

Part 2

Formulating Research Questions



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Theory and Method in Qualitative Research

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Introduction

This chapter deals with how theoretical and philosophical assumptions about science, knowledge, truth and evidence relate to the everyday practice of doing research. I consider different theoretical and philosophical schools of thought, such as positivism and social constructionism, and examine the methodological implications they have for psychology. For example, consideration will be given to the differences researchers from alternative viewpoints have regarding the status of participants' own accounts of their experiences and perspectives. In what follows, I will ask you to consider what psychological research is and what kinds of tasks it involves, and introduce you to two types of questions that have a bearing upon the way research – including the work you do yourselves as students – is conceptualised and conducted. These two types of questions are:

- Philosophical questions such as, 'what counts as good evidence', or 'can research give us ways of understanding what might be true and what false'?
- Theoretical questions such as, 'what roles does language have in psychology', or 'what is the nature of people's subjective experience'.

By addressing these types of question you will better understand the processes and practices of research and find it easier to make sense of and conduct psychological studies.

Psychology, science and philosophy

Psychology and scientific method

Doing psychology, including the psychology that you do as a student, involves a number of things (although not all psychologists do all of these things). These include:

- Examining how people think, feel and behave
- Finding out what influences how people think, feel and behave
- Exploring people's perspectives and the meanings they attach to things
- Examining how ideas, events and things are represented in language and made sense of
- Determining the consequences of how people think, feel and behave

In order to do these tasks, psychologists carry out research and this involves various activities, including:

- Asking questions or making predictions about how things work.
 - These are called 'research questions' and 'hypotheses', respectively. When we do research we are usually working with an idea of what we expect to find – or at least an idea of what we are asking about.
 - Such questions help us to develop explanations of what is going on (these are called theories).
 - Because particular kinds of research methods are best suited to giving answers to particular kinds of research questions, the kind of question you have will guide the kinds of methods that you use.
- Gathering evidence in the form of data.
 - This could be numerical, quantitative data; for example, data which is often obtained during an experiment (e.g., people's reaction times measured in seconds), or from scores on a set of items in a questionnaire (e.g., a score from a questionnaire that measures a person's attitudes towards capital punishment or the extent to which they describe themselves as sociable).
 - Alternatively, this could be qualitative data, which tends not to be numeric; for example, a set of field notes that a researcher writes to describe what they see whilst they are doing an observational study of children in a playground, or a verbatim (word-for word) record of what was said in an interview or a naturally occurring conversation (known as a transcript).
- Generating and evaluating explanations of how things work. An important part of research is to generate and test various possible explanations, which are often referred to as theoretical accounts. This is also often what you are doing when you do practical/laboratory work as an undergraduate.

When trying to understand the relationship between theories, research questions and data, try to think of it like this:

- Data is the evidence we gather to help us answer research questions.
- Hypotheses are predictions that we make about the possible answers to research questions.

- Theories give us a reason to ask certain questions and are the reasons why we sometimes predict particular answers.
- Theories are explanations of the thing that we are researching. We can test theories against the evidence produced when we gather data and use it to test research questions and hypotheses. We can also generate theories on the basis of data.

Activity Suggestion 2.1

Use a journal article that you have been asked to read for one of your modules and try to analyse it in terms of the above ideas. Can you identify the theory being tested or proposed? Is it clear what the research questions are? Do they relate easily to the theory? How does that data in particular help to address the research questions? Thinking through these kinds of ideas – and possibly identifying flaws in these areas – is one of the ways in which you can critically evaluate research evidence, which is something that will help to get you good marks.

There has been a long-standing tradition within psychology to view these research-related activities that we do as 'science'. However, not all psychologists agree about this, or about the best way to go about gathering evidence or generating and evaluating explanations, and there are differences of opinion about how research projects should actually be conducted in psychology. One of the things that influences research practice is philosophy, or to be precise, the philosophical approach that underpins both theory and method.

Where does philosophy come into all this?

Two branches of philosophy are especially relevant to a discussion of science (Ladyman, 2002). These are epistemology and ontology.

Definitions 2.2

Epistemology. This branch of philosophy asks questions about knowledge, beliefs and truth. For example, how do we determine what differentiates knowledge from beliefs? How do we recognise knowledge when we see it? How can we determine what a fact is? What is truth and how do we know when we've got it?

Ontology. This branch of philosophy asks questions about what things there are in the world. It is about defining and cataloguing the things that exist – so, in psychology, it might involve questions about whether personality or intelligence exists

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When you read about methodology and philosophy you will probably encounter these terms – especially the terms ‘epistemology’ and ‘epistemological’. For example, people may talk about the epistemological assumptions that a particular method rests upon. What this refers to is the fact that researchers’ standpoints in relation to epistemological questions (e.g., how do we recognise knowledge, what counts as evidence, what is truth and how do we recognise it) will determine how they do research and how they evaluate research done by other people. Ultimately, it influences our decisions about what counts as good, defensible, reasonable knowledge – and good psychology.

If we return to thinking about some of the things that psychology is trying to do – examining how people think, feel and behave; finding out what influences how people think, feel and behave; exploring people’s perspectives and the meanings they attach to things; examining how things are represented in language and made sense of; determining the consequences of how people think, feel and behave – the importance of understanding some of the underlying assumptions should be clear.

So, the central point here is that there are some key philosophical issues, which are reflected in particular approaches to doing research and building a body of knowledge, and which have direct relevance to research and to questions about science. Let us look at these in more detail.

? 2.3 Where are we now?

So far, we’ve seen that there are some key philosophical issues, which are reflected in the ways that we can approach the task of building a body of knowledge through research activities. Next, we will look at some of these approaches to gathering knowledge in more detail and think about their methodological implications.

Approaches to building a body of knowledge

Psychologists have particular views on what it means for psychology to be a science, and the kinds of methods, procedures and approaches to finding things out that should be used. There are a number of philosophical issues that impact upon this, and upon the everyday practice of doing research. In the paragraphs that follow I explore some of these issues in terms of how they might influence how research is actually conducted.

Activity Suggestion 2.4

Spend a few moments considering your opinion on some of the following questions. You may feel that you don't have the answers, and these are not easy questions, but try and think for a while and record your ideas, thoughts and questions in relation to each one.

- What counts as good evidence?
- What is truth?
- How do we evaluate truth-claims?
- Is it possible for us to recognise 'truth' when we see it?
- Is it possible for research to be totally objective?

These kinds of questions are what epistemology is all about and most psychologists will have views on these kinds of questions, especially if they sit down and consciously try to think about them, as you have just done. Even if researchers do not explicitly express opinions on these matters, the way in which they conduct their research will always involve taking on board certain philosophical assumptions concerning these questions. Similarly, the methodological strategies that you use in your undergraduate practical work will reflect certain kinds of assumption (both your own and those of the people who developed the methods you are using).

Many researchers' views will be roughly in line with one of two schools of thought that have been common in psychology for some time now: 'positivism' and 'social constructionism'. Until relatively recently, modern psychological research was heavily influenced by the ideas of positivism and it is only now that other approaches can be found in psychology.

Positivism

Positivism was traditionally the dominant view of science within the natural sciences and within psychology. The following ideas (adapted from Robson, 2002) are key features of positivism:

- Objective knowledge (facts) can only be gained from direct experience or observation. There is no place in science for things (theories, concepts) that are hypothetical or simply speculative.
- Science (if done properly) is a value-free and objective process.
- Science is based on the analysis of numerical (quantitative data) that is gathered through a strictly defined set of procedures. These procedures are different from those used to gather 'common sense' or lay knowledge.

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- The propositions made within science are based on fact. Hypotheses are tested to determine whether the facts are in line with the propositions (theories) that have been put forward.
- The main purpose of science, according to positivism, is to create universal causal laws – that is, overarching explanations of what things directly cause other things. This is based on the search for empirical regularities whereby two things invariably occur together (this is sometimes known as ‘constant conjunction’). So, for example, if our observations of the world (from systematic experimentation) show that cheese is always followed by nightmares then we can generalise a ‘law’ from this that cheese causes nightmares.
- According to positivism, cause is nothing more than constant conjunction – and all that we need to demonstrate a causal relationship is to observe (reliably and often – not just once) constant conjunction.
- We don’t need anything other than these types of general laws to explain the world.
- Psychologists can simply transfer the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences to our discipline.

Positivism, in this form, has come under some criticism in recent years – in psychology and in other disciplines. However, these general principles remain popular and the associated methods have developed as the norm within psychology. To return to the question of what philosophical issues have to do with research, it is useful to consider what methodological implications the key ideas of positivism might have for the way in which we conduct research (i.e., for methodology). Here are some examples of implications of a positivistic approach.

Methodological Implication 1: Positivist assumptions mean that researchers should be sceptical of using participants’ accounts and self-reports as useful data because this is not the same as directly observing the phenomena under study.

Methodological Implication 2: According to positivistic approaches, the key to being value-free and objective is the use of objective tools and methods. Therefore, the correct use of method is something that is central to doing good science in all disciplines that use science to accumulate knowledge. Doing science according to tried and tested methods is seen as key. Many of the processes by which scientific activity comes about (e.g., applications for research funding, gaining ethical approval, publishing research findings through peer reviewed journals – where it is scrutinised for methodological rigour by other researchers) involve strict scrutiny of the way the research will be, or has been, carried out.

Methodological Implication 3: Quantitative data and analysis tend to be seen as superior to qualitative data from a positivistic research perspective. Traditionally, psychologists saw less room for qualitative research in the discipline, as they tended to be more suspicious of non-numerical interpretation. Qualitative research has become more common in psychology partly because of shifting attitudes towards these issues and a decrease in the dominance of traditional positivistic views.

Methodological Implication 4: Experimentation is the most important method, from a positivistic point of view, because it allows the necessary control

and manipulation of variables in order to establish whether things are constantly conjoined.

Methodological Implication 5: Replication is seen as important because it helps to build a pattern of constant conjunction and therefore helps us to build causal laws (which, if we're being positivistic, is the main aim of doing science in the first place).

Where are we now? 2.5 ?

The previous section of the chapter summarised some of the key ideas of positivism (some of which are likely to have been familiar to you from the teaching on your course) and looked at some implications of these ideas for the way in which research is done and evaluated. Next, I will look at some of the criticisms of, and challenges to, this approach

Challenges for positivistic approaches

Realism and psychology

Positivistic approaches to psychology are underpinned by epistemological realism, which is one way of conceptualising the relationship between the entities in the world and our representations of them. In order to understand this, first it is important to grasp that we can divide the world up into the actual things that are in it (the 'entities') and our representations or ways of understanding these things. So, entities include anything that we consider to exist in the world and could include things that we can physically see and touch (like people, places, brains, schools), things that we consider to exist although we might not directly see and touch them (like personality, memory, intelligence, social conformity). Entities can be straightforward things (like a book, a pen, a person) or fairly complex things (like education, the criminal justice system, or sport). Representations include our ways of conceptualising and describing the entities that exist in the world. This includes our mental representations of things (i.e., the products of our system of visual perception and cognitive representations) and our ways of describing things in words or images (our talk, what we write and draw).

The 'realist ideology of representation' asserts that entities pre-exist and give rise to their surface representations (documents, behaviour, language, knowledge, thoughts). For the realist, science aims to establish links between surface representations (knowledge) and underlying entities (reality). Our attempts to explain what is going on in the world – that is, our attempts to use data as evidence to evaluate our theories and propositions – are seen by realists as a way of comparing different representations with reality in order to judge which of those representations

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seems to be correct. Realists think that we can meaningfully distinguish between entities and our representations of these entities, and therefore judge whether representations are accurate. This is an idea that is taken for granted in many areas of psychology, and in much of our everyday thinking, so it can be very difficult to recognise that this way of thinking rests on various assumptions (see above).



2.6 Definitions

Realism is the view that our representations of the things in the world are relatively straightforward reflections of the way those things actually are. This is also known as the 'realist ideology of representation'

Some people argue that a realist approach is one of the most problematic things about positivism – especially if we try to apply positivism to psychological entities (like memory, personality, conformity and intelligence). Instead, they argue that attempting to link surface representations with underlying reality is impossible – and opt instead for a 'constitutive' or 'relativist' view of the link between objects and representations. They argue that our knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of the way the world actually is, but is created and sustained through social processes – particularly through language (Burr, 2003).

Let's take emotion as an example of this idea and think for a moment about how we might think and talk about our own emotional states. Initially, let's assume (as a traditional approach within psychology would) that there are two things of interest here. First, there are the actual emotional states that we experience. Second, there are our representations of our emotional states. These representations might consist of our private thoughts about our emotions and also of the words that we use to articulate these thoughts to others. If I wake up in the morning and feel a particular way, I will probably create a mental representation of that feeling. In simple terms, I might have the thought 'I feel happy'. If somebody were to ask me how I feel, I might say 'I feel happy this morning'. If we think (as a realist would) in terms of 'entities' and 'representations', the first of these three things is the 'entity' (i.e., my actual emotional state) and the second two things are 'representations' of that entity. We could say, then, that the actual emotional state is the 'reality' and the thoughts and words are 'representations'. The 'realist ideology of representation' would imply that one can examine the entity (my emotional state) in order to determine whether the representations (thoughts and words) are accurate reflections of it or not. But how do we access 'reality' in order to check that what I think I'm feeling, and what I say I'm feeling are accurate representations? Is it possible to directly access my emotional state, or is it only possible to access it through what I say? How can I, or anyone else, tell the difference between what I really feel and what I think I feel?

As you can see, when we try meaningfully to separate out our representations (mental conceptualisations of emotions) from the reality of what they represent

(the emotion itself) things become difficult, to say the least. Relativists would use this as evidence that we cannot meaningfully access psychological reality – we can only really access representations of it.

Definitions 2.7

Relativism is the view that our representations of the things in the world are socially constructed and can't be seen as simple reflections of how those things actually are

It is most useful to think of relativism and realism as part of a continuum, rather than as two separate camps. Often, researchers' views on this matter will fall somewhere along a line that has extreme relativism at one end and extreme realism at the other (as in Figure 2.1).

Objectivity and the socio-political context of research

Another major component of a positivistic approach is the idea that if science is done properly, then knowledge rests upon objective facts. Many have argued that science, and the knowledge it produces, is actually far from being completely objective. Rather, science, like any other social activity, is done within historical, political and social contexts and these all have an impact upon the way that science conducts itself – the questions it asks, the methods it uses and the way findings are interpreted and used. For example, it would be very unlikely for researchers to conduct a project investigating the most effective way to use physical punishment to encourage learning in children because in our current climate of social norms and morals such behaviour would not be considered legitimate.

This does not necessarily mean that objectivity is a pointless aim, but that it is dangerous to assume that it is an automatic outcome of employing research methods. Research methods are used by human beings and are interpreted by human beings, and some feel that this means they can never be sufficiently detached from people's values and biases to be truly objective. According to this view, it is important for researchers to be reflexive – that is, to reflect upon how their own views, attitudes and experiences may impact upon the research that they do. It also encourages researchers to consider the social and political context, and the possible consequences, of the research they do.



Figure 2.1 A theory continuum in psychology.



2.8 Activity Suggestion

Go back to the journal article that you used for your previous activity in this chapter, or pick a new one if you prefer. Then, make a list of all the potential things that might have influenced the objectivity of that research project. When you do this try and think of the project as beginning with an idea, being designed, carried out, written up, published, read by other people and then perhaps used in some applied context. These could include things like the researchers personal beliefs, the previous experiences of the participants, the political climate in the country where they live, the political views of journal editors or reviewers, the aims and motivations of the people who might use the research findings to justify some course of action.

Now try and think through what might actually be done about these threats to objectivity. Do you think that they can be removed? How? What does this mean for the status of the project's findings? Can we trust them?

Experimentation and ecological validity

Another criticism of positivism is that it focuses too much on the use of experimental methods. The concern is whether the artificiality and level of control exerted in an experimental situation make the results irrelevant to the real world. The question of how well we can generalise the results from research to situations in the real world is known as 'ecological validity'. A common criticism of experimentation is that it sacrifices ecological validity in order to gain the high level of experimental control that is one of its defining principles. Some would argue that if all we have learned has come from experiments, maybe we know a lot about how people behave in experiments but not much about how they behave in the real world.



2.9 Definitions

'For a research study to possess **ecological validity**, the methods, materials and setting of the study must approximate the real-life situation that is under investigation.' (Brewer, 2000)

To illustrate this, imagine we set up an experiment to investigate the effects of caffeine on memory and, in doing so, create an artificial situation where we have control over the amount of caffeine a person has had, and where we have removed from the experimental situation as many other potential influences on memory as we can. For example, we might try to control for age and ensure that none of the participants are taking any kind of medication or have drunk alcohol recently. In doing this we establish experimental control and this helps us to be sure that any

changes we notice in memory are due to our manipulation of caffeine levels. However, in the real world, this high level of control does not exist. In the real world people do take drugs (prescription and otherwise) that affect their memory. So, how can we be sure that the results we have obtained in our experimental situation can really be generalised to other situations in real life?

So, for some critics, there is a need to replace, or at least add to, positivism with an approach to science that employs more 'naturalistic' methods – that is, such methods allow us to investigate psychological phenomena in naturally occurring or realistic settings and aim to specifically explore the role of context.

Different views of causality: the importance of meaning

Some psychologists have argued that positivism may be appropriate for some scientific disciplines but that it is particularly inappropriate for psychology because of the nature of our subject material. This argument is particularly relevant to areas of psychology that concern themselves with social behaviour. The positivistic idea that if we identify 'constant conjunctions' between variables in experiments we can determine causality rests partially upon the idea that causality happens because one particular variable has causal properties that have some kind of direct action upon the other variable. However, it is often argued that when we study psychology we actually need to think about causation in a slightly different way – that is, we need to think about the significance of 'meaning' in order to understand how causality works. John Hughes uses an example of traffic behaviour from Hart (1961, cited in Hughes, 1990) to support his argument that '*the regularities we discover by studying society are only the external appearances of what the members of a society understand*' (Hughes, 1990, p. 95). He argues that social reality cannot be understood without reference to shared social meanings rather than the regularities or 'constant conjunctions' that we might observe in quantitative data. In the 'traffic light example' we are asked to imagine that we are trying to study drivers' behaviour at traffic lights in order to understand and explain it – that is, we want to describe it and then try to create an account of why cars and drivers behave as they do. At lights, the traffic displays regularity and to try and arrive at a causal explanation for these patterns a positivist would aim to specify the conditions that produce certain patterns and formulate and test a theory that postulates the causal link between the lights and the movement of the traffic. What we would notice from our data is that there is a strong association between red lights and traffic stopping. Is it then safe to deduce that traffic lights have causal properties that cause cars to stop moving? Can we be said to have explained why cars stop moving at this stage? Hughes argues that we cannot because traffic lights do not have causal properties that cause cars to stop – there is no force field! Simply observing the association between red lights and stopping doesn't give us the explanation. We may know that red lights are important in stopping traffic, but we haven't truly explained how they have this effect. To get the explanation, we need to talk to people in order to understand the meaning and significance of the traffic lights within that particular social context. What causes cars (generally) to stop at red lights is that the traffic lights represent rules within society. To provide an explanation rather than merely

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a description of what is going on here we need to make reference to how people learned the rules and what they mean to them.

So, for some, the problem with positivism is that it does not allow for the significance of meaning in explanation and it has, as its core methods, techniques which are not very good at helping us to understand meaning. Qualitative methods are generally regarded as being particularly good at giving access to what things mean, and so people who share these concerns about positivism are often attracted to qualitative methods.



2.10 Where are we now?

We can see that positivism is not without its criticisms and challenges. These include objections to extreme realism, problems with the notion of objectivity, threats to ecological validity and the question of whether positivism offers psychology methods that allow full causal explanations. Next, I will discuss an alternative way of approaching the question of how best to build a body of knowledge.

Relativist social constructionism

This is a school of thought that has its roots in other disciplines, such as sociology, and began to emerge in social psychology in the 1970s. It is very different from positivism and has been a major influence on the growth of qualitative research methods within psychology. Relativist social constructionism includes the following general ideas (adapted from Robson, 2002):

- Scientific accounts (theories, knowledge) should not be given a privileged position. Science is seen as simply one way of looking at the world and there are held to be other ways of looking at the world that are equally valid.
- Relativist social constructionism asserts that it is not possible to generate rational procedures to determine truth, or to decide which forms of knowledge are 'better' than others in a truly objective way. Culture, morals, values, political beliefs etc. always get in the way of this.
- Even if there is a reality external to our understanding of it, according to relativist social constructionists there is no point trying to find ways of getting a true picture of this reality. Our perceptions and understandings of reality are all we actually have access to, so reality does not meaningfully exist as something separate from our ways of understanding it (which, in turn, are not separate from values, morals and ideology).
- Language is seen as the most important means for representing and understanding the world and should therefore be the main focus of our research. If we cannot get

at the truth of what the world is really like because it only meaningfully exists in the form of our representations of it, then we should study these representations (and that means studying language).

- To try and understand people, relativist social constructionists argue that we must understand context and meaning in its full complexity.
- Research is seen as giving us working hunches about the world that are inevitably shifting and imperfect, rather than as giving us immutable facts.
- Qualitative methodologies are more likely to be used because contemporary forms of these methods focus on language and on meaning.

Again, it is particularly important to try and tease out what the methodological implications of these views might be. If we adopt a more relativist social constructionist viewpoint, how does this shape the ways in which we might go about doing research in psychology?

Methodological Implication 1: Academic attempts to explain what is going on in the world can't really be objectively evaluated with regard to how 'true' they are. Proponents of this approach would argue that we can only ever examine academic explanations in terms of whether they are plausible and compelling. This doesn't necessarily mean that it isn't possible to evaluate knowledge, but that we might evaluate it according to different criteria. So, we might ask whether it helps to provide us with a useful solution to some or other problem or helps to bring us closer to some kind of outcome that is desirable. Imagine we were interested in finding out about the perspectives of patients who are attending medical screening. From this perspective, we might focus more on whether the understanding we gain helps us to create a screening process that is evaluated more positively by patients, or has better attendance rates, than on whether what we have found out about patients' perspectives is the 'truth'.

Methodological Implication 2: The purpose of psychology is not to discover (pre-existing) truth. So, for example, the consequences of believing certain things to be true and others not true, or the implications of talking about things in particular ways, are seen as more pertinent than whether the things are **actually** true or not. For example, if as a society we think of alcoholism as an illness we will treat it; if we think of it as a moral failing, we might be more inclined to punish it. Relativistic research would be interested in identifying and exploring the consequences of how alcoholism is regarded, rather than in trying to work out whether alcoholism really is an illness or a moral failing (as this would be seen as an impossible task). 'Truth' tends to be seen as something that we create and derive through social interaction and through actively trying to make sense of the world around us, rather than as something that is lying around out there waiting for the researcher to come along and somehow trip over it.

Methodological Implication 3: Many social constructionist researchers use research methods that involve the examination of language (e.g., Discourse Analysis).

Methodological implication 4: Research methods that allow us to explore meaning are seen as more useful by social constructions. So, for example, they

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tend to value the accounts of participants where positivistic psychology found them more problematic.



2.11 Where are we now?

The previous sections of this chapter have given you an outline of relativist social constructionism and drawn out some of the methodological implications of this point of view. Next, I will consider some of the criticisms and challenges of this approach.

Challenges for relativist social constructionism

Truth claims

The relativistic view that all perspectives, accounts or versions of events are potentially equally valid has political consequences. Many social constructionists are unhappy about the more relativistic forms of constructionism because they seem to thwart any attempts to take moral, ethical or political standpoints or to challenge oppression and falsehood. They argue that a logical extension of the relativist argument – that we cannot legitimately compare any truth claims (surface representations) against evidence of what is ‘really going on in the world’ (reality) – leaves us in a position where no claims can be either supported or refuted.



2.12 Activity Suggestion

To illustrate this, think about the following questions and note down your answers:

- How does one counter claims that the murder of millions of people in the Holocaust of World War II did not actually happen without using some kind of evidence (i.e., without comparing this representation with reality to see if the representation is supported)?
- How can we evaluate whether psychological therapies are useful and beneficial without being able to presume that we can take signs of improvement (surface representations) as an indication of actual improvement (reality) following treatment?

For some, the relativist epistemological view is problematic because it leaves us in a state, arguably, where we cannot distinguish beliefs from knowledge. This is problematic for notions of science, which partly rest on the idea that science is different

from other human activities because it allows us to work out the difference between knowing something and 'merely' believing it to be the case. In essence, the people who level this criticism at relativist approaches to psychology are uncomfortable with the idea that we cannot evaluate arguments against any form of evidence.

Materiality, embodiment and power

Cromby and Nightingale (1999), amongst others, have argued that wholly relativist constructionism fails to take into account certain key things. For instance, there is a tendency to gloss over the physical aspects of our existence. So, whilst it is useful to consider discursive aspects of health and illness, for example, they argue that we need to do this in ways that take into account the physical realities of our bodies and the physical processes that we are subject to. Similarly, and more generally, they argue for a social constructionism that takes into account the realities of the material world and of social structure (e.g., the power of governments, armies, institutions, employers).

Some forms of extreme relativism appear to have an exclusive focus on language. Critics ask, which came first, the 'reality' or the language? If we return to the traffic light example again, it might also be important to consider the consequences of crossing a red light at a busy junction. Those who are critical of extreme relativism might point to the fact that if we have a major collision in a vehicle, there is more going on in such a context than just our shared assumptions, or our sense-making. There is, for many, a tangible reality to a car accident that is somehow beyond our ways of conceptualising and representing it. Notice that this is not necessarily saying that the world is not socially constructed but, for some, it is about finding an approach that acknowledges and accommodates both the socially constructed nature of the world and its material 'reality'.

Critical Issue: the relativism–realism debate? 2.13

So, we have looked at two common and quite different approaches to the task of building a body of knowledge: 'positivism' and 'relativistic social constructionism'. We have looked at their key ideas, some methodological implications of these ideas and at some criticisms and challenges of these approaches. One of the most important differences between these two approaches is that positivism tends to lean towards extreme realism, whilst relativist social constructionism is, as the name implies, a much more relativistic approach. This debate between 'realism' and 'relativism' is an important one and at times the debate has become very polarised. Some researchers have, however, adopted approaches that have the potential to allow us to overcome this polarised debate (i.e., to move beyond the sticking point of arguing about whether realism or relativism is the more sensible approach to take). I will consider some of these approaches next.

Attempts to move beyond the relativism–realism debate

In philosophical terms, one of the biggest sources of difference between positivism and relativist social constructionism is their tendencies towards, respectively, extreme realist and extreme relativist positions. Increasingly though, as Vivien Burr (2003) notes, psychologists have been attempting to try and move beyond the ‘relativism–realism’ debate. Other approaches to gathering knowledge may help us to do this. Let us consider two of these next: critical realism and phenomenology.

Critical realism

For some researchers the extreme realism of traditional forms of positivism and the extreme relativism of some forms of social constructionism are equally problematic. This research perspective is identified in the literature as ‘critical realism’. So, if we return to the idea of a theoretical continuum, the addition of critical realism produces a picture like that of Figure 2.2.

Although critical realism shares with more relativistic approaches a strong emphasis on social construction and critique of the idea that science is an objective process, it differs from them fundamentally in asserting that *‘the phenomena studied in ... research are not completely constructions ... but correspond to real entities or processes which exist independently of us’* (Lund, 2005, p. 118). Some relatively common features of this approach are:

- Critical realism rejects the ‘extreme realism’ of traditional positivistic approaches.
- Knowledge is seen as historically and culturally specific. Similarly, research methods can never be truly objective from this point of view and research is seen as a social process that is always conducted in the context of values.
- Language is not seen as a simple reflection of the ‘reality’ of the world, but as also having the capacity to shape our thoughts and our conceptions of what is real. Furthermore, it has direct consequences in terms of what courses of action in the world are seen as legitimate or not.
- It is possible to gain (imperfect) access to a reality beyond discourse. So, ‘extreme relativism’ is also rejected.
- Knowledge of this reality is always distorted to some extent by our perspectives, by power and by culture.
- This means that truth claims can be evaluated against evidence. But, knowledge and truth are still recognised as being, to some extent, socially constructed.

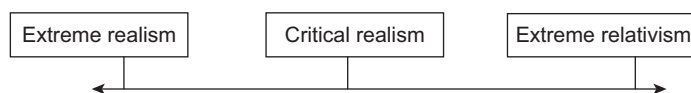


Figure 2.2 Critical realism and psychology.

Research that explicitly adopts a critical realist position is still relatively uncommon in psychology. However, the existence of this approach illustrates a crucial point here: that there are ways to avoid getting stuck in the difficult position of trying to decide between the merits of extreme relativism, on the one hand, and extreme realism on the other.

Where are we now? 2.14 ?

Critical realism is one way in which we can approach the task of building a body of knowledge that avoids both extreme realism and extreme relativism. Next, I will consider another approach that also does this, but in a different way.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is both a philosophical school of thought and a long-standing, increasingly popular approach to psychological research. In psychological research, its basic aim is to describe and interpret people's perspectives and perceptions and examine how they are related to their experience of the world around them.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl is regarded as the founder of phenomenology and advocated the position, clearly highly pertinent for psychology, that thorough understanding of experience is central to understanding in any discipline (Ashworth, 2008). The phenomenological approach that follows from Husserl's begins with the 'bracketing' of the question of whether people's experiences (and reports of that experience) can be linked to any kind of reality that is separate from those experiences.

Definitions 2.15 !

Bracketing is the idea, in phenomenology, that we can leave aside the question of whether people's experiences are separate from reality

Ashworth (2008) comments that if we accept that the understanding of experience should be central to psychology, it follows that the scientific method, and the examination of variables and their (arguably) causal relations to one another, is an inappropriate method for psychology. If one takes the view that experience is the key place for us to focus our attention, the question of whether that experience corresponds to some reality beyond it also becomes less significant. There are though,

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some other approaches to phenomenology that take a slightly different view on the debate about experience and its relationship to reality. However, the key point to grasp here is that certain forms of phenomenology, like critical realism, provide a potential way for us to legitimately avoid the choice between extreme relativism and extreme realism.

Summary

So, the way that we conceive of and conduct research, and the way that we make sense of research findings, are shaped by methodological traditions and epistemological standpoints. This can lead to adopting implicit assumptions that researchers are not consciously aware of, and do not spend much time consciously thinking about, but that are nevertheless still present and reflected in the way we do research. It is important to remember, though, that the relationship between epistemology and method is a fairly complex and flexible one.

For example, qualitative methods can be, and are, used within realist or positivistic theoretical frameworks. Also, quantitative researchers sometimes take a relativistic or critical realist standpoint. In spite of this, some texts, particularly older ones, tend to characterise qualitative psychology as inherently relativist or as incompatible with a more realist approach, whilst others (e.g., Ashworth, 2008) choose to place little emphasis on the use of qualitative techniques within realist approaches. Whilst it is probably fair to say that a more relativistic approach tends to lead one naturally towards more qualitative techniques, and a more realist approach towards more quantitative techniques, these are not formulaic rules and sometimes the choice of method simply reflects the particular question that is being asked.

Like these different approaches to building a body of knowledge, there are also different theoretical 'schools of thought' that offer particular ideas and assumptions about the fundamentals and basis of psychology. For example, 'behaviourism' is a school of psychological thought that assumes that psychology is best understood with reference to patterns of reinforcement and stimulus–response patterns, rather than with reference to notions of conscious or unconscious states of mind (Harré, 2006).

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2.16 Where are we now?

We have considered the issue of how research methodology is related to epistemological issues and seen that there are links between certain philosophical questions and the ways in which we do research and the way it is regarded and interpreted. Similarly, the way that we do research and the way that we make sense of its findings are influenced by broad theoretical approaches to psychology. This will be considered in the next part of the chapter.

Considering these schools of thought and their influence is beyond the scope of this book, but their existence demonstrates that our basic ideas and assumptions about certain psychological issues influence the way we do psychology.

Theoretical issues

There are two particular issues where a researcher's theoretical standpoint is highly likely to influence the way that they conceive of and carry out qualitative psychological research. These two issues are (a) the link between language, reality and thought, and (b) the issue of experience and how we can explore it.

The relationship between language, reality and thought

Psychology has tended to see language as something that reflects thought – as a set of symbols that we use to share information about our inner states (thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc.). However, there are some relativists who tend towards the view that language is actually something that pre-exists and shapes our thought – so, the way that we see the world can only be through pre-existing linguistic structures and forms. According to this view, we can only think with the concepts that language gives us, and so the concepts that exist in language will shape the way we think.

In trying to understand this viewpoint consider, for example, the following quotation from Vivien Burr:

... our experience of the world, and perhaps especially of our own internal states, is undifferentiated and intangible without the framework of language to give it structure and meaning. The way that language is structured therefore determines the way that experience and consciousness are structured. (Burr, 2003, p. 48)

This is how some relativist social constructionists come to the conclusion that there is 'nothing beyond the text' – that is, there is nothing to be gained by trying to 'see the reality beyond' language or trying to use language to give us a picture of reality. For those who subscribe to this theoretical standpoint, language is integral to sense-making and to thought. From this point of view, studying language is vitally important (or, perhaps, the only fruitful endeavour) for psychology.

We can return briefly to the issue of emotions in order to illustrate this idea. In the example on p. 00, I said that when I wake up in the morning I might have thoughts about my emotional state; I might think 'I am happy'. People who share my use of the English language know what that means and I can convey my emotional state to others by using this word as a label. I have selected the label 'happy' from a range of concepts that are available and meaningful to me and to those

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around me – that is, as a meaningful shared resource for labelling my emotional experience. We could think of the available emotion labels (and the concepts they represent) as being like tools in a toolbox. We can use a range of labels as tools to define our experience (what we think) and to convey it to others (what we say). Imagine that I had chosen the label ‘squibbly’ to describe my emotional state. This would not be something that would have meaning, either to me or to others. It does not actually exist as one of the meaningful labels that I have at my disposal (it isn’t in my toolbox).

The crucial idea here is that it is not just that I have a limited and pre-defined number of tools with which to describe my emotional state to others. It is also that I only have a number of tools with which to describe my emotional state to myself – that is, for the relativist, the only way I can meaningfully make sense of my emotional state is through the labels that are provided for me by my linguistic culture. Therefore, the very nature of my thought and experience is shaped and constrained by the concepts that are available to me and that pre-exist my thoughts. This has clear implications for the way we regard people’s speech and their ‘inner states’ (thoughts, emotions, perceptions).



2.17 Activity Suggestion

Do you suppose you can think without using any language? Is it the case that you somehow need words just to experience emotions or to think about things in an everyday way? Is it possible that there are some mental experiences (like a daydream perhaps) that can exist in our minds without involving words? Why not try reflecting on this throughout your day and see what happens!

Relativist qualitative researchers, therefore, would be very sceptical of the idea that participants’ accounts can give us a simple window into the ‘reality’ of their inner state. This is because, for the relativist, the reality of our inner states is not actually distinguishable in any meaningful way from our representations of it (the things we think or say). Relativist researchers would tend to use qualitative methods to analyse people’s talk and interaction as a way of examining things like: the way in which particular things or groups of people are made sense of, defined or ‘constructed’ in talk; and the way in which language might be used in a ‘performative’ way to achieve certain kinds of things in interaction – for example, to make claims, to lay blame, to defend a position, to negotiate identity. They do not tend to see talk as a realistic way of finding out ‘what people really think’ about things behind the language. Rather, they are interested in the way that language is used to make sense of the world, to describe and construct the world. For realist qualitative researchers, talk is the medium through which the world becomes ‘real’. They do not necessarily deny that there is a reality beyond talk (beyond ‘representations’), but they argue that we cannot gain access to it.

This, oddly, gives relativist researchers something in common with more positivistic approaches (although for very different reasons) – that is, the rejection of the notion that participants accounts give us simple access to their inner states. It also, importantly, sets them apart from those qualitative researchers who believe that they can access people’s perspectives, beliefs, experiences and thoughts through listening to their accounts of things. These researchers, who are less relativistic in their outlook, may value participants’ accounts as giving us insight into ‘meaning’. So, the issue of language is related to another theoretical issue which shapes the way that qualitative research is designed, conceptualised, conducted and interpreted. That is, the issue of ‘experience’.

Critical Issue: What can interview data actually tell us? 2.18

We have seen that the position we adopt about the relationship between language and reality will have a strong influence on the way that we regard participants’ accounts. A key implication of this is how we regard interview data. For some relativist qualitative researchers, it makes little sense to try and use interviews as a way of getting at what people really think and feel. However, some other qualitative researchers hold epistemological and theoretical positions that, for them, make it perfectly sensible to use interview data to gain access to the experience of others. This is a very good example of the extent to which different forms of qualitative research can vary, and shows us the dangers of thinking that all qualitative research is based on the same ideas and assumptions.

Experience and how we can explore it

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined some key things that psychology aims to do. Reflecting upon this list, you might notice that some of this involves trying to gain insight into the experiences of others. We would try to do this, for example, in order to meet the goals of:

- Examining how people think, feel and behave
- Exploring people’s perspectives and the meanings they attach to things

Whether we can do these things and, if so, how we might best go about it is clearly influenced by our views on what language is. If we are unable to treat people’s accounts as a window into their inner states it seems difficult to see how we can somehow address the aim of understanding their experiences and their perceptions of the world. For this reason, one of the key areas of recent debate has been the issue of whether it is possible to create a relativist social constructionism that

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allows us to gain knowledge about the experiences and perspectives of others. Some researchers have turned to the ideas of psychoanalysis as a way to try and resolve the issue of experience and subjectivity (Burr, 2003).

For others, this is a key reason why a critical realist form of social constructionism seems more attractive and appropriate than a relativist form. Research projects adopting this standpoint are more likely to see their research methods as allowing us to gain insight into the perspectives of others (because they are more likely to see language as giving us some insight into ‘inner states’) and to tap into their ways of experiencing the world around them.

We also noted that one of the most important theoretical traditions that has approached the subject of experience is phenomenology. Some phenomenological approaches hold that one can transcend the relativism–realism divide by ‘bracketing’ this question and focusing on experience as the key subject matter of psychology. There are also, arguably, some similarities between phenomenological approaches and the critical realist view discussed above. For example, Smith and Osborn (2008) state that researchers have to ‘*interpret people’s mental and emotional state from what they say*’ (p. 54), which suggests that it is possible to access people’s perspectives and experiences (their ‘inner states’) through listening to their talk. The key thing to note is that both of these approaches are viewed, by their advocates, as making it possible for research to serve the purpose of understanding experience.

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2.19 Where are we now?

Many qualitative researchers are interested in using their research to gain insight into people’s perspectives and experiences. The kinds of philosophical and theoretical positions that tend to lead researchers towards this, or that suggest to us that it is a feasible thing to do with qualitative research, include less relativist forms of social constructionism, critical realist approaches, phenomenological approaches and the use of psychoanalytical approaches in combination with social constructionism. Again, the key point that I want you to take from this is that we can see links between our philosophical ideas and theoretical assumptions on the one hand, and on the other hand, the way that we carry out and interpret research

Summary

With these two examples of language and experience, I have highlighted the connections that occur between our basic theoretical orientations towards psychology and our ways of approaching research. Such orientations influence the way that we

view our data (e.g., what do we think an interview transcript actually *is* – is it insight into people’s points of view, or an account constructed in a particular situation and context that should be analysed as just that?). There are many such theoretical debates and issues that permeate psychological research and they have implications for how we think about and conduct research.

Critical Issue: Mismatches between theory and method? 2.20

A common potential problem in qualitative work can arise when there is some kind of mismatch between theoretical concerns and the form of analysis performed or the way that the data is implicitly or explicitly conceptualised within the research. For example, research that is based within a relativist social constructionist approach would not logically ‘*treat people’s talk of experience as a transparent window on their world*’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 95). A fuller understanding of epistemological and theoretical traditions and standpoints can help us to avoid these kinds of inconsistencies and difficulties. It will also help you to spot these kinds of inconsistencies should they occur in the literature that you read for your course, which is another way of showing that you can use critical evaluation

Summary points

1. This chapter describes the complex ways in which epistemological and theoretical issues are related to research.
2. Theoretical issues can influence fundamentally the ways in which we approach research problems and questions, the ways that we design and conduct research, and the ways in which research findings are interpreted and utilised by others.
3. The relationship between theory, research question and method is a complex one, and it is important to remember that not all qualitative approaches share the same epistemological or theoretical assumptions. This is much less likely to be the case with quantitative approaches.
4. Understanding the role of epistemological and theoretical issues in shaping methodological practices and traditions will enhance getting-to-grips with the methods presented in the following chapters.
5. It is good to keep in mind that qualitative research can be very diverse, partly because of the issues surrounding the relationship between theory and method.



2.21 Want to know more?

More on social constructionism, realism and relativism:

Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge

Parker, I. (1998) (Ed.) *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*. London: Sage

For more discussion about how these ideas relate to methodology:

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3(2)**, 77–101

Madill, A., Jordan, A. & Shirley, C. (2000) Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology*, **91**, 1–20

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research*. Oxford: Blackwell