

PLSC 308: Introduction to Political Research

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Goals of Scientific Research

- **General, falsifiable** theories, motivated and supported by
- **Empirical** observation, generating
- **Objective** descriptions, explanations and predictions, and leading to
- Knowledge of **practical** value.

Why Do We Do Social Science?

- Description

- Discovery
- Verification

- Explanation

- Association / Correlation
- → Causality
- Processes / Mechanisms

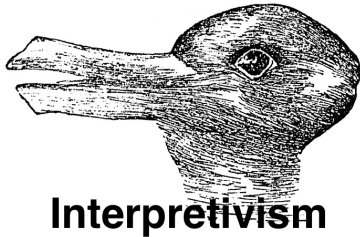
- Prediction

- Validation
- Forecasting

(At its best) Science is...

- Transparent
- Verifiable / Replicable
- Generalizable
- Cumulative

Three Challenges



Reflexivity: Humans Aren't Atoms (or Stars)



- Those studied respond to their environment
- E.g.: Economic “bubbles,” FiveThirtyEight.com, etc.
- May also respond to the *researcher* (e.g., “Hawthorne Effects”)
- Result: Reciprocal causality (Beliefs \leftrightarrow Actions)

Interpretivism



Interpretivism

The idea that human behavior has subjective / contextual meaning, and so cannot merely be observed, but must be interpreted.

Human beings (and groups) construct their own social realities.

- Reality is created through (inter)subjective understanding
- Individual example: “honor” ...
- Aggregate example: “security” ...
- Implies: “Reality is what we make it...”

Implications...

Subjectivity of knowledge → Difficulty (impossibility?) of intersubjective knowledge

- Measurement trouble
- Determining causality is difficult (due to reciprocity) or impossible (due to social construction)
- Practical effects:
 - Emphasis on case studies
 - Elevate qualitative over quantitative methods
 - Embracing of bias/subjectivity (e.g., critical theory)