

# Paradigms in social science research

Vishal Narain, December 2023



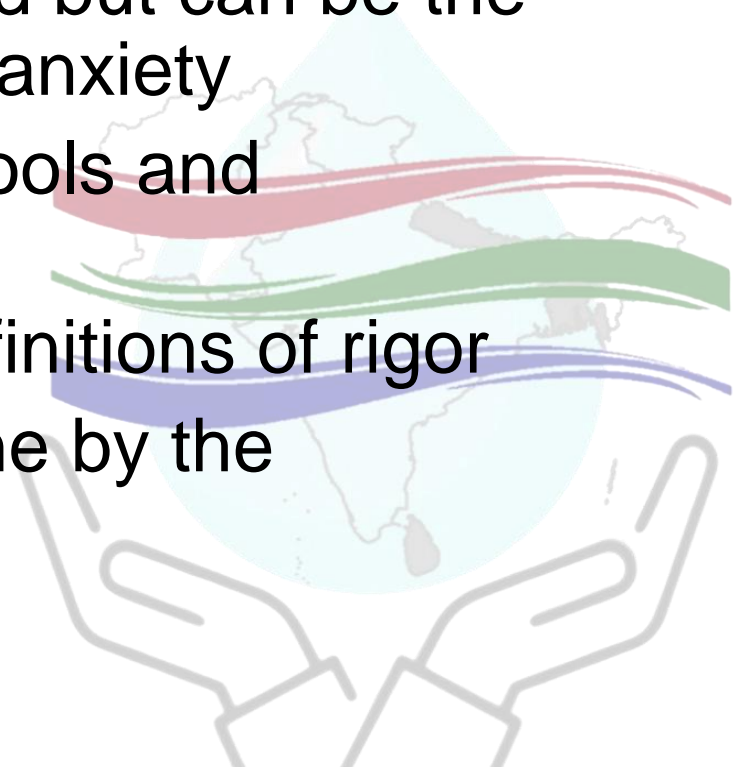
# What we will learn today

- Explore the meaning of the term paradigm
- Understand the significance of appreciating research paradigms
- Become familiar with different paradigms in social science research
- Positivism, interpretivism, critical social science
  - Their assumptions about what constitutes reality
  - Their influence on approaches to data collection and analysis
  - Their limitations and criticisms



# Familiarity with paradigms

- What is a paradigm ?
- Different paradigms inform different approaches to social science research
- They are never explicitly stated but can be the cause of much confusion and anxiety
- Influence choice of research tools and techniques of data collection
- Have different elements or definitions of rigor
- Can be dangerous to judge one by the parameters of the other



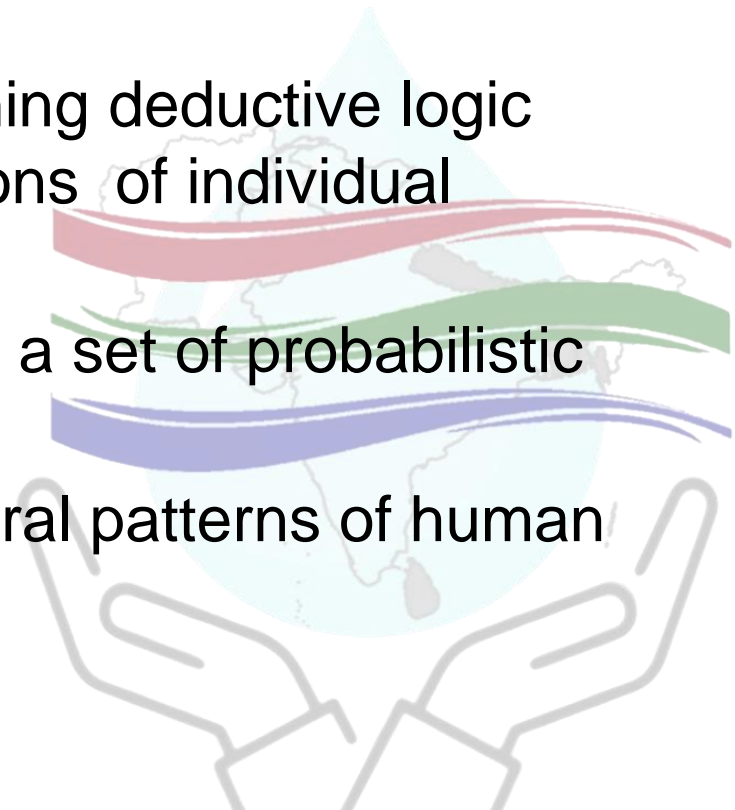
# The three basic paradigms

- Positivism
- Interpretivism
- Critical social science research



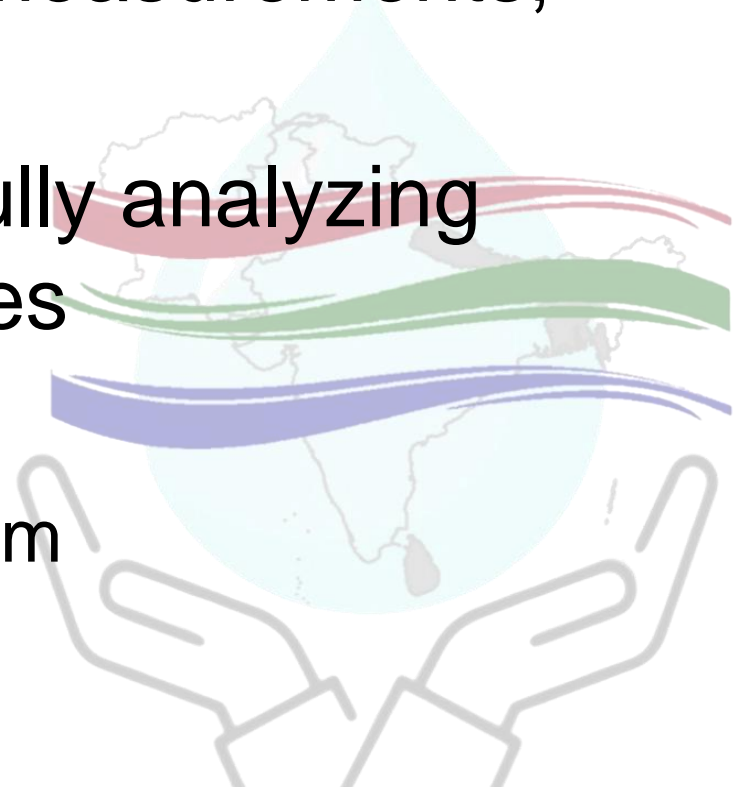
# Postivism

- Approach of the natural sciences
  - Physics, chemistry, biology, zoology
- Sees social science as
  - an organized method for combining deductive logic with precise empirical observations of individual behavior
  - in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws
  - that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity



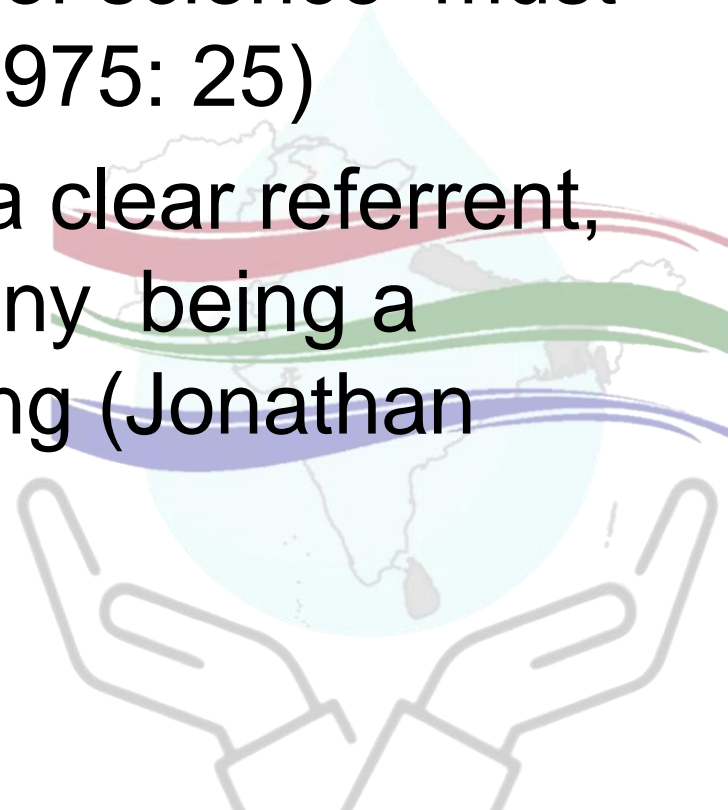
# Characteristics and tools of positivist research

- Uses quantitative data, surveys, experiments, statistics
- Relies on rigorous, exact measurements, and 'objective' research
- Tests hypothesis by carefully analyzing numbers from the measures
- Alternative labels:
  - logical empiricism, naturalism



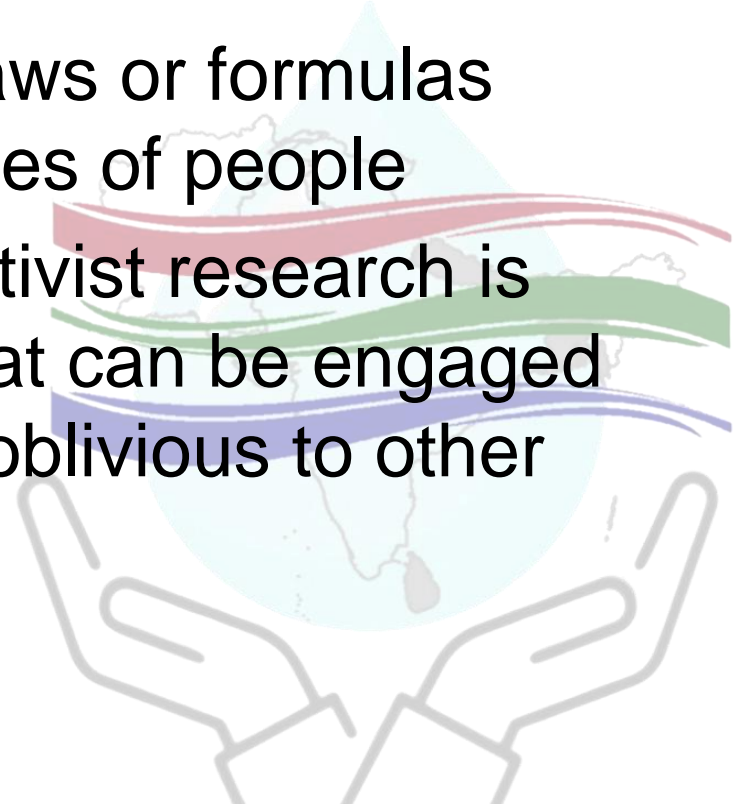
# What some people say...

- Positivism says that “ there is only one logic of science, to which any intellectual activity aspiring to the title of science must conform’ (Keat and Urry, 1975: 25)
- “Positivism no longer has a clear referent, but it is evident that for many being a positivist is not a good thing (Jonathan Turner: 1992: 1511)



# Why some don't like it...

- Limitations and criticisms
  - Critics argue that positivism reduces people to numbers; it is instrumental in its orientation
  - Its concerns with abstract laws or formulas are not relevant to actual lives of people
  - Many people think that positivist research is the only kind of research that can be engaged with, and remain closed or oblivious to other approaches



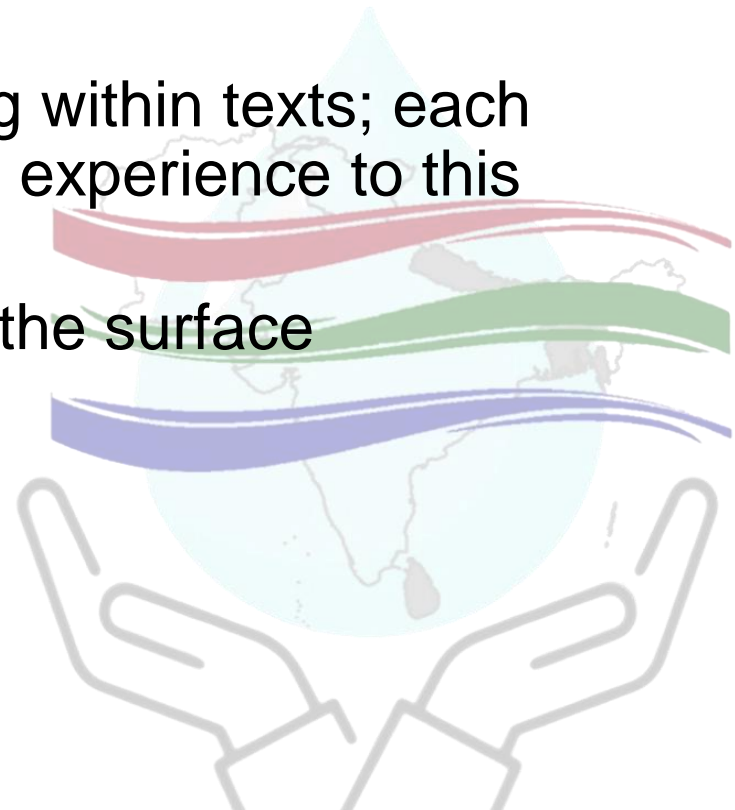
# Interpretivism

- The interpretive approach is the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action
- through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings
- in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds



# The basic premise

- Social science needs to study meaningful social action or social action with a purpose
- Interpretive social science is related to hermeneutics
  - Focuses on discovering meaning within texts; each reader brings his own subjective experience to this text
  - True meaning is not obvious on the surface



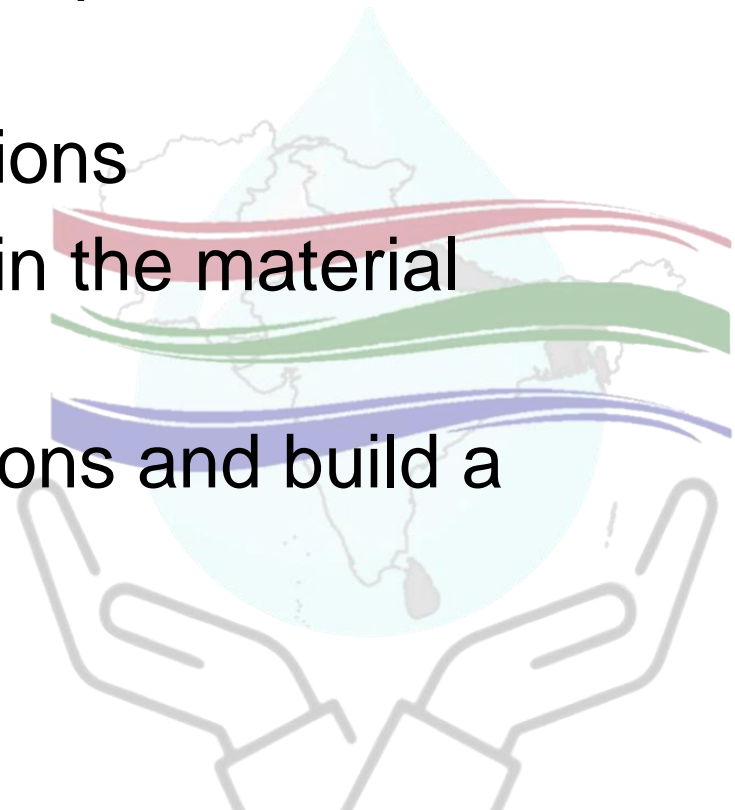
# Characteristics and tools of interpretive research

- Called the qualitative method of research
  - Concerned with how people interact with or relate to each other
- Focus on direct observation of people in their natural settings
- Participant observation; field research
- Researchers spend many hours in direct contact with those being researched
- Ethnography, study transcripts of conversations, or study videotapes of behavior in great detail
- Orientation is practical rather than instrumental



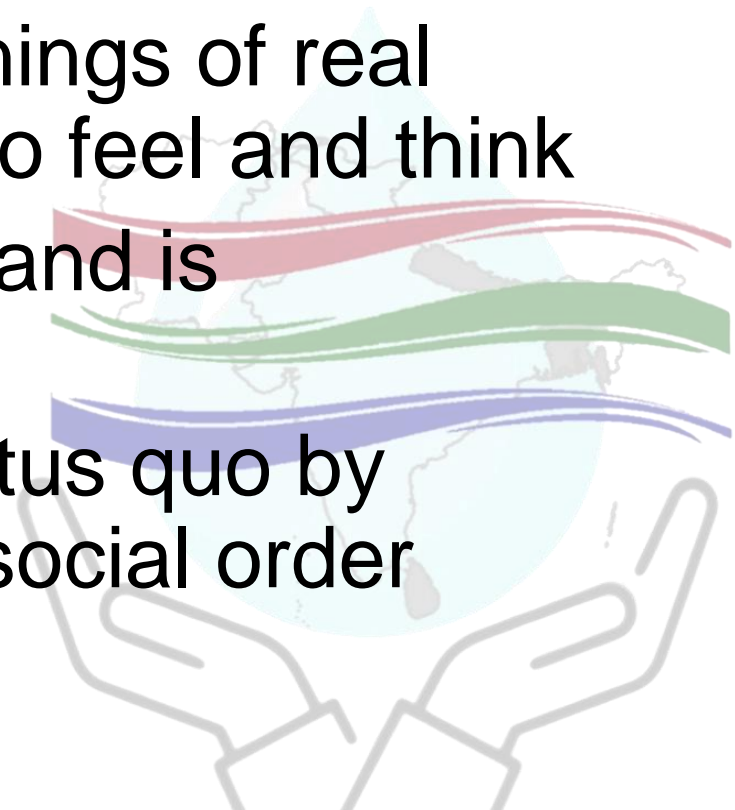
# Critical social science research

- Often called dialectical materialism, class analysis, or structuralism
- Sees social science as a critical process of enquiry
- that goes beyond surface illusions
- to uncover the real structures in the material world
- to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves



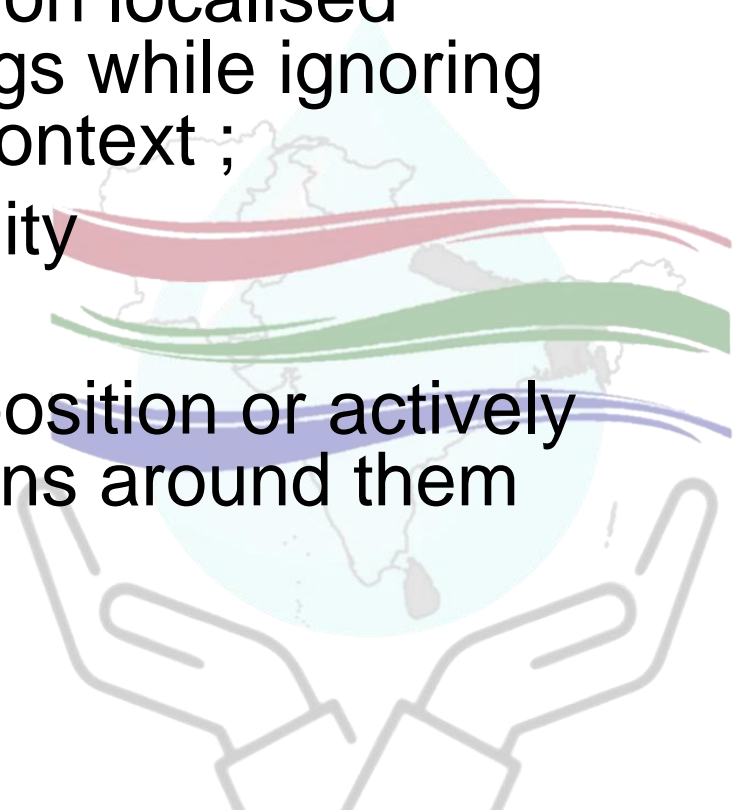
# Builds on criticisms of positivism

- Positivist science is criticized as being too narrow, anti- democratic and non-humanist in its use of reason
- Fails to deal with the meanings of real people and their capacity to feel and think
- Ignores the social context and is antihumanistic
- Positivism defends the status quo by assuming an unchanging social order



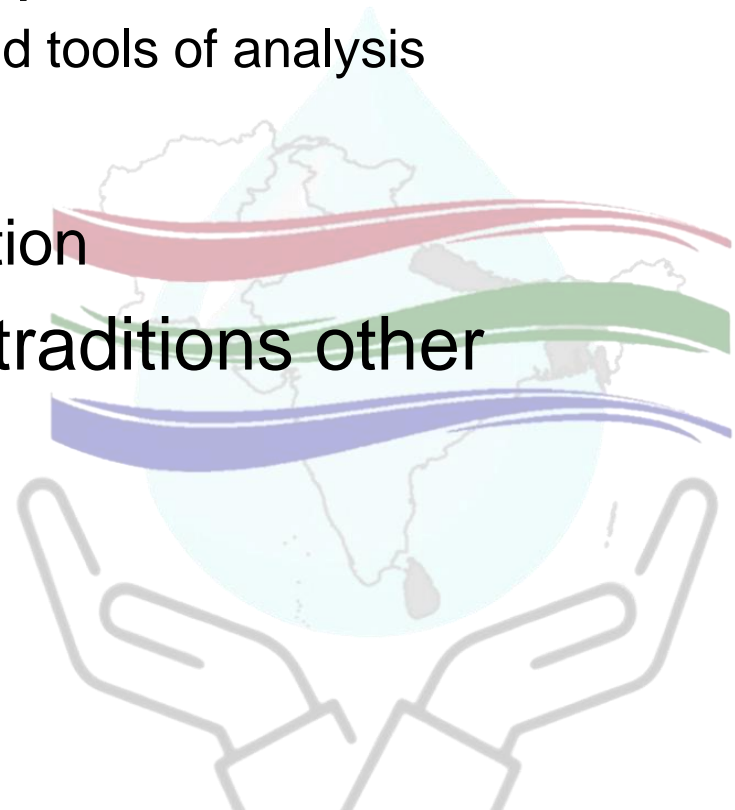
# Presents weaknesses of interpretivism

- Being too subjective
- Sees all points of view as equal
- Treats people's ideas as more important than actual conditions and focuses on localised micro-level shorter term settings while ignoring the broader and longer-term context ;
- concerned with subjective reality
- amoral and passive
- does not take a strong value position or actively help people to see false illusions around them for them to improve their lives



# Relevance of this discussion

- As researchers, we need to understand where we are coming from
- We need to make this more explicit in our work
  - Influences our modes of enquiry and tools of analysis
- Domain of generalization
  - Analytic vs statistical generalization
- Be sympathetic to intellectual traditions other than our own



# Some suggestion for reading on paradigms

- Social Research Methods. Qualitative and quantitative approaches. W. Lawrence Neuman. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Allyn and Bacon. Chapter 4. The meanings of Methodology (pp. 60-86).

