Interpretivism (interpretivist) Research Philosophy

Interpretivism, also known as interpretivist involves researchers to interpret elements of the study, thus interpretivism integrates human interest into a study. Accordingly, "interpretive researchers assume that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments".[1] Development of interpretivist philosophy is based on the critique of positivism in social sciences.

Interpretivism is "associated with the philosophical position of idealism, and is used to group together diverse approaches, including social constructivism, phenomenology and hermeneutics; approaches that reject the objectivist view that meaning resides within the world independently of consciousness"[2]. According to interpretivist approach, it is important for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate differences between people.[3] Moreover, interpretivism studies usually focus on meaning and may employ multiple methods in order to reflect different aspects of the issue.

Important Aspects of Interpretivism

Interpretivist approach is based on naturalistic approach of data collection such as interviews and observations. Secondary data research is also popular with interpretivism philosophy. In this type of studies, meanings emerge usually towards the end of the research process.

The most noteworthy variations of interpretivism include the following:

- **Hermeneutics** refers to the philosophy of interpretation and understanding. Hermeneutics mainly focuses on biblical texts and wisdom literature and as such, has a little relevance to business studies.

  - **Phenomenology** is "the philosophical tradition that seeks to understand the world through directly experiencing the phenomena".[4]

- Symbolic interactionism accepts symbols as culturally derived social objects having shared meanings. According to symbolic interactionism symbols provide the means by which reality is constructed

In general interpretivist approach is based on the following beliefs:

1. Relativist ontology. This approach perceives reality as intersubjectively that is based on meanings and understandings on social and experiential levels.

2. Transactional or subjectivist epistemology. According to this approach, people cannot be separated from their knowledge; therefore there is a clear link between the researcher and research subject.

The basic differences between positivism and interpretivism are illustrated by Pizam and Mansfeld (2009) in the following manner:

Assumptions	Positivism	Interpretivism
Nature of reality	Objective, tangible, single	Socially constructed, multiple
Goal of research	Explanation, strong prediction	Understanding, weak prediction
Focus of interest	What is general, average and representative	What is specific, unique, and deviant
Knowledge generated	Laws	

The use of interpretivism approach in business studies involves the following principles as suggested by Klein and Myers (1999)

The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle.

1. The Principle of Contextualization
2. The Principle of Interaction between the Researchers and the Subjects

3. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization
4. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning
5. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations
6. The Principle of Suspicion

Advantages and Disadvantages of Interpretivism

Main disadvantages associated with interpretivism relate to subjective nature of this approach and great room for bias on behalf of researcher. Primary data generated in interpretivist studies cannot be generalized since data is heavily impacted by personal viewpoint and values. Therefore, reliability and representativeness of data is undermined to a certain extent as well.

On the positive side, thanks to adoption of interpretivism, qualitative research areas such as cross-cultural differences in organizations, issues of ethics, leadership and analysis of factors impacting leadership etc. can be studied in a great level of depth. Primary data generated via Interpretivism studies might be associated with a high level of validity because data in such studies tends to be trustworthy and honest.

Generally, if you are following interpretivism research philosophy in your dissertation the depth of discussion of research philosophy depends on the level of your studies. For a dissertation at Bachelor's level it suffices to specify that you are following Interpretivism approach and to describe the essence of this approach in a short paragraph. For a dissertation at Master's level discussion needs to be expanded into 2-3 paragraphs to include justification of your choice for interpretivist approach.

At a PhD level, on the other hand, discussion of research philosophy can cover several pages and you are expected to discuss the essence of interpretivism by referring to several relevant secondary data sources. Your justification for the selection of interpretivism need to be offered in a succinct way in about two paragraphs…

[1] Myers, M.D. (2008) "Qualitative Research in Business & Management" SAGE Publications

[2] Collins, H. (2010) "Creative Research: The Theory and Practice of Research for the Creative Industries" AVA Publications

[3] Source: Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2012) "Research Methods for Business Students" 6th edition, Pearson Education Limited

[4] Littlejohn, S.W. & Foss, K.A. (2009) "Encyclopedia of Communication Theory" Vol.1, SAGE Publication