Interpretivism-Constructivism as a Research Method in the Humanities and Social Sciences – More to It Than Meets the Eye

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Abstract

Novice article-writers, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, including Philosophy and Theology, tend to merely mention in their draft papers that they had utilized interpretivism-constructivism as research method or approach, as if this disclosure were fully self-explanatory. Closer inspection of the procedures that they had followed reveals that the authors lacked insight into the fact that the term "interpretivism-constructivism" encapsulates a great deal more than just the interpretation of data or facts and the construction of new solutions to scholarly conundrums. There is much more to this term than meets the eye. A researcher who opts for interpretivism-constructivism as research method has to demonstrate an appreciation of the status of data and of facts, an understanding of the fact that interpretation works both "upwards" to the creation of new theoretical and/or social constructs, and "downwards" to a point where the current conversation terminates, has to demonstrate insight into the various theoretical and pre-theoretical considerations surrounding the method, as well as into the deep historico-philosophicalroots of interpretivism-constructivism.

Keywords: interpretivism, constructivism, research method, research methodology, research, humanities, social sciences

1. Introduction and Problem Statement

During the twenty years that I have been conducting seminars in Philosophy of Science and in the "art" of article-writing in a wide variety of scholarly fields, including Philosophy and Theology, I have repeatedly, especially in the last few years, come across draft articles in which the authors reported in the section entitled "Methodological justification", "Research Method" or "Methodology" that they had used interpretivism-constructivism, or interpretivism and constructivism as research method, a method that has risen to prominence since around the 1980s (Labaree 1998: 5). Some of them elaborated on this announcement by explaining what interpretivism and constructivism respectively and in combination entailed. Many of these explanations were rather sketchy and inadequate, to the extent that I felt compelled to insert the following remark on one of my PowerPoint Presentation slides: "Be cautious when considering interpretivism-constructivism as research method or scientific theory." More often than not, this remark evokes queries about what a researcher has to be wary of. In response, I then explain that there are a number of sand-traps to be conscious of:

- In many instances, the researcher (in the course of the seminars that I have conducted) merely states that he or she had applied interpretivism-constructivism (or either of them) as research method, as if this statement were completely self-explanatory.
- In other cases, authors state that they had used either interpretivism or constructivism as research methods, thereby demonstrating lack of insight into the fact that these research strategies form the two sides of the same coin.
- In most cases, authors merely announce that they had applied interpretivism-constructivism, without any reference to the theoretical orientation, framework, paradigm or episteme in terms of which the interpretation of the data had been done, and in terms of the underlying theoretical and/or pre-theoretical assumptions or assumptive values involved.
- Some authors indicate that they had used interpretivism-constructivism as the conceptual and theoretical framework or lens through which they had examined the research data.

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- In many cases, authors fail to demonstrate insight into the fact that interpretivism-constructivism as research "approaches" or "strategies" have deep theoretical roots, for instance in hermeneutics.
- Most authors of draft articles fail to demonstrate insight into the fact that interpretivism-constructivism is in essence an epistemological issue.
- Most of the prospective article-writers fail to demonstrate insight into the fact that interpretivism-constructivism is rooted in a rather long philosophical history.
- Many fail to demonstrate insight into the fact that their own spiritual/religious commitment and life- and worldviews play a role in how interpretivism-constructivism is applied in research.

Methodological problems such as these led me to examine the role that interpretivism-constructivism could fulfil in research. I used the above list of shortcomings surrounding interpretivism-constructivism as my research agenda. This paper is the result of that project that I now share with the research community (humanities; social sciences, including Philosophy and Theology) for two purposes. The first is to stimulate further discussion about interpretivism-constructivism as research method and its application in research. The second is to have something substantial to share with (novice) researchers early on in their research projects, preferably already in the conceptual stages.

2. Research strategy

I commenced my own investigation by analyzing the shortcomings that I came across in the course of the article-writing seminars in the hope of arriving at a coherent understanding of what exactly the problem with interpretivism-constructivism as a research method could be and how the problem could be resolved. The results of this procedure are reflected under the various headings of this paper.

It is clear from what I have written so far that the topic is essentially of a philosophical nature. The use of terms such as philosophy of science, epistemology, hermeneutics and philosophical conundrums is indicative of this. I decided, in order to comply with the needs of the widest possible range of readers engaged in research in the humanities and social sciences, to follow Barrett's (2009,p. 223) advice to present my findings in story format (a narrative). Barrett correctly surmised (slightly adapted) that "if the ability to translate [research findings, data] into captivating stories is one of the measures of good teaching, perhaps the same holds for good [research reports], at least if successful communication is a priority".

To construct the story, I also had to draw on interpretivism-constructivism as research method/approach/strategy. This begs the question: on the basis of which deeper background orientation did I interpret the data and construct the story? The answer is that my investigation was guided by the procedures and categories of systematic philosophy, that branch of philosophy that attempts to provide a framework that can explain the key questions and problems related to life (views, assumptions, beliefs and principles about reality, human existence, perception and behavior — all of which could serve as a basis for making judgments and decisions)(Cucen 2017, p. 96). This means that I will attempt to describe how interpretivists-constructivists view reality (their ontology), how they view the role of the interpreter-constructor (their anthropology), how they see and acquire knowledge (their epistemology), the role of interpretivism-constructivism in society (their theory of society), and so on (cf. Thompson 2017: 11). Having said this, I will try to avoid as far as possible the technical terminology associated with systematic philosophy, in line with Rorty's (1980,p. 725) advice "not [to] provide much of a jargon".

3. Interpretivism-constructivism as research method or strategy: the bare outline

In several recent cases, I was confronted with draft articles in which the authors merely stated as follows by way of methodological justification: "The/an interpretivist-constructivist method was applied/followed", as if this statement were fully self-explanatory. In other cases, authors (in this case, an educationist) would elaborate as follows:

> An interpretivist-constructivist approach was applied as hermeneutic instrument, an instrument for understanding and explanation. The interpretive phase of the method entailed examining the world of human experience as far as it affected educationists (education scholars) and the possible impact that Theology as a science might have had on them and their scholarly work. Interpretivists depart from the notion that social activity, including scholarship, emerges from intentional action and interaction at the individual level, in addition to other internal and external causal factors.

Since, as interpretivists contend, scholarship is not conducted in a deterministic sense, but as a chosen course of action toward the subjective end of the person (scholar/educationist, in this case), multiple perspectives in connection with the research problem were gathered, both in the form of literature studies and personal interviews.

This was done in an effort to gain in-depth insight into the issue of whether reformed Theology indeed has had an impact on Education as a field of scholarship, and if so, to what extent. The interpretivist phase provided the context described and discussed in the remainder of this article. It should, nevertheless, be kept in mind that educationists, like all social scientists, can only make tentative and contingent claims that could be difficult to sustain in the face of alternative claims by scholars following different interpretive approaches.

Closely associated with interpretivism is constructivism. Constructivism as a scholarly method or approach to a problem is based on the assumption that reality and the human behavior therein is characterized by continuous fluctuations, adjustments and transformations operating simultaneously at multiple sites and that they offer a subtle depiction of how facts emerge and "truths" are shaped. […] scholars are dealing with a heterogeneous yet interactive space of relationships, where differences, similarities, and interactions are all found, but each becomes more or less crucial at different conceptual, historical or cultural junctures. Scholars (in this case, educationists) work in a dynamic space-time or "a sea of energy of thought, a space at the edge of chaos" …Scholarly reflection and theoretical construction enable the scholar to find a way through this maze. Based on the data gathered regarding the research problem, and particularly the interpretations thereof, a picture was constructed on the basis of which a number of conclusions regarding the research question could be drawn (Van der Walt 2020; original source references removed. Another example of this type of methodological justification can be found in Van Huyssteen [2006,pp. 15—16, 27, 46]).

While this elaboration regarding interpretivism-constructivism as research method or approach is more satisfactory than the initialone-liner, it still does not demonstrate insight into the fact that this research method or approach is surrounded by a series of deeper methodological and philosophical issues. The indented paragraphs above represent only the tip of an iceberg. In the following sections, I touch on some of these deeper issues.

4. Deeper issues in connection with interpretivism-constructivism

Interpretivism-constructivism as research method encapsulates three sets of deeper or underlying issues: first, a number of pre-theoretical (pre-scientific) issues that the user of the method should keep in mind; second, as research method it is rooted in a combination of theories, and third, it is rooted in several older philosophical traditions. In this section, I will attend to the first set, namely the underlying pre-theoretical issues, and discuss the other two in subsequent sections.

4.1   The purpose of interpretation

The purpose of interpretation is to get at the meaning contained or hidden in the data obtained through scientific investigation (Barrett 2009,p. 21). Interpretation offers an account of the process of understanding the research conundrum and of the data yielded by theinvestigation (Aldridge 2018, p. 246).

4.2   Interpretation as research procedure

Interpretivism can be regarded as a research method in so far as it enables the researcher to examine signs and symbols in order to get at the meaning hidden in the data (Barrett 2009,p. 21). In the process, the researcher listens to many voices. First is the researcher's own voice as describer, analyst and interpreter. The researcher contrives to understand the world of human experience through her own views, background and experience. Second are those of her research participants (Thanh and Thanh 2015,p. 24), and third, those of the readers of her final report (article, conference paper, dissertation or thesis): "Rather than portraying readers as passive passengers carried along in a single direction by the 'objective reality' of a text, the [interpretivist] argues that each reader creates his or her unique interpretation of a text" (Barrett 2009,pp. 155–156).

4.3   The status of facts

There are two views regarding the status of facts. The first is that there is no such thing as a "hard and fast" fact; every "fact" is already the product of a series of interpretations of underlying data and assumptions. There are no uninterpreted facts of the matter, according to Caputo (2018,p. 3).

Things appear differently to the same perceiver at different times and under different conditions, and differently to different perceivers, so that no appearance can be regarded as definitely representing how anything really is. Since people differ from one another, they experience and judge differently. People's different sensory modalities – vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell – and the complexity of the things the different interpretivists take themselves to perceive, make it impossible to claim that any interpreter can arrive at definite knowledge about anything. Even the variability in the researcher's moods, age, health and context such as the role people play in creating the social fabric of which they are part (Thanh & Thanh 2015, pp. 25, 26) might render his or her perceptions and judgements variable (Grayling 2019,p. 121).In addition, different thought collectives might draw different conclusions from the same data (Jensen 2019).There is, says Labaree (1998, p. 5), a "mass of qualifying clauses" in play in interpretivism. Hence, Blackburn (2009,p. 24) concludes, "there is no fact of the matter".

One could come to this conclusion, he argues (Blackburn 2009, p. 23), when instead of finding generalizations and laws of behavior, we find only variation between individuals, change within individuals and "persistent indeterminacies of interpretation". Barrett (2009,p. 118) goes even further than Blackburn by stating that "it is highly dubious whether there is any such animal as data in themselves, 'raw data', uncontaminated by interpretation." In his opinion, it is always the interpreter who has the last say, who decides what counts as facts and data, what to include and how to interpret the data (Barrett, 2009, p. 208).

The other group of interpretivistsmaintains that facts do exist but that one has to be conscious of the deeper issues behind a statement that is regarded as a fact. The status of a fact depends on the validity of the preceding interpretative process. They agree with the first group that there are no uninterpreted facts of the matter; every fact of the matter is a matter of the interpretation that picks out salient information to create facts. People draw, for instance, different conclusions from the data, depending on their prejudices and prior beliefs (Baggini 2017, p. 95). People tend to disagree about matters, also about what constitutes a fact. If no consensus exists about a fact, "we should accept that we have insufficient grounds to insist on the truth of one conclusion and so do what we can to accommodate reasonable different ones, even if we believe only one of them to be the sole truth," according to Baggini (2017, p. 217).

In cases where consensus has been reached about a fact, the fact can endure, but only if, and as long as it is able to resist objections posed by congenially skeptical researchers and/or after having been subjected to experimental tests (Jensen 2019). At best, researchers in the humanities and social sciences are able to make tentative and contingent claims that might be difficult to sustain in the face of alternative claims by other researchers (Labaree 1998, p. 5).

4.4   *Interpretation all the way up, and all the way down*

Van Huyssteen (2006, p. 46) correctly concluded that interpretivism "goes all the way down and all the way back, whether we are moving in the domain of science, morality, art or religion". Interpretivism entails a two-directional activity: all the way up, until we reach a point where the researcher feels informed enough (on the basis of his or her interpretations of the data) to construct their own (new) picture or story based on the research data, and all the way down to the researcher's "last stand", as it were, to a final position or stance provided by some tradition, traditions or so-called bedrock beliefs. (Although Caputo [2018,p. 5] states that interpretation goes "all the way down" he clearly seems to recognize that it goes both up and down.)

"Interpretation all the way up"

The notion of interpretation "all the way up" embodies the basic purpose of interpretivism since it describes progress from the data to a stage in the research process where the meaning embedded in the data can be harnessed for the creation of a new theoretical construct. The researcher uses the interpretive experience to construct his or her understanding of the gathered data (Thanh and Thanh 2015, p. 24).

Her perceptions of the data and what they could mean in the context of the research are never expressions of an "objective" world "out there" but rather her subjective constructions. Constructivism always asks how the particular interpretivist has constructed a particular chunk of reality (the data, research findings), and what meaning she has drawn from the phenomena under investigation (Leutwyler, Petrovic and Mantel 2012, p. 112). The "process upwards" is never-ending, according to Labaree (1998, p. 11); even scientific foundations are constantly in the process of being reconstructed by the researcher. At best, it is occasionally punctuated by attempts on the part of the researcher to construct and reconstruct meaning from the available research data.

"Interpretation all the way down"

When confronted with a fact, the interpretivist has to make a judgement about its authenticity and acceptability status, and try to accommodate all reasonable views about the fact. Accommodation can, however, not continue infinitely sincein the end this might result in an anything-goes, laissez-faire relativism or total relativism (Baggini 2017, pp.73, 217). To avoid relativism, the "downwards" interpretative process has to terminate at some point, at least for some researchers. A researcher who wishes the interpretive process to terminate has to ask herself: "What piece of evidence provides the bedrock for this particular case, and why should this be so?" Shemight feel compelled to make a final judgement and take a final stand, in other words, to fall back on some "properly basic beliefs". As the arguments go deeper and deeper, based on increasingly refined reasoning, the dispute among those differing about the status of a particular fact becomes increasingly sophisticated, until it ends in one, both or all of the interlocutors taking a final stand. The final stand can take various forms. The researcher might, for instance, declare: "This is my final judgement; this is where I stand," or fall back on what she regards as basic beliefs, values, prejudices, assumptions, interests, world-views, attitudes, or religious commitment, and even upbringing and personality (Baggini 2017, pp. 17–21, 45, 72–73, 77, 81–82, 88).

How a person reacts in this regard might also depend on his or her age, sex, ethnicity, country of origin, and possibly also other things such as religion, or spiritual orientation (Barrett 2009, p. 125). Foundationalists, that is, persons who think of themselves not as just one of the many voices in a conversation, but as the representative of something that is somehow *more* than just another such voice (for instance, as are presentative of a particular religious grouping), might tend to seek legitimacy for their judgement in some or other authority (for instance, the Bible, the Quran or the Vedas)(cf. Rorty 1992, p. 719).

McIntyre (2002, pp. 209–210) describes how the interpretative process could regress towards a final stand:

> …suppose that a conclusion can be validly derived from certain premises. Then these premises in turn must be vindicated and if their vindication consists in deriving them from conclusions based on more fundamental premises, the same problem will arise. But the chain of reasons must have an ending, and we must reach a point where we simply choose to stand by certain premises. At this point decision has replaced argument: and in all argument on human existence there will be some such point… […] faith depends not on argument but on choice.

Tarnas (2010, p. 349) illustratesthis point with historical examples of where "it [was] a matter of faith rather than knowledge."

Post-foundationalists or neo-pragmatists such as Richard Rorty reject the strategy of taking refuge in a final stand because that would mean the end of the conversation (Rorty 1995, p. 298). In his opinion, it is the researcher's moral duty to make the conversation continue, without resorting to metaphysical or epistemological foundations or last stands (Rorty 1980, p. 734). The best that the pragmatist can do (Rorty, 1980: 736), is to remind the interlocutor of the position both conversationalists are in, namely that they share "contingent starting points, …that they share floating, ungrounded, conversations." Neo-pragmatists such as Rorty (1992, p. 71) feel the need to "extricate themselves from philosophical or theoretical hassles." They concentrate on contingencies as "last things" (things that are pragmatically useful) rather than on "authoritative reassurance" as "first things" (Rorty 1992, pp. 722–723). Rorty's (2000, p. 6) stand is clear:

> A lot of what social conservatives call "divine commands" are the controversial interpretations they have put on Scriptural texts in order to sanctify their own mean, resentful, squinty-eyed, disapproval of their neighbors. A lot of what liberals call "universal moral principles" are attempts to sanctify their own decent, tolerant, open-minded, efforts to bring about social justice and greater human happiness. "Reason" is on a par with "God". Both are names for a skyhook. The effect of invoking either is to pat yourself on the back, to suggest that your side of an argument is supported by something larger than yourself. Both rhetorical gestures are equally vacuous.

In sum, behind every interpretation, both "up" and "down", lies yet another interpretation, in an endless series of interpretations — that is, unless the researcher arbitrarily terminates the process, either upwards by way of the creation of a new theoretical (or social) construct, or downwards in the shape of some metaphysical "last ditch stand". We never reach an understanding of anything that is not in itself already an interpretation; we can never peel away all the layers to get to some raw, pure, uninterpreted, naked fact of the matter (Caputo 2018, p. 4).

4.5   Some interpretations are better than others – or are they?

What we in the end take to be a fact that we can scientifically work with matters quite a lot, says Caputo (2018, p.5). That is why it really matters what we understand facts to be and how we arrive at them, discover or find them. When confronted with a fact, we need to also understand the interpretative process that led to what we assume to be its factual status. If we did not have insight into the underlying interpretive process that led to the emergence of the fact, we just would not understand what the fact stands for. The facts that we deal with in scholarship are all expressions or results of the interested interpretations of their discoverers or formulators. "Disinterested interpretations are nowhere to be found," Caputo (2018, p. 5) contends.

Haddadi, Hosseini, Johansen and Olsson (2017, p. 1082), on the other hand, maintain that "interpretivist research can both be value-neutral and value-laden". In view of the discussion so far, value-neutrality is improbable;the entire interpretive process seems to be value-laden. The researcher's evaluation of a fact rests on his or her understanding of the interpretive process that led to the emergence of the fact, based as it is on the researcher's own personality, scholarship status, age, gender, world-view and all the other variables already mentioned. Van Huyssteen (2006, p. 15), therefore, suggests that we see the various interpretations (as manifested in facts) as alternatives and not necessarily as competing or conflicting. We should see them as complimentary interpretations of the manifold dimensions of our experience as researchers.

It seems, based on considerations such as these, that (arguably) two criteria could indicate whether one interpretation of the data or of a fact is "better" than another: (a) when the interpretation aligns with, or flows from the bedrock assumptions of the particular researcher (thereby running the risk of terminating the conversation, as Rorty indicated);

(b) or when the interpretative process leading to a particular interpretation is deemed to be more sophisticated, more realistic, more complex and logically moreconvincing than the process undergirding another interpretation. Application of this second criterion in principle keeps the door open to further conversation.

4.6 The status of the theoretical constructions resulting from interpretivism

At a given point in the "upward" interpretive process, researchers feel compelled to employ their interpretations for the purpose of creating a new theoretical construct, for instance an integrative theoretical framework that goes beyond the specific perspectives gleaned from a literature study and/or empirical investigation. The purpose of this new construct is to explain a particular situation or state of affairs related to the research problem (Elbanna, Eid and Kamel 2015, pp. 105–106). Barrett (2009, p. 9) correctly asks whether such the oretical constructions that mark the end of interpretivism is a thing, something concrete or an abstraction. In other words, is there a theoretical construction"out there" that we could discover through interpretivism, or does the investigator (the interpretivist) simply impose a structure on the data in order to make sense of a chaotic situation? In response to these questions, Van der Walt and Fowler (2006,pp. 32–33) aver that there are two kinds of constructivism:

> The only two types [of constructivism] distinguishable are *individualist constructivism* and *social constructivism*. In the first case, every individual constructs her own model to give meaning to the experienced world. In the second case, a social group of one kind or another reach an agreement. In the first case, if followed consistently, constructivism can only lead to social anarchism. In the second case, in a free society it can only be the basis of knowledge and learning for the particular group concerned.

Individualist constructions take place on different levels of sophistication and complexity, based on the interpretivist's personal (subjective) cognitions of the world and also his or her emotions, volitions, motivations and world-views. Interpretations therefore express the interpretivist's understandings and interpretations of how the world functions and how it is structured. Individualist constructivists are more subjective than objective; they value subjectivity and, according to Thanh and Thanh (2015, p. 25), eschew the idea that objective research on human behavior is possible. In other words, theoretical constructions preferably do not start with a theory (Haddadi et al. 2017, p. 1082),are "never expressions of a so-called 'objective' world, but rather subjective constructions of personal experiences with the world and its phenomena" (Leutwyler et al. 2012, pp. 111–112), and have limited possibilities for generalization (Haddadi et al. 207, p. 1082). In many cases, the interpretivist builds hypotheses about the ways in which the reality under investigation works, and then test these hypotheses in an ongoing process of constructing and reconstructing new realities or scenarios. The tests challenge the justifiability of the hypotheses, and occasionally lead the interpretivist to change or adapt his constructions of reality.

In the case of social constructivism, the constructs are the social product of the actors involved (Labaree 1998, p. 5; Thanh and Thanh 2015, p. 25). Reality is constantly being (re)constructed by such actors in interactions with others by assigning an individual meaning to an event or an experience. Based on their constructions, interpretivist-constructivists expect other people to act in a certain way, and therefore anticipate their behavior according to the image that the former has created (constructed) about them (Leutwyler et al. 2012, p. 112).

Another distinction could be made, this time between radical constructivists who assume that there is no underlying order in reality that may be discovered and interpreted, and who hold that the researcher interprets and constructs his or her own knowledge, and that this knowledge remains "true" or authentic as long as it is not refuted (Van der Walt and Fowler 2006, p. 15), and less radical constructivists,who hold that there is a real world "out there" that we experience, and that the researcher has to make sense of it. In the first case, the researcher *assigns* meaning to the data, and in the second, the interpretivist *discovers* meaning in the data or findings (Duffy and Jonassen 1992, p. 3).

5.   Interpretivism-constructivism is rooted in various theoretical orientations

This now brings us to the second set of issues surrounding interpretivism-constructivism as research method, namely that every scientific observation is theoretically selected and interpreted, and functions only within the network of presupposed theories that constitute a specific reasoning strategy (Van Huyssteen 2006, p. 15). The interpretivist uses interpretive and evaluative procedures to understand the phenomenon under investigation, and as he encounters the phenomena, hisbackground theories play a role in his received as well as ongoing interpretations. In this way he relates epistemically (that is, on the basis of his understanding of the knowledge acquisition process, in this case, through the filter of his interpreted experience) to the manifold dimensions ofhis world and existence (Van Huyssteen 2006, p. 16). Van Huyssteen (2006, p. 46) is adamant that "as such we have no standing ground, no place for evaluating, judging, and inquiring, apart from that which is provided by some specific tradition or traditions".

The process of interpretation is part of our epistemic (knowledge-acquisition) task of standing in a critical relationship to our theoretical traditions and worldviews (Van Huyssteen 2006, pp. 46, 88).It follows from the above that interpretation and constructivism are not only influenced and determined by who the researcher is as a person, individually equipped with own prejudices, assumptions, preconceived ideas, gender and age contingencies and so on, but also by the theoretical (scientific) assumptions embodied in his or her respective theoretical traditions. There are many definitions of "theory," but I will restrict myself to Christine Halverson's (2002, pp.244–245): Theories are like a pair of dark glasses, she says. Put them on and the world is tinted. The change brings some objects into sharper contrast while others may fade into obscurity. The value of a theory is not whether the theory provides an objective representation of reality but rather how well the theory can shape an object of study and highlight relevant issues.

In view of the above, the researcher is charged with a dual responsibility when applying interpretivism-constructivism as research method. She first has to take account of the (un)intended impact that her ownpre-theoretical (pre-scientific) orientation might play in the interpretive-constructivist process, such as her own life- and world view, her spiritual and/or religious orientation, her age, gender and so forth. She also, and most importantly, should be cognizant of the role that background theories and traditions might play in how she interprets the data and constructs new theoretical frameworks, how the various theories might have tinted her world, brought some objects into sharp focus and pushed others to the background.

The rest of this section now briefly deals with some of the theories in which interpretivism-constructivism is rooted, and of which the interpretivist-constructivist researcher should be cognizant.

Interpretivism-constructivism is rooted in nominalism, and hence opposed to positivism. This means that it assigns and constructs names to interpretive findings, the meanings assigned to or discovered in the data. Unlike positivists who are intent on establishing the validity and reliability of their findings, interpretivist-constructivists are more concerned about the authenticity, plausibility, justifiability, criticality, rational argument, coherence, comprehensibility, assessability, defeasibility, interest and compulsion of their interpretations (Chapman 2017, p. 3; Baggini 2017, pp. 25, 113ff, 164). Interpretivism-constructivism is aimed at a "holistic complementarity" rather than the acquisition of "proven facts". It holds that even the experiments that some researchers deem to yield positivistic facts are open to subjective interpretive analysis.

Interpretivism-constructivism is arguably also rooted in theories such as social action theory, in which the individual is seen as a conscious choice-making and judging actor whose subjective dispositions are the basis of negotiating interaction with others similarly endowed (Van der Walt and Wolhuter 2018, p. 111), and chaos, complexity and conflict theories.

Conflict theory rejects the notion of a unified central value system (Barrett 2009, pp. 108, 111), and complexity theory sees culture as an endless complex of changing and contesting individual interpretations and meanings. The latter regards an outcome as emerging from a complex network of causal interactions and not of a single factor. Both conflict and complex theories see every day behavior as "dynamic, messy, driven by choice, contradiction and power; …never in equilibrium" (Barrett 2009 p. 151). The "causal circumstance is vast," Baggini (2017, p. 84) concludes. The fact that complexity and conflict arise from the huge, multiplied webs of relationships and interactions that result from all kinds of local actions causes the system to be fuzzy in the sense that interdependencies and interactions multiply and mushroom (Dekker, Cilliers and Hofmeyr 2011, p. 3). The fact that in complex systems patterns emerge at each level of activity, hence resist simple reductionist analysis (Anderson 1999, p. 217), compels the researcher to engage her interpretive and constructive faculties to make sense of a situation. Chaos theory, in turn, suggests that simple rules can sometimes generate very complex and unpredictable systems; such systems can over time generate repeating patterns, and even when we think that we understand the rules and patterns that a system will follow, we will not be able to predict exactly what will happen next, no matter how much data we have (Webber 2002, pp. 26–27). Interpretivism-constructivism supposedly enables the researcher to draw meaning from such situations, that is, detect the complex self-organization hidden in data and in "systems" which appear at first sight to behave randomly.

Hermeneutics and deconstructionismare still other theoretical orientations in which interpretivism-constructivism is rooted. Hermeneutics, according to Barrett (2009, p. 157), is a literary "device" that supposedly enables the researcher to comprehend the manner in which (for instance) respondents decipher their own texts or culture. Hermeneutics, therefore, is "the theory that *everything* is a matter of interpretation" (Caputo 2018, pp. 3, 4). Hermeneutics defends the idea that there are no pure facts. Interpretation is an art, and hermeneutics is the theory of that art (Caputo 2018, p. 5). Deconstructionists such as Derrida, in turn, claim that what the researcher regards as the "given" is already a construction of human discourse (Middleton and Walsh 1992,p. 33).

6. Interpretivism-constructivism has deep philosophical roots

This brings us to the third set of considerations surrounding interpretivism-constructivism as research method that the researcher should be aware of. Since it is impossible within the constraints of an article to do justice to all the ramifications associated with the philosophical roots of interpretivism-constructivism, I will confine the discussion to a few broad historico-philosophical brush strokes.

Interpretivism arguably began in all earnest with Immanuel Kant's idealism. He held that the human mind can claim no direct mirror-like knowledge of the objective world, the world "out there," for the object that it experiences has already been pre-structured by the subject's (the researcher's) internal (rational) structure (Kant 1785/2018, p. 24). In other words, the human being knows not the world-in-itself but rather the world as rendered-by-the-human mind (Tarnas 2010, p. 417). Kant's influence can be seen in the positions later held by Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Heisenberg, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Foucault and others, namely that the world is essentially a construct; human knowledge is radically interpretive; there are no perspective-independent facts (Tarnas 2010, p. 418). Even later Romanticists such as Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, Coleridge, Emerson and Steiner acknowledged the validity of Kant's insight that all human knowledge of the world is in some sense determined by subjective principles (although they interpreted this insight in typical romantic manner, namely in terms of their participatory theory of knowledge [epistemology]) (Tarnas 2010, pp. 433–434).

Of more recent date are the contributions of Popper and Kuhn. Drawing on the insights of Hume and Kant, Popper noted that science can never produce knowledge that is completely certain, hence not falsifiable. The researcher cannot approach reality without bold conjectures in the background; every fact presupposes an interpretive focus. All facts are in principle subject to constant reinterpretation and re-evaluation in new frameworks (Popper 1962, p. 28). Kuhn's analysis of the research process then further undercut the notion of value-neutrality in the quest for truth. In his opinion, all scientific knowledge is grounded in interpretive structures based on previously adopted fundamental paradigms or conceptual models that serve as lenses or interpretive frameworks through which the researcher could isolate data, elaborate theories and solve problems (Kuhn 1970, pp. 43-52).

Interpretivism-constructivism is arguably also rooted in postmodernism. A postmodern orientation inclines the researcher towards listening to all the voices concerned (Barrett 2009, p. 155). According to Tarnas (2010, p. 396), postmodernists maintain that the mind is not the passive reflector of an external world and its intrinsic order, but is active and creative in the process of perception and cognition. Reality is in some sense constructed by the mind, not simply perceived by it. There is, therefore, no empirical "fact" that is not already theory-laden, and there is no logical argument or formal principle that is a-priori certain. All human understanding is interpretation.

An assumption of postmodernism, therefore, is that social life should be fundamentally conceived as the negotiation of meanings. Postmodern interpretivism is not science in search of laws or facts but a search for meaning (Barrett 2009, pp. 161, 162).

Postmodern is mhas in the past been criticized for being a "reinvigorated and sophisticated heir of relativism" (Barrett 2009, p. 161), but as we have seen, this need not necessarily be the case: by interpreting "downwards" to a final stance, the interpretivist is able to put a "provisional end" to the interpretive spiral. Van der Walt (2015) has demonstrated how this can be done on the basis of a post-post-foundationalist stance. To do so is always possible because interpretivism rejects the notion of value-neutrality.

Other key characteristics of the postmodern orientation that the users of interpretivism should be cognizant of are its rejection of the separation of subject and object (researcher and the researched) (Barrett 2009, pp. 168, 179) as well as any particular theoretical perspective; it also jumps across epistemological divides, mixes the particular and the general, and also objectivity and subjectivity. It furthermore rejects grand theoretical structures and even regards itself as post-paradigmatic (Middleton and Walsh 1995, pp. 32–33).

7. Conclusion

It is clear from this discussion of what interpretivism-constructivism entails, of the various considerations surrounding this method or approach to research, of the possibilities and the shortcomings of this approach, the fact that it is essentially value- and theory-laden in various ways, and that it boasts an unmistakable historico-philosophical heritage, that it would be indefensible for a researcher to merely mention in a research report, such as an article in a scholarly journal, a conference paper, a master's dissertation or a doctoral thesis, that he or she had employed "interpretivism-constructivism as research method or approach". There is, as the title of this paper summarized, much more to interpretivism-constructivism than meets the eye. Before utilizing this method or approach, the researcher has to come to grips with all the issues associated with it. Only then can the researcher use it with a measure of confidence.

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