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2 Methodological philosophies

This chapter will look at some of the philosophical ideas that have shaped the practice and development of qualitative research, and that continue to do so. These ideas, which relate to the nature of the social world (ontology), how knowledge of it is possible (epistemology), and to the purpose(s) of inquiry (which might be seen as an aspect of politics), can be complex and difficult. However, it is important to understand them.

Following on from the previous chapter, a useful starting point is to note that quantitative social science was, and in some respects continues to be, strongly influenced by one particular set of views about social research methodology, that have long been referred to as 'positivism'. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it is common to find qualitative researchers rejecting positivism and contrasting their own methodological ideas with it. Partly as a result, the meaning of this term has become largely negative – it is used almost exclusively as a means of dismissing other approaches. Thus, very few quantitative researchers today would actually call themselves positivists. The sense of the term 'positivism' has also become displaced, as a result of the fact that, in many substantive fields of social enquiry, a sequence of new qualitative approaches have appeared over time, each one denouncing their predecessors as positivist. Thus, an influential current interpretation applies the term to anyone who believes that there are truths that can be discovered about a common reality. An example is Plummer's (2001: x) self-critique of the 'thinly disguised positivistic concern with getting at the truth' that characterized the first edition of his own book on life history method (Plummer 1983).

Over the past few decades, then, there has been a diversification of qualitative research into competing versions, in large part due to the influence of methodological philosophies that stand opposed to positivism, and also as a result of the fact that these alternatives are in conflict with one another in important respects. In this chapter I will examine these philosophies under the broad headings of interpretivism, 'critical' research,

and constructionism. However, we need to begin at the beginning, with positivism.¹

Positivism

While the meaning of the word ‘positivism’ has become contextually variable, and almost always negative, we can nevertheless recover some important elements of its original sense, and these are worth remembering. The word was invented by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, and became the focus for a major intellectual – indeed a ‘religious’ – movement in France, and to some degree elsewhere (Pickering 1993; Charlton 1959; Wright 1986). For Comte, writing in the early nineteenth century, positivism was the modern scientific outlook that was in the process of replacing previously dominant supernatural ways of thinking about the world. And he developed a comprehensive view of the nature of science, and of the proper relationships among the various sciences. However, the most influential version of positivism for twentieth-century social science was a largely separate development in the 1920s and 1930s, what came to be called logical positivism or logical empiricism (Kolakowski 1972; Halfpenny 1982; Bryant 1985).² Perhaps the most important feature of positivism was that it took natural science, as developed in the West from the seventeenth century onwards, as the prime or only model for inquiry and knowledge. In this respect, it built upon central strands of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, although the sources of these can be traced back even earlier (see Olson 1993).

It is particularly significant that logical positivism generally took physics as its model for science. This had several consequences. One was that scientific knowledge was seen as general and abstract in form: consisting

1 There are no beginnings, of course, and it is important to remember that positivism itself developed out of a reaction against earlier ideas, notably those relating to natural law, see d’Entrèves (1954), Sigmund (1971), Portis (1986), and Hammersley (1992). The labels for alternative philosophies I have used here, while in common currency, are by no means the only ones available. My discussion will, however, cover most of the influential philosophical ideas that have shaped qualitative research.

2 There were a variety of interpretations of natural science method in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and some of these specifically distanced themselves from positivism. They include, amongst many others, the ‘critical rationalism’ of Popper (see Albert 1985), and the ‘critical realism’ of Harré and Bhaskar (see Keat and Urry 1983; Sayer 2000).

of laws that capture relations operating across all times and places. The emphasis, then, was upon the need for research to abstract from the study of particular situations to produce such general knowledge. As a result, there was a tendency for historical change and cultural variation to be treated as mere appearances that can be explained only by an analysis of underlying, universal causal relations.³ Newton's physics, with its identification of a small set of principles that govern the behaviour of all physical objects, whether in the heavens or on earth, was a key exemplar in this respect.

Another implication that followed from taking physics as a model was the requirement that all knowledge must be grounded in sense experience that is subjected to methodical control. This led many social scientists to insist on the need for rigorous measurement of phenomena, on the model of the measurement of physical attributes like length or temperature. Also emphasized was the need for experimental control of variables to test hypotheses. Furthermore, the notion of 'method' was taken to mean 'explicit procedures', with the implication that the conclusions reached would be the same whoever carried out the research, irrespective of variation in their social, cultural, or personal characteristics: a notion that came to be referred to as procedural objectivity (Eisner 1992, see also Newell 1986).⁴ Ruled out here are appeals to intuition, or to forms of expertise that are unique to a particular person or type of person. Reliance upon explicit or 'transparent' procedures was also seen as providing the basis for other researchers to replicate an initial study. And replication was regarded by many positivists as essential in order to test whether the knowledge produced is sound, precisely to show that it had not been affected by the 'subjectivity' of the researcher.

Central to positivism was a refusal to extend knowledge claims beyond those that could be fully supported by evidence of this kind, an attitude that has sometimes been given the closely related label 'empiricism'. Indeed, the two words – 'positivism' and 'empiricism' – are often treated as synonyms. This kind of empiricism had two important implications.

First, it ruled out those areas of inquiry that were seen as offering no prospect of empirical evidence of the required kind. These included not

3 Interestingly, this was at odds with the outlook of Comte, see Scharff (1995).

4 For evidence that this developed only slowly and by no means straightforwardly in natural science see Shapin (1994) and Daston and Garrison (2007).

just theology and ethics,⁵ but also sometimes social science too, since some positivists believed that knowledge is available only at the level of the description of physical behaviour, in the manner of psychological behaviourism, so that any appeal to intentions, attitudes, and thoughts, etc., or to unobservable entities like social institutions, was judged to be beyond the reach of rigorous analysis.

Secondly, empiricism insists that even in those fields where knowledge is judged to be possible, research must be strictly limited to questions for which the necessary kind of evidence is currently available. Speculation – knowledge claims not effectively supported by such evidence – must be avoided.

There has, however, been variation in what we might call the severity of the empiricism adopted by positivists, in other words in how narrowly they define the domain of legitimate evidence, and in the restrictions they place upon what kinds of inference can be used to draw justified conclusions. As we have already seen, a very stringent version, modeled on physics, insisted that the only legitimate data are those produced by explicitly defined procedures designed to measure observable phenomena that can be subjected to experimental manipulation, with the only valid product being universal laws. On this basis, not just qualitative, but also most quantitative, social science would be ruled out as unscientific, since it is unable to apply the strong form of measurement characteristic of natural science, can use only non-experimental designs, and at best produces only low-level, probabilistic generalizations. Not surprisingly, most quantitative researchers have adopted a more liberal definition of scientific method, one that legitimates various kinds of *approximation* to the physics model in these three respects.

Furthermore, it should be stressed that there is no automatic connection between positivism and the use of quantitative methods. For one thing, many quantitative researchers deny that they are positivists (see, for example, Marsh 1979). Conversely, we should note that empiricism had an important influence on the early development of *qualitative* methods, albeit usually reinforced by other influences. Thus, modern anthropology is often dated from Malinowski's insistence that ethnographers must collect their own data through direct observation rather than relying upon

5 Values came to be interpreted by many positivists as no more than expressions of emotional attitude 'for' or 'against' something.

'travellers' tales'; and the influence upon him of positivist ideas has been documented (Leach 1957). We can also see the effect of empiricism today not just in the continuing commitment of ethnographers to participant observation, to 'being there' (Geertz 1988), but also in their felt need to carefully record data, whether via fieldnotes or transcription of electronic recordings, to check the testimony from informants, and to provide evidence in their research reports. Moreover, some qualitative researchers, especially discourse analysts, insist that data must be audio- or video recorded, on the grounds that this provides a more accurate and detailed record than fieldnotes; that these recordings must be transcribed in order to capture not just *what* was said but also *how* it was said; and that all the data should be made available to readers so as to allow replication of the analysis (Peräkylä 2003). Alongside this, they frequently insist that the analysis must not go beyond the data, perhaps even that it should be restricted to what is 'observable' in the data (Schegloff 1997).

It is easy to forget how radical an orientation positivism was in earlier times, and how radical it still is today in some contexts: it challenges religious claims to knowledge about the world, various kinds of speculative philosophy that do not pay close attention to what could be warranted by empirical evidence, and even any appeal to what is 'obvious' in common-sense terms. It was often promoted as a 'levelling' orientation that opens up knowledge to anyone willing and able to employ scientific method, and we can see this in current arguments about the importance of evidence-based practice in medicine and other fields (for instance Oakley 2000). Furthermore, positivism often involved the expectation that science, including the human sciences, would pave the way for substantial social and political progress: by undermining beliefs and practices that were based solely on partial interests, superstition or tradition ('folk wisdom'), replacing these with ones founded on scientific evidence that (it was believed) would be in everyone's interests. The role of natural science in stimulating technological progress in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was taken as confirming this vision.

In short, then, positivism had considerable influence upon social researchers over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. It stimulated the emergence of quantitative method, but aspects of it also shaped early forms of qualitative work; and it continues to have a subterranean influence even today, especially where it is reinforced by other methodological philosophies. However, in the second part of the

twentieth century there was increasing criticism of positivist ideas, with various alternative philosophies being promoted. Some of these were almost as old as positivism itself: one of the earliest was what has been called interpretivism.

Interpretivism

The conflict between positivist and interpretivist ideas can be traced back into the nineteenth century. At this time, especially in Germany, there developed influential arguments to the effect that a distinctive kind of scientific method is required in studying history and the social sciences, one that is very different from that characteristic of physics and the other natural sciences (see Hammersley 1989: ch.1). Along these lines, interpretivists argued that in studying the social world it is essential to draw upon our human capacity to understand fellow human beings ‘from the inside’ – through empathy, shared experience and culture, etc – rather than solely from the outside in the way that we are forced to try to explain the behaviour of physical objects. One of the several words for ‘understanding’ available in the German language – *Verstehen* – came to be used to refer to this capacity. Indeed, it was often argued that *Verstehen* provides deeper knowledge of human phenomena than we can ever gain of the physical world (Truzzi 1974; Outhwaite 1976; Hausheer 1996; Harrington 2000).

Interpretivism was often associated with an insistence on the fundamental differences in nature between the phenomena investigated by the natural sciences and those studied by historians and social scientists. The key difference is that people – unlike atoms, chemicals, and even most non-human forms of life – actively interpret or make sense of their environment and of themselves; that the ways in which they do this are shaped by the particular cultures in which they live; and that these distinctive cultural orientations will strongly influence not only what they believe but also what they do. Thus, diverse ways of life, and associated beliefs about the world, can be found, both at different points in history *and* coexisting (peacefully or in conflict) at any one time across various societies, and even within the same society. The task of the social scientist, from the interpretivist point of view, is to document these cultures, and perhaps also their sources and consequences. However, as already indicated, it is believed that this cannot be done through the kind of science advocated

by positivists. Instead, researchers must try to understand other cultures by suspending their own cultural assumptions as far as this is possible, and learning the ways of thinking and feeling, and modes of action, characteristic of the culture they are investigating.

We can see, then, how interpretivism rejects central tenets of positivism. Interpretivists argue that we cannot understand why people do what they do, or why particular institutions exist and operate in characteristic ways, without grasping how people interpret and make sense of their world and act on their interpretations: in other words, without understanding the distinctive cultural character of their beliefs, attitudes, and practices, how these have developed over time, and/or how they ongoingly generate the social world. Moreover, to achieve this understanding, we must draw upon our own social experience or capacity for learning, rather than seeking to achieve procedural objectivity. And, from this point of view, any attempt to find universal causal relationships grounded in some fixed human nature or form of society is futile. Instead, the primary focus must be on trying to understand particular people and events in specific socio-historical circumstances. This is sometimes labeled as an idiographic focus, as against positivism's concern with nomothetic knowledge – with knowledge of universal, timeless laws.

One interpretivist way of thinking about the kind of understanding required in social science derives from hermeneutics. This had its origins in attempts to decipher the meanings conveyed by ancient texts, such as those of the Greeks and the Romans and biblical sources. For some historians and social scientists in the nineteenth century, this discipline became the model for the socio-historical sciences, and this continued long into the twentieth-century (Palmer 1969; Taylor 1985: ch.1). For example, in a famous characterization of the task of ethnography, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 10) described it as amounting to constructing a reading of a manuscript that is 'foreign, faded, and full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations and tendentious commentaries'.

Another important strand of thinking within interpretivism derives from the phenomenological movement in philosophy. This argued that all knowledge of the world, including science, is grounded in processes of immediate experience, and that these processes need to be subjected to careful description. Moreover, this must be done in ways that avoid, as far as possible, the distortions that can be produced by prior conceptual

presuppositions. Such presuppositions must be suspended, and careful attention given to the character of phenomena as they appear in our experience.⁶

Some psychologists and social scientists drew the conclusion from phenomenology that, instead of taking commonsense knowledge of the world for granted as a basis for social science, or simply dismissing it as defective in the manner of positivism, we should instead explore how it comes to take the form that it does, and indeed how the psychological and social phenomena people experience are constituted and sustained through the processes of interpretation and social interaction in which they engage (see, for example, Berger and Luckmann 1967). At the same time there was also an emphasis on cultural variation in these constitutive processes – among individuals, groups, and communities. The influence of phenomenology reinforced the primary focus of some qualitative researchers on detailed description of the experience and perspectives of diverse groups of people.

Both nineteenth-century hermeneutics and phenomenology proposed distinctive methods of investigation that their advocates claimed were just as rigorous as the very different kind of method employed by natural science. A third philosophical movement that strongly influenced the development of qualitative methods in US sociology in the first half of the twentieth century was pragmatism (Hammersley 1989: ch.2). This took a somewhat different line from the two other movements I have discussed. Pragmatism drew no sharp distinction between natural and social science, but insisted instead on a generic formulation of scientific inquiry that downplayed its differences from commonsense thinking in everyday life.⁷

However, in the twentieth century the commitment of interpretivism to some alternative, equally rigorous, method began to change. Under the influence of Heidegger's reformulation of phenomenology, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and Rorty's reinterpretation of pragmatism, it came to be argued that understanding other people is necessarily an uncertain process that relies upon openness to the world, and on the exercise of personal capacities, especially the imagination, *rather than upon any method*. Thus, Gadamer argued that knowledge is always generated in

6 On phenomenology, see Moran (2002). For its application in social and psychological research see Schutz (1962), Berger and Luckmann (1967), Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) and Smith and Osborn (2008).

7 On pragmatism, see, for example, De Waal (2005).

particular socio-historical contexts and must draw on the resources these provide, it cannot rely upon an abstract, scientific method, even of the kind identified by nineteenth-century hermeneutics or early phenomenology. Strong parallels were drawn here with the kind of understanding of life characteristic of literature and art.

In summary, then, interpretivism carries a range of implications for research. First, it requires the researcher to adopt an exploratory orientation, and in particular to learn to understand the distinctive perspectives of the people involved, and perhaps also to observe how their patterns of action unfold in particular contexts. Above all, any tendency to dismiss other people's attitudes or behaviour as irrational, or as objectionable in some other way, must be resisted: instead, research must be carried out on the assumption that their attitudes and behaviour make sense to, and are seen as justifiable by, them, with the researcher suspending any evaluation. The aim is to discover the 'logic' or rationality of what may at first seem strange, illogical, or even evil; and this requires detailed exploration of people's experience and perspectives. This, it is argued, is an essential requirement not just for explaining but even for *describing* people's behaviour and the social institutions in which it is located, and which it helps sustain. Many of the studies listed in Box 1.1 reflect the influence of interpretivism, but perhaps especially those of Morton, Bogdan, and Mitchell.

Interpretivism was one type of methodological philosophy that came to challenge positivism and quantitative method in social science in the middle of the twentieth century, and it had a huge impact on qualitative research. However, there was another, rather different, tradition that was at least as influential during the same period, what is often referred to as 'critical' theory and research.⁸

The 'critical' tradition

As with positivism and interpretivism, the immediate origins of 'critical' research lie in the nineteenth century, this time in the philosophical work of Hegel and Marx. Prior to this, Kant had written three 'critiques', the first of which was concerned with identifying the limits of human knowledge.

⁸ I have put 'critical' in quote marks because the meaning here goes beyond the sense in which all researchers adopt a critical orientation in assessing knowledge claims. See Hammersley (1992: ch.6) and (1995: ch.2).

In the case of Hegel and Marx the scope for critique was extended to include social institutions and practices, along with the forms of knowledge associated with these.

The most obvious way in which a 'critical' orientation contrasts with both positivism and interpretivism is that whereas they are concerned solely with identifying causal patterns and/or documenting other people's perspectives and practices, 'critical' researchers also evaluate the phenomena, such as people and institutions, they study. They do this either in terms of some set of ideals built into their own political or ethical position or against standards that they identify as inherent within the socio-cultural contexts they are examining (this second approach is sometimes referred to as 'immanent' or 'internal' critique). So, their research involves evaluative as well as factual concepts – for example 'exploitation', 'oppression', 'emancipation' – and is seen as properly directed towards achieving particular kinds of political goal: reducing or eliminating exploitation and oppression, and bringing about emancipation.

Equally important, whereas interpretivism aims to a large extent at understanding other cultures 'in their own terms', 'critical' research usually insists that they can be properly understood only within the framework of a global theory that locates them in a wider social system and/or a larger process of historical development that has been properly theorized. And, like some positivists but unlike interpretivists, 'critical' researchers insist that people's behaviour will often need to be explained by factors that are beyond their awareness. Indeed, they argue that in many cases this awareness will have been systematically distorted by social processes.

These three methodological philosophies also involve very different attitudes towards history. Positivists tend to treat the ideas of the past, where these are not regarded as precursors of present-day scientific knowledge, as wrong-headed – as the product of bias or irrationality.⁹ By contrast, some interpretivists reject any notion of historical progress, viewing the past as consisting of different eras, each with its own distinctive worldview; and they believe that these worldviews cannot be evaluated against one another because there is no overarching cultural scheme within which this could be done. 'Critical' research shares something with each of the other philosophies in this respect, but also differs significantly.

9 Interestingly, once again this was not the view of Comte, see Scharff (1995).

Hegel, whose philosophical work is one of the key sources for the 'critical' tradition, rejected the positivist idea that there could be any major set of beliefs or cultural assumptions in the past that was simply false, the product of irrationality. In this he was in line with the interpretivists. However, like the positivists, he saw the past as leading up to the present, albeit in a dialectical rather than a linear fashion. What he meant by this was that historical progress is achieved by struggle between different worldviews, on the model of a debate, with this struggle leading in each era to the emergence of a new perspective that transcends previous ones (incorporating and transforming elements from each of them), which itself then comes to dominate. However, the same process begins again in the next historical era: an opposing worldview will develop, leading to further struggle, with these conflicting perspectives themselves subsequently being transcended. Furthermore, the worldviews involved here are not just sets of ideas but whole ways of life: cultures embodied within particular societies. Thus, Hegel traces the process of dialectical development in terms of ancient Greece against Rome, medieval versus early modern society, and so on.

Hegel did not believe that this process of historical development would go on forever. Rather, he saw it as coming to an end at a point where not only true knowledge but also all genuine human ideals would be realized, and previous conflicts among them resolved. He claimed that this point had more or less been reached in the early nineteenth century, and that his own philosophy was therefore the final one that, at least potentially, captured the whole truth about the world.

Marx gave an important twist to Hegel's philosophical system, seeking to transform it into a scientific theory of society. While he inherited much of what I have just outlined, he differed from Hegel in seeing the driving force of history not as the conflict between ideas but rather as one between different social classes. And the character of this conflict at any point in time reflected the stage of historical development that had been reached, this being primarily determined by the development of productive economic forces. In other words, the conflict in ideas, or ideologies, stemmed from social class divisions and struggle generated by particular modes of production, not the other way round. And Marx saw the rise and fall of social classes as being determined by the socio-economic development of societies: for example, by the move from hunting and gathering societies to peasant forms of production, controlled by landlords, through

to the rise of modern, industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, associated with the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class and the proletariat as the main subordinate class.

Like Hegel, Marx believed that the process of historical development would come to an end, and that at that point human ideals, including our knowledge of the world, would be realized. However, for him this had not yet happened, and it required substantial social transformation. It would only take place in the future, though he believed that this would be in the *near future*: when the industrial working class overthrew capitalism and established a communist society.

An implication of Marx's argument is that in order to understand any particular situation one must locate it within a broader understanding of the current stage of development of the society in which it occurs, and the history of that society. This has very important implications for the practice of social inquiry. For one thing, it means that a comprehensive theory of society is required, as against a more specific disciplinary perspective or focus on a particular social problem. Equally important, it implies that the researcher is not located outside of the socio-historical process but is necessarily part of, and shaped by, it. As a result, he or she cannot but operate within some perspective that has been generated by the process of social development, and this carries with it the dangers of bias, and therefore error, *but also the only potential for true understanding that is available.*

Marx claimed that a distinctive set of interests, and a distinctive set of ideas related to them (an ideology), belonged to each social class. Furthermore, he argued that it was the responsibility of the intellectual to align her or himself with whatever class is the most progressive one in current society; and in the case of nineteenth-century Europe this was the working class. Marx saw such commitment as ethically required in that intellectual work has value only when it is engaged with the process of social change.¹⁰ The idea that research can be detached from ethical and political concerns, that it can or should try to be 'value neutral', in the manner proposed by most forms of positivism and interpretivism, is

¹⁰ An important parallel tradition here is that of action research, itself diverse but generally sharing a commitment to practical engagement, see Reason and Bradbury (2001).

dismissed by 'critical' researchers as either an ideological disguise or as self-delusion.

Marx also saw such political commitment as providing the only chance of gaining a true understanding of the world, both of the present and of the past. This was because he believed that it is the progressive social class, the one that is destined to come to power next, that has the best motive and opportunity for gaining a true understanding of the world.¹¹ According to Marx, once a social class has become dominant, its perspective on the world, while containing some original truths, will start to be distorted by the need to hold on to power in socio-economic conditions that are increasingly disadvantageous for it; and he assumed that false ideas would be most effective in this task, since true ideas would point to the need for this class to be overthrown. The only exception was the case of the working class, precisely because he saw its coming to power as bringing the process of historical development to an end, as establishing a classless society in which human ideals – including true knowledge of the world – would be realized.

Despite this standpoint epistemology, Marx did also insist on the need for scientific analysis: he did not believe that the spontaneously developed understandings of working class people were automatically valid, not least because they are likely to be shaped by ideology. For this reason, ideology-critique became central to the subsequent development of Western Marxism (Jay 1996). Dominant ideas were seen as legitimating the *status quo*, often through portraying it as natural and unchangeable. Indeed, it was argued by Marx that social formations inherently generate false appearances that are taken by most people to be reality. Thus, undermining the dominant ideology through critique came to be viewed as a precondition for significant change, and a major responsibility for intellectuals – a category to which social researchers would clearly belong.

'Critical' researchers today inherit many of the ideas outlined above, though they have abandoned, or downplay, others. One change is that, often, the focus is no longer primarily on social class inequalities and conflicts but on other kinds of social division as well or instead, notably those surrounding gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, and disability.

¹¹ This is a form of what has come to be called 'standpoint epistemology', later championed in a revised form by some feminists: see Hartsock (1987) and for an overview Anderson (2011).

Whereas traditional Marxists would see these other forms of division as ultimately deriving from social class differences, and as being abolished at the same time that social class inequality is overcome, most 'critical' researchers today treat them as having at least the same importance, and as being independent of, and just as fundamental as, social class. As part of this, many 'critical' researchers have abandoned the particular global theory and meta-narrative developed by Marx, and either replaced it with a new one or adopted a narrower and more specific orientation focused on bringing about particular sorts of social change related to the kind of social division with which they are primarily concerned.

Despite these changes in the 'critical' tradition, what is usually retained is the idea that research should operate within a framework of political assumptions, and should be geared to serving political goals. Many feminists, for example, believe that their research must be primarily directed towards the emancipation of women, though some – socialist feminists – insist that this must be done in association with class struggle. Almost all 'critical' researchers believe that researchers have a responsibility to resist dominant ideologies and to challenge inequitable social relations through their research.

In carrying out his analysis of capitalism, Marx drew on quantitative as well as qualitative data, but most 'critical' research in the twentieth century, and more recently, has adopted a more qualitative approach. For instance there has been a very influential tradition of Marxist historiography, as well as substantial ethnographic work and interview studies inspired by the 'critical' tradition, especially by social movements like feminism, anti-racism, and disability activism. Nevertheless, there has been some significant Marxist work of a quantitative kind (see for example Wright 1979) and some discussion among Marxists about the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches (see Burawoy 1987; Morrow 1994: ch.8). The studies by Rai, Wacquant, and Wetherell and Edley in Box 1.1 have been influenced by the 'critical' tradition in key respects.

As noted earlier, the philosophical ideas behind both the interpretivist and the 'critical' traditions have their origins for the most part in the nineteenth century. The final philosophical approach we will look at emerged more recently, and it amounts to a significant reaction against the others, though some of its ideas are inherited from them. It also revives some even older ideas, notably from ancient scepticism.

Constructionism

This final type of methodological philosophy is even broader and more diverse than the other three. The word 'constructionism', or 'constructivism', has become widely used in social science over the past twenty or thirty years. While it has been employed to refer to a range of rather different ideas, it is possible to outline a few core assumptions.¹²

What is central, first of all, is rejection of any idea that cognition, or even perception, is a process whereby objects and their characteristics, existing in the world, impress themselves upon our understanding. Instead, it is argued that perception and cognition are active processes, in which anything apparently 'given' is actually a product of processes of selection and construction. Another key theme is that these processes are socio-cultural in character, with different cultures generating divergent experiential worlds and stocks of 'knowledge'. This is, of course, similar to interpretivism, but there remain important differences. In particular, constructionists often question whether understanding other people, and perhaps even oneself, is ever possible. They also suggest that multiple, incommensurable interpretations are frequently generated and circulate within the same contexts.

The two key ideas that I have identified as central to constructionism up to this point are compatible, in principle, with the notion that through perception and cognition the intrinsic, independent features of objects and events in the world, and the principles upon which they operate, can be understood (see Maxwell 2012: ch.1). However, much constructionism goes beyond this to suggest that the character and content of any 'knowledge' and 'understanding' reflects primarily, or perhaps even entirely, the nature of the construction process, including the features, dispositions, etc of the agent involved. In other words, it is denied that knowledge can correspond to the intrinsic character of a set of independently existing objects.

This sceptical idea, whose history can be traced back to ancient philosophy (Hankinson 1998), has important implications for how inquiry should be pursued. The task can no longer be to document the features of various types of object existing in the world – their relationships, causes and consequences, etc. It is insisted that we must not be misled by appearances

¹² Advocates of some forms of work I am including under the heading of constructionism would resist that label. See, for instance, Button and Sharrock (1992). For a general introduction to constructionism/constructivism, see Burr 2003 and 2004.

into forgetting that such objects owe their existence and their 'character' to the constitutive processes that generated them. Instead, the proper focus of study must be those processes themselves. As should be clear, this involves a major shift, or re-specification, of the goal of scientific inquiry. An example would be to treat people's personal characteristics not as intrinsic to them but rather to examine the discursive practices through which people are characterized as intelligent/stupid, motivated/lazy, confident/hesitant, and so on; and how these operate in particular contexts, from informal situations among friends or family to more institutional ones such as job interviews or psychiatric assessments.¹³

There is another feature of constructionism that adds further complexity. Some versions of it do not view social phenomena as being constructed through the perceptual and cognitive dispositions of individuals who each independently make sense of their environment. Rather, the construction of social worlds is seen as occurring through shared processes of communication and social interaction; it is *these* processes that are constitutive of the character of social phenomena rather than the perceptual and cognitive capabilities of individuals. Indeed, for some constructionists the very existence of individuals with particular identities is itself only constituted in and through socio-cultural processes, whether those associated with particular, occasioned patterns of social interaction or those generated by relatively large-scale socio-historical formations that produce distinctive forms of discourse. I will call this more complex position, itself displaying several varieties, *social constructionism*.

We can identify at least two major stances within social constructionism, as it relates to qualitative research. The most common one involves a focus on studying the methods or practices through which people collectively construct their shared worlds. Key examples of this stance can be found in various forms of discourse analysis, where the goal is to document discursive practices or broader discursive formations that are seen as constitutive of social phenomena. There can be differences here in what is taken to be a discursive practice, in what is regarded as legitimate and sufficient evidence, and no doubt in other respects too. But what is shared is the idea that by means of discourse analysis the character of the practices through which social phenomena are constituted

13 For a discussion of 'discursive psychology', see Edwards and Potter (1992), Edwards (1997 and 2005).

can be documented (see, for example, Wetherell *et al.* 2001). The studies mentioned in Box 1.1 by MacLure and Walker, Wetherell and Edley, and Levitas are examples of this sort of approach.

Often, this has been associated with an argument that all language-use is performative, in the sense that it is not simply concerned (or concerned at all) with representing the world, with 'getting the facts straight', but is primarily if not exclusively directed at performing actions *within* the world. Thus, some commentators have stressed the rhetorical character of all accounts; in other words, that even when they *appear* to be concerned solely with description or explanation they are inevitably aimed at persuading audiences. One implication of this is that different people will inevitably produce conflicting accounts of the same scene, depending upon their assumptions, interests and purposes.¹⁴ With much the same result, other researchers have noted that accounts often take the form of narratives, and that the same set of events can be narrated in many different ways, leading to divergent versions of what happened.¹⁵

A second, rather different, form of social constructionism questions the idea, built into the first one, that the analyst can document the character and properties of discursive practices, or other sorts of practice, in some rigorous analytic manner. It is objected that this treats these practices as if they existed independently of the constitutive practices employed by the analyst her or himself. It is insisted, instead, that all researchers are necessarily implicated in the processes whereby social phenomena are constructed, and cannot escape this. It is also sometimes argued that the task of the analyst should be to subvert whatever seems to be the dominant constitutive regime in order to open up the prospect of something new, or to seek to identify and encourage novel or resistant forms.¹⁶

There are many sources of constructionist ideas. Indeed, as I noted earlier, some are even to be found within positivism, interpretivism, and

14 For examples of work along these lines, see Pollner (1987), Potter (1996), Cuff (1993) and Taylor and Littleton (2006).

15 For an enjoyable historical exploration of narrative variation, tracing the telling and retelling of an eighteenth-century murder story, see Brewer (2004).

16 There are also versions in which any distinction between agent, whether participant or analyst, and passive objects on which they act is erased, in favour of a view which presents objects of many kinds as involved in mutually constituting relationships that generate complex, contingent, and changing patterns. For an exploration of the implications of this sort of view for research method, see Law (2004).

the 'critical' tradition. For example, seventeenth century empiricism drew a distinction between primary and secondary characteristics of physical objects, with the latter – for example colour – being dependent upon human perceptual capabilities rather than being intrinsic features of objects (Murphy *et al.* 1998). Similarly, as we saw, phenomenology was concerned with how experience is constituted through subjective processes, rather than being the result of a direct apprehension of the world. And we also noted that a central idea of 'critical' research is that the dominant ideology emerges out of existing social circumstances and is taken for granted by most people – indeed, treated as 'natural' – obscuring the fact that those circumstances are a socio-historical product and can be changed.

However, prior to the second half of the twentieth century, none of these ideas were fully developed within social science into the kinds of constructionism I have outlined. One major stimulus for this development was the work of the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1970).¹⁷ He challenged the positivist idea that twentieth-century physics represented a cumulative development from earlier work in that discipline, such as that of Newton. Instead, he suggested that it was incommensurable with what had gone before: in other words that at the time it emerged there was no common ground on which these two versions of physics could be compared and evaluated. Here, Kuhn laid emphasis on the social and cultural character of natural science research. He argued that, rather than being a process of logically deriving knowledge from empirical evidence, it necessarily relies upon concepts shared within research communities existing in particular times and places, concepts that are open-ended in character but anchored by exemplary studies recognized as such by the relevant community. These concepts and exemplars make up what he refers to as a paradigm, and this provides a framework of assumptions which both indicates what is already known and contains 'puzzles' that require further work.

Kuhn saw mature sciences like physics, or particular fields within them, as being dominated during any one period by one single paradigm. However, over time some of the puzzles within the paradigm would come to prove recalcitrant and be recognized as 'anomalies', at which point there was the potential for a 'scientific revolution' that could eventually lead to

17 For detailed discussion of his work, see Bird (2000) and Sharrock and Read (2002).

the adoption of a new paradigm; for example, the move from Newtonian to twentieth-century physics.

In short, what Kuhn offered was a very different picture of natural science from the previously common view, adopted both by positivists and by many interpretivists: that natural scientific knowledge gradually accumulates, with errors being corrected, and new discoveries adding to further knowledge. Instead, according to Kuhn, the process of development is discontinuous, punctuated by paradigmatic revolutions involving disagreement that cannot be resolved at the time by rational means.

It is worth noting that Kuhn specifically describes social science as being in a pre-paradigmatic, or non-paradigmatic, state, *precisely because it continuously displays a host of competing approaches*. However, in appropriating his work social scientists tended to treat their own approaches as competing scientific paradigms. Moreover, his ideas were taken to raise fundamental questions about the status of the accounts of social scientists themselves – it reinforced the idea that these should be viewed as constructions generated by particular paradigmatic assumptions none of which could claim epistemological privilege over others.

Here we can see one important respect in which constructionism breaks with interpretivism, perhaps throwing into doubt the very possibility of knowledge in the conventional sense of that term. And there is significant overlap here with those ideas, deriving from French twentieth-century philosophy, that are often placed under the headings of post-structuralism and postmodernism, and which were very influential in the latter decades of the twentieth century. These challenge many attitudes that are regarded as characteristic of the modern world (often traced back to the Enlightenment) – such as belief in the validity, value, and power of scientific knowledge and in the prospect of progress, both in the sphere of knowledge and in social, economic and political life. However, postmodernism tends to involve not a simple rejection of modernism but rather a refusal to treat what it stands for as privileged as against what it opposes. Instead, there is a commitment to holding opposites in tension, on the grounds that there is no basis for deciding between them.¹⁸

One of the sources on which Kuhn drew was the work of the French philosophers and historians of science Gaston Bachelard and Georges

¹⁸ Again, there is a parallel here with the attitudes of some ancient sceptics, see Vogt (2010).

Canguilhem. These writers also saw the development of scientific fields as marked by discontinuity, in which new problematics (frameworks of assumptions organised around some set of problems to be investigated) arose to replace older ones. Moreover, they denied that there was any substantial unity of theoretical and methodological assumption across the various fields of modern natural science, and refused to treat any of them, including physics, as methodologically exemplary. Instead, they stressed the discontinuities *among* scientific fields, as well as those occurring in the development of particular fields over time as new problematics emerged to replace previously influential ones. Where, prior to this, it had often been assumed, for example by positivism and pragmatism, that there was a unitary scientific method, these writers emphasized variation in the methods of the different sciences.

These French explorations in the history and philosophy of science were among the main influences on the work of Michel Foucault (see Gutting 1989), who has come to be identified by many as a key figure in post-modernism (though he himself did not accept the label). He investigated how the human sciences – notably psychology, medicine and criminology – developed in discontinuous ways, and especially how they became embedded in specific institutional practices that have come to constitute modern social life. For instance, he traced what he saw as a transformation in the treatment of madness between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Working with detailed historical data of many kinds, he sought to identify the distinctive discourses, texts and networks of power relations that dominated different periods, and how these generated various kinds of occupational and organizational practice, accompanied by their own ‘truth regimes’, these defining the identities and constituting the perceptions and actions of those involved. For Foucault there were sharp discontinuities between different epochs in these terms, characterized by very different types of discursive construction and institutional practice. And the task he took on was to document these; though he also saw his work as providing tools for political struggles, for example that around the rights of prisoners (see Foucault and Deleuze 1977; Macey 1993: 256–89; Miller 1993: 187–94).¹⁹

19 His work has stimulated distinctive forms of discourse analysis, see Macdonell (1986) and Howarth (2000).

Other important stimuli to constructionism in continental Europe were the movements of twentieth-century thought referred to as structuralism and post-structuralism. It is not possible clearly to separate these from one another since, once again, the label 'post' indicates a process of elaboration and change rather than a complete abandonment of the earlier position – so that post-structuralism inherits important assumptions from structuralism.

Structuralism had its origins in the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He transformed the study of language in the late nineteenth century by shifting the main focus away from tracing the development of particular languages, and how words and other language elements had changed over time, to an interest in the structural character of languages as they exist and operate at any one point in time: in particular, how they generate distinctive yet intelligible patterns of sound and meaning. He explained this capacity as resulting from the deployment of structural contrasts between specific sounds, words, and grammatical forms. For example, at a phonemic level, in English the difference between the words 'cat', 'cut', and 'cot' all hinge on contrasts in vowel sounds that are by no means always significant in other languages. In semantics, the terms for colours used in different languages divide up the spectrum in varying ways, *each term gaining its sense from how it relates to the others*. The key point is that meaning is generated *within* the system of language, words do not get their sense from pre-existing objects to which they refer, nor from the intentions of the speaker or writer. This sort of structuralist approach became the dominant one in linguistics in the twentieth century, and its influence spread much more widely into the study of literature, anthropology, and even psychoanalysis and Marxism.

An important feature of structuralism was its commitment to science, albeit in a form that was not modeled on physics or any other natural science. Within linguistics, this demanded careful and detailed attention to linguistic material in order to detect relatively simple underlying generative structures made up of significant contrasts. Sometimes these structures were seen as unique to particular languages, so that it was often concluded that languages construct the world in discrepant ways; but there were also attempts to find universal forms (most notably in the highly influential work of Chomsky). Either way, these generative structures served a similar function within the structuralist project as the assumption of fixed universal laws did in positivism. Moreover, this

distinctive conception of science influenced some forms of qualitative research, most notably within anthropology through the work of Lévi-Strauss and the practitioners of cognitive anthropology (Tyler 1969), as exemplified by Frake's study mentioned in Chapter 1. The general trend in the later decades of the twentieth century was, however, to question structuralism's assumptions about science, and this was central to much post-structuralism.

The idea, central to structuralism, that signs are not natural in character but matters of cultural convention, and are in that sense arbitrary, was capitalized upon by a number of French writers, most notably Roland Barthes (see Culler 2002). He stimulated much work in cultural studies by applying it to aspects of popular culture. One example he used was all-in wrestling, arguing that this sport amounts to the exchange of symbols rather than to the expression of natural aggression. Indeed, he suggests that it relies upon a kind of authentic but knowing pretense on the part of both the wrestlers themselves and their audiences. The latter, as with any kind of theatre, are required willingly to suspend disbelief: treating as real what is known to be contrived. The key point for Barthes is, however, that there is no reality that is *not* contrived or constructed in-and-through social and discursive practices. In this way, he developed structuralist ideas in a radical direction that stimulated a considerable body of empirical research, under the heading of semiotics (see Bignell 1997).

Another influential writer often associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism, but also rejecting these labels, was Jacques Derrida. He started from a critique of phenomenological philosophy, charging that it treated language as anchored in a direct relationship to the world (concept to object, sound to meaning), and as having a stable structure that thereby produced fixed, essential meanings accessible to anyone who knows the language. By contrast, Derrida emphasized the extent to which structures, whether within languages or within particular texts, involve conflicting and shifting elements. As a result, meaning always escapes our grasp even while we nevertheless manage to communicate with others, feeling that we understand what they say or write. Indeed, a key feature of much post-structuralism and postmodernism is a denial that language or discourse can be a tool that is under our control. Rather, it is claimed, discourse forms us, and in a sense even speaks through us.

The writer who applied the term 'postmodernism' to his own work, Jean-Francois Lyotard, emphasized that we must think of discourses not so

much as languages but as language games: as forms of practice that generate meaning, and that are incommensurable with one another.²⁰ As this indicates, what postmodernism opposes above all is the idea that there is, or can be, a single comprehensive perspective in terms of which we should understand or approach the world, whether that of science or of 'critical' philosophy. Instead, it is argued that any particular discourse leaves untouched an elusive remainder, some of which may be central for other discourses. This means that we must recognize and accept radical diversity in perspective. Moreover, the opposition to purportedly 'totalising' perspectives here is not just on epistemological or ontological grounds, but also on ethical and political ones: it is argued that such perspectives are totalitarian in political terms, and have generated social oppression, for example the imprisonment of political opponents in mental hospitals and in the gulag in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century.

While belonging to the political Left, many of the French writers associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism were reacting directly against Marxism, with its claim to know that history is leading to a society in which all divisions will be overcome. The challenge here was not just to any idea of historical inevitability (Berlin 1954; Popper 1957) but also to the very idea that such a trend would be desirable. Rather, it was seen as likely to erase or overlook important differences in identity and experience. This line of thinking parallels developments within the study of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, where there has been an ongoing conflict between a refusal to treat these sources of difference as biological in character (this being dismissed as 'essentialism') and the insistence that they are nevertheless fundamental and must be recognized and valued for themselves.

I have emphasized the diverse ideas to be found under the heading of constructionism.²¹ These have been very influential among qualitative researchers in the past few decades. In particular, they have stimulated research on text, discourse, narrative, and images. Much of this work has been designed to examine in detail how the use of symbols, broadly

20 He took the concept of language games from the philosopher Wittgenstein, whose work has also influenced other social scientists drawing on interpretivism and constructionism. See, for instance, Hutchinson *et al.*, 2008.

21 And there have been other important sources, even within France, that I have not mentioned: from the work of Deleuze to that of Latour. See Gutting (2011), James (2012), Harman (2009), and Restivo (2010).

conceived, actively constitutes psychological and social phenomena, constructing them in *some* ways rather than others, and generating diversity or fragmentation. This work has also sometimes been closely related to a political concern with what is seen as cultural imperialism (Clifford and Marcus 1986). As part of this, there has been a shift in some quarters from viewing science as a progressive force to seeing it as an expression of Western political and economic dominance; with some writers defending, as an alternative, modes of knowing that are marginalized, for example those of 'indigenous' groups (see Denzin *et al.* 2008).

Moreover, as we saw, there are forms of constructionist research that are not concerned simply with documenting how psychological and social phenomena are constructed through the discourses and practices operating within particular situations, but rather with how research accounts themselves are implicated in this. Indeed, there has been a small body of work that has applied discourse and narrative analysis to research reports, especially to those of qualitative researchers (see Hammersley 1994). Beyond this, there have been calls for researchers to display a reflexive awareness of how they simultaneously document and construct the world through studying it, and how this betrays their own commitments and orientations. As a result, constructionism has sometimes stimulated forms of research writing that are specifically designed to undercut not only the scientific image of research but also any claim on its behalf to well-established knowledge (see, for instance, Ashmore 1989).

Summary

In this chapter we have looked at some of the methodological philosophies that have shaped qualitative research. We started with positivism, which was a major influence on quantitative research; though we also noted respects in which it had shaped qualitative work as well. We moved on to interpretivism, which has been among the most important sets of ideas underpinning qualitative enquiry. It stresses cultural difference, while insisting that understanding can take place across cultures. We noted how in some of its forms interpretivism proposed an alternative conception of rigorous inquiry to that ascribed to natural science by positivism, while other forms rejected any idea of reliance upon method, and especially scientific method. A third set of philosophical ideas, collected together under the heading of 'critical' philosophy, shares some features

with both positivism and interpretivism, but also differs significantly from both – notably in its emphasis on the need for a comprehensive theoretical framework and explicit social critique, and on the inevitability of political engagement. Finally, we looked at various ideas that can be loosely grouped under the heading of constructionism. We saw that some of these were quite close to interpretivism, at least in recommending the careful documentation of how particular social phenomena are culturally or interactionally constructed in particular places at particular times; though constructionism usually involves a different understanding of what this requires. We also noted more radical versions of this methodological philosophy that turn the notion of construction back on qualitative inquiry itself, implying that the accounts it produces can claim no more epistemic authority than any others. Here, at most, the role of such inquiry can only be to highlight the constructed, rather than ‘natural’ or ‘scientific’, character of dominant ways of thinking, and perhaps thereby to subvert them.

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