Interpretive Paradigm
in Educational Research

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Abstract

In this paper, one of the two mutually exclusive paradigms of research in education, the interpretive paradigm, is investigated thoroughly. As it is commonly conceived, the writer examines the methods, ontology and epistemology that are associated with this paradigm, including data collection methods. The issues of validity of interpretive research are further addressed with a suggestion on how to increase validity claims. Finally, the paper concludes with the pros and cons of the interpretivism, which are thrashed out in relation to its opposite, the positivism.

Introduction

According to Enc (1999), a ‘paradigm’ is a set of scientific and metaphysical beliefs that form a theoretical framework within which scientific theories can be tested, evaluated and if necessary revised. However, a paradigm indicates movements within social science as well. A number of researchers have used the term paradigm in social science as they believe that the use of certain methods in social scientific research carry with them implicit positions on the nature of social reality and what constitutes human knowledge of this reality.

Often compared to the dichotomy, the interpretive paradigm takes different ontological and epistemological positions from the positivist paradigm. Interpretive researchers do not regard the social world as “out there” but believe that it is constructed by human beings. While the objects of study of the natural sciences have independent existence, the objects of study of the social sciences are both dependent on and are the creation of human beings. As it is people who give meaning to their social world, interpretive researchers seek to investigate how humans perceive and make sense of this world. For the interpretive researcher, there can be no truly objective position. He or she becomes part of the research as a meaning-maker interacting with the other meaning-makers. The research becomes the construction of meanings between the participants, one of whom is the researcher himself or herself.
Interpretative Methods

The methods used by interpretive researchers differ greatly from positivist research. While positivist researchers start their research with a hypothesis, interpretivists use more open-ended research questions. Also, the main focus is on qualitative data, from which the researcher will interpret meanings. Moreover, interpretive studies are often idiographic, using small numbers of participants. This is because the purpose is not to generalise, but to explore the meanings which participants place on the social situations under investigation.

In the process of the research, participants often create new meanings and make new connections of ideas. Interpretive research is often called heuristic. By our very nature as human beings, we are able to communicate with one another and in interpretive research such forms of communication are given priority. It is also connected with hermeneutics as ‘Hermeneutics’ originally involved the study and interpretation of ancient texts, but in interpretive studies this can be extended to a study and interpretation of qualitative data.

Ethnography and Case Studies

Ethnography is situated on the interpretive side of the paradigm division. Its purpose is defined by Denscombe (1998:71):

> The purpose of ethnographic research is to produce detailed pictures of events or cultures - descriptions which stand out in their own right without the need to worry about how representative the situation is or what the broader implications might be in terms of other events or cultures of the type, or of contributing to wider theories. The ethnography from this stance, is a stand-alone ‘one-off’ that is to be judged by the depth of its portrayal and the intricacy of its description.

However, Denscombe (ibid.) cites Woods, who observes that there is a debate in this area, with some researchers identifying it as idiographic and others as nomothetic. Where the argument is made for generalisability, this takes a different form from positivist generalisability. Interpretivist generalisability involves heuristic methods to build frameworks of analysis and for interpretation.

Another approach to interpretivism is a case study. Case studies are defined by Denscombe (ibid.) as strategies rather than methods. In the case study one particular group or organisation is selected and studied in depth and events are studied as they naturally occur. The researcher is aiming to gain depth in one area rather than the shallower breadth obtained through the use of surveys.

Grounded Theory

One method of conducting interpretive research is grounded theory. Here ideas are generated from the analysis of data itself. The researcher does not test a theory against qualitative data, but
uses data to develop a theory. However, it is important to consider what is meant by grounded theory as superficially there is a danger of implicitly accepting a blank slate (tabula rasa) view of the mind. This is because usually a researcher has a highly trained mind and is in possession of and affected by a large number of theories. To use Popper’s (1979) term, he/she is theory impregnated. Thus, in grounded theory, the researcher consciously tries to place theories at the back of his/her mind, collects data in response to open questions, and then analyses the data to find or adapt theory to create the closest fit with the data he/she can.

Interviews and Questionnaires

One of the key tools in interpretive research is the interview. Cohen et al. (2001:267) point out that the interview is intersubjective, stating

Interviews enable participants ... to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable.

Interview types can fall into three categories: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. In a structured interview, the interviewer has a strictly defined set of questions for the interviewee. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a set of questions but there is more room for developing ideas. The questions act to loosely structure the interview process but the interviewer is less constrained than in the structured interview. In the case of an unstructured interview the interviewer does not have a pre-prepared set of questions.

Questionnaires are another way of obtaining qualitative and quantitative data. Questionnaires are used in both positivist and interpretive research. In the interpretive paradigm there is more flexibility in the use of questionnaires. They can be used to generate qualitative data from larger groups of people than the more time consuming interviews. They can also be used to confirm the findings of interviews with larger groups of people. This does not necessitate generalisations from small groups to larger populations. Rather, the results of the interview data can be used to focus the questionnaire. Interpretive researchers may also use successive questionnaires to gain depth in the research.

Validity

Within the framework of this paradigm, the researcher’s findings are an interpretation of the events within the study. Validity issues are therefore slightly different from the positivist paradigm. The conclusions drawn from the research should be backed up by the qualitative data, so that the study is coherent. To strengthen validity claims triangulation can be used, where researchers use two or more methods in their investigations. If the different methods reinforce the same conclusion, then validity claims are strengthened.
Strengths and Weaknesses of the Interpretive Paradigm

Criticism of interpretive approaches exists to a certain degree. Arguments range from the concerns about false consciousness to the relativism of the paradigm. Cohen et al. (2001: 27) cite Giddens:

No specific person can possess detailed knowledge of anything more than the particular section of society in which he participates, so that there still remains the task of making into an explicit and comprehensive body of knowledge that which is only known in a partial way by lay actors themselves.

Cohen et al. (2001) give two examples of studies in the Nissan automobile factory which drew radically different conclusions. One found a virtuous circle of work organization practices that demonstrated flexibility, teamwork and quality consciousness, the other found a vicious circle of exploitation, surveillance and control. Cohen et al. (ibid.) observe that ‘both versions of the same reality coexist because reality is multi-layered. However, for a positivist, seeking for objective reality, such contradictory findings are unacceptable.

The strengths of the paradigm come from its naturalistic approach, relying on natural forms of human communication. It attempts to understand that the social world is complex and cannot be reduced to the relationship between a small number of variables. Participatory and inclusive in nature, the interpretive approach accommodates human change over time and does not make the same type of generalisability claims of the positivists.

References


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Asst. Prof. Dr. Sureepong Phothongsunan has served AU since 1998. He earned a doctorate in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) from the University of Exeter, UK. His TESL Graduate Diploma and M.A. in TESL were from the University of Central Missouri, USA. His interests are in the domain of ESP, EFL, and educational research.