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Realism

Realism refers to a range of ontological and epistemological positions within which research may be conducted. Realist ontologies (assumptions about the nature of reality) range from the view that the world of objects and social structures exist independently of human experience to the idea that, although the world exists independently of any one person, human perception is such that our reality is a pre-interpreted one. Realist epistemologies (theories about what counts as knowledge) range from view that the world can be known directly through the senses to the idea that internally consistent interpretations of reality can count as knowledge if bounded by, and revisable in light of, interactions with the world. Holding a realist ontology does not always commit a researcher to a realist epistemology.

Realism has often been associated with quantification but is compatible with many qualitative methods and is the position of choice of many qualitative researchers. In the following paragraphs, realism as a philosophical position influencing the development of research methodology is first set in context. Positivistic philosophies of science are then outlined and naïve and scientific realism explored. The nature of post-positivistic science is then considered along with subtle, analytic, and critical realism. Finally, the relation of critical and standpoint theory to forms of realism is explored. Although these sub-divisions can be identified and described, the dividing line between positions is often a matter of emphasis. Moreover, what is described under each heading can contain contradictions as some stances have more than one strand.

Realism in context

Realism as an overarching philosophical doctrine is the position that we should strive to understand the world from an objective point of view. In this, realism is a radical counter to religious and authoritarian truths and, as such, was defended by Galileo. Realism brought an optimism that the world is knowable and that this knowledge could be value-free, and it has dominated Western thought since the 18th century enlightenment. Throughout the 20th century anti-realist positions have made headway in the philosophy of science, particularly the social sciences, arguing for the impossibility of human objectivity. The impact of anti- and modified-realism on social science has gained momentum since the 1960s evolving into, what is sometimes referred to as, the 'turn to language' or 'reflexive turn' in relation to qualitative methodology. However, forms of realism are still compatible with contemporary understandings of science which incorporate an element of interpretation into what counts as knowledge and are adopted by many qualitative researchers.

Realism and positivism

Positivism

Positivism is a hugely influential philosophy of science associated with a 19th century model of the physical sciences. It is empiricist in asserting that the world exists of observables that are knowable through sensory experience, aspires to the discovery of universal causal laws through the identification of statistical regularities, and commits to value neutrality. The ontology proscribed to positivism ranges from the naïve realism that the world exists of objective material things to the more complex position that, although there is a real world to be discovered, it can be apprehended only imperfectly and probabilistically. The epistemology of positivism is tied to the scientific principle of

verification that specifies rules for what counts as knowledge, in particular confirming sensory experiences through replication. However, although an objective stance is sought, positivistic empiricism admits a certain subjectivity through restricting the knowable to the experientiable. In fact, during the 1920s and 30s, the logical positivist introduced elements of epistemological relativism arguing that the truth of a statement was always internal to a culturally-produced linguistic framework of meaning. Moreover, although strongly associated with quantification, the role of interpretation in statistical analysis is acknowledged in logical positivism, inductive theory generation accepted as a stage of scientific inquiry, and qualitative methods not disqualified *prima facie*, particularly in the social sciences.

Many authors suggest that, since the mid-20th century, positivism has no longer been held as a coherent philosophy of science, even though the language of positivism may still be entrenched in most scientific disciplines. It is argued that the idea of empirical science offering a solid foundation for knowledge has been successfully refuted. For example, post-modern and constructionist perspectives argue that methodology is never neutral, that guiding ideals such as objectivity are value-laden and untenable, and that methods used to study the social world of self-conscious agents must differ from those used in the natural sciences. However, in dismissing and 'othering' positivism, qualitative researchers may be oversimplifying this complex philosophy which, in some forms, actually anticipated post-positivistic science. Moreover, some qualitative methods, themselves, involve elements that might be considered positivistic, for example, the search for universal causal laws in analytic induction, the verificational aspects of grounded theory, and the strict empiricism of conversation analysis.

Naïve/ common-sense/descriptive/crude realism

Naïve realism asserts the ontology that, under normal conditions, things are just as we perceive them to be and the epistemology that true knowledge can be identified through its correspondence with reality. Arguably it is the common-sense philosophy adopted tacitly in daily life. Naïve realism is an unsuitable position for inquiry into things that are not directly perceptible but, in itself, is compatible with both quantitative and qualitative methods and is drawn on within both positivistic and post-positivistic theories of science.

In qualitative methodology, naïve, or descriptive, realism is most associated with naturalist ethnography and symbolic interactionist research in the tradition of Erving Goffman and Herbert Blumer. The methodology of naturalism requires an immersion and co-participation in the social environment under study in its natural state. The empathic understanding gained is the basis for knowledge of the context investigated. In focusing on cultural meanings, as opposed to universal laws, naturalism was developed in counterpoint to positivistic science, but did maintain the claim that social reality can be apprehended directly. This naïve realism has been attacked by Thomas Kuhn who argues that all scientific knowledge is relative and provisional. Moreover, naturalism has been derided by post-modern perspectives that argue 'descriptively real' texts of research findings are a rhetorical construction imposing uni-vocality on what is a multi-perspectival social world. However, there is an argument that, in utilising a basic process of human sense-making (i.e. intersubjectivity), immersive understanding has a claim to be able to produce knowledge of social life.

Scientific realism

Scientific realism accepts the broad ontological and epistemological postulates of naïve realism and adds a commitment to the scientific method as the best mode of inquiry into the nature of reality. The natural sciences are often held as exemplifying methodological procedures and some qualitative researchers, particularly in the 1920s and 30s, sought to emulate them. This included pioneers such as Florian Znaniecki, Blumer, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown. However, striving to emulate the natural sciences is fraught with problems from the start as there is no one true method. Even physics has been shown to have divergent underpinnings including positivist, conventionalist, and realist interpretations, amongst others. However, although scientific realism is heavily associated with positivism, post-positivistic approaches are developing a modified version in critical realism.

Realism and post-positivism

Post-positivism

Many argue that contemporary science is dominated by post-positivistic positions that favour quantification and the search for causation, although amenable to certain forms of qualitative method, and includes a concern with subjectivity and meaning. In general, post-positivists are ontological realist in being willing to accept the existence of an independent reality. However, they espouse a more explicitly sceptical epistemology than the positivists, doubting that reality can be known in a direct way, although having faith that language is in some way referential. Even so, post-positivist epistemology is nonfoundationalist in the sense that truth is considered so only relative to a paradigm. However, a major principle of post-positivist science is falsificationism; the principle that knowledge claims must be tested empirically in conditions under which such claims

could be refuted. Hence, in subjecting beliefs to empirical test, post-positivists allow that the world sets constraints on what can be accepted as truth, even if human understanding requires this to be interpreted within a contemporaneously acceptable framework of meaning. Moreover, post-positivists argue that some beliefs are just more plausible than others and evidence, such as consistency of account or set of associations, although not proof of truth, helps provide this credibility. Some critical perspectives argue that post-positivism can be an overly conservative philosophy by awarding the power of truth determination, however provisional, to contextually dominant paradigms of knowledge.

Post-positivism has developed positions which attempt to claim the middle ground between realism and relativism; subtle realism, analytic realism, critical realism, and Kantian soft or 'transcendental' idealism (the latter which, as it does not identify as a realist position, will not be explored further here).

Subtle realism

Ethnography is one of the oldest forms of qualitative method in the social sciences and the 'reflexive turn' during the late 20th century had a particularly profound impact on ethnographers leading to a critical examination of its foundations. In response, Martyn Hammersley articulated a position termed subtle realism and David Altheide and John Johnson a position known as analytical realism.

Subtle realism, argued to be applicable to social science research in general, is a middle ground between the naïve realism of naturalism and the relativism of constructionist and post-modern approaches. Subtle realism shares the naïve realist ontology that the world consists of independent phenomena but argues that we do not have direct access to them. In terms of epistemology, subtle realism agrees with naïve

realism that the world is knowable, but adds that our understanding always relies on cultural assumptions and is, at best, a selective representation; that is, one of many possible valid accounts. This is a correspondence theory of truth but one that allows that, because we have no direct access to reality, we can never have absolutely certain knowledge. Hence, subtle realism requires that researchers make explicit the relevances on which their accounts are based. For example, accounts must be plausible given our existing knowledge, have credibility as the kind of account that might reasonably be expected given the conditions of the research, and have relevance to issues of human concern.

Analytic realism

Altheide and Johnson's analytic realism is a humanistic approach to qualitative methodology, particularly ethnography, focusing on what they call the empirical world of lived experience. Like subtle realism, analytic realism rejects the dichotomy of realism and relativism, although they argue that analytic realism places the stronger emphasis on knowledge verification. Ontological assumptions concern the social world and this is conceptualised as interpreted, rather than literal. Epistemologically, interpretation is accepted as a valid way of knowing even though knowledge is considered relative to a perspective and it is accepted that different researchers, and research conducted at different points in time, may come to different conclusions. So, although analytic realism shares with naturalism a faith in immersive understanding, it includes a particular concern with the interpretative validity of research accounts and is careful to specify criteria increasing the validity of reports. Criteria include clear delineation of the research context and method, reflexive reporting, and attention to the multi-vocality of members'

perspectives. Such procedures do not ensure the objective truth of findings, as the report is considered to be truth only as the researcher has come to understand it, but make the researcher's claims better open to evaluation.

Critical realism

Critical realism is a position under development by a growing number of proponents but is, possibly, most associated with Roy Bhaskar. Writings on critical realism often stress the position as an ontology, although it does have epistemological implications and may even be considered a philosophy of science.

The ontological position of critical realism states that the objects of the world consist of the emergent properties of physical and social entities although our beliefs and expectations influence the way we perceive and theorise these objects, particularly in the social sciences. Hence, as an epistemology, critical realism accepts a perspectival theory of knowledge situated within a socially and historically relativistic theory of science. However, some forms of knowledge are argued to be more plausible than others and critical realism accepts the importance of empirical investigation with Bhaskar arguing for a form of naturalism in the social sciences. This substantiates the interpretation that Bhaskar views critical realism as a development within scientific realism that jettisons some of its more positivistic assumptions. That is, in viewing meaningfulness as the key element of social life, critical realists eschew the use of quantification and experimental control in the social sciences. Moreover, although accounts of the social world are believed grounded in practices with an underlying structure and logic, critical realism is non-reductionist in arguing that the best explanations are not necessarily at the level of most basic empirical elements and mechanisms.

The final defining characteristic of critical realism is that it is also a moral philosophy that places human emancipation as a central concern of science. Bhaskar argues that social science theories, developed through empirical investigation, can show certain beliefs, or ideologies, to be false and can demonstrate how they have been generated within transitory, and hence changeable, social relations and structures.

Critical realism has been critiqued as too vague and too general to be a convincing philosophy of science. Moreover, it is argued that faith that the social world is grounded in knowable, extra-theoretical, deep structures seems at odds with Bhaskar's commitment to scientific relativism associated with Khun's theory of paradigmatic shifts in the nature of the objects and processes with which science populates the world.

Realism and critical approaches

Critical theor(ies)

Critical theory has had an influence on social science from the 1960s incorporating a backlash to the perceived value-neutrality of positivism and perceived failure of interpretative, or hermeneutic, social science to recognise macro-structural constraints.

Critical theory is emancipatory in its aims and focuses on the critique of ideology; that is, on revealing historically-created distortions in understanding that influence everyday life.

In general, three versions of critical theory can be identified; Marxist, the Frankfurt School version of Marxism, and positions influenced by feminism (as well as by Marxism).

Ontologically, critical theory allows that the world exists of real objects but that reality can take on different meanings within different, humanly-constructed symbolic fields. Hence, critical theory has a non-foundational epistemology, believing that there is

no theory- or value-free knowledge as human understanding consists of socially and historically situated patterns. However, critical theory retains the idea that knowledge can be objective by defining objectivity, not in terms of correspondence with an independent reality, but in relation to explicating the shared patterns of culturally and historically developed understandings.

This peculiarly historical and political emphasis, and strength with which discourses are understood to be constitutive of the world, makes critical theory difficult to match easily with subtle or analytic realism, or, perhaps, even critical realism. Although having a realist ontology, the discursive emphasis of critical theory can make it difficult to ground research findings as truth. Moreover, it seems inconsistent to claim that one truth is more empowering than another when the interests of one oppressed group may well be in conflict with those of another.

Standpoint theor(ies)

The political and emancipatory elements of critical theory are shared by standpoint theory which commits to the empowerment of oppressed groups informed by feminism but also stances such as anti-racism and anti-colonialism. The ontology of standpoint theory is the acceptance of a materially real world. However, just as critical realism is sometimes presented as a particularly sophisticated ontology, the emphasis of standpoint theory is its epistemology. Standpoint epistemology provides a securer grounding for truth claims than does critical theory through espousing a stronger foundationalist stance, although this foundationalism is complex and has been described as 'fractured'. That is, truth claims are grounded in a material world understood to set boundaries on what is possible,

while it is accepted that many different interpretations of this world are plausible and valid within the different contexts provoking them.

An important aspect of standpoint theory is the attempt to democratise knowledge production through approaching participants as experts on their own experience and for the researcher to incorporate a reflexive awareness about how their own biography and actions influence the knowledge(s) produced. This does not prima face exclude quantitative methods but tends to be more compatible with qualitative approaches. However, standpoint research does tread a precarious and, arguable, contradictory line between knowledge as construction and knowledge as experience. Some researchers have argued that standpoint research produces more objective knowledge than traditional methods through its revelation of otherwise ignored values and frameworks of power. This has been critiqued by, most pertinently, post-modern feminists who argue that this glosses the problems of accepting that differing accounts of the world may be true relative to their context, particularly when power relations between members of an oppressed group differ. For example, one may ask if it is possible even for research on women by women to democratise the research process and produce value-free knowledge when the actors have many different social identities each with potentially different structural power relations; ethnicity, sexual orientation, class etc. In support of standpoint theory, in good research such tensions are not dismissed but incorporated reflexively as dilemmas to be explored as part of understanding the complexities of lived experience.

Conclusion

Realism covers a range of complex ontological and epistemological positions within which research can be conducted. The philosophy of science is in continual development

and, as outlined above, new and modified realisms are under debate. Many of these are relevant to qualitative research even if the perception can be that these methodologies are dominated by relativist, social constructionist, and post-modern perspectives. Realist positions offer qualitative analysis grounding for research findings: sophisticated, complex, and compatible with the ethos of many qualitative methods. Critical realism, in particular, is gaining advocates as a strong foundation for forms of discourse analysis and other qualitative researchers, perhaps most notably in the phenomenological and humanistic traditions, are drawn to realist positions allowing them to argue that they access the lived experience of those they study.

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See also critical realism, epistemology, ontology, positivism, postpositivism

Further Readings

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