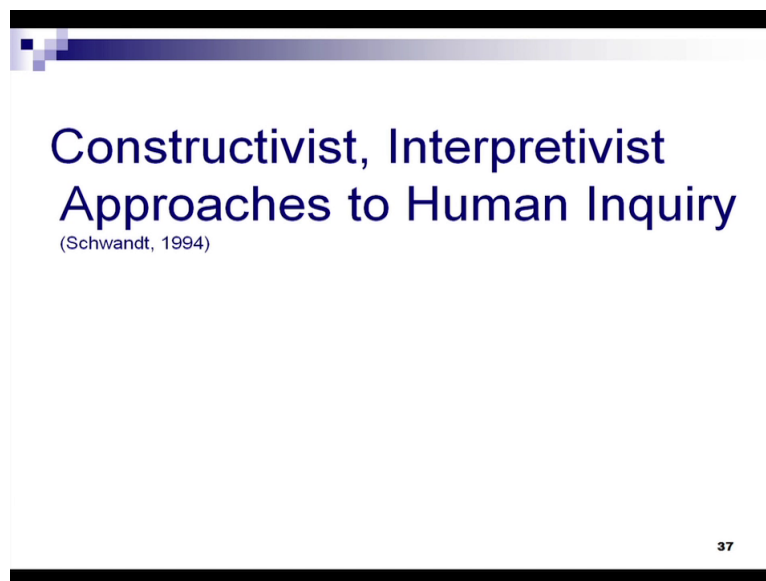


**Qualitative Research Methods**  
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**Lecture – 7**  
**Interpretivist Thinking**

Welcome back to the NOC course title qualitative research methods, my name is Aradhna Malik and I'm helping you with this course, we have discussed what qualitative research is, how quantitative and qualitative research are different, we have also talked about what qualitative research in details, so how do you conduct qualitative research. Today, we will talk about the paradigm, so will get started on the paradigms of qualitative research and the first paradigm that I would like to introduce you to is the interpretivist paradigm in qualitative research.

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So the approaches to human inquiry, how do we study, you know human behavior from the different mindset and how do we approach the human behavior from different perspectives, so we will talk about the constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry and this is from a book by Schwandt, you know that this is from an article by Schwandt that appeared in the book titled qualitative research methods, the handbook of qualitative research methods that I told you about right in the beginning of the course. Okay.

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## What does a constructivist/ interpretivist do? (Schwandt, 1994)

“The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors.”

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So what does a constructivist or interpretivist do? “The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it, so the constructivist or interpretivist does not take things at face value, the constructivist or interpretivist situates whatever is being studied in the context interprets within that context. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language in action of social actors.”

You are studying human behavior, we're studying environments, now how do we make meaning out of a situation is what we interpretivist and the constructivist does. The constructivist or interpretivist study is how we arrive at particular meanings of the things that we study. Why do I assign a specific meaning to something that I am studying? For example the definition of professionalism, how do we arrive at what it means to be professional?

How do we define professionalism in specific context? maybe in the Western context professionalism is defined in a certain way in the Eastern or more community oriented cultures, professionalism is defined in a different manner. How do we define different situations? How do we study different situations? if I want to study human behavior in educational settings, the behavior of students in classrooms.

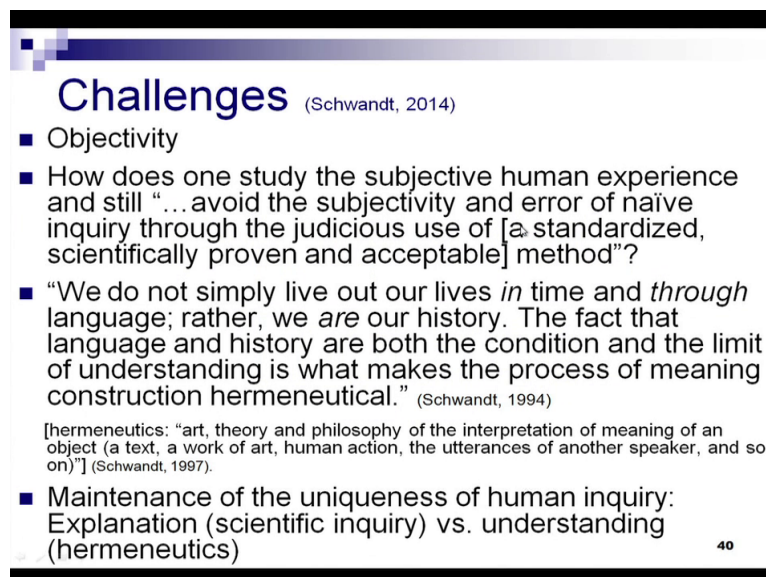
For example how do I decide what is normal? How do I decide what is appropriate? How do I make meaning of what the students do in the classroom? And how do I decide where to draw the line between normal and not so normal or unique and general? so where do I draw that line and how do I come to those meanings, how do I sit with us meaning, how do I connect

what I see in the environment, to the environment that I see it in. What is the process that goes behind my understanding, how, whatever I am studying is related to the environment it is situated in, is what interpretivist and constructivist do.

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Interpretivist thinking, the challenges in Interpretivist thinking are obviously number one challenge is Objectivity, The way inquirer A interpret something is very different, from the way inquirer B interpret the same thing, within the same context, so objectivity is a big challenge. The second challenge is How does one study the subjective human experience and still "avoid the subjectivity and error of naïve inquiry through the judicious use of a method"?

So how do we decide you know, how do we remain objective and still study the or how to we avoid subjectivity, multiple interpretations, to many in you know, how to do we avoid subjectivity and how do we remove the error of naive inquiry, which means unstandardized inquiry, which means the starting out now, naive is somebody who doesn't know, whatever you know who doesn't know enough about the situation, somebody who is new to a situation and in that newness to a situation, makes some mistakes.

So how to be removed that my naïve at of inquiry and still remain objective, how to be removed these multiple interpretation and how what kinds of methods will be used and so that is the how do we remain objective, how do we study whatever we are studying and still and how do we study things qualitatively and still remain objective and that is a big, big challenge here.

“We do not simply live out our lives in time and through language: rather, we are our history”. so we are not living, we are not outside of the context that we are studying, we are within the context and we are studying the context as we are experiencing it, we are creating history by virtue of being within the context. So we are defining the context, is enriched by our presence within it as inquirers as well and we are studying the same context that we are a part of.

And going back to this we are not you know, we are not simply living, whatever we are studying we are creating history by being within the context, by using the language that we are using, The fact that language and history of both the conditions and the limit of understanding is what makes the process of meaning construction hermeneutical. Now hermeneutics is the art and theory and philosophy of the interpretation of meaning of an object. So how do we interpret meaning the philosophy behind interpretation of meaning is called hermeneutics.

And then we go back to this the fact that language and history or both the condition of understanding, we need a language to understand the context. But language also limits how we understand it, language on the one hand gives us a tool to understand the context we are in, on the other hand it limits how we understand the context. My favorite example for this is describing snowfall, I belong to the mountains in India, in Northern India so I have

experienced snowfall in a variety of ways, but I have colleagues here who have only seen snowfall in movies.

West Bengal is a cold region despite the sweater that I'm wearing here, this room is very cold and winter is creeping in. This place, West Bengal is a very cold, is very warm region, so people here have not seen snow falling, occasionally, very rarely they may see hailstones. But they have not experienced snowfall, know those of us who have seen snow falling, and have various definitions for it.

Even in Himachal Pradesh we have three or four names for different types of snows, we have snow, we have large flakes, we have small flakes, we have sleet, which is a mixture of snow and very, very tiny hailstones and rains. We have what we call in the local language as Bajri, which is very tiny stone like solid snowflakes, they are not hailstones, they are something between snowflakes and hail stones.

So language, am giving you all these examples, because I wanted to know, I want to facilitate your understanding of how language gives us an opportunity to experience whatever we are experiencing. Now on the one hand language gives us so many things, on the other hand if I see a different kind of snow for which I have never heard of a name, I will not know how to describe it. So Language also limits our understanding of whatever we experience.

If I am in a new situation I will not know how to describe it, because I don't have the words for it. So language becomes a limiter, it is also a facilitator and it is also a limiter and language facilitates our understanding of the phenomena that we experience of the phenomena that we study and the philosophy behind understanding the phenomena that we study is called hermeneutics. Okay.

How do we make meaning of the situation that we are trying to study, what are you trying to understand? Why are you trying to understand it in way, by method A or why not by method B. What are the parameters that we're using to understand, whatever we are understanding, what is the basis of this understanding, if I am trying to classify or if I am trying to explain sleet, to somebody here in Kharagpur and I say it's a mixture of snowflakes and very tiny hailstones and rain and they'll say well it all comes from the sky.

So what is the difference between snowflakes and hailstones, if they are coming at the same time are the three different clouds, at three different locations, I don't know, but it's very difficult for me to explain the concept of a snowflake to somebody, who has never seen a snowflake, so it limits their understanding so I have to tie it with something they understand so I'll tell them, okay.

Have you seen hailstones, shrink the hailstones, make them very tiny and then make them light and fluffy and so if I show them how water expands to such an extent after cooling down, after freezing, that it becomes very light as cotton or maybe light is air, then it becomes a snowflake and there are these tiny patterns and it's very difficult for me to explain these things, to them unless I tried with something the people already know.

And that is what we're talking about here interpretivist, from my perspective as a person who has experienced snow, the way I interpret and explain snow, will be very different from a person who has read about snow but never experienced it. That interpretation will be very different from the interpretation of a read about snow, who understands the science behind how snow is formed, but has never experienced it.

And that will be very different from the interpretation of a person who has seen snowflakes, enough of snowflakes on television or through various media, but has never read about the science behind how snow is formed. So you know we all have different interpretations and that is one big challenge how do we bring these interpretations, what is the logic we are using to understand these, to create these interpretations and to understand the phenomenon that we are trying to understand, that is what an interpretivist does. Okay.

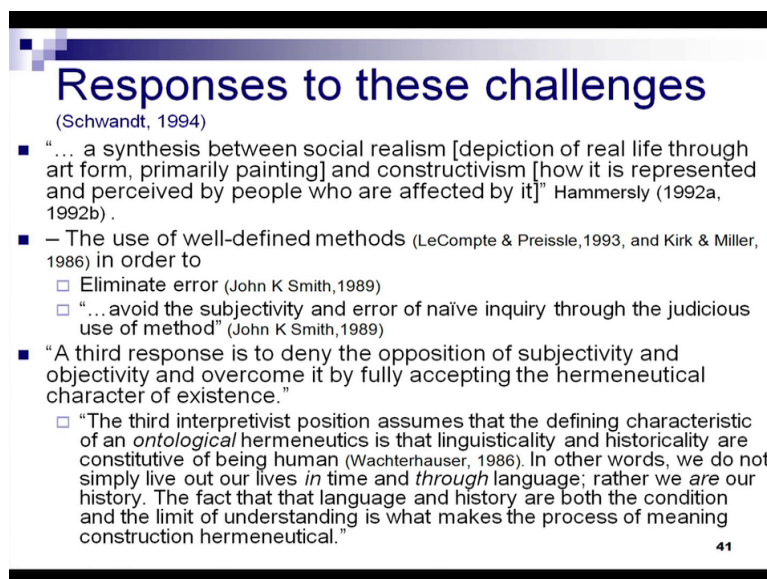
Third and forth challenge here is maintenance of the uniqueness of human inquiry explanation versus understanding, explanation is scientific inquiry, why do things happen, the way they happen, so scientific inquiry there is description, hermeneutics is the philosophy behind the Y, it goes one step back, so the parameters that we are using to understand a phenomenon are also based in a context.

Why are you choosing X parameters in not Y parameters, the uniqueness of what we're trying to understand, situated in a more generalized context, where do we draw the line between a generalized context and the uniqueness of what we're trying to understand, how do we

separate out the two, where do we say okay this is what can be quantified and this is what cannot be quantified so far, so this will have to be dealt with through a qualitative descriptions.

How do we connect this qualitative descriptions situated in to the quantified understanding of a situation is what interpretivist deal with and that's a big, big challenge. Where do we say okay, we quantified something enough, we still have not understood this much part of it, now we need to move on and we need to figure out, how we can describe this unexplained part, in such a way that it connects to the quantified hole. Okay.

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### Responses to these challenges

(Schwandt, 1994)

- "... a synthesis between social realism [depiction of real life through art form, primarily painting] and constructivism [how it is represented and perceived by people who are affected by it]" Hammersly (1992a, 1992b) .
- — The use of well-defined methods (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, and Kirk & Miller, 1986) in order to
  - Eliminate error (John K Smith, 1989)
  - "...avoid the subjectivity and error of naïve inquiry through the judicious use of method" (John K Smith, 1989)
- "A third response is to deny the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity and overcome it by fully accepting the hermeneutical character of existence."
  - "The third interpretivist position assumes that the defining characteristic of an *ontological* hermeneutics is that linguisticity and historicity are constitutive of being human (Wachterhauser, 1986). In other words, we do not simply live out our lives *in* time and *through* language; rather *we are* our history. The fact that that language and history are both the condition and the limit of understanding is what makes the process of meaning construction hermeneutical."

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Responses to these challenges, are first one is, "a synthesis between socialism depiction of how of real life through art form, primarily painting and constructivism how it is represented and perceived by people who are affected by it", so one is response to what we are doing here is realism, a combination, a balance between depicting things as they are and situating the interpretation within the context, from which we have extracted out this unique piece.

That we want to study for, want of a better word, this unique phenomenon, this the uniqueness of the phenomenon or the uniqueness of the specific aspect of a specific phenomenon that we are trying to study and we create a balance we say here it is, please interpret it anyway you want, no that's not me just say, we put it out and we say okay, this is what it looks like and this is how we are going to interpret it and here is why so we draw balance between these two.

The use of well defined methods, there are methods of qualitative inquiry, that are well defined, that are defended, proven over time, so we use well defined methods to eliminate error, number one the first reason why we use methods is to eliminate error, the second reason is to avoid the subjectivity and error of naive inquiry, the third responses to deny the opposition of subjectivity and objectivity and overcome it by fully accepting the hermeneutical character of existence.

So we say subjectivity and objectivity are not opposing each other they are connected and they are connected in and through hermeneutics. Hermeneutics or the hermeneutical character of existence is what connects, the objective, the quantifiable, verifiable, objective view of understanding something and the subjective explanation or interpretation that we have formed, about the unique portions that cannot be quantified, that bridge is created in and through hermeneutics. Okay.

“The third interpretivist position assumes that the defining characteristic of an ontological hermeneutics is that linguistically and historicity are constitutive of being human, which means we do not simply live out our lives in time and through language, this is what I was saying, that we are situated within time and we are creating history through language. We are creating our own history through language; we are part of the history that we are studying. The fact that language and history of both the condition and the limit of understanding is what makes the process of meaning construction hermeneutical.”

So the connection between language as a limiter and a facilitator, is what makes this whole process hermeneutical, once we understand that a balance has to be achieved, that's when we start looking at things, the way they are, we situate them in different contexts, in special and specific contexts and we study them, within the context as unique aspects of the context they are situated in.

So we get a thorough understanding of the context, the phenomena we are studying are situated in and the uniqueness of the phenomena that we are studying, okay, all the sounds very difficult but hopefully it will become more and more understandable as we go along, so that is all we have time for in this lecture, you will continue with more on interpretivist thinking in the next session thank you very much for listening.