

The SAGE Dictionary of Sports Studies

Epistemology and Ontology

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Epistemology is the philosophical study of what constitutes knowledge (and hence how it is acquired through research), seeking to inform us how we can know the world, or most simply asking 'what is knowledge'? Ontology is the philosophy of the nature of existence, the fundamental things that exist in the world, or most simply asking 'what is reality?' To what degree is the social world an objective, fixed reality (e.g. like a football that can be measured and weighed), or is it a social construction which therefore only exists in the perceptions and actions of people (e.g. the notion of **class**)?

On the one hand, knowledge and reality appear to be self-evident concepts but, when probed, epistemological and ontological questions become rather more complex. For instance, three key epistemological questions relate to **positivism** and interpretivism (**idealism**): (1) what is the relationship between the researcher and the subjects? Can the researcher be separated or detached from the research subjects or are the two inherently interconnected? Does each influence the other and if so, how?; (2) what can be said to be the truth/reality? Is there only one reality, or are there many different realities based on human perceptions? If there are multiple realities, are they all equally valid?; and (3) what is the most appropriate way to measure the social world? Should social scientists use the techniques of the natural sciences, or is knowledge only derived through human interpretation of what events *mean*?

The main ontological positions are divided between objectivism and constructionism (**objectivity and subjectivity**). Is it possible for researchers to provide objective representations of the social world that are not coloured by their individual perceptions, prejudices and interpretations, or do we have to accept that all portrayals of the social world are essentially personal, stemming from the *meanings* which individuals place on social phenomena?

A sporting example of these issues might be to ask whether we can understand **race** relations through statistical analysis of black athletes' participation in sport and their occupational positioning (**stacking**), or whether it is more valid to look at the messages and meanings behind the **media** presentation of, for instance, **Michael Jordan** (**signifier and signified**)? Ontologically we might ask whether there is an 'objective' social reality to be observed (e.g. through personally witnessing a sports event) or whether it is more accurate to consider that individuals construct their own sets of

meanings/reality (e.g. through identification with a particular team and the mediating effect this has on their understanding of that sports event). Thus, taken to its extreme, this latter position suggests that there are as many realities as there are individuals (**modernity; post-modernism; post-structuralism**).

While epistemological and ontological questions may seem unnecessarily complicated to students of sports studies, ultimately they underpin all theoretical positions and thus the validity (**reliability and validity**) of all research (**qualitative and quantitative research**) and writings.

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