

KEY REFERENCES

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VERSTEHEN This is a German term for *understanding* used to refer both to the aim of human sciences as well as their method. Reacting to the growing prominence of empiricist and positivist epistemologies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the German philosopher and historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) set out to establish the unique nature of historical and cultural knowledge. He argued that what fundamentally distinguished the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) from the human (mental) sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was that the former aimed at developing causal explanations (*Erklärung*) from the outside, so to speak, through the use of general laws, whereas the latter aimed at understanding meaning (*Verstehen*) from the agent's or actor's point of view by grasping the subjective consciousness of action from the inside: "Nature we explain; psychic life we understand." Dilthey relied heavily on the analysis of inner, psychic experience as distinct from (but related to) outer experience of external nature. He emphasized that the social inquirer must engage in a psychological reenactment (*Nacherleben*) or imaginative reconstruction of the experience of human actors in order to understand human social life and history. Hence, his view of *Verstehen* had strong overtones of psychologism (the doctrine that reduces the objects of consciousness to mental states).

This distinction between the natural and human sciences, and the role and meaning of *Verstehen*, was further elaborated by neo-Kantian philosophers Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), who objected to the psychologism inherent in Dilthey's view. Windelband argued that the natural sciences seek *nomothetic knowledge* (general laws), whereas the historical sciences seek to describe unique events (*idiographic knowledge*). Unlike Dilthey, he held that there was no essential difference in the objects that the two sciences studied, only a difference in *method*. Any kind of object (e.g., mental events or physical objects) could be studied by means of

both methods. Windelband claimed that positivism's error was in believing that every event must be viewed nomothetically. Rickert developed a connection between ideal or transcendent cultural values and historical events, arguing that it was only through grasping this connection that the meaning of historical events could be made clear. He used the term *Kulturwissenschaften*—cultural sciences—to signal a revision of Dilthey's focus on inner, psychic experience.

Max Weber's (1864–1920) efforts to establish an *interpretive sociology* (*Verstehende sociology*) predicated on an understanding of actors' perspectives of their social action was, in turn, indebted to the work of these predecessors. Weber distinguished two kinds of *Verstehen*: "direct observational understanding," in which the purpose or meaning of human *action* is immediately apparent, and "explanatory understanding," which required grasping the motivation for human behavior by placing the action in some intelligible, inclusive context of meaning. Weber argued that human action is both open to and requires interpretation in terms of the subjective meaning that actors attach to that action. Social scientific (causal) explanation of human action had to be predicated on this kind of understanding.

The phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz (1899–1956) sought to clear up the meaning of *Verstehen* by distinguishing three senses of the term:

1. As "the experiential form of common-sense knowledge of human affairs": *Verstehen*, in this definition, has nothing to do with introspection or the subjective states of human agents. Rather, it refers to the intersubjective character of the *lifeworld* and the complex processes by which human beings come to recognize their own actions and those of their fellow actors as meaningful.
2. As an epistemological problem: The central issue here is how *Verstehen* (as a kind of knowledge) is possible. Here, Schutz drew on Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) considerable work on the concept of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*). Husserl had argued that the lifeworld was ontologically prior; all scientific, logical, and mathematical concepts originate in this lifeworld. The lifeworld is the grounds of all understanding.
3. As a method unique to the human sciences: Schutz argued that social reality has a specific meaning and relevance structure for human beings living, acting, and thinking within it. *Verstehen* thus refers to a first-order process by

which we all interpret the world. The interpretation of the world sought by the social scientist must begin by grasping this first-order understanding. The social scientist then fashions a second-order interpretation of that world by employing the constructs of the social sciences. *Verstehen* thus also means a second-order process, a special means of entry into the lifeworld, by which the social inquirer seeks to understand the first-order process.

Despite the efforts of Schutz and others to clarify what is meant by *Verstehen* or interpretive understanding, *logical empiricists* (e.g., Theodore Abel and Otto Neurath) seized on the tendency to equate the act of understanding with grasping subjective, mental states. They argued that *Verstehen* defined as psychological empathy or getting inside other people's heads was interesting only as a heuristic device for generating objectively testable hypotheses. This logical empiricist formulation of *Verstehen* has persisted to the present day and continues to be refuted. For example, echoing Schutz, Charles Taylor, in his often-cited essay "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (*Review of Metaphysics*, 1971, 25, 3-51), argued that *Verstehen* has nothing to do with inorganic or psychological states but with understanding intersubjective meanings constitutive of social life. These meanings, in turn, are not grasped via empathy but by means of a hermeneutic process. And in defending interpretive anthropology, Clifford Geertz found it necessary to explain ("From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," in *Local Knowledge*, Basic Books, 1983) that ethnographers cannot claim "some unique form of psychological closeness" with their subjects. He argued that interpretive understanding of the meaning of human action is forthcoming more from the act of looking over the shoulders of others:

The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to (p. 58)

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) accepted Dilthey's idea that the operation of *Verstehen* is profoundly different than explaining the events of nature, but he too rejected the view that understanding depends upon a psychological reenactment of the experiences of human actors. In *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed., Continuum, 1989), he argued "*Verstehen ist sprachgebunden*"

("Understanding is tied to language"). Language is the medium of intersubjectivity and the concrete expression of traditions that give human actions particular meaning. *Verstehen* is achieved by entering into a conversation or dialogue with those traditions.

Jürgen Habermas's theory of critical social science accepts the view that the historical-hermeneutic sciences aim at interpretive understanding or *Verstehen* serving the *interest* of clarifying the conditions for communication and intersubjectivity. These social sciences stand in contrast to the empirical-analytic sciences that aim at explanation in the interest of controlling and manipulating the social world. Habermas, however, argues that each kind of science, although not reducible to each other, makes the mistake of claiming it provides the fundamental knowledge of human action. He defends a third, more basic, emancipatory cognitive interest that permits the dialectical synthesis of the other two interests and forms the basis of his understanding of a critical social science.

See also *Explanation, Understanding*.

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VERSTEHENDE SOCIOLOGY See **INTERPRETIVE SOCIOLOGY**.

VISUAL RESEARCH METHODS This is a collection of methods and approaches for using visual materials or images (e.g., drawings, photographs, and videos) in social research both to produce and to represent knowledge. The visual materials in question may be produced by the researcher or found or produced by those the researcher studies. Included here are techniques of *photo-elicitation*, ethnographic film making, video interviewing, photography as a means of participant observation, and so on. These methods are employed