UNIT 1 CONCEPTS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

To ‘know’ the world we inhabit is among the most abiding interests we have had as human beings. But to know the world and to know it more clearly is where our journey begins differently. A commonsense understanding of the world gets formed just as we begin to see, feel and make sense of what we see and feel. But to derive a conclusion or conclusions out of these feelings and to define them as experiences is the task of ‘understanding’ and ‘knowing.’ It requires theorizing them in which more complex concepts get involved.

To know something does not depend on experiencing something in one way, that is, in a commonsense way. There seems to be a more complex relation that obtains between us and the world we inhabit which must be put systematically together if we want to know it. We seek to understand if what we ‘know’ is true, that is, for sure. The business of knowing thus, involves notions of truth and certitude. So, is the ‘essence’ of a thing is its truth? Does knowing entail seeking truth to establish the validity of an experience? Can there be more ways of understanding truth, even though it still defines itself as the essence of things and invokes universality.
In this unit we will address some of these questions that are generally asked and are known as the content of social inquiry. We will start with looking into ways of understanding scientific knowledge and what are the methods of acquiring it. Methods are sought to make our experiences of the world credible and justified.

In the next section of the unit, you will read about concepts that are seminal in carrying out qualitative research. These are justification, verification and meaning. Following this is a segment on Structuralism, post-structuralism and language. The unit will end with introduction to hermeneutics, its origin and its relationship with feminism.

Let us now look at the objectives of reading this unit.

### 1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- Explain modern ways and modes of acquiring knowledge;
- Comprehend significance of concepts in qualitative research; and
- Apply learning from the unit to your research.

### 1.4 MODERN WAYS OF KNOWING: METHOD OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Do you know that human beings have thought differently in different times and cultures? For example in Europe, Greek philosophers (like the Sophists; idealists like Socrates and Plato and a realist like Aristotle, and later on, skeptics and Epicureans), were engaged with the question of truth and ways of knowing it. And, all of them thought differently.

In this unit we will discuss mainly the European methods of knowledge, as the concepts under discussion are primarily those that emerged in the modern West, during its modernity - that is to say, as it was breaking away from its own ancient and medieval past. Just for your understanding, let us talk a little about what was so specific about the methods of thinking of their predecessors that the modern thinkers did not agree with and criticized it in their effort to establish new modes and methods of knowing the world.

The common presupposition of the pre-modern European thinking was that the world was a meaningful order, hierarchically arranged with an ‘Idea of Good’ at the apex. In medieval Europe, God provided the rationality to this order and it was thought that human beings were part of this hierarchical order and the meaningfulness of their lives was derived from this rationality.
Earlier, Aristotle argued that there was a reason why things were as they were; they were because their material, efficient and final causes made them stay the way they did. These ‘causes’ provided things their inner nature. That is to say, a thing had a purpose by which it defined itself and came to ‘be’. Remember the adage spoken in a common parlance that ‘child is the father of man’ meaning a man is potentially present within a male child. This is because, it was believed that things have their nature towards which they tend; they develop to their full potential by actualizing or realizing their ends.

Things grow and attain their form, thanks to the final cause. According to this view, no radical change is conceivable in the scheme of things as they are given according to their nature. The world runs according to the ‘rationally explained causes’ which govern them. The world is constitutive of these causes. One has to simply understand one’s place in it, which is equivalent to understanding its rationality by being part of it. Understanding is self explanatory here.

So, unlike Isaac Newton’s explanation, as to why an apple falls on the ground once broken from the stem, (which was because of the gravitational force produced by earth), an Aristotelian explanation would be that it was in the nature of the apple to fall on the ground. The way an Aristotelian thinking worked, it did not allow this world to be explained in a probabilistic manner so that new ways of looking at the world could emerge.

In a way this cosmological framework influenced the mathematical concepts that arose in the Greek philosophical tradition. Plato, for example, absolutely loved geometry and the relationships between the lines that gave rise to squares and triangles. To him it was pure truth that all three corners of the triangle were equal. Even Aristotle, in spite of being a realist, accepted this truth from which various kinds of conclusions could be deduced.

**Box No. 1.1**

A true proposition is deduced from the first principle of rationality.

After reading how do we understand and construct scientific knowledge let us now read about various forms of acquiring knowledge.

**1.4 MODES OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE IN MODERN SCIENCE**

Modern thinkers rejected the meaningful rational order and all the causes which kept it together. Most vehemently, the final cause of Aristotle’s ‘Scientia’ was rejected as a metaphysical speculation with no way of validating or justifying its veracity.
The inaugurator of new science, Francis Bacon, a 17th century thinker, argued, that science had to be built on other foundation. It must have a different method and logic, other than the syllogistic logic (see Glossary). That is to say, it was required to produce testable, verified, procedurally transparent knowledge, which is amenable to human senses. The ground for a positivist empiricist model of knowledge and its inductive and deductive methods were getting laid down here to be further developed in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Bacon thought that we could aspire to have knowledge of things that we observe and sense; we could theorize only that which appeared to our senses and that which did not, could not be. We could not acquire them, or deduce them from some principles of rationality, intuitively or conjecturally. New Science had to be built on the firm foundation of facts collected through observation and experiment. Bacon writes,

“There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering the truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgment and the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now fashion. The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms at last of all. This is the true way, but yet untried.” (Quoted in Martin Hollis, 2000, p. 23)

Further distinguishing the ways of building scientific knowledge, Bacon writes,

“The men of experiment are like the ant; they only collect and use; the reasoners resemble spiders, who make cobweb out of their own substance” (Quoted in Ian Hacking, 1983, p.247)

Let us now read about Bacon’s inductive method of acquiring knowledge.

1.4.1 Inductive Method

Contextualizing Bacon’s inductive method and empiricism as the basis of modern science, Martin Hollis, argues that Bacon despised scholastic and bookish attempts to derive knowledge from the first principles. He thought that instead effort should be made to create concepts and discover truths at the lower level of generality. Science should be built from the bottom up.

He thought that things that had been handed down and taught by philosophers like Aristotle were mainly taken on trust, just as the notion of truth was handled by the ancients on trust through rational intuition.
Inductive method came into the realm of human experience and allowed theorizing worth making credible knowledge of it. What effectively it means is that knowledge has to be built bit by bit. Through observation one gathers experience and accumulates them as facts; by putting them together and collating them one builds theory. But this theory has to pass the test of confirmation to be validated as correct. The confirmation also works as validation which is done by testing the veracity of the theory by repeatedly going through similar observations. It is on this basis that a particular theory acquires generality or a statement is generalized as true. In another words, the statement that emerges out of this procedure of generalization, serves as true statement till it remains stable by being confirmed by the facts.

To explain it further, a statement that ‘all crows are black’ generated by repeatedly observing black crows, would be a true statement till a white crow is sighted. Till the white crow comes along, ‘all crows are black’ holds the place of a true statement. This way of reasoning and producing knowledge opens the way for yet more new knowledge. This is how modern empiricism was born- a method of acquiring knowledge through observation and accumulation of facts, and passing the test of verification. We will talk about verification a little later in this unit.

**Box No. 1.2**

*Thus, knowledge generated through the inductive methods is probabilistic in nature and scientific in outcome.*

Bacon taught that we must not only observe nature passively but also twist the lion’s tail, that is, manipulate our world to learn more secrets. Observe and experiment, both. The status of knowledge arrived at through the accumulation of facts is by nature probable as experiment is based on this presupposition that nothing has finally been known. However, there is more to be discovered and known. For certitude is not what any generalization can claim to produce; only statements derived from law like generalizations can have that quality, and they come about through, another method, that is, deductive.

**Box No. 1.3**

*Inductive method and the kind of knowledge generated by this method:*

The inductive method presupposes that the explanations about the world (and how it works, how it appears to work) should be based on the facts gathered from pure and dispassionate observation that is neutral towards values. Generalizations are built out of these observations. That is to say, inductively one starts with singular or particular and goes to the general or universal statements. The validity of this generalized statement is secured by a method of verification, meaning thereby, confirmation of the statement by more facts.
Before reading ahead take up the following exercise to assess your learning from this section of the unit.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) What were the ancient ways of knowing the world?

ii) Write in a few lines, difference between ancient and modern ways of knowing the truth.

Let us now discuss the critique of inductive method.

**Critique of Inductive Method:**

The critics of inductive method say that it is no method as it is essentially capable of producing only descriptions of things, not knowledge per se. Knowledge should have more enduring relationship with truth. This is precisely because it does not cover the causes of the generalized conjunctions. And there is no logical process for establishing the validity of universal statement from a bunch of singular statements. Also, it is almost impossible to observe all the things that are going on by a single individual, and also, the infinite number of observations required to prove the universal statement true in all cases is far from achievable.
Feminists’ theorists also point out that most societies are patriarchal and, thus, women’s perspectives on truth (based on their experience of the world), remains excluded from the so called, **objective standpoint of the observer**. They further argue, critiquing the claims of dispassionate objectivity, that women’s experience of the world may not be that of a disinterested subject; and that women may not relate to the world by objectifying it as their subjectivity is not formed in a manner similar to that of men. Women know this world through their oppression and deep emersion into it; never though objectification.

Feminists argue that empiricism is a philosophical adventure of male ambition to gain control over nature and society by dispassionately objectifying it. This objectification is based also on exclusion of women from the exercise of constructing knowledge and methods of acquiring it. And to that extent it cannot claim to be objective. Individuals who are trusted to collect data are already prejudiced in favor of a masculine view of the world. Thus, data collection and generalizations built on such data, produce flawed understanding of nature and society.

The most damaging criticism of inductive method has been made by an influential philosopher of natural sciences itself, **Sir Carl Popper**, who seemed to have solved the problem of induction by abolishing it from scientific inquiry.

Let us read about the other method of acquiring knowledge building that is deductive method.

### 1.4.2 Deductive Method

The deductive method of knowledge was developed by the likes of ancient philosophers, **Thales**, **Aristotle** and **Pythagoras** and other ancient Greek philosophers. Since then, it has been the cornerstone of rationalist thinking in the West. The deductive logic functions like this.

All apples are fruit. All fruits grow on trees. Therefore all apples grow on trees.

We see here that from the beginning we are dealing with generalities, like all apples are fruits. This statement itself has not been inductively brought into general form that is established by repeated observations. It is not of the order that after observing a number of Japanese wearing glasses we generalize that all Japanese wear glasses. For even if a single Japanese is found to be not wearing glasses, it will shake the generalization arrived at through the observation.
Generalizations are a form of inductive reasoning but not in the way they are presumed in the deductive reasoning. For inductive method knowledge is the result of a particular observation and can extend to general belief or statement only in so far as experiences can confirm them. **Inductive method starts from the particular to the general.** On the contrary, the deductive method starts with the general principles to reach the specific statement of truth.

To explain why apples fall on the ground, Isaac Newton, for example deduced it from the general law of gravitation. The epistemic status of both kinds of knowledge is that in one case the causality of the law-like generality produces more stable truth statements than in the second one where it is only the probabilities which are attained.

**Modern reconstruction of the Deductive Method:**

The deductive approach is the opposite or reverse of the inductive one as it is clear from the above paragraph. It may be important here to tell you about the nature of causality or the nature of causal laws (first principles) which function as the covering principles in deductive reasoning. In the pre-modern deductive reasoning, the causes were taken as necessary laws of nature.

In the modern period, **Rene Descartes** (modern French Philosopher who established the primacy of mind as the site of rationality) argued that to understand the truth it is a good way to begin by deducing what we understand from the first principles, but these principles should be an ingredient of human mind itself, not of a meaningful order as man is now bereft of it.

He further argued that at least one mind exited self evidently, and that guaranteed or from which it can be deduced that whatever is self evident is true. It can function as a good first principle provided by the mind from which more true statements can be deduced.

**Martin Hollis,** reflecting on the phenomenon of Descartes writes,

“Since the first philosophy included that god exists, no conflict between science and religion was intended. But all the same, by removing the imprimatur of reason from all traditional authorities and giving into every reflective individual with an open mind, Descartes laid the ground for a secular science, which would be neutral on questions of meaning and value”.

( Martin Hollis, 2000, p. 28)
Thus, Descartes though using the deductive method, found a more secular way of establishing the first principle, more within the grasp of the human mind. You can see that the legitimacy of inductive thinking was also being created here. The world we inhabit is the real one and our own mind, is good enough to establish the first principles or first philosophy of acquiring knowledge.

David Hume further made deductive method even more amenable to modern science which took inductive method as most appropriate for this enterprise. He demystified further the relationship between cause and effect. His anti metaphysical theoretical stand expressed doubts about the independent existence of causes. He argued that cause is only a constant conjunction. To say that ‘A is because of some power, cause B to happen’, amounts only to saying that things of type A are regularly followed by things of type B. The laws of gravity are a form of regularities that describe what happens in the world. In fact, it is better to think that all causal laws are mere regularities because that is what we can observe. We cannot have knowledge of something a priori. Empiricists think that the correct way of doing science is not to look for causes but regularities.

Scientists resolved that they should not think of the laws of nature revealing what must happen in the universe, but only what does happen. The natural scientist began to find universal statements - theories and laws - which cover all phenomena as special cases. To say that one has found explanation of an event only meant that the event can be deduced from a general regularity.

**Box No.1.5**

*Both inductive and deductive methods now are rational projects of the natural science, one starting from the particular to the general resulting in probabilistic generalizations; the other explaining a particular event deducing it from the general principle which is in the form of conjunctions of regularity functioning as causal was.*

Here, it again becomes essential to assess your learning from the text discussed in the last few sections.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) What is understood by inductive and deductive method?
Let us now move on to other concepts that are required to understand qualitative research.

1.5 JUSTIFICATION

By now it must be clear to you that ideas and beliefs are held by people because they are justified as true. They have an epistemic status. We can say that justification is the reason why we can hold certain beliefs. That is to say, one has to offer an explanation as to why certain beliefs are true; one has to give an account of how one knows what one knows.

We provide evidence of our senses, authoritative testimony and logical deductive justification in favor of our beliefs so that they can appear justified.

Box No. 1.6

Justification, then, is the difference between a mere belief and knowledge.

To have knowledge, one must have justification. How our beliefs are justified is among the central questions of epistemology- of our theory of knowledge. It is in this sense that Rene Descartes and Immanuël Kant constructed the foundation of modern knowledge and took this foundation to be the most important issue in building the theory of knowledge.

ii) Write a brief critique of inductive method.
The sure foundation, indubitable and perspicuous, becomes the justification for knowledge to be valid, meaning true. In his Meditations, Descartes challenged the existing theory of knowledge based on senses. The reliability of senses can be challenged, he thought. A surer foundation of knowledge must be created. His method was to question all those beliefs that he himself held till he reached what he called ‘indubitable and infallible foundation’—the truths of geometry for example as they were clear and distinct. He found that other than these geometrical truths, it was only his thinking mind that shared this indubitability and clarity with these geometrical principles. He, thus, said, Cogito Ergo Sum—“I think therefore I am”. This belief he finally accepted as the justified basis of knowledge.

This has also come to be known as foundational theory of justification. Your justification for accepting an explanation has to be sought from a truth statement which cannot be referred back to another statement. Representational theories of knowledge close the argument of truth at the level of a thing being true because of it being the representation of the object to be known. Objectivity becomes the basis of justifying the representational theory of knowledge. This is how foundationalism works as a theory of justification.

However, critics of foundational theory of justification point out that for a belief to be justified, it must be supported by another belief. They argue that one cannot avoid regression. Regression also produces knowledge, even though probable in nature, which happens to be pragmatic in its consequence. Justification need not be deductive in its structure; it can be discursive and inductive.

Apart from foundational justification, one can have inferential justification as well, one belief justified by another without this one further subjected to foundational requirements. Inferential justification requires the existence of supporting ideas just believed to be true, not necessarily formed by representation of objects in the minds of the subjects.

Let us now read about what is understood by verification.

1.6 VERIFICATION

Just as justification of a belief is a condition for it acquiring the status of knowledge with the elements of truth built into it, so is verification needed to confirm a proposition or statement of knowledge to be confirmed.

The Verification takes place by confirming a statement factually. It is the evidence that makes a hypothesis more probable, it is argued.
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Verification is the method of testing an empirical theory of its truthfulness. It takes place from bottom up. One makes observations, sees how they add up to confirm or verify a more general statement.

Box No.1.7

Verification is testing the truthfulness of statement based on facts by more facts.

Though, within the empirical method of acquisition of knowledge where to be true means to be verifiable by facts, the logical positivist stream of this school added a further dimension to the notion of verification. An important logical positivist, Morris Schlick, for example, argued that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification, meaning, a statement is meaningful or have cognitive meaning only if it is verifiable. The intended endeavor was to exclude all those statements as meaningless which could not be verified by facts. For example a statement that ‘all bachelors are unmarried’ can be rendered meaningful because it can be factually verified, but a statement very close to the above statement in its facticity, i.e., “bachelors are carefree” cannot be verified as it may not be factually of the same order as the first statement about bachelors, and so it can be rendered meaningless and untrue. This relationship of verifiability to language only produced tautologies (see Glossary to understand what is tautology) which were found unacceptable by the new positivists like Karl Popper who thought that meaning and its creation is not the business of scientific theories of knowledge. He suggested that robustness of a theory can, in fact, be ascertained more by their falsification than by verification. Facts cannot mingle with the meaning, they can however, produce scientific statement with the status of being either true or false, not whether a statement is meaningful or not.

It is precisely this limitation of the positivist-empiricist position on the nature of truth and science that led to radical departure within the social sciences known as interpretive social science which argued that it is crucial for human subjects to understand the meaning of their actions.

Natural sciences and social sciences, thus, have different kinds of subjects and objects of study. A human being cannot be a mute object like objects in nature which will not resist being observed in an objectifying manner. Human subjects change their behaviour and action on the basis of their subjective assessment of a particular situation. We need not only observe a human subject, but also understand the meaning of her/his behaviour. Human beings are self-interpretive animals and not mute objects of nature. Meaning is crucial for accomplishing understanding of things that are done, imagined or expressed through speech and action.
It is this difference between observing a tree and a human subject that challenged the unity of method hypothesis of positivism and brought the question of meaning in the centre of the philosophy of social sciences.

So, we find that there is a close relationship between truth and meaning, and the method required to understand this cannot be that of either deduction or induction in nature which is a requirement of an empiricist theory of knowledge. A different method, adequate to the subject of social sciences, will be necessary- a method to understand the meaning of social action. But what constitutes ‘meaning?’ Let us find out.

1.7 MEANING

Let us see if we can we make sense of a sentence like - “a spoon is angry” or “a tie is compassionate”. We will find these sentences close to being nonsense, not making sense; not meaningful ultimately. Just as we can be troubled by such sentences as challenging existing sense of meaning about what spoons and ties can do and how they are placed in the universe of human society. Philosophers and social scientist have made great efforts to deal with the question of meaning in our personal and social lives.

We read in the earlier section that the sentences are meaningful only after they were found verifiable (corroborated by facts). These sentences had to be formulated in a way that they carried literal meaning and the proposition they expressed were to be either analytic or empirically verifiable.

According to the analytic requirement a meaningful statement, like ‘all bachelors are unmarried’, is meaningful as it is verifiable, but not one like - ‘bachelors are careless’. A sentence like the later one, even though meaningful, becomes meaningless.

It is perhaps important to bring in a little discussion about the picture theory of language and meaning at this point, propounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein, an important philosopher of language in modern times. Wittgenstein formulated that the language is the picture of the world and that the epistemic relationship of language to facts is one of mirror-like reflection. Meanings are obtained in language through this relationship.

He argued that, language is not bereft of the objective world of matter, rather the world is constitutive of language, and that is where properly the question of meaning arises. The world that we understand meaningfully, in fact, is the world that is constituted linguistically.

Ludwig Wittgenstein in his later writings , however, changed his position on the picture theory and proceeded to put forward a ‘language-games’ theory of language and meaning which was less epistemological and developed more on the lines of rules of the life worlds we create and inhabit. This also came to be called as the ordinary theory of language.
As mentioned above, Wittgenstein in his later philosophical writings revised his picture theory of language and meaning by saying that meaning arises in language by words being used under certain rules. We learn to speak a language by discovering the use of the words and thus meaning of a word is not what words stand for, but simply the way the word is used. Think of a duster in the classroom being used as an object to hurt someone by being thrown at for then it clearly ceases to be a duster. The change in its use changes its definition and, thus, meaning. Some sentences may still describe facts by standing for them, but this is only one of many ways in which sentences function. When we raise a finger in the air, the meaning of this raising a finger will clearly not be understood if its context is not understood within which it has been used to convey one’s intention. For example, one can raise one’s finger to ask a question in the classroom; one can do so to be counted as a ‘yes’ in an opinion poll.

You should also know that in the contested zone of meaning creation, post modernism through post-structuralism have also contributed in challenging fixity of meaning by dissolving the need of essentialism in producing meaning. Post modern feminism, mainly French feminists, have also affirmed the contingency of meaning and rejected essentialism obtained by relating facts to meaning in a positivist sense. For more analysis see Block 4 of this course.

Check Your Progress:

i) Define: Verification, Justification and Meaning.

ii) Write in 2-3 lines about the contribution of the following thinkers to the world of knowledge: Immanuel Kant, Rene Descartes, Karl Popper, Wittgenstein.

Now we will read about the last concept introduced to you in this unit, that of hermeneutics.
1.8 HERMENEUTICS

You have already read that ‘explanation’ as a mode of knowing is part and parcel of the positivist-rationalist world of deductive reasoning and method. As opposed to this world view, hermeneutics helps us to comprehend our social and natural world through interpretation where meaningfulness of a thing to be known is at the stake. In other words, it is the interpretation which is the way to hermeneutical understanding. Here the process of understanding presupposes pre-structures like language, history and traditions of knowledge as values that help us in becoming aware of reality; we never stand as value-neutral subjects without a language in front of an object to recognize it. To gather facts, we need to have a historical comprehension of how and why facts have become central in understanding reality.

Hermeneutical understanding does not aim at gaining objective knowledge or does it think it is possible. It points towards the impossibility of disregarding or bypassing one’s context of understanding. Since the context is forever constituted by our language and history within which we think and have our existence, we cannot extricate our selves from the language we use to understand something. In this sense, getting objective view of the reality is not the goal of understanding, rather gaining clarity about what we already understand is the modest ambition.

Hans Georg Gadamer, an important hermeneutical thinker of our times, maintains that ‘understanding’ is never an acquisition of mind but an event in understanding. Mind is not beyond language, rather it has its being within it and it cannot be suspended for the sake of gaining objective knowledge. As we know methods are sought to create procedures for producing objective knowledge equivalent to truth, and in this procedure pre-understandings find no place. It is the method that produces knowledge. However, for hermeneutical thinkers the pre-pre-structures of understanding are the conditions of any activity of knowledge taking place. Language, history and traditions within which we think are the obvious pre-structures or prejudices which we presuppose in every act of understanding.

Box No.1.7

Hermeneutics as philosophy of interpretation is dependent on the ontological understanding of language. The starting point in the hermeneutical practice of inquiry is not facts, but interpretations.

Interpretations are forms of understanding arrived at. They are pre-understanding to be precise and which come into being by bringing clarity to a confused situation; an event which suffers deficit of meaning by being fudged by a new situation. Facts cannot be the starting point of an
interpretive inquiry, nor can they close it by virtue of their truth like status as within positivism. The starting point in hermeneutical inquiry is the interpretive subject who is embedded in the language, history and the context of social practices. Such a complex combination of given realities cannot be turned into bare facts by observation, induction and deduction.

**Martin Heidegger**, one of the most important hermeneutical thinkers of modern times, writes in his famous book, *Being and Time* (1927) that our starting point as subjects of knowledge is that we find ourselves as thrown into a situation and the primary task of our being is to understand this thrown-ness.

The method and process of understanding central to hermeneutics is, thus a ‘circular’ one, a “to and fro’ movement (not one single take on this world by the observer who goes to pick up the facts - subject to object); here the movement is dialectically circular, also known as the ‘hermeneutical circle’- a circle within which a part and the whole, as constituents of understanding, find themselves relating to each other in a to and fro movement.

The contested position on truth and knowledge that hermeneutics worked out within the social sciences in modern times, and started a new strand within it known as interpretive social science, lies in how it originated in the Greek philosophy, traveling down to philology within the medieval and modern times in Europe.

**Box No.1.8**

**Origin of Hermeneutics**

A mythological character known as ‘Hermes’- the wing-footed god messenger in Greek mythology, it is believed, functioned as the interpreter of things which were beyond human grasp. He brought sense to things or situations from unintelligibility to understanding. The Greeks also credited this messenger with the discovery of language and writing. From the very beginning the understanding was caught up with making sense of things, grasping meaning of things which were unclear. And the fact that he discovered language to make things understandable renders the relation between understanding and language that very old, acquisition of meaning being the main goal of the entire exercise of understanding. Thus, hermeneutics originated from the verb ‘hermeneutikos’, referring to explaining, clarifying, rendering something obscure, plain. Hermeneutics remained for many centuries a sub discipline of Philology (See Glossary) developed to clarify, restore the authentic meaning of theological texts. It acquired an important position in the humanities in the sixteenth century as serious scholars joined the discipline of philology.
The social sciences developed throughout 19th century under the shadow of natural sciences and its primary philosophical umbrella-positivism. And this view of science eliminated such human characteristics as purposes, intentions or even human will as simply inadmissible as factors in human knowledge and understanding. Only one method, suitable to natural sciences which focused on objective knowledge, became the norm of any knowledge. Hermeneutics challenged that.

**Feminism and Hermeneutics:**

Feminism is generally apprehensive of the hermeneutical gain made in the field of social sciences as they thought that the pre-structures that hermeneutical understanding relies on may ultimately be patriarchal. Later on, in their discourse the violence reposed within the project of objective knowledge came to find a reasonable consideration. They realized that seeking objectivity as the basis of rational understanding has led to violent abrogation of one’s context and has firmed up the imperial status of rationality as a project of Western hegemony which is simultaneously patriarchal.

Feminist discourses by now have a tradition of their own, constitutive inherently of their thought and world view, which must become the contextual presupposition in further understanding the world. They figured out that gaining objective knowledge is ultimately a masculine ambition which symbolizes the power of rationality, generally personalized by the masculine gender.

Also, feminist appreciated the idea that ‘tradition’ is not something static, that it too can be transformed through interpretation. In fact, interpretation is more feminine as an act of understanding which requires infinite negotiations and intricate handling of the text and pretext than inductive or deductive methods of empiricism as rationalism which proceeds by objectification of the object of knowledge allowing no negotiation.

Georgia Warnke, a feminist hermeneutical thinker writes,

“Traditions are not static or monolithic structures. Rather, they are contexts of investigation in which the ideas and assumptions that comprise them can, at different times, be put in question, confirmed or reassessed in relation to other ideas and assumptions that remain, for the time being, unquestioned. Members of a tradition can begin to raise questions about their tradition either because they encounter another tradition that reveals the biases in their own, because they start to interpret certain authoritative texts within the tradition differently with different issues and concerns in mind, because internal inconsistencies between some of the traditions’ own beliefs and practices become clear, or because the situation in which they find themselves seems to require new responses to old beliefs. (Warnke, 1993,p.81)
It is also important to note here that hermeneutical feminism, unlike postmodernism, allows female subjectivity to fine tune its structures and desist from deconstructing the category of ‘women’ itself. All knowledge is not power, in the form of ‘understanding’ it still remains a meaningful achievement with which derogatory and subjugating theories of patriarchy can be interpreted away.

Thus, hermeneutics provides an option for feminism to still plot an emancipatory project of politics and criticism in both theory and practice; ‘understanding’ after all is a project of existence, not of knowledge alone. The hermeneutical feminist position simultaneously critiques positivism for presupposing mind and rationality as its basis and not seeing the masculine biases built into them.

### 1.9 LET US SUM UP

What we have been discussing in this unit pertains to how knowledge is acquired and which is both truthful and meaningful. The modern scientific thinking built methods of acquiring knowledge which were both empirical and rational. The empirical knowledge needed inductive method which accepted facts as its basic building block. The critics of inductive method argues that inductive method is only producing descriptions of things and not knowledge. Deductive logic begins with generalities that is established by repeated observations.

In the next segment of this unit you read about the concept of justification. Justification is the reason why we hold certain beliefs and without this modality , no knowledge can be taken as valid. Next, we read about verification which means confirming a statement factually by testing an empirical theory of its truthfulness.

Any statement to be meaningful should found to be verifiable, corroborated by facts. The last section of the unit deals with hermeneutics, philosophy of interpretation. Earlier feminists argued that pre-structures that hermeneutical understanding relies on may be patriarchal. But, contemporary feminists are of the view that traditions too can be transformed through interpretation.

### 1.10 GLOSSARY

**Deductive method**: A method of reasoning by which concrete applications or consequences are deduced from general principles.
### Hermeneutics
It is a Greek word meaning ‘interpreter’. Hermeneutics is the art or science of interpretation. It consists of a wider discipline that includes written, verbal, and nonverbal communication. It is the study and interpretation of human behaviour and social institutions.

### Inductive method
We begin with specific observations and measures, detect patterns and regularities, formulate some tentative hypotheses to explore, and finally end up developing some general conclusions or theories.

### Justification
A condition of knowledge being authenticated by accurate representation.

### Logic
The study of structure and principles of reasoning or of sound arguments. It can also be defined as the study of principles or of methods of proof or demonstration.

### Philology
The branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of a language or languages.

### Syllogistic deductive logic
A form of deductive logic consisting of a major premise and a minor premise and a conclusion, for example, major premise: all humans are mortal; minor premise: all Greeks are human; conclusion: all Greeks are mortal. Here conclusions follow logically from the premise; if the premises are true, the conclusions must be true. Aristotle defined Syllogistic logic as a discourse in which specific things having been supposed, also something different from the things supposed, result of necessity because things are so.

### Tautology
It is a Greek word meaning formula that is true in every possible interpretation. The word *tautology* was used by the ancient Greeks to describe a statement that was true merely by virtue of saying the same thing twice.

### Validation
It means certification of a proposition or a statement by explanation having being confirmed by facts.

### Verification
Confirmation of a proposition or a statement of knowledge.
1.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the criteria for a sentence to be meaningful. Support your answer by giving examples.

2) Explain hermeneutics and its relationship with feminism.

3) Discuss mode of acquiring knowledge in modern science.

1.12 REFERENCES


1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS
