

RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND APPROACHES

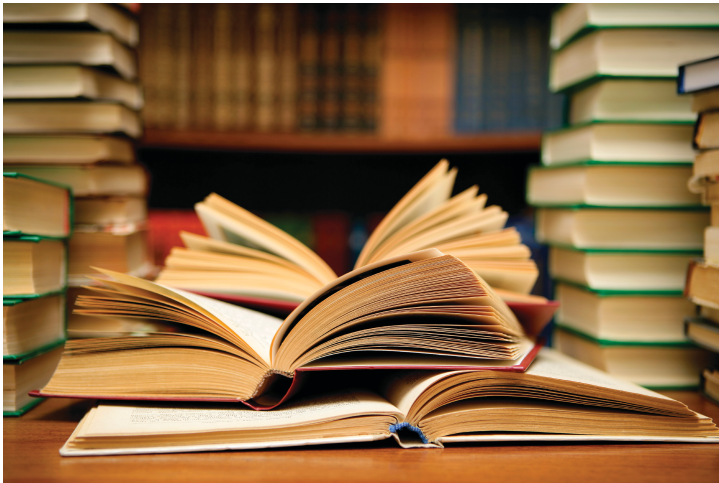
Interpretivism and Positivism (Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives)

IMAGE

MARCH 14, 2012 AUGUST 23, 2016

DR. PRABASH EDIRISINGHA

52 COMMENTS



What is Ontology and What is Epistemology?

Ontology is the nature of reality (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) and the epistemology can be defined as the relationship between the researcher and the reality (Carson et al., 2001) or how this reality is captured or known. There are two dominant ontological and epistemological traditions/ideologies: 1) Positivism, 2) Interpretivism.

Positivism:

The positivist ontology believes that the world is external (Carson et al., 1988) and that there is a single objective reality to any research phenomenon or situation regardless of the researcher's perspective or belief (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Thus, they take a controlled and structural approach in conducting research by identifying a clear research topic, constructing appropriate hypotheses and by adopting a suitable research methodology (Churchill, 1996; Carson et al., 2001). Positivist researchers remain detached from the participants of the research by creating a distance, which is important in remaining emotionally neutral to make clear distinctions between reason and feeling (Carson et al., 2001). They also maintain a clear distinction between science and

personal experience and fact and value judgement. It is also important in positivist research to seek objectivity and use consistently rational and logical approaches to research (Carson et al., 2001). Statistical and mathematical techniques are central to positivist research, which adheres to specifically structured research techniques to uncover single and objective reality (Carson et al., 2001). The goal of positivist researchers is to make time and context free generalizations. They believe this is possible because human actions can be explained as a result of real causes that temporarily precedes their behaviour and the researcher and his research subjects are independent and do not influence each other (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Accordingly, positivist researchers also attempt to remain detached from the participants of the research by creating distance between themselves and the participants. Especially, this is an important step in remaining emotionally neutral to make clear distinctions between reason and feeling as well as between science and personal experience. Positivists also claim it is important to clearly distinguish between fact and value judgement. As positivist researchers they seek objectivity and use consistently rational and logical approaches to research (Carson et al. 2001; Hudson and Ozanne 1988).

Interpretivism:

The position of interpretivism in relation to ontology and epistemology is that interpretivists believe the reality is multiple and relative (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that these multiple realities also depend on other systems for meanings, which make it even more difficult to interpret in terms of fixed realities (Neuman, 2000). The knowledge acquired in this discipline is socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Carson et al., 2001, p.5) and perceived (Hirschman, 1985, Berger and Luckman, 1967, p. 3: in Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Interpretivists avoid rigid structural frameworks such as in positivist research and adopt a more personal and flexible research structures (Carson et al., 2001) which are receptive to capturing meanings in human interaction (Black, 2006) and make sense of what is perceived as reality (Carson et al., 2001). They believe the researcher and his informants are interdependent and mutually interactive (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The interpretivist researcher enters the field with some sort of prior insight of the research context but assumes that this is insufficient in developing a fixed research design due to complex, multiple and unpredictable nature of what is perceived as reality (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). The researcher remains open to new knowledge throughout the study and lets it develop with the help of informants. The use of such an emergent and collaborative approach is consistent with the interpretivist belief that humans have the ability to adapt, and that no one can gain prior knowledge of time and context bound social realities (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Therefore, the goal of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the meanings in human behaviour rather than to generalize and predict causes and effects (Neuman, 2000; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). For an interpretivist researcher it is important to understand motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences which are time and context bound (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2000).

The following table summarizes the differences between the two research paradigms:

Ontology and epistemological differences of positivism and interpretivism

(Adopted from Carson et al. 2001, p. 6)

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Ontology	Positivist	Interpretivist
Nature of 'being' / nature of the world Reality	Have direct access to real world Single external reality	No direct access to real world No single external reality
Epistemology		
'Grounds' of knowledge / relationship between reality and research	Possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge Research focus on generalization and abstraction Thought governed by hypotheses and stated theories	Understood through 'perceived' knowledge Research focuses on the specific and concrete Seeking to understand specific context
Methodology		
Focus of research Role of the researcher	Concentrates on description and explanation Detached, external observer Clear distinction between reason and feeling Aim to discover external reality rather than creating the object of study	Concentrates on understanding and interpretation Researchers want to experience what they are studying Allow feeling and reason to govern actions

Techniques used by researcher	Strive to use rational, consistent, verbal, logical approach Seek to maintain clear distinction between facts and value judgments Distinction between science and personal experience Formalized statistical and mathematical methods predominant	Partially create what is studied, the meaning of phenomena Use of pre-understanding is important Distinction between facts and value judgments less clear Accept influence from both science and personal experience Primarily non-quantitative
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References:

- Berger, P. L., and Luckman, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Irvington Publishers.
- Black, I. (2006). The presentation of interpretivist research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9(4), 319–324.
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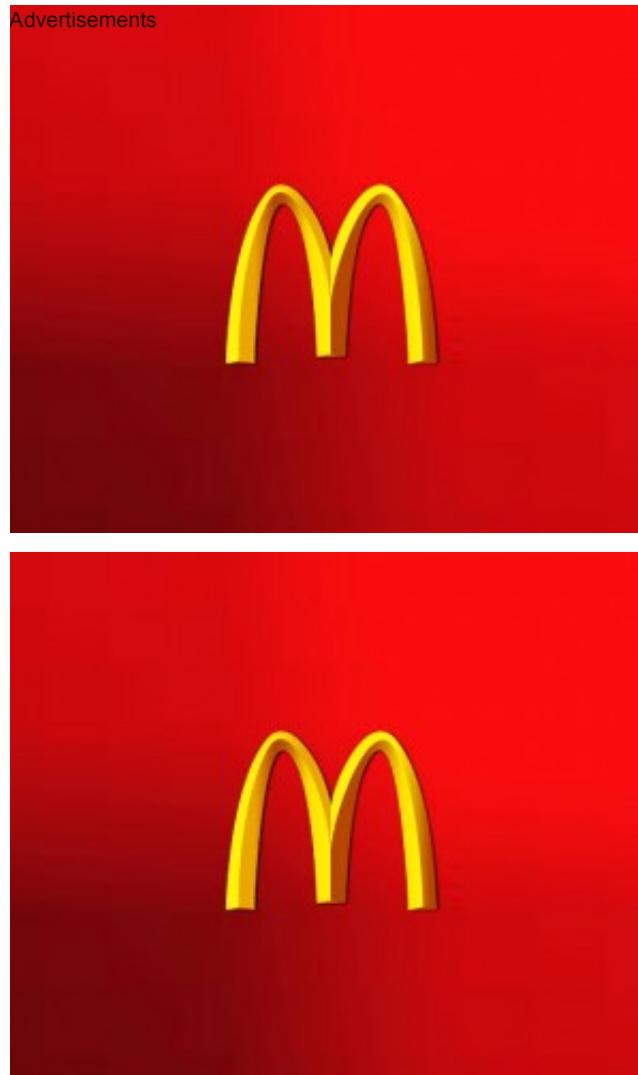
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 - Lincoln, Y., and Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage.
 - Neuman, L. W. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (4th Ed.), USA: Allyn and Bacon.

Dr. Prabash A Edirisingha

Faculty of Business and Law

Northumbria University

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK



EPISTEMOLOGY, INTERPRETIVISM, ONTOLOGY, POSITIVISM, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH,
RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

52 thoughts on “Interpretivism and Positivism (Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives)”

Kent says:

FEBRUARY 16, 2013 AT 1:10 PM

I put together this general introduction to ontology:

Hope it can serve as a parallell “reading” to this nice blog post.

[REPLY](#)

Prabash Edirisingha says:

AUGUST 26, 2013 AT 8:10 AM

This is great...Thank you for sharing!!!

[REPLY](#)

chisala Mulenga says:

JULY 24, 2016 AT 3:29 AM

Between Single and Multiple reality, which one is good for Business or Management research? answer with justification please.

[REPLY](#)

laurasitali says:

FEBRUARY 26, 2017 AT 7:18 PM

Hi Chisala, Did you get anything on single and multiple reality. Would be interested to have a read on this.

x0haibali says:

MAY 27, 2013 AT 6:54 AM

Good assessment , it really helped.

[REPLY](#)

Houda says:

AUGUST 18, 2013 AT 1:53 PM

What is the name of the original Hudson and Ozanne 1988 research paper please?

[REPLY](#)

Prabash Edirisingha says:

AUGUST 26, 2013 AT 8:06 AM

Hudson LA & Ozanne JL, Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research, Journal of consumer research, vol 14(March 1988), pp. 508-521

[REPLY](#)

Donald Stephen (@Pancadevata) says:

AUGUST 22, 2013 AT 1:24 PM

you have your in-text citation but where is your reference list?

[REPLY](#)

Prabash Edirisingha says:

AUGUST 26, 2013 AT 8:07 AM

Thank you..I better put it up soon.

[REPLY](#)

Charles says:

JANUARY 15, 2014 AT 2:02 PM

Have you put them up yet? I would quite like to read them and be able to reference them myself in an assignment I am doing.

Thanks a lot! very helpful!

Christopher Goscomb says:

AUGUST 22, 2013 AT 2:24 PM

very clear explanations – thank you

REPLY

Introduction to Qualitative Communication Research | Research Methodology says:

AUGUST 28, 2013 AT 10:47 AM

[...] <https://prabash78.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/interpretivism-and-positivism-ontological-and-epistemologic…> [...]

REPLY

MB Vianello says:

OCTOBER 23, 2013 AT 10:42 AM

Can you give the full Carson et al 1988 research paper title etc...please

REPLY

Rejecting Other Ways of Thinking – Some Neural Network Theory | rjheeks says:

JANUARY 9, 2014 AT 12:44 PM

[...] At this point, you might ask whether arts and sciences are so different. Can't one person be an artist and a scientist? Perhaps they can, but when researching into writing theory I came across a lot of literature that would suggest there are pretty big differences between what kinds of things arts and science people value about writing – basic beliefs and attitudes. Chandler, for example, has approached characteristic differences between Classical and Romantic ways of thinking. Classical writers value planning, logic, order, structure, purpose, rigour, and objectivity. Romantic writers, by contrast, favour discovery, freedom, lack of structure, enjoyment, and emergent form. Classical relates to the sciences, Romantic relates to the arts. Similar characteristic differences can be found between positivism and interpretivism. [...]

REPLY

Rumi says:

JANUARY 10, 2014 AT 3:30 AM

Appreciate this! 😊 Thank you!

REPLY

sj says:

JANUARY 21, 2014 AT 4:42 AM

Thank you, very helpful 😊

REPLY

Mark says:

APRIL 9, 2014 AT 8:13 PM

Hi,

what is the original paper for Carson et al. 2001?

Great article, many thank .

M

REPLY

Study Notes:Research Paradigm(1)Ontology,Epistemology,Methodology | KT Huang says:
APRIL 15, 2014 AT 2:01 AM

[...] <https://prabash78.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/interpretivism-and-postivism-ontological-and-epistemologic…> [...]

REPLY

Study Notes:Research Paradigm(2)-Positivism | KT Huang says:

APRIL 15, 2014 AT 2:59 AM

[...] Reference: <https://prabash78.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/interpretivism-and-postivism-ontological-and-epistemologic…> [...]

REPLY

Study Notes:Research Paradigm(3)-Interpretivism | KT Huang says:

APRIL 15, 2014 AT 3:59 AM

[...] <https://prabash78.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/interpretivism-and-postivism-ontological-and-epistemologic…> [...]

REPLY

abigail says:

APRIL 27, 2014 AT 12:24 PM

Hi where is the original research paper for the carson et al 2001 ? x

[REPLY](#)

daphne says:

MAY 14, 2014 AT 5:02 AM

what is the full reference of Lincoln and Guba(1983)?

[REPLY](#)

aisha adamu (@AdamuGm) says:

JUNE 7, 2014 AT 11:14 AM

The post was quite informative and useful, thank you.

[REPLY](#)

chishambo says:

JUNE 26, 2014 AT 11:00 AM

good material

[REPLY](#)

Lincoln says:

JULY 17, 2014 AT 1:49 AM

I know I'm late to the game, but this is good information. Can you send me your reference page for this information. You never posted it. Thanks! I would have emailed you, but I don't see how on this page. If you need my info, let me know.

REPLY

Prabash Edirisingha says:

NOVEMBER 15, 2014 AT 11:43 PM

Article revised and references are listed. Thank you for all the comments and I am glad it has helped in your work.

REPLY

Terri says:

DECEMBER 1, 2014 AT 1:43 PM

Hello, Do you have a reference Black (2006).

great article, Much needed a simple way of understanding these process . Well done and nice one

REPLY

Prabash Edirisingha says:

DECEMBER 2, 2014 AT 1:00 AM

Thank you!!! Here it is: • Black, I. (2006). The presentation of interpretivist research. Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 9(4), 319–324. Cheers!!

Felicity says:

FEBRUARY 21, 2017 AT 7:01 PM

Great piece....It has helped me. It was easy to understand

REPLY

Jay says:

JANUARY 9, 2015 AT 11:30 AM

thank you it has been very helpful

REPLY

WinnerDrama says:

FEBRUARY 25, 2015 AT 4:21 AM

Will Mr Prabash help me to understand more?

I'm lost with my understanding on certain things regards to ontological and epistemological.

REPLY

Prabash Edirisingha says:

JUNE 12, 2015 AT 7:56 AM

Hi, I am really sorry for this late response. I would have been happy to discuss this with you but I was busy shifting from one country to another with my family after the PhD. You may contact me on prabash.edirisingha@northumbria.ac.uk, if you still need any help regarding the topic. Kind Regards, Prabash

REPLY

discordion says:

FEBRUARY 25, 2015 AT 10:04 PM

Reblogged this on [discordion](#) {[Artist Ian Pritchard](#)} and commented:

Had a seminar today on the philosopher Karen Baras wish I had stumbled onto this yesterday. Thanks for this post.

REPLY

Linda Etale says:

MARCH 10, 2015 AT 2:42 AM

This was very helpful even as i work on my dissertation

REPLY

Ontology & epistemology: Where do you stand? | Thesis Talk / Trácht ar Thráchtais says:

JULY 17, 2015 AT 2:19 PM

[...] <https://prabash78.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/interpretivism-and-postivism-ontological-and-epistemologi…>; [...]

REPLY

Ellen says:

AUGUST 12, 2015 AT 5:10 PM

It's helpful, thanks.

But the title has incorrect spelling.

It's 'positivism' not 'postivism'. 😊

REPLY

Prabash Edirisingha says:

AUGUST 13, 2015 AT 1:09 PM

Thanks Ellen...kind of you to point it out.

REPLY

Gecho says:

NOVEMBER 10, 2015 AT 7:41 AM

Thank u so much for this very clear, constructive and helpful post and I hope that you will post more from now on.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY says:

JANUARY 17, 2016 AT 11:02 AM

Research Strategy

Once you have an idea of the research approach that you are going to take, you next need to think about a research strategy that will lead you to find answers to your research question. That is, you need to think about your methodology and methods. You should get going on this near the start of your project and certainly before you do any data collection. It is at this stage that you would consider, for instance, whether your research is going to involve a survey, one or more case studies, some action research, participant observation, or some other methodology. Whatever choice you make, you must be able to justify it in terms of your learning objectives, your research question, and your research approach.

Your thinking at this stage should involve quite a high level of detail. For example, if your project were to involve in-depth interviewing, you would need to justify:

who is to be interviewed, and why

what questions are to be asked, and why

how open ended you would like the responses to be, and why how will the responses be recorded, and why

how will these responses be analysed and why

how will conclusions be drawn from the analysis, and why.

You are expected to be methodologically aware; – this means not only that you know what you are doing but also that you are able to provide the rationale for why you are doing it. For example, the design of interview questions should (normally) be based upon appropriate theory. Therefore, you will be expected to read and refer to appropriate textbooks on research methodology. Your reading might begin with the recommended text book (see section 3.1 in these guidelines) and move on from there as your needs become more specific.

Issues that you are likely to encounter in the course of your thinking and discussion about methodology include:

what your learning objectives might mean in terms of practical implementation

how to ensure ethical conduct in your research

how to derive research questions, hypotheses or a project brief what reading you should focus on and when

how to identify, contact and talk to clients or to staff in study organisations

the design of your data-gathering approach or instrument pilot-testing your data-gathering approach or instrument

what tools you will use to record and organise your data what methods you will use to analyse your data

the synthesis of data and how to derive theory (or learning) from it review and redesign of objectives, methodology, and reading project management (timetable, resources, review dates etc.) critical engagement with your methodology and results

learning review

alternative (creative) ways of writing up.

As with objective setting, your methodology should be the subject of continuous review and revision in the light of progress so far.

Remember

You need to be methodologically aware to get the best learning from your project.

You need a methodology that is consistent with your research approach, and is designed to both answer your research question and fulfil your learning objectives.

Your methodology should describe not only how you will undertake the research, what data you will use and how you will analyse it, but also, why this is an appropriate design for your particular project.

Once you have begun an investigation, you have invested time in it. It is generally not rewarding to have to repeat work simply because you did not spend the time, in advance, planning how you were going to use (or analyse) the results of your investigation.

There is never time to do the planning perfectly! You do need a record of actions though.

[REPLY](#)

Intersectionality, Standpoint Ontology, and Libertarianism (with needless personal reminiscence) | Simon Radford says:

FEBRUARY 17, 2016 AT 2:30 PM

[...] can use different ways to order the links between ontology, epistemology (theory of knowledge or “how we know what [...])

[REPLY](#)

dianettekoroma says:

MARCH 1, 2016 AT 9:28 PM

please help me with this question'compare and contrast the positivist and naturalist perception in social work

[REPLY](#)

Dr. Prabash Edirisingha says:

MARCH 20, 2016 AT 11:39 AM

Hi, what is your question exactly?

[REPLY](#)

dianettekoroma says:

MARCH 1, 2016 AT 9:31 PM

compare and contrast the positivist and naturalist perception about reality in social work

[REPLY](#)

Sani Ibrahim Paki says:

MARCH 11, 2016 AT 5:20 PM

Helpful indeed sir.

[REPLY](#)

nahidatakhtar says:

APRIL 17, 2016 AT 8:09 AM

Thank you for this.

It has really helped me wrap my head around some of the philosophical underpinnings of research and the references are also very helpful, as I plan to do more reading.

[REPLY](#)

Ashlyn Arrowood says:

JUNE 5, 2016 AT 11:25 PM

Hello. This post was really motivating, particularly since I was searching for thoughts on this issue last Thursday.

[REPLY](#)

Maybelle Mcclelland says:

JULY 18, 2016 AT 7:42 AM

great points altogether, you simply won a new reader. What might you suggest about your put up that you just made a few days in the past? Any certain?

[REPLY](#)

Samra says:

AUGUST 5, 2016 AT 7:14 AM

Thank you for the info.

[REPLY](#)

midwifejen says:

FEBRUARY 2, 2017 AT 8:54 PM

Reblogged this on Midwife Jen and commented:
great article!

[REPLY](#)

Kelly Pugin says:

FEBRUARY 6, 2017 AT 6:27 PM

Good day, I would like to ask for the correct and full Harvard reference for your article, Mr Edirisingha. This one entitled, 'Interpretivism and Positivism (Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives). Could you perhaps help me? Thank you and kind regards

[REPLY](#)

Inonge Fwankila says:

FEBRUARY 24, 2017 AT 8:30 AM

Very helpful, thank you.

REPLY

Deon says:

MARCH 20, 2017 AT 2:07 PM

Great appreciation and thanks for an easy to understand explanation, it is a great help for a novice like myself. Thank you also for sharing of your sources, really much appreciated.

REPLY

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