



Verstehen

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What is it?

The notion of *verstehen*, literally to understand or comprehend in German, has a rich tradition, linking its origins to the works of Comte, Weber, and Dilthey, with further influence from the sociological work of the US Chicago School. The idea of *verstehen*, defined more completely as the deep, complex, and detailed understanding of social phenomena, establishes the importance of situated contexts as analytical tools. The operationalization of the *verstehen*, therefore, relies on rich, overly contextualized data, drawn from the engagement in the field. These data, consequently, help researchers create scenarios that embody the participants' experiences as closely as possible (sometimes called "vicarious experience") to develop findings and conclusions that are sensitive to the realities of the context and the participants. *Verstehen*, in this sense, transcends traditional understandings of "comprehension", as something that one does from afar and invites a deeper engagement with the social phenomena under study as the essential condition to fully describe and interpret them.

Who uses the concept?

The concept of *verstehen* has been widely used across the social and human sciences. While firmly rooted in philosophy and sociology, qualitative inquiry at large has embraced this concept since the 1940s as instrumental in the construction of the field. In fact, different scholars have placed this concept at the root of the differences in worldview between natural and applied sciences and social and human sciences.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

With its interest in the depth of social phenomena and as a cornerstone of social science research, *verstehen* is an essential concept in intercultural dialogue. Given the goals of developing deeper understandings and appreciation of the complexities of human nature, intercultural dialogue embodies the idea of *verstehen* at its core. We cannot engage in deeper dialogues unless we remain faithful to the idea of understanding these social interactions as fully as possible, while conveying the complexity of dialogues through the richest narratives available, two notions ingrained in the idea of *verstehen*.

What work remains?

The idea of *verstehen* is a very powerful concept that highlights what makes social and human research relevant and necessary today. In the midst of the ongoing debates about what constitutes "good" (or even) research, a closer look at the idea of *verstehen* and its push for careful understanding of our communities as a fully contextualized affair will enable the academic community to recover the historical roots for our work while projecting its importance for the future.

Resources

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