

## Paradigms Summary

### ANTH 410/510 Anthro Research Methods

24 August 2005; Last revised 2 February 2009

Some lecture notes on **the ontological-epistemological basis, i.e., the nature of phenomena (what is real) and how do we come to know it (what is knowable), of the Positivist and Constructivist Paradigms.** The two paradigms represented here are idealized positions at opposite ends of a continuum of paradigm possibilities.

---

**A. Positivist** (akin to logical positivism, Durkheimian functionalism, Praxis Marxism, to Lewis Binford's processual archaeology, cultural ecologists, materialist, and other theories emanating out of modernity):

1. What is real (ontology)? Phenomena is **objective**. Presupposes a Cartesian **dualistic** world of knower and known, of object and subject, of mind and matter. Phenomena, "social facts" or "data," have existence independent of observer. When the tree falls, it still falls if you hear it or not. Can look out into the world, in passionately, as if behind a **great glass pane** – dualistic world – and observe what is going on independent of it.

e.g., [Pythagorean Theorem](#): mathematics and reality

Thus a **singular, absolute reality** out there.

The phenomenal world is **orderly and regular** – governed by patterns – which are knowable.

Thus all phenomena necessarily have **antecedents** effecting them through time – cause and effect relationships. Temporally and spatially ordered.

Orderliness is essential if going to come up with "cause and effect" relationships and "laws," and not a random chaotic universe.

The significance of phenomena resides in their **material, quantifiable properties** – **reductionist**.

phenomena is accessible through the **five senses** – **material objects**, overtly and behaviorally based. Basis of **empiricism**.

phenomena is **intrinsically discrete and discernable**, increments made up of numbers – a mechanistic universe Basis for **statistical analysis**. e.g., Pythagorean theorem has existence in the natural world

“The language of nature is mathematics” Galileo and Bronowski

**KEY: Views humans as mechanistic, behavioral responders to social, psychological and environmental phenomenal stimuli.**

If you know the phenomenal stimuli, you know the human

2. What is knowable then (epistemology), and only knowable via a systemic application of rigorous methods, are quantified, material “facts,” the singular “truth.” “The truth is out there!”

**Given that** “reality” exists in the **ultimate “facts,”** the sense-datum, the “data,” ethnographic account (the story of the water potato) attempt to know, represent and **correspond** to (given levels of validity and reliability). Knowledge and ideas can be true pictures of the phenomenal reality, yet such ideas are autonomous from the phenomena. The data, of which the account represents (the idea/knowledge), is but one incident, one measurable unit, among many, for this singular truth. - all premised on an **underlying dualism**

**Knowledge is the verifiable hypothesis** accepted by the academic community as a valid and reliable representation of the phenomena – the facts – i.e., knowledge and phenomena not one in the same thing - dualism

The **facts and sense-datum are the empirical focus**, with knowledge the analysis of the empirical evidence.

3. Summary: **Positivism**

Ontology: Reality exists (out here) as temporally (continually changing) and spatially (three dimensional) phenomena (the object) autonomous from the anthropologist (the subject).

Premises: A dualistic world view of objects and subjects, of mind and matter - Cartesian Dualism. Time and space are absolute and order phenomena into an ultimately singular truth. Phenomenon is discrete, finite and discernable - a fixed target, an object.

Epistemology: The goal of the anthropologist (the subject seeking to know) is to accurately (via the scientific method) represent (create a text that corresponds with) the phenomena (the object). The focus of study, of knowing is “out there,” in the autonomous objective world

---

**B. Constructionist-interpretivist** (akin to theories of Clifford, Crapanzano, Geertz, Marcus, Rosaldo, Sahlins, to hermeneutical approaches, Neo-Marxism, feminist ethnography and archaeology, cognitive ethnography and archaeology, and postprocessual archaeology of Hodder, and other theories emanating out of post-modernism. Spawned in part by the “**crisis in**

**representation**” issue; just what is this crisis?):

1. What is real (ontology)? Phenomena (meaningful sense-datum) are located in the **symbolic construction that occurs as participants negotiate and intersect their praxis experiences with one another** – i.e., world is a **subjective** (all is intrinsically connected and as opposed to dualistic), **transactionally** constructed (in the praxis act of interaction the world is created), and what is “real” is the act of interaction, is **the process**, and not a finite, discrete object. When you look out onto the world, you are a part of it, helping create meaningful phenomena as you observe.

e.g., a “**Montana Rainbow**” along the Interstate Highway, also suggest by Owen Barfield, a British philosopher of language: what does it take to experience it?

e.g., **Pythagorean Theorem**: mathematics reconsidered – just who’s language is it?

phenomena is a **construction** of those participating in a given local at a given time; it is the “world made in the act of participating in it” - which is a continually unfolding process

and not concrete, discrete, measurable, absolute and materially based

and not an objective and dualistic world, with autonomous and independent anthropologist and participants - there is **no great glass pane**, no Cartesian Dualism, as it is a construction of the European scientific revolution

This is not to suggest only that which is conceived of and interacted with is “real.” A “wall” (rain drops, sun light) still has an existence whether you conceive of it or not; when you walk into it, it has a reality. But its particular significance and meaning is only derived from the context of human interaction with it. Focus on assigned meaning. Contrast between noumenon with the phenomenon of Immanuel Kant.

There is no world accessible to anthropologist outside that which is constructed by the interaction of cultural participants, anthropologists and audiences.

Thus phenomena has existence in the **complex web of interactions and connections** (a gestalt), as a process, as an event, in a given time and space – **time and place relative**

focus on **process**, dynamics, relationships within a specific scene/case

and can not be isolated in specific discrete quantifiable and objective variables

As world is context-based, relative in time, space and actors to specific locale – “relativist ontology” – **multiple realities**.

e.g., **the reality** of the anthropologist and social science, **the reality** of the participants and subject, and **even the reality** of those who will come to read the final report, among others.

**KEY: View humans as creators of their own constructed realities.**

As an ethnographer, when you engage in the ongoing web of participatory interactions (another's culture, another's text), you begin to contribute to and create an "ethnographic text."

Re-entering the "[Tin Shed](#)" – further reflections on its ontological and epistemological implications

2. What is knowable (epistemology) then is the "**text**," and only the text, of that negotiated construction, which necessarily results from the interaction of "subjects" (participants), "observers" (anthropologists), and the "interpreters" (audiences). In this sense, the distinction between "subjects" and "observes" becomes blurred, if not dissolved.

Acknowledge the **active role** of not only the participants of a given scene, but also both of the anthropologist and the audience in constructing the text – "subjectivist epistemology" (knower and subject create understandings)

thus constant need for "self-reflection" - **reflexivity** - the anthropologist needs to be cognizant and take ownership of what he or she brings into construction

e.g., consider the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard among the [Nuer](#), and the contrast in the works of Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis in [Tepoztlan](#)

"Data" does not have objective substance; "**objectivity**" is thus a construct, imposed upon the noumenon, to render it meaningful

Places anthropology as a "humanities," and not "social science."  
in fact, "science" itself is understood as just another constructed text as well

**As there is no dualism**, "reality" exists in and only as an ongoing interaction of participants, an event knowable as a **constructed "text,"** i.e. be it the moment of engaging in the *field* experience, and as continued out of the field, at the moment of in which someone engages in a **narrative** descriptive of that experience, i.e. an *ethnography*.

For the anthropologist, "reality" is thus in the very act of writing it; and hence the statement and understanding, "**writing culture**" (Geertz, and Clifford and Marcus)

In this sense, “knowledge” held and generate, and “phenomena” of the cultural other are one in the same thing – they are “the text” – as there is no Cartesian **dualism** separating them

So that the “**text**” is the empirical **focus of the research** and study, with the focus of study not an illusionary objective phenomenal “reality out there” (as such does not exist).

And, importantly, given acknowledgment of all the participators' role in creating the text, and his or her own **reflexivity**, there are the huge **ethical responsibilities** connected with working with a host community, all relating to collaborative partnerships, cultural property rights, empowering the voice of others, host community review processes, etc., with the co-creators of culture.

All these issues may or may not be acknowledged as vital and pursued in a purely positivist's approach.

### 3. Summary: **Constructionism**

**Ontology:** Reality exists at each moment of participatory convergence by all its actors.

**Premises:** A non-dualistic world view. Time and space are imposed constructs and not absolute entities. Reality thus has multiple truths, is relativistic. Phenomenon is an event, a process, a convergence, infinitely changing given those who are participating at each moment of convergence - there is no fixed “target,” per se.

**Epistemology:** The goal of the anthropologist (one of the actors) is to create (hence the expression “writing culture”) a convergence of his or her own (known as a “text”) that links (empowers) the voices of other actors (be they living, using ethnographic tools, or be they the dead, using archaeological tools), with those who will engage the text (future audiences), all along acknowledging his or her own role (reflexivity) in this constructed convergence. The focus of study, of knowing is the “text.”

### **Implications**

How you frame your research questions, construct your research design, select and apply your research tools, interact with your consultants or data, interpret or analyze your research, produce and present your research, and apply ethical considerations to your research are all contingent on how you are anchored to these differing ontologies and epistemologies.