PERSPECTIVES ON THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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This chapter reviews and clarifies the various ways in which qualitative researchers approach the creation of knowledge. Qualitative research can take many forms. Within the general rubric of qualitative research, we can find a wide range of activities that are driven by different goals, deploy different research strategies, and generate different kinds of insights. This means that although all qualitative research shares some important attributes (and these will be identified in the next section), it also is characterized by fundamental differences in epistemological orientation. In other words, qualitative researchers can take a range of different positions in relation to questions about the nature and status of any knowledge claims that may be made on the basis of their research. This chapter maps out the range of epistemological positions available to qualitative researchers and discusses the implications for the way in which qualitative research is conducted and evaluated.

The chapter is structured as follows: In the first section, we are reminded of the nature and purpose of qualitative research in general. We identify the most important characteristics of qualitative research, those which are shared by all forms of qualitative research (see the section What Is Qualitative Research?). In the second section, we discuss the different strands within the qualitative research endeavor. Here, we focus on the different types of knowledge that can be generated on the basis of different approaches to qualitative enquiry (see the section Differences Among Qualitative Approaches). In the third section, we introduce the various epistemological frameworks that underpin these different approaches

(see the section Epistemological Frameworks). In the last section, we discuss their implications for the evaluation of qualitative research (see Evaluation).

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research is primarily concerned with meaning. Qualitative researchers are interested in subjectivity and experience. They want to understand better what their research participants' experiences are like, what they mean to them, how they talk about them, and how they make sense of them. Qualitative researchers try to capture the quality and texture of their research participants' experiences and aim to understand the implications and consequences of those experiences, for participants and for other people. Qualitative research addresses the following types of questions:

- What does something feel like? For example, a qualitative researcher might want to find out what it is like to be the only man in an all-female workplace.
- How is something experienced? For example, we may want to conduct qualitative research into the experience of being made redundant.
- How do people talk about something and with what consequences? For example, we may analyze naturally occurring conversations about housework and explore subject positions available to men and women within this.
- How do people make sense of an experience? How do they construct its meaning? What does

this allow them to do or not to do? To feel or not to feel? For example, a qualitative study could explore the ways in which people who have been injured in a road traffic accident make sense of this experience and how this allows them to position themselves in relation to the accident.

■ How does a particular (social or psychological) event unfold? How do participants experience the event? What may be its consequences? For them or for others? For example, we may want to find out how the end of an intimate relationship comes about, how those involved experience such an ending, what *breaking up* means to them, and how it may shape their views of future relationships.

Qualitative research does not, and cannot, answer questions about relationships between variables or about cause-and-effect relationships. Qualitative research is concerned with the description and interpretation of research participants' experiences. It tends to prioritize depth of understanding over breadth of coverage, and as such, the knowledge it generates tends to be localized and context specific. Qualitative researchers do not aim to generalize their findings to general populations and they do not aim to develop predictive models of human behavior. Instead, qualitative researchers tend to work in a *bottom-up* fashion, exploring in depth relatively small amounts of data (e.g., a small number of semistructured interviews, an individual case, or a set of documents relating to a specific event), working through the data line by line. As a result, any insights generated on the basis of qualitative analysis tend to be context specific and are not generalizable to general populations.

Common features of qualitative research include the following:

■ **Presents findings in everyday language.** Because qualitative research aims to capture and convey the meanings research participants attribute to their experiences and actions, research findings tend to take the form of verbal accounts. Such qualitative accounts may vary in the extent to which they are descriptive or interpretative, in the extent to which they utilize expert discourse (such as psychological terminology), and in the

extent to which they deploy poetic language or a prose style. Qualitative research findings, however, tend *not* to be represented by numbers or equations, they do *not* involve statistical calculations, and they do *not* draw conclusions about probabilities of occurrences or covariations of phenomena within a population.

■ **Views meaning in context.** Qualitative researchers are concerned with how individual research participants make sense of specific experiences within particular contexts. This means that any meanings identified are specific to the context within which they are constructed and deployed by the participants. For example, to understand what it means to somebody to get married, we need to know something about the individual's life history and their social and cultural context as well as their situation at the time of the interview. Qualitative research, therefore, tends not to draw conclusions about what something might mean in general. Indeed, from a qualitative perspective, it is questionable whether such generalized meanings do, in fact, exist.

■ **Incorporates researcher reflexivity.** Qualitative researchers' concern with meaning and interpretation means that they need to pay particular attention to the ways in which their own beliefs, assumptions, and experiences may shape (both limit and facilitate) their reading of qualitative data. For example, whether the researcher has personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation is important and the nature of the experience (or indeed its absence) needs to be thought about as it inevitably will frame the researcher's approach to the topic. Researcher reflexivity ought to be an integral part of any qualitative study because meaning is always *given* to data and never simply identified or discovered within it.

■ **Studies the real world.** Qualitative research is concerned with participants' life experiences, which means that ideally qualitative data ought to be collected *in situ*, that is, where and when the experiences of interest actually take place. Such naturally occurring data include tape recordings of conversations in real-life contexts, such as homes, workplaces, or over the telephone,

as well as video recordings of social interactions such as those at football matches, pubs, or clubs. Because collecting naturally occurring data is not always ethically or practically possible, however, a lot of qualitative data takes the form of transcripts of semistructured interviews with people who have agreed to talk about their experiences. Either way, whether in situ or in the form of description and reflection after the event, qualitative data always are concerned with real life, that is, with events and experiences that take place irrespective of whether the researcher studies them. Experimentation has no place in qualitative research (unless the aim is to study the experience of taking part in an experiment).

■ **Is primarily inductive.** Unlike hypothetico-deductive research, qualitative research does not set out to test hypotheses derived from existing theories. On the contrary, most qualitative research deliberately brackets the researcher's theoretical knowledge to allow novel insights and understandings to emerge from the data. As such, most qualitative research aspires to an inductive model of knowledge generation. Exceptions to this do exist, however, and these are in the section Differences Among Qualitative Approaches. Also, most if not all qualitative researchers recognize that pure induction is an impossibility given the role of the researcher in the research process and that without some kind of theoretical lens data collection and analysis cannot take place. The challenge to the qualitative researcher is to enable the data set to speak for itself (as far as possible) and to surprise the researcher rather than to simply confirm or refute his or her expectations.

DIFFERENCES AMONG QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

Drisko (1997) developed Glaser's (1992) analogy of qualitative research as a "family of approaches" by suggesting that "in this family there are some close relations, some distant relations, some extended kin, some odd cousins, and a few nasty divorces." Differences between qualitative approaches to research can go deep and some varieties of qualitative

research methodology are incompatible with one another. The various formal philosophical and epistemological positions available to qualitative researchers are mapped out in the section Epistemological Frameworks. In this section, we prepare the ground by identifying the major points of tension around which the family of qualitative research organizes itself. These points of tension include (a) the role of theory, (b) description versus interpretation, (c) realism versus relativism, and (d) politics.

The Role of Theory

As indicated in the section What Is Qualitative Research? although most qualitative research adopts an inductive model of knowledge generation, some qualitative approaches also include a deductive element. For example, grounded theory methodology involves a process of testing emerging theoretical formulations against incoming data, thus moving between developing and testing theory as the research progresses toward saturation. For example, a researcher may want to understand what caused a fight between rival fans at a football match. The researcher begins the research with no assumptions about what happened and she or he begins by interviewing bystanders, witnesses, and participants in the fight. Preliminary analysis of the data generates a hypothesis about what triggered the event and the researcher returns to the field and conducts further interviews with particular individuals to test the hypothesis and to develop it into a coherent account of how the fight came about. In this case, the theory that is being tested is the emergent theory that has been conceived on the basis of an inductive process and does not involve the application of preexisting theoretical perspectives.

Alternatively, approaches such as psychoanalytic case studies draw on existing theoretical frameworks (such as Freudian or Kleinian theories) to account for the manifest content of the data. For example, the researcher may attribute theory-driven meanings to an interviewee's behaviors during the interview and conclude that the interviewee's long pauses, hesitations, and incomplete sentences signify resistance to acknowledging underlying feelings, such as anger or anxiety. In these cases, theory is imported

from outside of the study into the research. Another example of deliberate and purposeful importing of theory into qualitative research is provided by critical approaches, such as Marxist or feminist analyses, whereby a preestablished perspective is applied to interpret the data (see Drisko, 1997). Imported theoretical perspectives supply a lens through which the data can be read, thus generating insights into particular dimensions of experience that have been identified as being of interest to the researcher or as being important for social or political reasons long before the data have been collected.

Description Versus Interpretation

Qualitative approaches also vary in the extent to which they aspire to move beyond the data and to interpret what is being presented. That is to say, they vary in the extent to which they take data "at face value." Some qualitative approaches, such as descriptive phenomenology, stay close to research participants' accounts of their experience as the aim of such research is to capture, clarify, and represent the quality and texture of those experiences. Here, analyzing data means paying close attention to what is being said by the participant, grasping and distilling its meaning, and systematically representing it to others. In descriptive approaches to qualitative research, meaning is found in the text itself or, as Kendall and Murray (2005) put it, "the meaning of any story is embodied in that story" (p. 749).

Other approaches, such as interpretative phenomenology, aspire to go further and to give meaning to participants' experiences beyond that which the participants may be able or willing to attribute to it. In other words, even without the application of a particular theory to the data (see the section What Is Qualitative Research?), it is possible to extract meanings that are not immediately obvious to even the person who has produced the account (i.e., the research participant). For example, existential themes such as fear of death or fear of meaninglessness may be expressed only indirectly and by way of analogy in the research participant's account, yet an interpretative analysis may conclude that they underpin and, indeed, give a deeper meaning to the account.

These two positions (descriptive vs. interpretative) are sometimes referred to as "hermeneutics of meaning recollection" (descriptive) and "hermeneutics of suspicion" (interpretative; see Langdridge, 2007, Chapter 4, on Ricoeur and hermeneutics; see also Giorgi, 1992, for a discussion of the differences between interpretative science and descriptive science).

Realism Versus Relativism

Qualitative researchers need to think carefully about the status of the products of their research and the sorts of claims they wish to make on the basis of them. They need to ask themselves to what extent their research aims to shed light on reality (i.e., on how things are in the world) and to what extent they are simply trying to offer reflections that may (or may not) be of use to others who are trying to make sense of their own and others' experiences. In other words, does their research aim to hold up a mirror to reflect reality as it is or is the purpose of their research to provide a space within which to engage with and reflect on a particular experiential phenomenon? Discussions about realism and relativism in qualitative research are complicated by the fact that both the status of the data (as realist or relativist) *and* the status of the analysis of the data (as realist or relativist) need to be established. It is important to recognize that these are two distinct but equally important considerations that easily can get confused or conflated.

To start with the status of the data, qualitative researchers can take a realist position that takes data (such as research participants' accounts) at face value and treats them akin to witness statements, that is to say, as a description of events that actually took place in the real world. From such a position, the researcher would take great care to ensure that the data collected are accurate and truthful by ensuring that the conditions under which accounts are produced are favorable (e.g., that participants feel safe and nondefensive, and that nothing will prevent them from opening up and telling the truth). Alternatively, the researcher can adopt a relativist position in relation to the status of the data, which means that research participants' accounts are of interest *not* because they inform the researcher about what is actually going on in the world (e.g., what really happened to the

participant), but rather because they tell the researcher something about how the participants are constructing meaning in their lives. In such a case, the researcher is not concerned with the truth value of what participants are telling him or her; instead, the aim of the research is to generate rich and detailed accounts that will enable the researcher to gain a better understanding of the participant's meaning-making activities.

Moving on to the status of the analysis, again, two broad positions are available to the researcher: a realist position that aspires to the production of accurate and valid knowledge about what is going on, either in the social world, in terms of (a) events that are taking place in this world (this is in line with the realist position on the status of the data) *or* (b) actions that research participants are taking when they construct meaning (this is in line with the relativist position on the status of the data). In both cases, the researcher's (metaphorical) task is to hold up a mirror to accurately reflect what is going on either in the world out there, or inside the mind of the research participant. This means that it is possible to adopt a realist position (i.e., holding up the mirror) in relation to relativist data (i.e., the research participant's constructions). Such a position claims that the researcher can accurately and truthfully represent the participant's subjective world (i.e., their constructions of meaning). Alternatively, the research can adopt a relativist position in relation to the analysis. This would mean abandoning any truth claims regarding the analytic insights produced, arguing instead that what is being offered is the researcher's reading of the data, which tells us just as much (or more) about the researcher (and his or her meaning-making activities) as it does about the participants or indeed about the social world. It could be argued that a very fine line exists between this type of research and the sorts of activities that an artist may engage in.

Politics

Qualitative research can have an explicitly political dimension in that some qualitative researchers are motivated by a desire to give voice to otherwise underrepresented or oppressed social groups.

Indeed, feminist scholars were instrumental in introducing and promoting qualitative research methods in psychology. Because qualitative research tends to be bottom-up (allowing the voices of research participants to be heard) and because it tends to be inductive (avoiding the imposition of existing concepts and categories), qualitative research can be used as part of an empowerment agenda. Qualitative research also can be practiced in an egalitarian, participatory, and collaborative way (such as in action research or some types of ethnography in which the research participants set the agenda and shape the direction of the research), thus allowing the researcher to challenge established power relations between (expert) researchers and (naïve) research participants.

More interpretative versions of qualitative research (see the section Differences Among Qualitative Approaches) adopt a more conventional "knowing" stance, embracing the role of an expert who, as a result of familiarity with the relevant psychological literature, may be able to understand the participants better than they can understand themselves. For example, Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) approach to qualitative analysis was based on the premise that people "may not know why they experience or feel things in the way that they do [and] are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions" (p. 26). Thus, qualitative researchers have a range of options regarding the political orientation of their research activities. Although qualitative research often is associated with a liberal, egalitarian social agenda, not all qualitative research adopts this perspective.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The previous section demonstrated that qualitative researchers can adopt a wide range of positions regarding the meaning and status of the kind of knowledge their research generates (or, indeed, regarding the extent to which the production of knowledge is possible or desirable in the first place). Epistemological positions are characterized by a set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing that

provide answers to the question "What and how can we know?" Paradoxically, although we tend to think about research as being about finding answers to questions through some form of systematic process of empirical enquiry, the starting point of any research project is, in fact, a set of assumptions that themselves are not based on anything other than philosophical reflection. This is inevitable, and it is important that researchers are aware of, clear about, and prepared to acknowledge and *own* their epistemological position. This is not always easy because the most fundamental assumptions we make about the world are often unacknowledged and implicit; that is, we take them for granted. This section maps out the range of epistemological positions available to qualitative researchers and discusses their relationships with one another. It also suggests ways in which researchers can identify and clarify their own assumptions.

Perhaps the easiest way for a researcher to access the assumptions she or he makes is to ask him- or herself a series of questions (see also Willig, 2008, Chapter 1), such as the following:

- What kind of knowledge do I aim to create?
- What are the assumptions that I make about the (material, social, and psychological) world(s) that I study?
- How do I conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process? What is the relationship between myself and the knowledge I aim to generate?

The remainder of this section looks at the range of possible answers to these three questions and provides examples of research designs informed by the epistemological positions indicated by such answers. Positions and their concomitant designs will be grouped into three broad approaches that are characterized by the type of knowledge they aim to create: (a) realist knowledge, (b) phenomenological knowledge, and (c) social constructionist knowledge (see Figure 1.1 for a summary).

Three types of knowledge

Realist	Phenomenological	Social Constructionist
direct critical	descriptive interpretative	radical moderate

Researcher as:

| detective | counselor | architect |

Aims to:

| discover/uncover reality | understand | deconstruct |

The (social/psychological) world is:

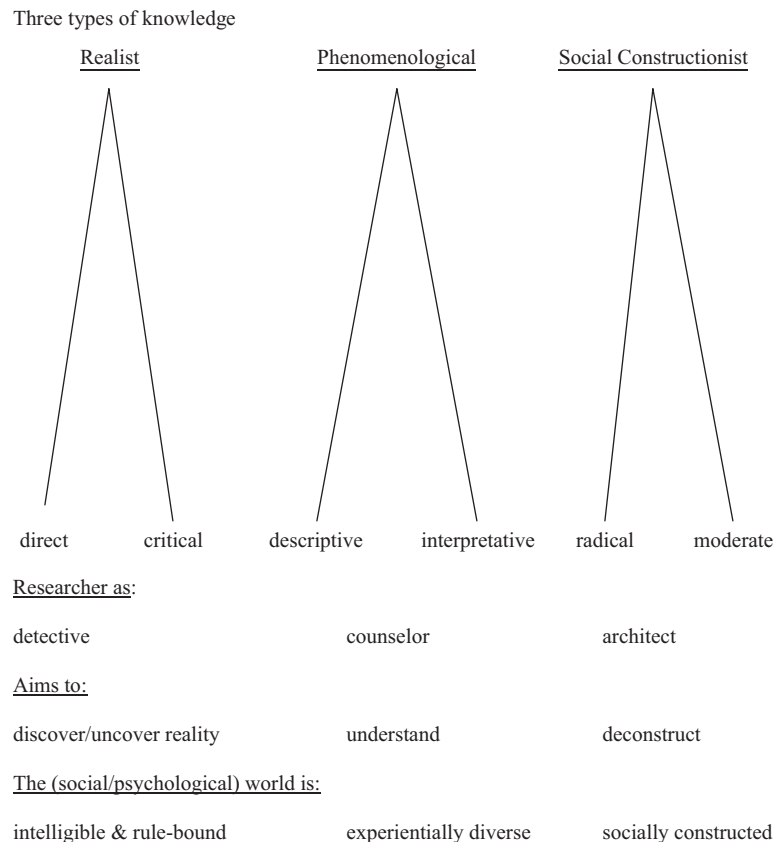| intelligible & rule-bound | experientially diverse | socially constructed |

FIGURE 1.1.   Three types of knowledge.

Realist Knowledge

Qualitative researchers can use qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to obtain a rich, accurate, detailed, and comprehensive picture of (some aspects of) the social world or of human psychology. The type of knowledge sought in this case aspires to capture and reflect as truthfully as possible something that is happening in the real world and that exists independently of the researcher's, and indeed the research participants', views or knowledge about it. The sorts of things a researcher who aspires to generate this type of (*realist*) knowledge might study include social processes (e.g., what happens when a new member joins an established reading group or what happens when an organization implements a new equal opportunities policy?) and psychological mechanisms or processes (e.g., how a person who suffers from panic attacks plans a journey on public transport or how people who lost a parent at an early age approach intimate relationships).

The assumption underpinning this type of research is that certain processes or patterns of a social or psychological nature characterize or shape the behavior or the thinking of research participants, and these can be identified and conveyed by the researcher. This means that the researcher assumes that the (material, social, psychological) world she or he investigates potentially can be understood, provided that the researcher is skilled enough to uncover the patterns, regularities, structures, or laws of behavior that characterize it and that generate the social or psychological phenomena we witness (and that constitute one's data). The researcher can succeed or fail in this process, which means that the researcher aspires to generate valid and reliable knowledge about a social or psychological phenomenon that exists independently of the researcher's awareness of it. As such, this type of research is characterized by a discovery orientation (see Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). The role of the researcher in this situation is akin to that of a detective who uses his or her skills, knowledge, and experience to uncover hitherto hidden facts and who, through his or her labor, makes what appeared puzzling or mysterious intelligible. The kinds of methods used by qualitative researchers who aim to produce this type of (realist) knowledge include

(realist versions of) ethnography and grounded theory methodology as well as such varieties of interpretative analysis as psychoanalytic approaches (but these methods also can be used from within a less realist epistemological framework, which is discussed in the section Varieties of Realist Knowledge).

Phenomenological Knowledge

Alternatively, qualitative research can aim to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants (rather than about the social or psychological patterns or processes that underpin, structure, or shape such subjective experiences, as realist knowledge does). In this case, the researcher aspires to capture something that exists in the world (namely, the participants' feelings, thoughts, and perceptions—that is, their experiences); however, no claim is being made regarding its relationship with other facets of the world or indeed regarding the accuracy of the participants' accounts of their experiences (e.g., whether a phenomenological account of an embodied experience such as anger or anxiety matches up with objective physiological measures such as blood pressure or galvanic skin response). Such research aims to understand experience (rather than to discover what is "really" going on). In other words, it does not matter whether what a research participant describes is an accurate reflection of what happened to him or her or a fantasy; instead, the type of knowledge the researcher is trying to obtain is *phenomenological* knowledge—that is, knowledge of the quality and texture of the participant's experience. For example, a researcher might want to find out what it is like to be living with a diagnosis of psychosis or how a participant experiences the process of going through a divorce. Finding that a participant experiences herself as "rejected by the whole world," for example, constitutes phenomenological knowledge irrespective of whether the participant really is being rejected by everyone she encounters.

The task of the researcher in this type of research is to get as close as possible to the research participant's experience, to step into that person's shoes, and to look at the world through his or her eyes, that is to say, to enter his or her world. Here, the

role of the researcher is similar to that of the *person-centered counselor* who listens to the client's account of his or her experience empathically, without judging and without questioning the external validity of what the client is saying. This means that the researcher assumes that there is more than one *world* to be studied. This is because researchers who seek this type of knowledge are interested in the experiential world of the participant (rather than the material, social, or psychological structures that may give rise to particular experiences—for example, the biochemical changes associated with psychosis or the social processes that can give rise to stereotyping); what appear to be the "same" (material, social, psychological) conditions (e.g., a divorce, a diagnosis, an accident) can be experienced in many different ways, and this means that there are potentially as many (experiential) worlds as there are individuals. A researcher who attempts to generate this type of knowledge asks, "What is the world like *for this participant*?" (rather than "What is the world like and what is it about the world that makes a particular experience possible?"). The kinds of methods used by qualitative researchers who aim to produce this type of (phenomenological) knowledge, unsurprisingly, tend to be phenomenological methods (such as interpretative phenomenological analysis or descriptive phenomenology, but note that phenomenological methods engage with the process of interpretation in a variety of ways that are discussed in the section Varieties of Phenomenological Knowledge later in this chapter).

Social Constructionist Knowledge

Finally, a qualitative researcher can adopt a much more skeptical position in relation to knowledge and argue that what is of interest is not so much what is really going on (realist approach to knowledge) or how something is actually experienced by participants (phenomenological approach) but rather how people talk about the world and, therefore, how they construct versions of reality through the use of language. Here, the type of knowledge aspired to is not knowledge about the world or knowledge about how things are (experienced) but rather knowledge about the process by which such knowledge is constructed in the first place. This

means that questions about the nature of social and psychological events and experiences are suspended and instead the researcher is concerned with the social construction of knowledge. Because language plays such an important part in the construction of knowledge, qualitative researchers who adopt a *social constructionist* orientation to knowledge generation tend to study discourses and the ways in which they are deployed within particular contexts. For example, a researcher might analyze the language used in policy documents about antisocial behavior to understand how the phenomenon of concern—"antisocial behavior"—is constructed within these documents and how the discourses used in the documents position those who are constructed as the targets of proposed interventions.

Such an approach to research is based on the assumption that all human experience is mediated by language, which means that all social and psychological phenomena are constructed in one way or another. It also means that all knowledge about the world and experience of the world is very much socially mediated and that individual experiences are always the product of internalized social constructions. In other words, when participants are telling the researcher about their experiences, they are not seen to be giving voice to an inner reality (as in phenomenological research) or to be providing information about social or psychological processes (as in realist research); instead, the researcher is interested in how socially available ways of talking about the phenomenon of interest (i.e., discourses) are deployed by the participant and how these may shape the participant's experience. Here, the role of the researcher is to draw attention to the constructed nature of social reality and to trace the specific ways in which particular phenomena are constructed through discourse and to reflect on the consequences of this for those who are affected (that is to say, who are "positioned") by these social constructions. As such, the role of the researcher is akin to that of an architect who looks at the phenomenon of interest with a view to how it has been constructed and from what resources and materials. The most commonly used method to produce this type of (social constructionist) knowledge is discourse analysis (of which there are several versions,

including discursive psychology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis); however, other methods such as narrative analysis and memory work also can be used.

Within these three basic approaches to conceptualizing the types of knowledge sought by qualitative researchers, each theme has variations (usually in the form of more or less radical versions). In the following section, we identify a variety of positions within each approach to knowledge generation.

Varieties of Realist Knowledge

Realist aspirations to knowledge generation range from what is sometimes referred to as naive to more critical varieties. *Naive realist* approaches are characterized by the assumption that a relatively uncomplicated and direct relationship exists between what presents itself (the data, the evidence) and what is going on (the reality we want to understand). In other words, we assume that the data more or less directly represent (mirror, reflect) reality. For example, if we wanted to find out how people make decisions about whether to have an HIV antibody test and we interviewed individuals who recently made such a decision, a naïve realist approach would dictate that we take participants' accounts at face value and that we accept that their accounts constitute accurate descriptions of how they made their decision. The task of the researcher, therefore, would be (a) to ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable enough to provide the researcher with accurate and detailed accounts and (b) to analyze the accounts in such as way as to produce a clear and systematic model of the decision-making process (or the variety of pathways for decision making if that is what the accounts indicate).

To call such research "naive realist" is to belittle it. The label *naive* does imply a criticism, and it is unlikely that a researcher would ever willingly describe their own research as naïve realist—even if he or she subscribed to the assumptions about knowledge generation that are associated with this label. Also, some very valuable research aims to "give voice" to otherwise-marginalized individuals and communities and is underpinned by the assumption that what participants are telling the researcher about their experiences (e.g., of suffering,

of exploitation, of oppression) reflects a social reality that needs to be exposed, acknowledged, and understood. Again, to call such research "naive" is to disparage and devalue research that clearly does have its uses and significance. Perhaps a less value-laden term such as *direct* realism would be preferable.

Critical realist approaches to knowledge generation differ from the more direct (or naive) version in that they are formed on the basis of the assumption that although the data can tell us about what is going on in the real (i.e., material, social, psychological) world, it does not do so in a self-evident, unmediated fashion. In other words, a critical realist approach does not assume that the data directly reflect reality (like a mirror image); rather, the data need to be interpreted to provide access to the underlying structures that generate the manifestations that constitute the data. For example, if we carry out a participant observation of the social rituals and practices that characterize life within a particular community, the data we collect (in the form of recordings of observations, conversations, interviews, documents, and photographs which capture life in the community, perhaps) would provide us with information about what members of the community do, how they relate to one another, and how they structure and manage their social life. However, the data would not tell us, directly and explicitly, what it might be (e.g., historically or politically) that drives, shapes, and maintains these structures and practices. To understand this, we need to move beyond the data and draw on knowledge, theories, and evidence from outside the particular study and use these to account for what we have observed. For instance, a community's history, its relations with neighboring communities or particular geographic conditions may help the researcher explain why people do what they do.

Crucially, from a critical realist standpoint, it is not necessary (in fact, we would not usually expect) that research participants be aware of the underlying mechanisms or conditions that inform their overt behaviors and experiences. Research informed by psychoanalytic theory is a good example of critical realist research in that it is assumed that the underlying (in this case, psychological) structures that

generate the manifest, observable phenomena (behaviors, symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue, etc.) are not necessarily accessible to those who experience them (i.e., the research participants, the patients). This assumption, however, does not mean that such structures are not "real." Critical realist research can vary in the extent to which it proclaims the existence of underlying structures and mechanisms with anything approaching certainty. Some researchers have presented their analyses with caution and the proviso that the interpretations offered are just that—interpretations that represent possibilities rather than certainties (e.g., Frosh & Saville-Young, 2008). Others have taken a much more knowing stance and present their analyses as insights into how things (actually, really) are (e.g., how people function psychologically or how communities are formed; see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Varieties of Phenomenological Knowledge

All phenomenological knowledge aspires to increase the researcher's understanding of research participants' experience. As such, phenomenological knowledge is *insider knowledge*—that is, a knowledge that attempts to shed light on phenomena through an understanding of how these phenomena present themselves in or through experience; that is to say, how they appear to somebody within a particular context. Differences exist, however, in the extent to which phenomenological knowledge bases itself on the researcher's interpretation of research participants' experience. This means that phenomenological approaches to knowledge generation range from descriptive to interpretative varieties. *Descriptive phenomenology* is very much concerned with capturing experience "precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it" (Giorgi, 1992, p. 121). Descriptive phenomenology does not aim to account for or explain the experience or to attribute meanings to it that are imported from outside of the account of the actual experience. In other words, it does not go beyond the data. For example, a descriptive phenomenologist might be interested in the phenomenon of being surprised. To better understand this phenomenon, the researcher might conduct a series of semistructured interviews with individuals who recently have experienced a surprise (such

as winning a prize, being invited on an unexpected holiday, or receiving a letter from a long-lost friend). The analysis of the interviews would aim to generate an understanding of what characterizes the experience of being surprised; in other words, the researcher would want to know what it is that people experience when they are surprised—for instance, the person may experience a sense of a loss of control, of ambivalence, or of uncertainty about how to respond, and perhaps also feelings of joy and excitement. We do not know what characterizes the experience until we have conducted a phenomenological analysis of the data and, as a descriptive phenomenologist, we should not allow our experiences, expectations, and assumptions regarding the experience of surprise to inform our analysis of the data. The end product of a descriptive phenomenological study would be an account of the structure of the phenomenon of being surprised that is formed entirely on the basis of participants' accounts of their experiences.

By contrast, *interpretative phenomenology* does not take accounts of experience "at face value" in the same way; instead, interpretative phenomenologists do move beyond the data in that they step outside of the account and reflect on its status as an account and its wider (social, cultural, psychological) meanings. As Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) put it in their discussion of interpretative phenomenological analysis, such interpretative analysis "positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context. This second-order account aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal 'sense-making' activities" (p. 104). For example, an interpretative phenomenologist might want to explore the experience of women who have tried and failed to conceive with the help of in vitro fertilization. The researcher would start the research process in much the same way as a descriptive phenomenologist and conduct semistructured interviews with women who recently have had this experience. The next step (still in line with descriptive phenomenology) would be to engage with the interview transcripts with the aim of entering the participant's world, understanding what it has been like for the participants to go

through the experience, and producing a description of the experience that captures its quality and texture, and that portrays its structure and essence.

The interpretative phenomenologist acknowledges that understanding the participant's experience presupposes a process of making sense of the participant's account in the first place; in other words, the researcher needs to give meaning to the account to understand it. Therefore, through a hermeneutic circle of giving and recovering meaning, the researcher is intimately implicated in making sense of the participant's account of a failure to conceive a child. In a further interpretative move, the researcher may contextualize the participants' experience by reflecting on the social and economic structures within which women in our culture experience reproduction, or the social and cultural expectations and norms that prevail at the time of data collection. The aim of such reflection would be to make (further) sense of participants' experiences and to understand better how such experiences are made possible by the context within which they occur.

Descriptive and interpretative versions of phenomenological research therefore differ in their approach to reflexivity. Although descriptive phenomenologists believe that it is possible to produce descriptions that capture and comprehend the phenomenon as it presents itself, interpretative phenomenologists argue that it is not, in fact, possible to produce a pure description of experience in any case and that description always involves a certain amount of interpretation. At the most basic level, it is argued, one's choice of words shapes the meaning of what they are trying to convey and this means that, inevitably, the researcher adds meaning to the data.

Varieties of Social Constructionist Knowledge

By way of contrast with realist approaches, the social constructionist perspective is often described as *relativist*. It is relativist in the sense that it questions the "out-there-ness" of the world and it rejects the idea that objects, events, and even experiences precede and inform our descriptions of them. Indeed, it rejects the notion of description altogether and replaces it with that of construction. Social

constructionism is relativist in the sense that it conceptualizes language as a form of social action that constructs versions of reality; here, it is discourse that constructs reality rather than reality that determines how we describe or talk about it. More or less radical strands of social constructionism exist, however, and not all social constructionist researchers would describe themselves as relativists. This means that social constructionist approaches to knowledge production can range from *radical* to more *moderate* versions. Research that is concerned with the ways in which speakers within a particular social context strategically deploy discursive resources to achieve a particular interactional objective may be conducted from a radical relativist position. Such a position demands that the researcher abandons any ambition to gain access to the participants' inner experience or indeed to understand how they make sense of their experience. Instead, the researcher assumes that participants will construct different versions of reality (i.e., of their experiences, their histories, their memories, their thoughts and feelings) depending on the social context within which they find themselves and the stake that they have in this context.

In other words, from a radical social constructionist perspective, there is nothing outside of the text. Reality is what participants are constructing within a particular interaction through discourse. This reality does not survive the context within which it has been constructed, as a different reality will be constructed to suit the next context. This means that the radical version of social constructionism foregrounds the variability and flexibility of accounts. It aims to understand how and why discursive objects and positions are constructed in particular ways within particular contexts and it explores the consequences of such constructions for those who are using them and those who are positioned by them (i.e., the speakers in a conversation). For example, a researcher might be interested in how people who have decided to commence psychotherapy introduce themselves to their new psychotherapist and how they explain why they are there. To obtain suitable data, the researcher would need to obtain recordings of first sessions of a number of therapist–client dyads. These recordings would be transcribed and then analyzed. The aim of the

analysis would be to identify the ways in which the participants in the sessions deploy discursive resources and with what consequences. For instance, the researcher might observe that some clients begin by pointing out that they had waited until they had reached the "end of their tether" before making the appointment. The researcher might observe that by doing this, clients position themselves within a moral discourse and construct themselves as deserving of help because they have tried very hard to sort out their own problems before asking for help. Clients may also disclaim an (undesirable) identity, perhaps that of a needy person, by emphasizing that they have never sought help before and that their present visit to the therapist was an exceptional event. In this way, clients might position themselves as responsible adults whose help-seeking is not a sign of weakness or of psychopathology.

The important thing to remember is that a radical social constructionist researcher would not be interested in the validity of these accounts—indeed, he or she would not believe in the relevance or even the possibility of establishing these accounts' validity. In other words, it is irrelevant whether clients really are seeking help for the first time or whether they really are (or feel) weak, strong, or needy. The point of social constructionist research is to examine localized, context-specific discursive productions (e.g., of the self as "adult," as "strong," "normal," or "deserving") and their action orientation and consequences within the specific context. In other words, the radical social constructionist researcher would be interested only in the particular reality constructed for the purposes of a specific conversation.

By contrast, more moderate (that is to say, less relativist) approaches to social constructionist research would want to go beyond the study of localized deployments of discursive resources and make connections between the discourses that are used within a particular local context and the wider sociocultural context. For example, the researcher might be interested in exploring contemporary therapy culture more generally, looking at self-help texts; television shows that reference psychotherapy; and "problem pages" in newspapers and magazines, where experts answer letters from troubled readers.

Having identified dominant discourses surrounding psychotherapy in the 21st century, the researcher might then explore the ways in which such discourses position people (e.g., as damaged by their past, as in need of expert help, as responsible for working through their issues) and with what consequences (e.g., as a society, we may expect individuals to invest in their mental health and well-being). By grounding discourses in social, cultural, economic, and material structures, more moderate social constructionist researchers are making reference to something outside of the text. They invoke a reality that preexists and indeed shapes the ways in which individuals construct meaning within particular contexts. This means that the moderate social constructionist position has an affinity with the *critical realist* position (see the section Varieties of Realist Knowledge). Although radical social constructionists emphasize people's ability to play with discursive resources and to use them creatively to construct the social realities that suit their needs at a particular moment in time, moderate social constructionists are more concerned with the ways in which available discourses can constrain and limit what can be said or done within particular contexts.

Figure 1.1 provides a summary of what characterizes the three different types of knowledge that qualitative researchers can aim to produce. In this chapter, I have kept the use of specialist (philosophy of science) terminology to a minimum and instead have focused on a description of the assumptions (about the nature of knowledge, about the world, about the role of the researcher) that underpin and characterize the three approaches and that define their differences. I have argued that what matters is that we ask the right questions about a study (i.e., What kind of knowledge is being produced? What are the assumptions that have been made about the world that is being studied? What is the role of the researcher in the research process?) and that these answers will help us to identify (and make explicit) its epistemological foundations. I would argue that how we then label a particular epistemological position is of secondary importance as long as we are clear about its parameters. Those who are familiar with the qualitative research methodology literature will be aware that, as Ponterotto (2005) has pointed

out, numerous classification schemas in the literature aim to classify approaches to qualitative research in meaningful and helpful ways and that use terminology lifted from the philosophy of science. For example, we find references to "modernisms, postmodernism, social constructionism and constructivism" (Hansen, 2004); "positivism, postpositivism, constructivism-interpretivism, and critical-ideological" approaches (Ponterotto, 2005); and "positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, constructivism, and participatory" approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Such classification schemas often are developed within the context of formulating a critique of quantitative research in cases in which qualitative (often referred to as "new paradigm") approaches are contrasted with quantitative (often characterized as *positivist* and *postpositivist*) approaches. Such critiques are important in their own right, but it is not necessarily helpful to present classifications of qualitative epistemologies within such a context. A preoccupation with contrasting quantitative with qualitative perspectives can lead to a homogenizing of qualitative research and a lack of attention to the differences between qualitative approaches. As a result, we often find representations of both quantitative and qualitative perspectives that lack sophistication and differentiation and that (despite the use of erudite terminology) actually simplify and sometimes even caricature both perspectives. Often, a simple dichotomy between a positivist (old paradigm) quantitative perspective and a constructivist (new paradigm) qualitative perspective is constructed (and this usually positions the former as flawed and in need of replacement by the latter; see also Shadish, 1995, for a discussion of common errors and misrepresentations in epistemological debates in the social sciences). The problem with such dichotomous classifications is that they do not acknowledge the full range of qualitative epistemologies that, as indicated, can reach from naive (or better, direct) realism to radical social constructionism. In other words, not all qualitative research is constructivist, not all of it is relativist, and not all of it is interpretivist. Furthermore, as discussed in the section Differences Among Qualitative Approaches, references to these terms do not mean anything until we have

clarified whether we are applying them to describe the status of the data (e.g., as descriptions of reality, as witness statements, as individual constructions, as social constructions, etc.) or to the status of our analysis (as accurate knowledge of reality, as an interpretation, as a construction, as an artistic production, etc.).

EVALUATION

How can we assess the quality and value of a particular piece of qualitative research? Given that qualitative research is concerned with meaning, and given that it usually takes the form of descriptions or interpretations of research participants' context-specific experiences, it follows that the criteria traditionally used to evaluate quantitative research (i.e., reliability, representativeness, generalizability, objectivity, and validity) are not applicable to qualitative research. Does this mean that qualitative research cannot, or should not, be evaluated? Does it mean that in qualitative research "anything goes"? Opinion is divided on this subject, with some qualitative researchers (e.g., Forshaw, 2007) rejecting the whole notion of "method" in qualitative research (and with it any aspirations to "rigor"), proposing that the aim of qualitative research ought to be to produce ideas that resonate with readers and that generate debate rather than to produce insights that claim to have some validity or even truth value. It follows that it is not meaningful to assess the value of qualitative research in terms other than its creativity and originality.

Others (myself included; see Willig, 2007, 2008) disagree with this argument, proposing instead that qualitative research involves a process of systematic, cyclical, and critical reflection whose quality can be assessed. Like everything else in qualitative research, however, evaluation is not a simple or a straightforward matter. This is because the criteria we use for evaluating a qualitative study must be informed by the study's epistemological position. In other words, to be able to evaluate a study's contribution to knowledge in a meaningful way, we need to know what it was the researchers wanted to find out and what kind of knowledge they aimed to generate. Several authors have compiled lists of generic criteria

for evaluating qualitative research (e.g., Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Yardley, 2000) and although some overlap exists between these, as I have argued elsewhere, "it is clear that authors approach the question of evaluation from the particular standpoint afforded by their own preferred methodological approach" (Willig, 2008, p. 152).

I concur with Madill et al. (2000) and Reicher (2000), who have argued that no such thing as a unified qualitative research paradigm exists and, therefore, that the criteria we use to evaluate qualitative studies need to be tailored to fit the particular methodology they are meant to appraise. For example, Madill et al. proposed that *objectivity* (i.e., the absence of bias on the part of the researcher) and *reliability* (i.e., the extent to which findings have been triangulated) are criteria that can be applied meaningfully to evaluate realist research, whereas from a radical constructionist point of view, any criteria that are concerned with the accuracy or authenticity of accounts would be meaningless. Instead, to evaluate such studies, we would need to assess their *internal coherence* (i.e., the extent to which the analytic narrative "hangs together" without internal contradictions), to establish *deviant case analysis* (i.e., the extent to which the limits of the applicability of the analytic insights have been identified), and *reader evaluation* (i.e., the extent to which the study is perceived by its readers to increase their insights and understanding). Finally, an evaluation of what Madill et al. described as *contextual constructionist* research (and that is compatible with the phenomenological perspective identified in this chapter) requires scrutiny of the study's use of reflexivity and the extent to which it explores (and ideally theorizes) the relationship between accounts (i.e., both the participants' accounts, that is to say the data as well as the researcher's analytic account) and the context(s) within which these have been produced. Finlay and Gough (2003) proposed that different "versions of reflexivity" reflect different epistemological orientations so that

for some, reflexivity is celebrated as part of our essential human capacity, while

for others it is a self-critical lens. Some researchers utilize reflexivity to introspect, as a source of personal insight, while others employ it to interrogate the rhetoric underlying shared social discourses. Some treat it as a methodological tool to ensure "truth," while others exploit it as weapon to undermine truth claims. (p. x)

This means that reflexivity can be used in different ways and for different purposes. For example, for a *direct realist* researcher, reflexivity can be a way of acknowledging and bracketing off personal expectations and assumptions so that they do not make their way into the analysis and distort (or even silence) the participant's voice that is trying to make itself heard. By contrast, an interpretative phenomenological researcher may draw on his or her own thoughts and feelings about what the participant is saying to uncover meanings within it that are not immediately obvious to the participant. Finally, a radical social constructionist researcher can use reflexivity to trace the ways in which his or her own contributions to the conversation with the participant have positioned the participant and how this may have shaped the interview.

Again, these differences have implications for the evaluation of a qualitative study in that the use of reflexivity within the design of the study needs to be assessed in its own terms. In other words, we need to ask whether reflexivity has been used in a way that is compatible with the epistemological orientation of the study and whether the use of reflexivity within the study's design has met its own objectives. From our discussion of evaluation so far, it should have become clear that to make meaningful evaluation possible, a study's author needs to clearly identify the study's epistemological position. Therefore, the most important criterion for evaluating qualitative research ought to be *epistemological reflexivity* (i.e., the extent to which a study clearly and unambiguously identifies its epistemological stance) as this is a precondition for any further evaluation. Indeed, Madill et al. (2000) concluded that "qualitative researchers have a responsibility to make their epistemological position clear, conduct their

research in a manner consistent with that position, and present their findings in a way that allows them to be evaluated appropriately" (p. 17).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter is to review and clarify the various ways in which qualitative researchers approach the production of knowledge. It has been suggested that qualitative researchers can aim to produce three types of knowledge and these were given the labels *realist*, *phenomenological,* and *social constructionist.* Each of these types of knowledge was shown to be formed on the basis of different answers to questions about the nature and status of knowledge claims, the assumptions the researcher makes about the social and psychological worlds she or he is studying, and the role of the researcher in the research process. It was proposed that different methods of data collection and analysis are required to generate the different types of knowledge, and that the evaluative criteria we use to assess the value and quality of a qualitative study may differ depending on the type of knowledge the study aspires to produce. To develop these epistemological arguments and to clearly distinguish among the three positions, we have foregrounded their differences. In this concluding section, I return to the bigger picture and reflect on the ways in which the three approaches complement one another. Each research project is motivated and driven by a research question that specifies which aspect or dimension of social or psychological reality the study aims to shed light on. No study ever seeks to simply study (the meaning of) life as such or to understand the world in general. Even realist research only ever seeks to establish the truth about something in particular rather than simply the truth. In addition, every study will have to work within a set of practical constraints (such as available time and finances, for example) which set limits to what it can aspire to find out.

All this means that even the most carefully designed study can never achieve more than to shed light on one small part of a much bigger whole. It could be argued, therefore, that the three types of knowledge identified in this chapter, rather than

constituting alternative visions of what valid or useful knowledge should look like, are simply providing three different angles from which to view human experience. They shed light on three different aspects of human experience. From this point of view, qualitative research is about attempting to discover new aspects of a totality that never can be accessed directly or captured in its entirety.

Cohn (2005) referred to this as the "amplification" of meaning. To illustrate this way of thinking, and to illustrate what amplification of meaning may involve, let us imagine a researcher who wants to understand what happens when someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness. First, the researcher might want to listen to first-person accounts of this experience. To this end, she conducts semistructured interviews with a number of participants who have had this experience. Her aim is to shed light on the experience of receiving a terminal diagnosis. At this point, the researcher adopts a realist approach, taking the accounts at face value. She produces a thematic analysis that aims to capture and systematically represent how the participants experienced the process of being given their diagnosis. She identifies a number of interesting patterns in relation to the ways in which participants were treated by medical staff and perhaps also in the ways in which the participants' loved ones responded to the situation. The research could end here, having produced some useful and important insights.

Let us assume that the researcher has the time and motivation to continue with the research. Let us also assume that the researcher had noticed that, despite their many shared experiences with medical staff and loved ones, the participants gave quite different meanings to their illnesses. She also noticed that this seemed to inform the participants' sense of themselves as a terminally ill patient and how they felt about their illness. To better understand these differences, the researcher arranges further interviews with the participants, this time using a phenomenological approach to explore their subjective experience in greater depth. This phase of the research generates a further set of themes, this time capturing the existential dimensions of the experience of being diagnosed with a terminal illness and the range of existential meanings that can be given

to such an experience. Again, the research could end at this point. Let us assume, however, that the researcher is still willing and able to continue with her project. She reflects on the fact that all the participants included references to the question of responsibility (for the illness) and that many of them grappled with issues around blame (for the illness) in their accounts. She decides that she wants to find out more about this and adopts a social constructionist approach, focusing on the use of discourses of individual responsibility within the context of terminal illness. She returns to the data (both sets of interviews) and analyzes them again, this time using a discourse analytic approach. To contextualize her participants' use of discourse in their constructions of meaning around their terminal diagnosis, the researcher analyzes newspaper articles and television documentaries about terminal illness and compares the discursive constructions used in those documents with those deployed by the participants.

Much more could be done to shed further light on the experience of being diagnosed with a terminal illness, but let us take pity on our hypothetical researcher and stop here. It remains for us to conclude that, rather than being mutually exclusive, realist, phenomenological, and social constructionist forms of knowing can be thought of as providing access to different aspects of our social and psychological world(s) and that our choice of which one(s) to mobilize within the context of a particular research project is a question of knowing what we want to know on this particular occasion.

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