

Summary and Glossary for Daniel Little's "Objectivity, Truth, and Method: A Philosopher's Perspective on the Social Sciences."

Because social scientists often study human behavior that is open interpretation, it is common to hear criticism leveled against social science for being too "subjective." In this short but dense article, Daniel Little explores the tension between objective approaches to knowledge/truth that rely on evidence (empiricism), and approaches that rely more on the interpretation of meaning (*Verstehen*/hermeneutics). Little argues that interpretive approaches to social science are indeed legitimate for arriving at assertions of truth, as long these sciences:

1. Rely upon observable evidence. In other words, all science is empirical.
2. Are founded upon a logical system of belief.
3. Report results that can withstand the scrutiny of other experts.

Before reading the article, it might be helpful to know the meaning of the following words:

Empiricism – a way of knowing through sensory experience. An empirical assertion about what is true relies upon observable evidence. Empiricism could be considered an objective approach to knowledge.

Verstehen – A German word meaning "understanding." In the emerging social sciences of the 19th century, the term signified the subjective approach to knowledge about others' behavior—how researchers interpret the actions of others.

Hermeneutics – the study of interpretation. Asks: How do we make meaning of our experience?

Epistemology – the study of how knowledge is acquired. Asks: How do we know what we know?

Ethnography – a method for studying groups of people, such as distinct ethnic groups or a subculture. Ethnographers collect data through observation, interviews, questionnaires, etc., to attempt to understand the nature of the people studied.