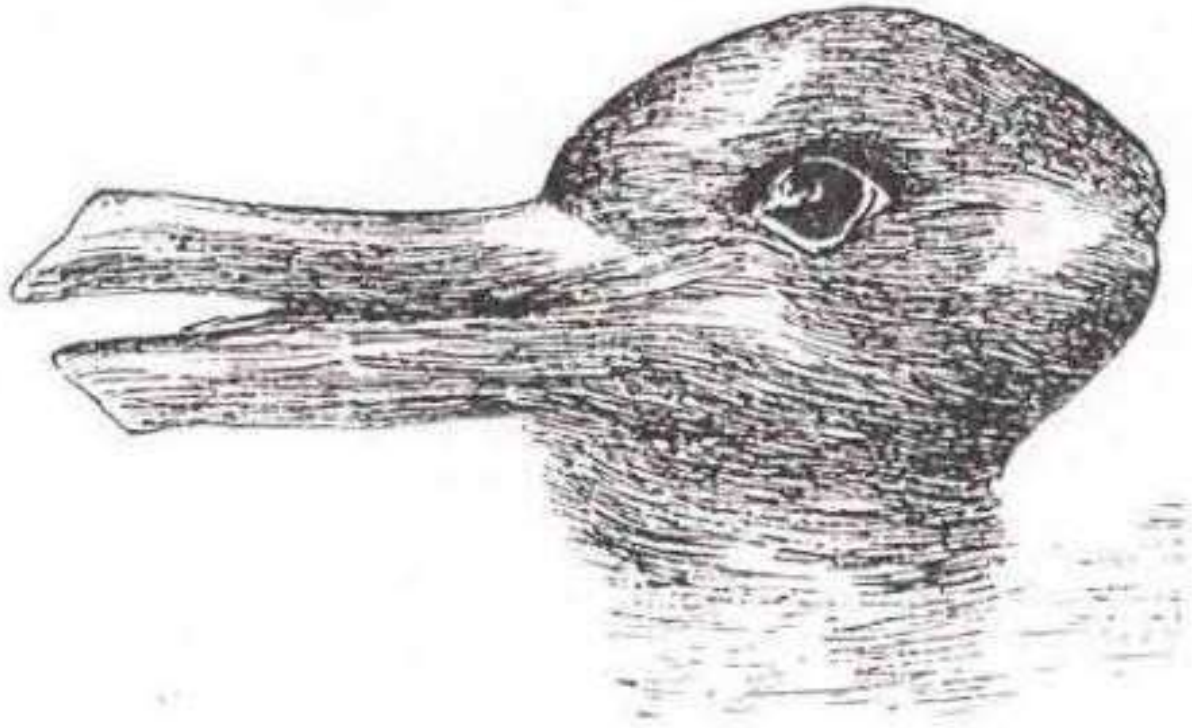
- "...scientists „from within“...challenged its claims to objectivity, precision and certitude...This is a less arrogant form of positivism. It is one that talks of probability rather than certainty, claims a certain level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity, and seeks to approximate the truth rather than aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence." (Crotty, 1998 p.29)

- Karl Popper (1902-94) „every scientific statement must remain *tentative for ever.*“



What is this?

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# Hermeneutic/Interpretive Epistemology

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- Emergence of varied challenges to positivism (scientism) especially from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Other ways of knowing the social world – more context sensitivity (and historical) – a questioning of universalistic aspirations.
- Development of hermeneutic/interpretive epistemology as ways of understanding different constructions of meaning in social interaction. See Berger & Luckmann (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality*.
- Emphasis on human knowledge for understanding, interpretation, illumination and insight – in the context of social practice.
  - Max Weber - idea of „verstehen“: access individual perspective



# Hermeneutic/Interpretive Epistemology

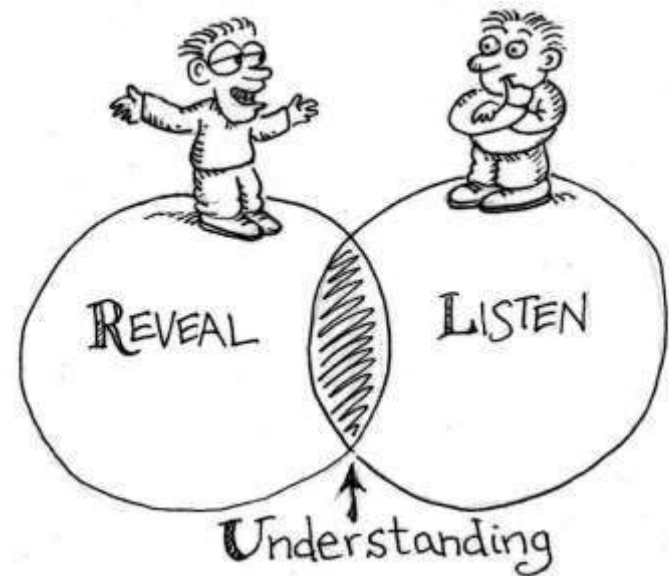
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- The rise of qualitative approaches to research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, etc.
- Knowledge formation is, therefore, circular, iterative and spiral, not linear and cumulative as portrayed in positivistic epistemology – not objective in a positivistic sense. Reflexivity and dialogue.
- Gadamer: „double hermeneutic“?

# Hermeneutic/Interpretivist (Usher, 1996)

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- “To explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour.”
- The researcher plays a further role as interpreter...



# Interpretivism

Ontology	Reality is socially constructed
Social science is ...	exploring subjective „meanings“
The researcher ...	is subjective, part of social world
People are ...	Subjects/participants
Methodology	e.g. case study, ethnography
Research methods e.g.	Observation, semi-structured interview

# Dominant Philosophical Approaches

	Positivism	Interpretivism	Critical Theory
Ontology	Reality exists	Reality is socially constructed	Ideological, subjective views of reality
Social science is ...	identifying laws and regularities of human behaviour	exploring subjective „meanings“	analysing power and ideology, to bring about change
The researcher ...	is detached value-free observer	is subjective, part of social world	has explicit value-based political position
People are ...	objects of study	Subjects/participants	agents (actively create reality)
Methodology	quasi-experimental or large scale	e.g. case study, ethnography	Theory-led
Research methods e.g.	Questionnaire survey, statistical analysis	Observation, semi-structured interview	Policy analysis, Critical discourse analysis