

**THE  
IMPORTANCE  
OF  
INTERPRETATION**

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## Abstract

This briefing paper describes a broad consensus in current philosophy of social science, and then considers the implications of this consensus for the ways we might think about data, knowledge, and policymaking.

Since the late twentieth century, philosophy has been dominated by meaning holism. Holists believe that the meaning of a sentence or belief depends on the wider language game or web of beliefs of which it is a part. This holism has given rise to: first, comparative epistemology; second, constructivist ontology; and third, contextualizing historical explanations. Current philosophy thus supports a view of the social sciences as an attempt to interpret other people's interpretations of the world.

Interpretive social science encourages certain views of data and knowledge. First, all kinds of techniques generate valid data, and ethnographic and historical studies are important supplements to other data. Second, models, frameworks, and correlations are reifications, so we should consider if they need to be disaggregated. Third, correlations, models, and frameworks are just more data, not explanations, and—to explain such data—we have to tell stories. An interpretive social science suggests lessons for policy makers. First, practitioners should take an eclectic approach to data, and remember that all data is partial and provisional. Second, practitioners should remain aware of the diversity of beliefs and actions as well as the historical and cultural contexts that influence them. Finally, practitioners should consider multiple stories that reveal new aspects of situations.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

Approaches to social science are strange beasts. Most of them contain a jumble of philosophical theories, methodological techniques, and empirical topics. Each approach contains theory, techniques, and topics that have some links to one another, but definitely do not logically entail one another. For example, social scientists often talk about behavioralism as if it were a coherent whole but, in reality, there are no necessary ties between positivist theory, large-N statistical techniques, and behavioral topics. My most general suggestion is, therefore, to distinguish theoretical “approaches” from techniques of data collection with their strengths and weaknesses for the study of various topics.

The first half of this paper discusses philosophical issues informing choices about data and knowledge. Most current philosophy supports a unifying perspective consisting of (i) comparative epistemology, (ii) constructivist ontology, and (iii) contextualizing historical explanations. Having discussed this philosophy, I consider its implications for data collection and analysis. My main suggestions are as follows:

- All kinds of techniques generate valid data, and ethnographic and historical studies are important supplements to other types of data.
- Models, frameworks, and correlations are reifications, so we should consider whether they need to be disaggregated.
- Correlations, models, and frameworks are just more data, not explanations; to explain such data, we have to tell stories.

Finally, I briefly suggest some possible implications of this view of data and knowledge for policy makers.

### Contemporary Philosophy

Social scientists often get most worked-up about the techniques and topics associated with different approaches. Many believe rigorous methods are key to proper science, and promote formal frameworks, large-N statistics, and deductive models. When others oppose formal modes of knowing, they generally appeal to topics; institutionalists in particular like to claim they study “big questions”. I think this emphasis on techniques and topics is mistaken. In my view, an equally important aspect of any approach to social science is its philosophy. Philosophical reasoning is vital to establish the appropriateness of methodological techniques and empirical topics.

Formal social science arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as modernist empiricism replaced developmental historicism. Nineteenth century thinkers used historical narratives to make sense of societies. They were committed to empiricism and induction, believing that valid narratives depended on the systematic and impartial collection and sorting of facts. But they made sense of facts by placing them in narratives about the gradual development of principles such as nationality and liberty. It was in the early twentieth century that developmental historicism fell to modernist empiricism. The First World War undermined belief in reason and progress. Social scientists then replaced historical narratives with modernist modes of knowledge. They remained committed to induction: knowledge arose from accumulating facts. However, they made sense of facts

by locating them not in historical narratives but in ahistorical frameworks, correlations, or models. Modernism was straightforwardly empiricist, often positivist, and it privileged formal, synchronic explanations over historical ones.

Philosophy has moved a long way from modernism. Some textbooks in the philosophy of social science open with a brief preface on the demise of modernism before devoting themselves to introducing undergraduates to perspectives and issues that have arisen in its wake (Fay, 1996). The main developments in philosophy arise from the ubiquitous spread of meaning holism. Meaning holism states that the content of sentences or beliefs depends on the wider languages or webs of belief of which they are part. I will summarize the implications of meaning holism in three main areas:

- It undermines naïve empiricism, leading to an epistemology based on comparing rival accounts.
- It undermines reified social ontology, leading to constructivism.
- It undermines formal explanations, leading to a contextualizing historicism.

### Comparative Epistemology

Social scientists are generally empiricists. Empiricism can be defined as the belief that knowledge comes from experience. While empiricism has a clear appeal, it lapses into skepticism. Skeptics ask: why assume patterns in past experiences will persist in future ones? They pose the problem of induction. What justification is there for assuming a generalization based on previous observations will hold for other cases? The problem of induction is generally thought insurmountable. It led Karl Popper to shift attention from confirmation to refutation (Popper, 1959). Popper argued that data can never confirm a theory. It is worth belaboring what his argument implies since a number of social scientists believe he lends support to their use of induction. In Popper's view, it is impossible to confirm a theory to even the slightest degree irrespective of the amount of observations gathered in accord with it and irrespective of the number of observations it predicts.

Epistemology and philosophy of science have moved far even from the views of Popper. The most important move has been towards holism following the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962), W. V. O. Quine (1961), and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1972) (also see Fodor and LePore, 1992). Holism asserts that the meaning of a proposition depends on the paradigm, web of beliefs, or language game in which it is located. What would have to be the case for a proposition to be true (or false) depends on the other propositions we hold true. Holism undermines earlier ideas not only of confirmation but also of refutation. It implies that no data can verify or falsify a proposition. People can reject or retain any proposition in the face of any evidence provided they make appropriate changes to other propositions they hold true. No proposition ever confronts the world in splendid isolation. Evidence only ever confronts overarching webs of belief, and even then the evidence is saturated by theories that are part of the relevant webs of belief.

Meaning holism renders implausible naïve empiricism. Yet to reject naïve empiricism is not to accept out-and-out relativism. Contemporary philosophers offer alternative accounts of justified knowledge based on comparative approaches to theory

choice. Recognition that theories can be tested only as webs of belief inspired attempts to think about domains and criteria by which to choose among rival webs of belief. The trick is to find valid philosophical ways of generating a domain and criteria of comparison. One common idea is to locate the domain of comparison in the ability of a tradition to narrate itself and its rivals. My own view is that we also might try to generate criteria of comparison as something akin to deductions from holism.

A shift from naïve inductive empiricism to comparative approaches to theory choice has clear implications for social science. Holism implies that it is a mistake to think that methods – models, regression analyses, etc. – can justify causal claims or even the data they create. Methods create data, the validity of which is still open to debate. The validity of data and causal claims depends on comparisons between rival bundles of facts, theories, and assumptions. The comparisons may depend less on methodological rigor than philosophical coherence, theoretical imagination, fruitfulness, and synergies with other ways of thinking.

### Constructivist Ontology

Holism implies that the world, as we recognize it, consists of things that we can observe and discuss only because we have the web of beliefs we do. The implication may appear to be that holism entails a constructivist ontology according to which we make the world through our concepts. However, although holism leads to a constructivist view of the objects in “our world”, there are philosophical debates about the relationship of “our world” to “the world”. Some philosophers are reluctant to evoke a real world that is apart from our world and so, by definition, something we cannot access. Others are equally reluctant to give up their realist intuitions.

We need not resolve debates about “the world” to show the profoundly constructed nature of social objects. All that matters is that we make the social world by acting on conscious and unconscious beliefs that gain content only as part of wider webs of belief. Holism implies a linguistic constructivism according to which we not only make the social world by our actions but via which we also make the beliefs on which we act. Our beliefs, concepts, actions, and practices are products of particular traditions or discourses. Social concepts (and social objects such as “bureaucracy” or “democracy”), do not have intrinsic properties and objective boundaries. Social concepts are artificial inventions of particular languages and societies so content varies with the wider webs of belief in which they are situated.

Linguistic constructivism implies that social concepts are pragmatic. This constructivist ontology undermines attempts to treat social objects as natural kinds and to ascribe to social objects an essence that determines their other properties or effects. Linguistic constructivism implies, in other words, that institutions are merely aggregate products of activity and that social life consists of concrete activity. When we use aggregate concepts to refer to a set of actions, the decision about which actions to include under the concept is a pragmatic one made in accord with our purposes.

Constructivism does not preclude the existence of institutions or structures. Instead, it just requires social scientists to conceive of institutions and structures as practices. A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern,

perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. “Practice” is a pragmatic concept in that there is no natural boundary or essence to the set of actions, and in that the practice itself does not possess intrinsic causal properties. In contrast, “institution” and “structure” are typically used to evoke an entity with an essence and causal properties. The institution or structure is meant to explain why people act as they do or why their actions have the consequences they do. Obviously, people can act on their beliefs about the nature of a practice, but these beliefs are not necessarily correct; in fact, their beliefs—and not the practice—causes their actions. Again, obviously people find that practices – or rather the actions of others – effect or even constitute the consequences of an action; but the consequences are then the results of other people’s activity not some reified institution or structure.

### Contextualizing Historical Explanations

Social scientists sometimes evoke institutions and structures as if they were given objects. When concepts such as class, legislature, and democracy are used descriptively, they usually can be unpacked as social constructions: we can treat them as simplified terms for patterns of concrete activity. However, when these concepts are used to explain actions or outcomes, they can take on a formal or fixed content; they get reified and thus treated as causes that either operate independently of the actors’ beliefs or stand in for these beliefs. Social scientists sometimes want only to describe the world, but they more often aspire to provide explanations, and it is this aspiration that sometimes encourages them to reify concepts.

Meaning holism sustains a constructivist ontology that rejects reifications. In this view, social science explores actions in relation to the intentionality of the actors. Social life is intentional in a way purely physical events are not. Actions embody the reasoning, beliefs, and desires—whether conscious or not—of the actors. More importantly, meaning holism implies that social explanation requires us not only to relate actions to beliefs, but to make sense of these beliefs by locating them in larger webs of belief that provide content. It, thereby, undermines formal and ahistorical explanations, and leads instead to contextualizing and historicist explanations.

First, holism prompts social scientists to adopt contextual explanations. It implies we can properly explain people’s beliefs (and thus their actions and the practices to which actions give rise) only if we locate them in the context of a wider web of beliefs. Holism points to the importance of elucidating beliefs by showing how they relate to one another and not by trying to reduce them to categories such as social class or institutional position. Social scientists should explain beliefs – and so actions and practices – by unpacking the conceptual connections in a web of beliefs.

Secondly, holism prompts social scientists to adopt historicist explanations. It implies that people can grasp their experiences and so adopt new beliefs only against the background of an inherited web of beliefs. Social scientists cannot explain why people hold the webs of belief they do solely by reference to people’s experiences, interests, or social location. To the contrary, even people’s beliefs about their experiences, interests, and location depend on their prior theories. A social scientist can explain why people hold the webs of belief they do only by reference to their inherited traditions. Holism

suggests, therefore, that social explanation contains an inherently historicist moment.

The shift towards contextual and historical forms of explanation implies that correlations, classifications, and models are not properly showing explanations. They are just further data that we will accept in so far as we trust the methods by which they are produced. Social scientists can explain data only by appealing to contexts and histories. Correlations and classifications become explanations only if we treat them as shorthand for accounts of how some beliefs fit with other beliefs to make possible certain actions. Models may appeal to beliefs and desires, but they are fables that become explanations only when we treat them as accurate depictions of the beliefs and desires people held in a particular case.

### **Techniques and Topics**

Approaches to social science are typically amalgams of theories, techniques, and topics, which may overlap in intelligible ways but are not logically required by each other. Current philosophy supports “interpretive social science” focused on the webs of belief that inform concrete activity (for a collection of essays on relevant theories, techniques, and topics, see Bevir, 2010). In this view, interpretive social science consists primarily of a theory that has only loose implications for techniques and topics (for a greater focus on methods, see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Interpretive theory suggests that other approaches may overly privilege some topics because those topics can be studied using techniques that are deemed “scientific”. Interpretive social science reminds us of the validity of different types of data, the limitations of reified modes of knowledge, and the importance of storytelling.

#### **Types of data**

*All kinds of techniques generate valid data, and ethnographic and historical studies are important supplements to other types of data.*

Holism has implications for how to use and explain data generated by multiple methods. Interpretive social science encourages us to see data as evidence of concrete activity informed by historically contingent beliefs. It is worth emphasizing that holism does not negate any particular method for creating data. Interpretive social scientists can construct their historical interpretations from data generated by various techniques. They can draw on participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, mass surveys, statistical analysis, and formal models as well as reading memoirs, newspapers, and official and unofficial documents. The philosophical analysis underpinning an interpretive approach does not prescribe a particular methodological toolkit for producing data. Instead, it prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. Proponents of an interpretive approach argue that social scientists should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions.

Nonetheless, the interpretive view of how we should treat data does have some implications for the kind of data that is most helpful and ways in which we might gather it. Interpretive social science highlights, in particular, the importance of learning about

the intentionality of actors; that is, the beliefs, cultures, and traditions that inform actions and practices. The constitutive relation of beliefs to actions encourages studies of beliefs and identities as well as the actions and cultural practices to which they give rise. Likewise, the historically embedded nature of activity encourages studies of the traditions that inform people's beliefs and actions.

Interpretive social scientists typically favor qualitative methods, and especially textual analysis and ethnography in so far as these techniques encourage thicker accounts of the diverse webs of meaning that are embedded in social and political life. They favor detailed studies of the beliefs of the relevant people using textual analysis, participant observation, and interviews. For example, Cris Shore's (2000) analysis of how European Union elites sought to build Europe uses a battery of methods, including participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques. Some social scientists prefer the latter techniques and ignore, or even denigrate, other methods. In contrast, an interpretive approach does not require an exclusive use of any one method. It redresses the balance to the qualitative analyses associated with anthropology and history.

### Disaggregating models and frameworks

*Models, frameworks, and correlations are reifications, so we should consider whether they need to be disaggregated.*

Interpretive social science is less about methods for creating data than how to think about and explain data. Models, frameworks, and correlations are all ways of abstracting from concrete human activity—they describe patterns in concrete activity; but to describe an abstract pattern is not to give a uniquely correct account of the world. If we looked at the same concrete activity at a different level of abstraction, we might see a different pattern or even no pattern at all.

Models, frameworks, and correlations are reifications that highlight patterns in concrete activity, yet they may blind us to differences within a pattern. The worry is that if we overly privilege models, frameworks, or correlations, we may see them as uniquely correct descriptions of the world and so ignore complexities and diversities within them. When we find a pattern, we should generally ask whether it hides differences that would appear if we asked (i) whether different beliefs happen to have produced similar actions, or (ii) whether different webs of belief happen to include some similar features.

Some patterns arise when people act in similar ways for very different reasons. In Britain, there is a well-established (if declining) correlation between being working class and voting for the Labour Party. The worry is the correlation may lead us to think there is a monolithic pattern. Yet, different working-class people may vote Labour for different reasons. Some may vote Labour because they believe themselves to be working class and Labour will promote the interests of the working class. Others may vote Labour because they believe themselves to be working class, do not think Labour will promote the workers' interests, but have an emotional identification with the symbolism of Labour. Others may believe (perhaps mistakenly) that they are middle class and yet vote Labour because they see themselves as committed to values such as social justice.

Other patterns arise—especially in speech, beliefs, and attitudes—because people have webs of belief that have some abstract features in common but are very different in their specifics. Suppose, for example, that many people from a particular nationality or religion say they support a strong state. We might think we have found a clear pattern. Equally, however, we should be aware that different members of the group may mean different things when they use the word “state” or may have very different reasons for advocating a strong state. Some may think their state is unable to defend the rule of law and just want it to do so. Others may want the state to impose stronger moral norms on society and so on.

It is important to recognize that the case for disaggregating models, frameworks, and correlations is a philosophical one. So, although someone might propose using more nuanced models, frameworks, and correlations to capture the diverse reasons workers have for voting Labour or people have for wanting a stronger state, we could still consider whether these more nuanced theories should be disaggregated. We should adopt a suspicious attitude to reified patterns, always recognizing that they might cover diverse types of concrete activity.

### The importance of storytelling

*Correlations, models, and frameworks are just more data, not explanations, and to explain such data, we have to tell stories.*

Models, frameworks, and correlations are reifications that describe patterns. We should be careful not to mistake such descriptions of a pattern for an explanation of it. The observation that working class people vote Labour does not mean that their being working class explains the behavior. Likewise, that people of some nationality or religion support a strong state does not mean that their nationality or religion explains their beliefs about the state. Explanations of social data—including the patterns among data—depend on (i) accounts of the beliefs that lead people to act as they do and (ii) the cultural and historical contexts in which they adopt those beliefs.

We explain actions by referencing beliefs, explain beliefs by placing them in a web of beliefs; and explain webs of belief by categorizing them against the background of historical traditions. Social scientists should not treat beliefs as epiphenomena to be explained in terms of objective facts about the world, social formations, or a purportedly universal rationality. Social science relies on explanations that refer to the reasons people had for acting that contextualize and historicize these reasons.

Social explanations thus resemble narratives. Historical and fictional narratives characteristically relate actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them. Narratives depend here on conditional connections that are not necessary or arbitrary: it is because they are not necessary that social science differs from the natural sciences, and yet it is because they are not arbitrary that social scientists can use them to explain actions and practices. These conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. The relevant objects condition each other, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship. But neither object follows inexorably from the other, so they do not have a necessary relationship. Social knowledge depends on telling stories that postulate just such conditional connections between beliefs, actions, practices, and their contexts.

### **Implications for policy-makers**

Interpretive social science emphasizes that theories of meaningful and contextualized nature of actions and practices, methods that facilitate the recovery of whole webs of beliefs or systems of signs, and topics associated with a historical sociology rather than a formal one. All these emphases may prompt suspicion of the general and mid-level theories tied to many models, classifications, and correlations.

Critics might wonder: does suspicion of such expertise mean that interpretive theories are unable to inform policy? On the one hand, interpretive social science can indeed inspire a suspicion of formal expertise lacking concrete specificity. On the other hand, interpretive social science inspires other types of policy analysis, whereby interpretive theories highlight the importance of, for example, telling stories, learning by analogy, and encouraging a dialogue among the relevant actors.

There is a long-standing and growing literature on “the interpretive turn” in organization studies, policy analysis, and public administration. Rein (1973, pp. 74-75) argues for example, that advice to policy makers is based on “illustrative stories, or accounts from past experience, which suggest how the future might unfold if certain actions were taken”. In his view, policy narratives present a chronology of linked events. There is usually a moral to the tale and the validity of stories is assessed by rules that are aesthetic as well as logical. The task of policy analysts is to invent objectively grounded normative stories, to participate in designing programs of intervention based on them, and to test the validity of stories that others commend. Similarly, Morgan’s (1993, pp. 301-302) protocol is to “get inside a situation and understand it as far as possible on its own terms”; adopt the role of a learner (not expert); let the situation speak for itself; “create a rich description” of what is said and done; and develop an “evolving” interpretation. As a final example, Weick (1995) identifies six rules of thumb to guide practitioners:

1. Acting and talking: You will find out what you think by acting.
2. Words matter: The stories you tell and the words you use to tell them will affect what you see and how others see you.
3. History: ‘Good’ decision makers retrospectively construct a history that appears to have led directly to the decision.
4. Committees: meeting more often is good for you; it makes sense of ambiguity, puzzles and the organization.
5. Sharing: tell stories about shared experiences to foster shared meaning.
6. Reality: reality is up for grabs and expectations are powerful realities.

An interpretive approach has techniques (storytelling), which provide guides for managers in the guise of rules of thumb or, if you will, proverbs.

Personally, I would emphasize three implications of interpretive social science for policy makers:

- Practitioners should take an eclectic approach to data, not make a fetish of hard data, and remember that all data is a partial account of concrete activity, and, moreover, possibly wrong.
- Practitioners should be wary of treating data as evidence of a reified social logic or law-like regularity; they should be aware of the diversity of concrete human activity and the historical and cultural contexts that influence it.

- Practitioners should experiment with multiple stories that reveal new aspects of situations; they should hear different voices, talk to one another, and so develop tentative and evolving narratives.

Given that much of my argument is general, it is important to bring it down to earth with a thud. Most if not all policy advisers will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Practitioners often use phrases such as “Have we got our story straight?”, “Are we telling a consistent story?”, and “What is our story?”. Advisors often explain past events to justify recommendations for the future. Interpretive social science makes sense of the kind of knowledge they are seeking and acting on. In short, a stress on interpretation and storytelling is not an example of academic whimsy. It reminds policy-makers of what they do, and explains why doing that remains a valuable corrective to overly formal approaches to data and knowledge.

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