Philosophical Assumptions

Qualitative interviewing has become a prominent research method in the social sciences. Face-to-face conversation is an everyday occurrence and this has probably resulted in an assumption that interviewing is a preferred option because the researcher feels most at ease with this technique. In well-executed research, preferences are not the issue, rather the focus is on ‘justification’. To what extent can the methodology and methods adopted be justified in relation to the purpose/rationale for the research? This question brings to the fore a host of issues that need to be carefully worked through, examining our philosophical assumptions about reality and associated theoretical perspective(s). With this in mind, this chapter will explore the epistemological and ontological thinking behind qualitative research and qualitative interviewing. We will concentrate on the following philosophical issues as they have direct relevance for qualitative interviewing:

- methodology and methods
- different approaches to research
- theoretical groundwork and making connections
- developing a rationale
- epistemology and qualitative interviewing

Methodology and methods

Having supervised numerous undergraduate and postgraduate student research projects, we can say with confidence that the issue of methodology and methods is always something that causes confusion. The two are not the same. Methods are easily explained; they are the techniques or procedures we use to collect and analyse data. In qualitative research, interviewing is one of the most frequently used methods when generating data. Other methods could include, for example, observation, diaries, the generation of visual images or other forms of text. In this book we will cover using qualitative interviewing as a ‘method’ – a means of collecting and analysing data. Having said this, we will also aim to make evident how methods are informed by methodology. Methodology, as the word suggests, relates to a process where the design of the research and choice of particular methods, and their justification in relation to the research project, are made evident. As such, methodology requires more from the researcher than just preference or intuitive appeal to justify the choice of particular
techniques of data collection and analysis. It becomes necessary to outline the philosophical and theoretical positions informing the research process. Thus there is a requirement to outline assumptions embedded in the methodology adopted. Often you will find methodology explained as an ‘approach’ or ‘perspective’ that has within it implicit and explicit expectations about how research is undertaken.

Different approaches to research

Two paradigms: qualitative and quantitative

Holliday (2002) refers to two ‘paradigms’ in research, suggesting that the qualitative and quantitative paradigms represent very different ways of thinking about the world. It is not our intention to become overly embroiled in the qualitative versus quantitative debate. However, it is fairly standard to begin any conversation about qualitative research by saying what it is not in relation to quantitative research. While this seems a useful place to begin, it can create unhelpful prohibitions resulting in novice researchers feeling that they are required to ‘choose’ a side. You’re either qualitative or quantitative. We are both psychologists and all too familiar with the assumption that because we employ qualitative methods in our research, and have developed a certain level of expertise, it is thought that we either disapprove of or see no merit in quantitative approaches. This assumption is inaccurate in that we have used, and will continue to use, some quantitative methods if this enables us a route to the required knowledge in a particular project.

Quantitative research is concerned with measurement, precisely and accurately capturing aspects of the social world that are then expressed in numbers – percentages, probability values, variance ratios, etc. Measurement, a term loosely employed here, is approached differently by qualitative researchers. The aim is still to capture aspects of the social world but this is done in numerous ways that do not rely on numbers as the unit of analysis. Using the term ‘qualitative interviewing’ situates the methodology and method deliberately within the qualitative domain where a broad and holistic approach is taken to the study of social phenomena.

Temptingly, Kvale (1996: 1) says that: ‘If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them?’ If only life were so simple when embarking on a research project. As Kvale suggests, in order to use the interview as a ‘construction site of knowledge’, the researcher is required to develop a rationale that is methodologically sound. Hence, we cannot emphasise enough the importance of this phase of the research. A newly appointed PhD student, who had recently been asked to read up on methodology, returned saying: ‘This is the crux of everything, I can’t progress until I understand more of this!’ We would wholeheartedly agree with this evaluation. Thus, in this section, the differing paradigms of qualitative and quantitative
research will be compared and discussed with a view to revealing a process that illuminates an often bewildering methodological journey.

**Epistemology**

A concise definition of epistemology is the philosophical theory of knowledge. Of major importance is the issue of what counts as knowledge and social scientists are often preoccupied with attempting to formulate sufficient criteria for evaluating knowledge statements – what it is we can claim to know. Unfortunately, differences between qualitative and quantitative research often become drawn as fervently oppositional rather than merely rooted in different understandings around what we *can know*, and what we might *want to know*, as researchers. If we take the idea of *knowing* as the basis for elaborating on the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, we can hopefully make clear the fundamental methodological issues that underpin the justification for a specific approach. Our rationale for the choice of methods becomes less idiosyncratic (something we will return to later) and more complex when we ask knowledge-based questions about specific issues and phenomena. This, then, promotes consideration of what might be a reliable route to such knowledge. Therefore *epistemology*, how we know what we know, a means of establishing what counts as knowledge, is central in any methodological approach. Marshall and Rossman (2006) use the term ‘epistemological integrity’ when referring to the connections between the nature of the research, overall strategy, research questions, design and methods. Developing such integrity is not always easy and involves thinking through the values and ideals, principles and rules by which the phenomena under investigation can be known.

**Ontology**

Ontology is likely to be an unfamiliar term to those new to social research and is seldom unproblematic for others who might consider themselves seasoned researchers. It should be said that ontological and epistemological issues often arise together, resulting in a somewhat confusing representation. Blaikie (1993: 6) offers a ‘root definition’ of ontology: the ‘science or study of *being*’ (our emphasis). We are not sure that this takes us much further in our endeavours to unravel methodological approaches. However, he goes on to say that ontology means ‘the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social enquiry makes about the nature of social reality’ (1993: 6). There are those who would say that, strictly speaking, we should stay with ontology as the study of ‘being’ (e.g. see Crotty, 2006) where the emphasis is on the theory of existence. Nevertheless, for our purposes, Blaikie’s pragmatic view provides us with a clear indication of why we need a philosophical perspective for our methodology. Without a perspective on the nature of social reality – how people might exist in the world – it would be impossible to consider what might count as relevant knowledge in the research process. For example, if we assume that people’s behaviour – their way of being in the world – is brought
about by their interactions in social situations, our view of social reality is very
different from our belief that genetic inheritance explains behaviour. These are
two very different ontological approaches regarding the theory of existence.
One approach relates to social practices and people as social actors; the other
is biological, suggesting that what ‘drives’ our being in the world is inherited
and located within the individual.

Ontological positions are often described primarily as ‘realist’ or ‘relativist’.
Put somewhat simply, a realist ontology subscribes to the view that the real
world is out there and exists independently from us. The world is made up of
objects and structures that have identifiable cause and effect relationships.
Indeed, the natural sciences (e.g. chemistry, physics, biology) are all broadly
founded upon a realist ontology. Quantitative, experimental methods in social
research are also based upon the belief that ‘real’ elements of our existence can
be uncovered using appropriate methods of data collection and analysis. For
example, social researchers have used twin studies to investigate criminal
behaviour and the impact of genetic inheritance (Walters, 2006). Relativist
ontology rejects such direct explanations, maintaining that the world is far
more unstructured and diverse. Our understandings and experiences are relative
to our specific cultural and social frames of reference, being open to a
range of interpretations. Within relativism, society is not viewed as a pre-existent
‘real’ entity with objects and structures but rather is the product of people
engaging with one another. Therefore relativism is more consistent with the
social practices and interactive explanation of how people exist and live in
their world. Existence is therefore explained differently within these two
approaches and, as such, the data that would need to be collected to investigate
these different versions of reality are not the same.

There are, however, variations that blur the somewhat crude realist/relativist
distinction. Offering a version of experience and existence that only takes
account of people as social actors (relativism) with no recognition of the con-
straining impact of social structures has been questioned (see Willig, 1999b).
Similarly, conceiving the person as a mere automaton subject to social or biological
mechanisms that then determine behaviour (naïve realism) has also been
treated with sceptism (Bhaskar, 1991). Critical realism is a perspective that
retains a core element of ontological realism, whereby behaviour and experience are seen to be ‘generated by’ underlying structures such as biological,
economic or social structures. These structures or mechanisms do not directly
determine people’s actions; instead, structures have tendencies that may impact
on our lives. For example, social structures can create inequalities that have the
potential to influence our existence. Bill Jordan (2004: 3), when exploring the
transformation of collective life in modern society, gives a very candid account
of how structural inequality with regard to gender and education in the 1950s
impacted upon his family life:

My own marriage was to the daughter of close family friends, and the commitment
to it made before I went to university. My wife subscribed to the new ethos of auton-
omy for women, but had none of the advantages of education or opportunities of
Social structures are seen to be located outside the individual’s control; the sexual division (social structure) of labour inherent at the time had consequences that cannot be disregarded when trying to understand both Bill’s and his wife’s experience. A critical realist ontology would take account of such structures when attempting to make sense of social reality. Yet, while recognising the ‘real’ potentiality of mechanisms and structures, critical realism does not propose ‘hard’ determinism. People can transform their lives, having insight into their own contextually located existence.

Generally speaking, quantitative research subscribes to a realist ontology with qualitative research having its foundations in more critical realist and relativist approaches. Therefore epistemological questions around what represents knowledge within a particular ontological view expose the connectedness of research. By this we refer to how theory and philosophical understandings impact on what we believe can be known and these beliefs and understandings then influence how we gather and make sense of information. For example, if we believe that genetic inheritance determines behaviour, we would not use qualitative interviews to investigate this explanation. Conversations and words do not provide the kind of data that would be required to explore the genetic transmission of behaviour. However, if we subscribe to a social and interactive explanation for behaviour, then speaking with people in order to explore their social experiences would be consistent with our ontological position. Thus research is connected – our ontological beliefs and understandings impact upon what counts as knowledge. Ontology, epistemology and methodology and methods are all connected and cannot be viewed in isolation.

Theoretical groundwork and making connections

Supporting what we have already said, Williams (1998) makes the point, when discussing various methodologies, that the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches are not wholly technical matters. Instead, he suggests that differences result from particular philosophical and theoretical traditions. Theory guides us in research; it can sometimes help to define the problem, offer insight and show us possible solutions. Just imagine, as a student, you ask one of your lecturer how to write a good essay. The lecturer could begin by explaining in detail the overarching learning outcomes of the course and how these link to pedagogical issues in higher education. This insight might enable you to understand the broad aims of the course and how these are exemplified in different forms of assessment that require certain strategies. You might argue that a simple set of pointers would have sufficed and taken much less time. Then again, you might think that now you know
how things work, you have an understanding of how things fit together and can put this into practice. In research, this theoretical understanding of how things fit together is fundamental to the research process.

**Interpretivism**

Qualitative approaches are generally, but not always (see Holliday, 2002), founded upon theoretical perspectives rooted in *interpretivism* and are variously described as hermeneutics, phenomenology, ethnography, discursive, interactionist – to list only a few. Each of these approaches to qualitative research has distinct features, many of which we will expand upon in later chapters in relation to qualitative interviewing. The point being made here is that within the social sciences the term ‘interpretative’ is quite broad but can be encapsulated in concerns around how the social world is experienced and understood. Interpretative research is generally *idiographic*, which literally means describing aspects of the social world by offering a detailed account of specific social settings, processes or relationships. The focus for research might be to uncover how people feel about the world and make sense of their lives from their particular vantage points. Therefore, qualitative interviewing fits; actually conversing with people enables them to share their experiences and understandings. While this might appear a rather obvious comment to make, it is said with a degree of caution and is something to which we will continually return. In research it is all too easy to adopt such simplistic and seemingly rational viewpoints. As we shall see, interpretivism perceives experience and understanding as seldom straightforward; people participate in indeterminate lifeworlds, often attaching different interpretations and meanings to seemingly similar ‘facts’ and events. Alfred Schütz (1962: 5) explains that:

> All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. They are, therefore, always interpreted facts, either facts looked at as detached from their context by an artificial abstraction or facts considered in their particular setting. In either case, they carry their interpretational inner and outer horizons. (also cited in Flick, 1998: 31)

The stance Schütz takes is that what we might see as ‘facts’ become open to levels of interpretation. The notion of searching for one overarching truth about the reality of how we live our lives is seen to be misplaced. Rather, we have ‘multiple realities’ or different interpretations.

**Locating scientific methodology**

**Positivism**

Interpretivism is usually seen as counter to ‘scientific’ approaches which are more accurately referred to as ‘naturalist’ approaches to research. The naturalist approach assumes an ontological view that human beings are part of
nature and can be studied in the same way as other objects in the physical world. This is a controversial and much contested viewpoint in the social sciences. The idea that human beings and human behaviour are reducible to variables that can be measured and subject to statistical analysis continues to be a major topic for debate. Even so, the theoretical approach within the natural sciences, and dominant also in the social sciences, is *positivism* (often viewed as akin to naïve realism). The positivist approach is *nomothetic* which means developing general laws or principles to explain particular phenomena.

The positivist position is situated within the epistemological tradition of *objectivism*, where objects in the world have meaning that exists independently from any subjective consciousness of them. Therefore, the underlying aim for research within this tradition is to provide objective knowledge – knowledge that is value-neutral, unbiased by the research/researcher process. Of vital importance for science is the belief in an objective reality that can be uncovered. This objective reality is more commonly referred to as ‘truth’ – a belief in the correspondence of knowledge with what can actually be proven to exist. Objectivism and the search for regularities, principles and laws underpin the quantification of scientific research. Aggregate data across large populations, statistical analysis, replication, generalisation and the reduction of intervening social variables are scientific strategies that claim to make known the ‘real’ aspects of existence.

The positivist ideal of objective knowledge existing independently is distinctly unlike the interpretivist view, where the activities of our mind select and give meaning to the world around us. Take, for example, the issue of climate change. Evidence exists that demonstrates changes in the earth’s atmospheric conditions. Changes in air temperature, solar variation and weather conditions can all be measured and exist independently from our subjective viewpoints. What do we actually know from this evidence? There is continual disagreement among experts about causality and projected consequences. While this may infer that there is conflicting evidence, there are also the interpretations and investments of the researchers to consider. It may be possible to argue that subjective understandings are different from the scientifically established ‘facts’ inherent in objects, as with the climate change illustration. On the other hand, it remains hard to comprehend how such facts can effectively be distanced from any interpretation of them.

Banister et al. (1994) refer to a ‘gap’ between the object of study and the way it is represented. Interpretation is seen as the bridge between representations of particular phenomena – what we claim is occurring – and the actual world out there. How we represent data can be influenced by a host of factors, including the context in which the data were generated, moral and political concerns and researcher agendas. Pursuing objective knowledge, and indeed truth, becomes somewhat elusive if it forever pivots on interpretations and understandings which are open to the vagaries of human relations. It is fair to say that even those who operate within the confines of scientific method often acknowledge that preconceptions and suppositions can impact upon
explanations. Yet it is these concerns that create the methodological and ideological chasm often exemplified by the qualitative/quantitative divide.

Empiricism

Central to the scientific approach is empiricism – the view that our knowledge of the world is gained from experience. No problem here, you might say, but what this means is that only the systematic collection of sense data via observation gives rise to the development of knowledge. Willig (2001) describes how nowadays few social scientists would subscribe to a pure form of empiricism, or indeed positivism. Such forms seem naïve when much of what passes as scientific research is founded upon pre-existing theory. What empiricists would claim is that the acquisition of knowledge depends upon the collection of observation data. Therefore, on the basis of multiple observations, researchers are able to develop general laws based upon the ‘fact’ that under particular conditions certain effects will always occur. This process and form of reasoning are called induction. The philosopher David Hume (1711–76) did not share such confidence, arguing that there could be no logical justification for such claims. Hume’s position is that there can be no certainty as the seemingly logical connection between cause and effect is based upon expectations created by past experience. How can we claim that something will always have the same effect in the future? Experiences may change and therefore reasoning with regard to cause and effect changes. Karl Popper (1902–94) proposed the hypothetico-deductive method whereby theory claims are put to the test and are either rejected or retained for the time being. With this scientific method, the emphasis is not on conclusive verification – the establishment of a proposition as true for all time – but on falsification – facts are not unassailable; rather they are open to constant challenge.

Undoubtedly, the key issue is that science is ‘based on facts … Based on what we can see, hear and touch rather than personal opinions or speculative imaginings’ (Chalmers, 1999: 1). Interestingly, Kvale (1996) takes exception to the implication that qualitative interviews are necessarily ‘unscientific’, arguing that this depends on how science itself is defined. He offers the following definition of science: ‘the methodological production of new, systematic knowledge’ (1996: 60). Inherent within Kvale’s argument is the view that scientific method based upon hypothesis testing, objective results and generalisability is one way of configuring science. Alternatively, scientific method could also include systematically produced ‘intersubjective reducible data’, such as those produced in qualitative interviews.

Verstehen and the issue of causality

While we might question aspects of the scientific process, the overarching principles of data generation, founded upon hypothesis testing, observation and measurement, are sacrosanct in that domain. Alternatively, interpretivism prioritises the interpretation and meaning of human experience over measurement, explanation and prediction. Personal opinions and imaginings are not
framed as merely ‘speculative’, but rather they constitute what makes life intelligible. This differentiation is attributed to the thinking of Max Weber (1864–1920), who suggested that the human sciences should be concerned with understanding (verstehen). The following explanation from Strike (1972: 28) is certainly outdated in its gendered assumptions, but it appears to exemplify why the scientific process alone may not be sufficient:

... the verstehen doctrine will claim that human beings can be understood in a manner that other objects of study cannot. Men have purposes and emotions, they make plans, construct cultures, and hold certain values, and their behaviour is influenced by such values, plans and purposes. In short, a human being lives in a world which has ‘meaning’ to him, and, because his behaviour has meaning, human actions are intelligible in ways that the behaviour of nonhuman objects is not.

This search to uncover meaning is then contrasted with an emphasis on explaining (erklären) and establishing causal relationships exemplified by the natural sciences. Demonstrating causality requires the researcher to show that an effect is due to a particular cause/variable. For example, we might undertake research to investigate a causal link between early parenthood and relationship breakdown. Causal explanations are usually in a linear form, stating cause and effect in a straight line – X causes Y. Yet if we accept the general import of verstehen, such uncomplicated linear explanations seem incomplete, even unsustainable. The reason(s) for relationship breakdown might be connected with a combination of numerous factors: changing aspirations, differing values in relation to gender roles, factors related to the child, social difficulties. Further, what counts as ‘relationship breakdown’ itself may be a matter for differing interpretations. To prove causality we would need to eliminate the possibility that an effect might be due to something other than the causal variable (e.g. early parenthood). It is the complex meanings that people give to their existence that are of interest in qualitative research, and thus tracking down linear causal relationships often become erroneous or unproductive and of little value in developing understanding. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) had earlier contrasted verstehen and erklären, proposing that natural reality and social reality are different kinds of reality and therefore require different methods of investigation. Maybe this is the point at which the researcher has to make some decisions. What kind of reality do we subscribe to and how does this impact upon our rationale for using qualitative interviewing?

Developing a rationale

While much is made of the differences that exist between qualitative and quantitative research, it is undeniable that both paradigms share a purpose. The purpose of research is to enhance knowledge, to in some way enable us to
know more. When undertaking research it is standard practice to develop a research proposal outlining a clear rationale for the research – what is it that we want to know, what is the purpose of the research and how this might be achieved? This is often where those new to the use of qualitative research methods hit problems. Crotty (1998: 13) argues, when discussing the research process, that ‘we need to be concerned about the process we have engaged in; we need to lay that process out for the scrutiny of the observer; we need to defend that process as a form of human inquiry that should be taken seriously’. Nonetheless, the philosophical underpinnings of quantitative research are often not outlined, remaining implicit within the methods used for generating data. For quantitative research, the status of ‘facts’ supported by measurement and observations seems enough to demonstrate that the work has epistemological integrity. However, as we will see in the following chapters, a more detailed account for qualitative research is needed. This is not done out of any inherent need to defend qualitative methods. Rather, when we acknowledge multiple realities and different ways of being, it is essential to elucidate which approach/version of reality is being used in order to make specific connections. It is at this point that there is a need to make appropriate connections between the nature of the research, overall strategy and how we will go about collecting and analysing data.

Box 2.1 outlines two different rationales for research looking at coercive treatment for drug misuse. Using this particular research project, where the second author was part of a research team commissioned by a local agency, we make visible the initial implications of these traditions. Evident are the ways in which theoretical frameworks rooted in specific philosophical positions produce differing rationales for what might need to be known, thus advocating particular research methodologies and methods. In using this example we do not intend to exemplify a full account of any methodological approach. Instead, we aim to present the main aspects of interpretivist and positivist traditions in a format that enables a comparative assessment.

Box 2.1 Developing a rationale underpinned by philosophical theoretical perspectives

Recent government initiatives on coercive treatment (alternatives to prison) for those convicted of offences linked to substance misuse have resulted in a need to know more about the treatment process and the impact this might have in terms of bringing about behaviour change. The figure below aims to make evident how different philosophical understandings impact upon the rationale we might develop when proposing research in this area. Also evident is how the rationale then impacts upon what kind of data we aim to generate.

(Continued)
The interpretivist rationale focuses on understanding how individual offenders experience treatment services and what it means for them. The positivist rationale relies on more factual, statistical information where cause and effect can be investigated. Thus it is more interested in comparing rates of offending. Both rationales have the potential to enhance our knowledge base around coercive treatment. However, philosophical theoretical underpinnings result in different rationales – different perspectives on what we might need to know.

Epistemology and qualitative interviewing

Having explained some of the overarching philosophical tensions that exist in the research process, we now aim to situate issues raised within very specific
epistemological traditions. A useful place to begin is to consider the status of conversation. It is all too easy to view conversation, within the qualitative interview situation, as an uncomplicated exchange of ideas and opinions. As Breakwell (1990: 81) states: ‘The interview approach relies heavily upon respondents being able and willing to give accurate information.’ The assumption here is that accurate information is there to be discovered and thus such knowledge is achievable. We do well to take time to consider how these ideals have been challenged by more critical approaches.

Rorty (1979) emphasised how we constitute knowledge through conversation and social practice. So rather than knowledge being conveyed in conversation, it is brought into being. This has resonance for qualitative interviewing as we become increasingly aware of the constructive nature of social interaction and the part played by active subjects in making sense of their experiences (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003b). Indeed, Shotter (1993: vi) describes how ‘conversation is not just one of our many activities in the world. On the contrary, we constitute both ourselves and our worlds in our conversational activity’ (original emphasis). Here we return to the idea that it is our personal imaginings that make life intelligible. Thus the idea of conversation as no more than observable verbal behaviour, or verbal exchange, where knowledge of an objective reality is described and discussed, is continually being extended and challenged. It becomes clear that what counts as knowledge, and how that knowledge is generated and understood, carry real implications for qualitative interviewing. Methods and methodology do not exist in a vacuum; rather, they are subject to new and extended ways of thinking about the world.

In later chapters we will locate qualitative interviewing within specific philosophical, theoretical perspectives, endeavouring to reveal how data are intricately associated with beliefs about reality and knowledge. In an attempt to make clear the implications embedded in such beliefs we explore three discrete epistemological positions: realist, contextual and constructionist. We are aware of now presenting realism as an epistemological position, knowing that previously we have discussed realism as an ontology – a way of understanding the nature of social reality (how people exist in the world). The term ‘realism’ is frequently used to denote both an ontological and epistemological position; ontological because it denotes a particular way of understanding our existence in the world and epistemological due to the emphasis on specific assumptions about the ‘real’ truth status of knowledge. This said, the epistemological positions we offer are by no means the only ones appropriate when using qualitative interviewing (see Reicher, 2000). We select these three epistemologies for two reasons. Primarily, we would argue that they do span the different approaches taken by researchers who utilise qualitative interviewing, drawing on both realist and relativist thinking. Equally, as our aim is to provide accessible information, it is helpful that each one is distinctly different, making it easier to show inconsistencies and diversions. Having decided to take this route, we would want to be clear in stating that there is a certain amount of overlap with these positions (see Madill et al., 2000).
Of value in this process of exploring these different epistemologies are three questions posited by Willig (2001: 12–13), which she suggests provide a framework for elaborating on assumptions that might underpin particular methodological approaches:

- What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?
- What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?
- How does the methodology conceptualise the role of the researcher in the research process?

These questions will be evident as we try to outline these differing epistemological traditions. It might also be the case that these questions prove useful for any researchers who are in the process of interrogating the integrity and coherence of their research. Table 2.1 gives a summary of each position using this framework.

**Realist**

**Assumptions about the world**

A realist epistemology would uphold the view that the individual is part of a material, real world where processes and relationships can be revealed. We have already discussed how realism underpins scientific method, maintaining that we have unmediated access to a real knowable world. There is, according to this theoretical position, an unproblematic relationship between our view of the world and the world that exists. Thus the knowledge produced in qualitative interviewing reflects the actual reality of people’s experience in the world. For example, research with marginalised groups is frequently characterised by the notion of giving ‘voice’, enabling people to share their previously unheard understandings and meanings. It is often assumed that qualitative interviewing with such groups can provide the route to such ‘real’, previously inaccessible knowledge.

**Knowledge produced**

We said earlier that epistemology relates directly to a means of establishing what counts as knowledge. Those utilising realist thinking believe that by adopting particular methods we can describe and measure the world out there. Fundamental assumptions about objectivity and reliability, dominant within quantitative positivist research, prevail when using qualitative interviewing underpinned by a realist epistemology. Attention is given to representative sampling and generalisability so that even if studying a small number of cases, the aim is to be inclusive of those that represent the larger group or population under study. Often this prompts the perennial question of ‘how many people should we interview?’ Within a realist framework the answer might be lots! Indeed, one of the authors has a colleague who undertook almost 200 telephone interviews because the principal researcher operated within a realist epistemology. Even when, after 50 or so interviews, it became
evident that interviewees were merely providing data that replicated what had already been generated, the research interviews continued. This was necessary because the criteria upon which the results would be judged, what counted as knowledge, was set within a scientific realist framework where responses needed to be coded, categorised and counted. While this may be an extreme example, many researchers using qualitative interviewing will look towards such established criteria.

Role of the researcher
When engaging in qualitative interviewing within a realist epistemology the objectivity of the data is seen to be commensurate with the detachment of the researcher. The telephone interviews referred to earlier required the researcher to endeavour to ask set questions in the same format and with the same level of interpersonal engagement each time in order to produce data that had not been impacted upon by subjective researcher bias. The data were coded by a team of researchers who calculated inter-rater reliability in order to avoid error. Generally, qualitative research does not claim to produce objectively defined knowledge, as subjective interpretation is a philosophical keystone and value-neutrality a highly questionable notion. However, it should be noted that a modified version of positivism – ‘post-positivism’ – does exist. Here researchers maintain some positivist elements, such as being highly systematised and concerned with quantification and causal factors, while at the same time incorporating interpretivist concerns around subjectivity and meaning (see Seale, 1999). Grounded theory is often cited as a post-positivist method. Similar to scientific process, grounded theory, when first developed, relied on a process of inductive theory-building based on the observation of the data. Accordingly, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) say that grounded theory is a form of qualitative research that is systematised and fits well with a ‘modern’, rational social science. Nevertheless, some have argued that grounded theory displaces the false precision of positivism, offering relevance in its place (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). However, there is very little acknowledgement of the personal qualities of the researcher or the relationship between the researcher and researched. Therefore similar to aspects of the scientific, objectivist approach, the researcher role remains distant, unmarked. As we will see in later chapters, this is in stark contrast to other qualitative approaches to interviewing, such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry, where such relationships are made evident.

Contextual
Assumptions about the world
The basic assumptions of contextualism are that everyday life is set in a particular time, consisting of a myriad of factors, relations and activities and is in a state of incessant change. From this position ‘facts’ cannot be commensurate with, or reducible to, a decontextualised view of human nature (Jaeger and Rosnow, 1988). The context of a historical, cultural and social milieu is integral
to how we live, understand and experience our lives. The realist, scientific linear process of cause and effect, where directly observable facts are the arbiter of what counts as knowledge, becomes just one of many explanations set within its own historical context (Feyerabend, 1993). This means that all knowledge produced is dependent upon the context, including the perspective or standpoint taken when formulating the research. Hence, contextualism is founded on the belief that all knowledge is local, provisional and situation dependent (Madill et al., 2000). Yet, we can see that acknowledging the impact of context suggests a critical realist position with particular social mechanisms (practices) having potentiality with regard to both exploring and understanding individual lives.

**Knowledge produced**

In the qualitative research interview there is often, but by no means always, a face-to-face verbal interchange where one person (the interviewer) attempts to obtain information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons. It would therefore be important to know as much as possible about the context of a particular encounter in order to produce knowledge that acknowledges and understands situated perspectives. Despite this, the decontextualisation of experiences is often a feature of studies using qualitative interviews. Rightly, Pidgeon and Henwood (1997: 250) identify specific dimensions that play a role in the way that knowledge is produced. The four

### Table 2.1 Summary of epistemological positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemological positions</th>
<th>Realist</th>
<th>Contextual</th>
<th>Constructionist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions about the world</td>
<td>There exists unmediated access to a ‘real’ world where processes and relationships can be revealed</td>
<td>Context is integral to understanding how people experience their lives</td>
<td>Social reality is constructed through language which produces particular versions of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge produced</td>
<td>Seeks to produce objective data which is reliable and representative of the wider population from which the interview sample is drawn</td>
<td>Data is inclusive of context aiming to add to the ‘completeness’ of the analysis by making visible cultural and historical meaning systems</td>
<td>Does not adhere to traditional conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the researcher</td>
<td>The researcher aims to avoid bias, remaining objective and detached</td>
<td>The subjectivity of the researcher is an integral part of the process</td>
<td>The researcher is ‘co-producer’ of knowledge and therefore required to be reflexive and critically aware of language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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dimensions are: (1) participants’ own understandings; (2) researchers’ interpretations; (3) cultural meaning systems which inform both participants’ and researchers’ understandings; and (4) acts of judging particular interpretations as valid by scientific communities. All of these dimensions would appear to have relevance, showing context as a web of interrelations that has the potential to build a more complete picture.

Role of the researcher
Within contextualism, researcher influence within the qualitative interview is not treated as a source of ‘bias’ threatening to undermine the validity and reliability of results. When undertaking qualitative interviews the assorted context of people’s lives becomes relevant data and all accounts are understood to be infused with subjectivity. Rather than remaining neutral, as in the realist approach, the researcher is required to communicate the perspective(s) from which they approach their work. Gender, age, ethnicity, social status are all factors that might reverberate in the research process and, as such, it becomes necessary to reveal the situatedness of the researcher so that the audience can appreciate the position from which they write. Importantly, objectivism and the naïve scientific position it supports, where knowledge claims are value-free and universal, are seen from this perspective to be unsustainable. Rather, the knowledge research generates will vary in a multiplicity of ways according to the context in which the data were collected and analysed. This may inescapably lead to findings that are very context-specific and therefore of relevance to a limited constituency. On the other hand, limitations are mediated by the opportunity to potentially retain original and fresh perspectives that may have been inaccessible within a more standardised approach. In later chapters we will explore the different ways in which contextualism is incorporated into qualitative interviewing, often providing insight into how people make sense of their unique lives.

Constructionist
Assumptions about the world
Any epistemology with its roots in constructionism begins by emphasising the role of language. The belief that language is referential, merely representing reality ‘out there’, is overwhelmingly brought into question within this relativist approach. Rather than objects having meaning in the world that exists independently from our conscious interpretations of them, our interpretations/representations construct objects. These are by no means immediately accessible ideas as they are counter-intuitive to more normative ways of thinking. Language does things. For example, Clarke and Cochrane (1998) trace how ‘natural’ forms of childcare rooted in biological drives can actually be understood as embedded in discourse. Discourse refers to the way that images, stories, statements, ways of talking can produce a particular version of events.
Let’s use Hall’s (2001: 72) quote to outline further what is meant by the term ‘discourse’:

Discourse … constructs the topic. It defines and produces objects of our knowledge. It governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others.

So, rather than claiming that mothering is a ‘natural’, biologically located instinctual drive, Clark and Cochran make visible the way in which language effectively constructs a host of expectations and obligations that suggest, rather than prove, that forms of mothering are ‘natural’. Therefore, language is conceptualised as being productive. This means that language has the potential to construct particular versions of reality. This contrasts dramatically with positivism, where the one ‘true’ knowledge of the world is accessible through observation. It is hardly surprising that the rise of social constructionism and related critical approaches has to some extent challenged the foundations of existing knowledge, necessitating a radical rethink of what we consider knowledge to be.

Knowledge produced

Social constructionism produces knowledge that does not adhere to traditional conventions. Objectivity and value-neutrality are seen as discursive devices employed by a positivist science to uphold its powerful grip on knowledge production. The idea that human beings can somehow remove themselves from the process of active engagement in knowledge production is viewed with a level of incredulity. As Burr (1995: 152) expressively states: ‘No human being can step outside of their humanity and view the world from no position at all, which is what the idea of objectivity suggests, and this is just as true for scientists as for everyone else.’ Also rejected is the view that there is an objective truth waiting to be discovered. What we have is meaning that comes into existence out of our engagement with the social world. Meaning is not out there waiting to be discovered; rather it is brought into being in the process of social exchange. Consequentially, social constructionism is relativist, seeing knowledge as historically and culturally located. At different times and places there will be different and often contradictory interpretations of the same phenomena.

Role of the researcher

Burr (1995) asserts that social constructionists call for the democratisation of research relationships, with research being necessarily a ‘co-production’ between the researcher and the researched. Reflexivity (covered in far more detail in Chapter 8) is seen as particularly relevant to a social constructionist epistemology as it requires researchers to consider their contribution to the construction of meaning. Willig (2001) identifies two kinds of reflexivity:
epistemological reflexivity and personal reflexivity. Epistemological reflexivity advocates that the researcher reflects upon assumptions about the world that have been made in the course of the research. This could include how the research questions have been defined, interview schedules structured and the method of analysis undertaken. Personal reflexivity involves giving consideration to the ways in which our beliefs, interests, experiences and identities might have impacted upon the research. Clearly, much of this echoes aspects outlined for a contextualist epistemology. However, Willig goes on to raise the issue of critical language awareness as a form of reflexivity. If the words we use are seen to construct meaning, then it would seem obligatory to reflect on the categories and labels the researcher might use in the research process, acknowledging how these might shape research findings.

Conclusion

Qualitative research, including qualitative interviewing, requires a great deal of effort, with researchers having to explore how they conceive the world. In this chapter we have made evident some of the philosophical and theoretical issues that prevail when engaged in qualitative interviewing. By showing that methods and methodology are distinct aspects of social research, we have sought to make accessible some of the more difficult features of qualitative research. We have covered several of the tensions that exist between qualitative and quantitative approaches, outlining theoretical differences and presenting particular epistemological positions that we believe have relevance for qualitative interviewing. In the following chapters, as we examine the process of carrying out qualitative interview research, we will endeavour to show in more detail the ontological and epistemological thinking inherent in particular approaches. Such detail aims to equip researchers with the tools to ensure that they have the insight and information needed to give credence to their work, moving beyond mere description to present theoretically-driven and coherent qualitative research.

Recommended reading


This chapter thoughtfully considers how social reality cannot be considered as a unitary whole with one explanatory principle. The implications of such complexity are given a methodological focus.

In this chapter, science, epistemology and qualitative methods are discussed with examples of how this impacts upon research that uses a grounded theory approach.


The first chapter in this book provides an accessible yet detailed account of ‘what is methodology in social research’. While this account is clearly situated within feminist methodology, the outline offered is useful for other methodological approaches.


The first three chapters of this book examine the ways in which researchers have attempted to understand the social world. Experimentation, science and social constructionism are all covered in some detail.