

## **Position paper: Phenomenological approaches and intersubjectivity**

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### **Introduction**

An *interpretive* position understands the subjective meaning of social action (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Phenomenology examines the relationship between consciousness and being. From an epistemological standpoint, being is perceived as a correlate of conscious acts (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2002). As such, a phenomenological position rejects the "naturalist" worldview that is the consequence of modern natural scientific method (also referred to as objectivism or positivism). Burrell and Morgan reflect that the phenomenological movement is not altogether a coherent one. Husserl (1929) argued that reality could only be understood by interpreting an individual's stream of consciousness in relation to that reality. Schutz (1932) developed this concept by emphasizing the importance of *reflexivity*: turning back upon oneself and examining what has been going on, in the context of the situation:

"The fact that social action is meaningfully related to the behavior of others implies that the actor (since he is Other-oriented in his action) turns his attention to the subjective experiences of the Other in their constitutive structure." (Schutz, 1932, page 148)

Unlike Husserl, who argued that individuals could insert themselves into the Other's stream of consciousness, Schutz argued that intersubjectivity required a "leap of consciousness" (Schutz, 1967, *quoted in* Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This leap is developed further in Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutic phenomenology, which takes the position that the interpretation of common experience leads to intersubjective understanding of the Other's intention.

The interpretivist stance in MIS owes a great deal to the development of theories of social construction in the design of technological artifacts (e.g. Berger and Luckman, 1966; Bijker et al., 1987; Latour, 1987; Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1985). While they often have slightly different philosophical underpinnings, these writings are strongly related by the central concept that intentionality can be interpreted through an analysis of physical and social artifacts (e.g. technology and/or documents and/or verbal statements). This position is an extension of the phenomenological position stated by Heidegger (1962) that intersubjectivity resides in our reflections on being-in-the-world and that all description is necessarily interpretation. An interpretivist position based upon hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the experiences of the individual (Other), the meanings and behaviors derived from these experiences and thus an understanding of the situated (in context) worldview of other individuals. Understanding may be obtained through a self-conscious *interpretation* of external artifacts such as texts, physical artifacts and social interactions (Gadamer, 1975). Which brings us back to interpretivism.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest four elements of difference between interpretivism and the functionalist/objectivist position:

1. The ontological debate: interpretivism takes a nominalist position, where phenomena are viewed as convenient concepts for the individual to make sense of the external world, while functionalism takes a realist position, where external phenomena exist independently of the individual's perceptions.
2. The epistemological debate: interpretivism takes an anti-positivist position, where understanding is seen as useful by talking the perspective of an 'insider' to the situation being observed. The insights generated are not seen as being universally applicable but of use to individuals in a similar situation. Each situation is viewed as essentially unique, but having subjectively-interpreted elements in common with other situations. Functionalism takes a positivist position that there are essential laws that relate to all aspects of existence, that these laws may be observed from outside the situation being observed and abstracted in sufficiently general terms to apply to a wide range of situations.

3. The debate concerning human nature: interpretivism takes the position that human beings have complete autonomy and that their actions are dictated by free will (which may be constrained by external forces), while functionalism takes the position that the behavior of individuals *en masse* (with exceptions that can be explained by a lack of rationality or variance from the mean) can be viewed as being determined by the external situation or environment.
4. The methodological debate: interpretivism takes an ideographic position, that emphasizes subjective, insider accounts of situations, that can only be obtained by personal involvement in the situation. Functionalism takes a nomothetic position, attempting to derive (abstract) general, models or laws through the use of systematic protocol and technique to construct scientific tests regarding the nature of the "real world".

Hirschheim and Klein (1989) argue that the four paradigms of the Burrell and Morgan model overlap. This is true, especially as most "interpretive" researchers have been educated according to a positivist tradition that emphasizes the values of scientific truth and teaches falsification as an important element of logic. Yet understanding the differences outlined above can contribute greatly to any debate about the value of interpretivist research. When I first encountered grounded theory, I blindly assumed that, because Glaser and Strauss (1967) took a contingent approach to the collection of data, their proposed research method must be interpretivist in nature. Attending a seminar run by Barney Glaser soon disabused me of this notion: it was clear that the discourse related to models of the world that were "out there" in the "real" world<sup>1</sup>. The data collected were analyzed using statistical methods to derive universal laws of behavior.

As an interpretivist researcher, I am aware that I hold a different worldview to many other researchers. My worldview sees "facts" as subjective and I am aware that the "real world" that I perceive, as a researcher, is different to the "real world" that the subjects in my research perceive and that my act of observation affects the behavior of the phenomena being observed. I am also aware that, far from being universally applicable, the findings of my research are inductively-generated and are, at best *interesting*<sup>2</sup> rather than universally applicable.

We then run into the problem of generalizability. These problems do not affect the functionalist researcher, who is able to bound the research "problem", in order to exclude elements of the situation which inconveniently differ (such as differences in the people involved, the task being undertaken, the external pressures on those involved, power differences between research "subjects", the perceived legitimacy of actions, etc.). They can "design" a research study to selectively collect data on phenomena that they consider relevant to their bounded problem. The interpretivist researcher, on the other hand, must be aware that all phenomena in the situation being studied are relevant to the observed outcomes, that the outcomes and phenomena that they observe are selected according to inductive sensitization to such phenomena, and that they affect those very phenomena by their interaction with them. This leads the researcher to (a) question the fundamental value of research<sup>3</sup>, or (b) question everything. I believe that the latter position makes us become fundamentally better researchers. We need to continually assess what we are observing and why we are observing these phenomena (are we finding only what we are looking for and missing other, more valuable, insights?). We need to collect data *obsessively*, so that we can revisit it, when we realize that we have missed something critical. And we need an external "sounding-board", someone who is sufficiently knowledgeable to understand what we are

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<sup>1</sup> I was saved from self-immolation by a chance meeting during the break with Andy Lowe from Strathclyde who convinced me that the method could be applied in an interpretivist way by adapting the analysis of data and emphasizing the constant comparison element of the approach.

<sup>2</sup> I have Geoff Walsham to thank for this insight. I suspect that he may have made the point in his book: Walsham, G. (1993) *Interpreting Information Systems In Organizations*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK

<sup>3</sup> ... which may lead them to get a 'proper' job instead (as one of my students phrased the issue) ...

saying, yet not so associated with us or the problem that they cannot be somewhat objective in their critique of our reasoning<sup>4</sup>.

Given my interpretivist position, I have been asked how I can believe that research is worth doing and that the data that I collect in this way contribute to knowledge in my field. I have to say that there are times when I have a certain sympathy with this perspective. However, I also believe that an understanding of this position gives the researcher a deeper insight into the validity and application of their research findings than is otherwise the case. We learn to "talk the talk" and "walk the walk" in a way that functionalist researchers, who are content with quantifying phenomena rather than trying to understand their nature, cannot do. This is how we achieve intersubjectivity with our subjects: we share their experience<sup>5</sup>. But there is a step after intersubjectivity which constitutes **making the subjective objective again**.

Winograd and Flores (1986), after Heidegger (1962) talk about an object being *present-at-hand* – we understand the nature of their being – only when something goes wrong with its normal use. They distinguish this relationship with external objects with the *ready-to-hand* relationship that we normally enjoy, where the object is just a mediating tool for the task in hand. In interpretivist research, external phenomena – conceptual as well as physical – become *present-at-hand* for us. We question the nature of phenomena that we previously took for granted as part of our everyday existence. We interpret phenomena at many different levels in our everyday lives: we receive data subconsciously as well as consciously and we evaluate this data both objectively and subjectively. A phenomenological approach to research is at the core of interpretivism. It allows us to consciously make the implicit explicit. It allows us to question the very axioms of our existence. So the cycle of research is:

- a) Understanding the "problem situation" objectively and determining appropriate situations in which phenomena relevant to the research problem can be observed.
- b) Engaging in those situations intersubjectively with actors who regularly participate in such situations, to obsessively collect data on all phenomena that we can – whether or not they seem significant at the time of data collection. (See footnote 5).
- c) Disengaging from the situation at relevant points, to analyze the data, to question which phenomena are significant (from a pattern-recognition and utility<sup>6</sup> perspective, rather than a frequency or quantity perspective), then reengaging if data saturation has not been achieved. Disengagement also requires *regular*, objective questioning of the value-systems and assumptions that we bring to interpretation of the situation.
- d) Disengaging from the situation, to present the subjective as objective and to interpret the situation for others.

One of the wonderful things about performing research within the discipline of information systems is that we can borrow from many different established areas of theory. But this also presents a clear and present danger. As we have not "grown up" in these disciplines, IS researchers often lack the inductive experience of what constitutes an appropriate level of analysis. One example is the use of the "mental model" or "cognitive frame" concept, to refer to everything from an intent to take a specific action, to a preprogrammed mental script for action. Phenomenology is an example of where we must be especially careful, as it is very easy to base

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<sup>4</sup> As an interpretivist researcher, I have to say somewhat, rather than completely objective!

<sup>5</sup> Either vicariously, through stimulating multiple scenarios in case study research, or better, directly by engaging in participant observation.

<sup>6</sup> I use the word "utility" based on the classical Utilitarianism perspective (c.f. the works of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill). The use of this word is not an unintentional slip into functionalism!

wide-ranging conclusions on a very loosely-observed set of phenomena and not to question the assumptions that underlie our research observations. In our everyday experience, we bound the scope of the phenomena that we consider useful and therefore monitor. For example, as an instructor, I have learned to filter out the glazed expression that a class of Undergraduates students gets whenever they are asked a question. However, as a sociologist, I would consider this a critical indicator of their internal experience as students. Similarly, as a researcher, it is too easy to filter out phenomena that do not fit with our expected model of behavior and then justify our findings in the light of theoretical groundedness. To have a research paper published, one must justify its findings in the light of existing theory. Yet to achieve radical advances in theoretical thinking - to make a paradigm leap - one must often fundamentally dispute, or ignore established bodies of theory (Kuhn, 1970). So we have a conflict between the explicit aims of research, to contribute to knowledge, and the implicit aims of research, to have papers accepted for publication<sup>7</sup>. In accepting the aim of career advancement (or even maintaining a career), we are imposing limitations on research that constrain the scope of the phenomena that we observe.

I am an evangelist for rigorous grounded theory research. Yet even the use of the adjective rigorous is problematic in an interpretivist worldview, as it has so much baggage of functionalism and positivism attached to it. However, I believe that we can combine subjectivity and objectivity in a particular way, to be systematic in the analysis of data, but to permit an absence of systematic protocols for data collection and interpretation. It is permissible to allow inductive recognitions and patterns to emerge from the data, if we constantly question our own value-systems and assumptions as we do so.

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<sup>7</sup> This conflict, in itself, makes a fascinating subject of sociological study, as many debates on the ISWORLD listserv attest.