

# Approaches to Social Enquiry

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*Advancing Knowledge*

*Second Edition*

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# Major Choices in Social Enquiry

## Introduction

Over the past century, a range of approaches to social enquiry have emerged, and a wide variety of research methods for collecting and analysing data have been developed, to advance knowledge of social life. Approaches to social enquiry are concerned with both the logics used to develop new knowledge – with the steps and procedures that this involves – and with philosophical and theoretical ideas and assumptions about what constitutes social reality and how knowledge of it can be produced. *Research methods*, on the other hand, are techniques that are used, within a particular approach, to generate and analyse data to describe or explain characteristics, patterns and processes in social life.

As very little attention is given in the social scientific literature to the logics available for generating new knowledge, this book concentrates on them and their philosophical and theoretical foundations. It does not deal with research methods *per se*.

Before a researcher can undertake social enquiry, a number of choices have to be made. These include:

- the research problem to be investigated; ✓
- the research question or questions to be answered; ✓
- the research strategy or strategies to be used to answer these questions; ✓
- the posture to be adopted by the researcher towards the researched; and ✓
- the research paradigm containing assumptions about reality and how it can be studied.

The first two of these choices depend mainly on the nature of the research being undertaken, and on practical considerations, but the last three are heavily influenced by theoretical and methodological commitments.

The choice of research strategy and posture poses a number of dilemmas for the social researcher. A *dilemma* is a choice for which there is no straightforward answer. That is, the appropriateness of each alternative has been both advocated and contested, with the result that the choice becomes more a matter of weighing up strengths and weaknesses in relation to a particular research problem.

However, researchers deal with these dilemmas in different ways, depending on their ideas about the nature of science and scientific knowledge, on the way they view the social world, and on the views and commitments of the social scientific community or communities to which they belong. In other words, these choices are more ideological than practical in nature (see Blaikie 2000 for a more detailed discussion of these choices). The remainder of the chapter deals with the range of these choices, while chapter 2 deals with some of the major dilemmas.

## Research Problem

All social enquiry needs to address a research problem. The statement of the problem provides both a signpost for what will be studied and a set of boundary markers to delimit the territory to be covered. It points to what the research is about and where it will be conducted. Here is an example.

Some degree of long-term unemployment is a characteristic of modern capitalist societies, particularly when there are downturns in the economic cycle, new technologies replace certain categories of occupations, and companies relocate manufacturing to low-wage economies. Of course, at any time, some members of a population may choose a lifestyle that does not involve being in regular paid employment, and others may have a disability that prevents them from undertaking normal work. They are not the concern of this study. Rather, it is those who want to work, but who have been unable to find suitable employment for an extended period; that is the focus of this study. As most people need to earn a living through work in order both to survive and to have a satisfactory lifestyle, this situation is regarded as both a personal and a social problem.

Research on this problem could be given the following title:

The nature, causes and consequences of long-term unemployment.

Selecting a research problem is the first and most fundamental choice. However, to be researchable, a research problem has to be translated into one or more research questions.

## Research Questions

Research Questions (RQs) are the foundations of all research; they make a research problem researchable.

### Types of research questions

RQs are of three main types: 'what' questions, 'why' questions and 'how' questions.

- **What** questions require a descriptive answer; they are directed towards discovering and describing the characteristics of, and patterns in, some social phenomenon.

- **Why** questions ask for either characteristics and regularities or an understanding or explanation of social activities and processes.
- **How** questions are concerned with the processes and practical outcomes.

Here are examples of the three types of the research problem on long-term unemployment.

- 1 What kinds of people experience long-term unemployment?
- 2 What is it like to be unemployed for a long time?
- 3 Why are these people unemployed for a long time?
- 4 How could they be re-employed?

Answering RQ 1 is the first step towards a description of the characteristics of long-term unemployment in terms of association amongst variables. RQ 2 is like for them, and how they experience it. This is what welfare workers and social workers could provide them with a better life. The final RQ seeks solutions to explain unemployment; it is an applied question.

These RQs may look innocuous. However, as we shall see, finding answers to these research questions, and their RQs, involves philosophical, theoretical and methodological choices.

## Research Design

It is important to note that the 'what' questions normally precede 'how' questions. In other words, we can explain it, and we need to know before we can be confident of the sequence also represents a hierarchy of difficulty, with 'what' questions being easier to answer than 'why' questions, and 'how' questions being the most challenging of the three.

It is not necessary for every research project to follow this sequence. Some may deal with only one or two of the next step and seek answers to the remaining questions.

- **Why** questions ask for either the causes of, or the reasons for, the existence of characteristics and regularities in a particular phenomenon. They seek an understanding or explanation of the relationships between events, or within social activities and processes.
- **How** questions are concerned with bringing about change, with intervention and practical outcomes.

### Examples

Here are examples of the three types of questions that could be used to address the research problem on long-term unemployment.

- 1 What kinds of people experience long-term unemployment?
- 2 What is it like to be unemployed for an extended period?
- 3 Why are these people unemployed?
- 4 How could they be re-employed?

Answering RQ 1 is the first stage of the research. The answer would provide a description of the characteristics of long-term unemployed people and, perhaps, patterns of association amongst these characteristics. RQ 2 explores the consequences of long-term unemployment on the unemployed person. We want to know what it is like for them, and how they cope with it. RQ 3 brings us to the crux of the problem. This is what welfare workers and policy makers want to know. While unemployed people will usually have some idea of why they are unemployed, answers to this RQ could also provide them with a bigger picture that could help them to regain employment. The final RQ seeks solutions to the problem. It is one thing to describe and explain unemployment; it is another to be able to reduce its level.

These RQs may look innocent enough, as their wording is straightforward. However, as we shall see, finding satisfactory answers can be rather complex. This research problem, and its RQs, will be used throughout the book to illustrate the philosophical, theoretical and methodological discussions.

### Research questions in sequence

It is important to note that the three types of research questions form a sequence: 'what' questions normally precede 'why' questions, and 'why' questions normally precede 'how' questions. In other words, we need to know what is going on before we can explain it, and we need to know why something happens the way it does before we can be confident about introducing interventions to change it. The sequence also represents a hierarchy of difficulty; 'what' questions are generally easier to answer than 'why' questions, and 'how' questions can be the most challenging of the three.

It is not necessary for every research project to address all three types of RQs. Some may deal with only one or more 'what' questions. Others will take the next step and seek answers to 'why' questions. The pursuit of answers to 'how'

questions is confined to applied research projects. Where limited or no research has been conducted on a topic, the first step will normally be to answer appropriate 'what' questions, before proceeding to 'why' or 'how' questions. However, in areas where adequate description of the problem is already available, a researcher may be able to proceed directly to answering one or more related 'why' questions. Similarly, if answers to both 'what' and 'why' questions exist already, the research may simply pose one or more 'how' questions. Therefore, whether a researcher sets out with all three types of RQs will depend on the nature of the research problem and the state of knowledge in the field. Nevertheless, the sequence implicit in answering these three types of questions remains.<sup>1</sup>

## Research Strategies

The major task in designing a piece of social research is to work out how to answer the RQ(s). This involves much more than deciding which methods will be used to collect and analyse data. What is required is a procedure, a logic, for generating new knowledge. **Research Strategies (RSs)** are such logics; they provide a starting point and a set of steps by means of which 'what' and 'why' questions can be answered.

*Following the choice of a research problem and RQs, the choice of a RS, or a combination of them, is the most important decision that a researcher must make.* These RSs will be elaborated in detail in chapter 3. However, in order to discuss other choices, they need to be introduced here.

There are four distinct RSs: the Inductive, Deductive, Retroductive and Abductive. Each one provides a distinctly different way of answering RQs (see table 1.1).

**Table 1.1** The logics of the four research strategies

	<i>Inductive</i>	<i>Deductive</i>	<i>Retroductive</i>	<i>Abductive</i>
<b>Aim:</b>	To establish universal generalizations to be used as pattern explanations	To test theories, to eliminate false ones and corroborate the survivor	To discover underlying mechanisms to explain observed regularities	To describe and understand social life in terms of social actors' motives and understanding
<b>Start:</b>	Accumulate observations or data	Identify a regularity to be explained	Document and model a regularity	Discover everyday lay concepts, meanings and motives
	Produce generalizations	Construct a theory and deduce hypotheses	Construct a hypothetical model of a mechanism	Produce a technical account from lay accounts
<b>Finish:</b>	Use these 'laws' as patterns to explain further observations	Test the hypotheses by matching them with data	Find the real mechanism by observation and/or experiment	Develop a theory and test it iteratively

The Inductive RS starts with observations and then proceeds to derive generalizations. It is used to describe the characteristics of a population and to determine the nature of the patterns between these characteristics. Once these patterns have been established, the researcher can predict the occurrence of specific events. This RS is useful for answering 'what' questions and 'why' questions.

The Deductive RS adopts a top-down approach. It starts with a theory or hypothesis already discovered and the researcher has to find out whether the evidence supports the theory. The task is to test the theory, and then collect appropriate data to support or refute it. However, if the data do not support the theory, it is modified or rejected. This RS is used for answering 'why' questions.

The Retroductive RS also uses a top-down approach. It starts with a theory or hypothesis already discovered and the researcher has first to try to establish its existence in the real world. The use of indirect methods is often necessary. Should it exist, certain predictions can be made. The process of working back from the real world to the theory involves imagination and analogy. This RS is used for answering 'why' questions.

As we shall see in chapter 3, the Inductive version locates explanatory power in the data while the other version locates explanatory power in the theory.

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<i>Abductive</i>	
ing	To describe and understand social life in terms of social actors' motives and understanding
	Discover everyday lay concepts, meanings and motives
	Produce a technical account from lay accounts
	Develop a theory and test it iteratively

### Inductive research strategy

The Inductive RS starts with the collection of data, followed by data analysis, and then proceeds to derive generalizations using so-called inductive logic. The aim is to describe the characteristics of people and social situations, and then to determine the nature of the patterns of the relationships, or networks of relationships, between these characteristics. Once generalizations about characteristics and/or patterns have been established, some writers claim that they can be used to explain the occurrence of specific events by locating them within the established pattern. This RS is useful for answering 'what' questions, but is very limited in its capacity to answer 'why' questions satisfactorily.

### Deductive research strategy

The Deductive RS adopts a very different starting point and works in the reverse order to the Inductive RS. It begins with a pattern, or regularity, that has already been discovered and established, and which begs an explanation. The researcher has to find or formulate a possible explanation, a theoretical argument for the existence of the regularity in the social phenomenon under consideration. The task is to test that theory by deducing one or more hypotheses from it, and then collect appropriate data. Should the data match the theory, some support is provided for its use, particularly if further tests produce similar results. However, if the data do not match the theory, then the theory must be either modified or rejected. Further testing of other candidate theories can then be undertaken. According to this RS, knowledge of the social world is advanced by means of trial and error processes. It is only appropriate for answering 'why' questions.

### Retroductive research strategy

The Retroductive RS also starts with an observed regularity, but seeks a different type of explanation. This is achieved by locating the real underlying structure(s) or mechanism(s) that is (are) responsible for producing an observed regularity. To discover a previously unknown structure or mechanism, the researcher has first to construct a hypothetical model of it, and then proceed to try to establish its existence by observation and experiment. This may require the use of indirect methods, as the structure or mechanism may not be directly observable. The search is for evidence of the consequences of its existence. Should it exist, certain events can be expected to occur. Retroduction is a process of working back from data, to an explanation, by the use of creative imagination and analogy. This RS provides an alternative way of answering 'why' questions.

As we shall see in chapter 3, the Retroductive RS comes in two versions. One version locates explanations in social structures that are external to social actors, while the other version focuses on cognitive mechanisms and socially constructed

rules for behaviour. To put this in another way, the former adopts a structuralist view of social life, and the latter a social constructionist view.

### Abductive research strategy

The Abductive RS has a very different logic to the other three. The starting point is the social world of the social actors being investigated. The aim is to discover their constructions of reality, their ways of conceptualizing and giving meaning to their social world, their tacit knowledge. The main access a researcher has to these constructions is through the knowledge that social actors use in the production, reproduction and interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation. Their reality, the way they have constructed and interpreted their activities together, is embedded in their everyday language. Hence, the researcher has to enter their world in order to discover the motives and reasons that accompany social activities. The task is then to redescribe these actions and motives, and the situations in which they occur, in the technical language of social scientific discourse. Individual motives and actions have to be abstracted into typical motives for typical actions in typical situations. These social scientific typifications provide an *understanding* of the activities, and may then become ingredients in more systematic explanatory accounts. This RS can be used to answer both 'what' and 'why' questions.

While the RSs have been constructed so that their logics of enquiry are incompatible, it is possible that they can be combined in practice, such as being used in sequence, or one incorporated in part of another. We shall return to this in chapter 3.

Each RS has a philosophical ancestry and foundation, and includes ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and epistemological assumptions about how that reality can be known. The RSs are elaborated in chapter 3, and the RPs, with which they are associated, are discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

### Basic difference: working top down or bottom up

One of the basic differences between the RSs is the way they answer 'why' RQs. One possibility is to apply existing theory or ideas to the problem, or to invent a new theory, and then test its/their relevance in that context (the Deductive RS). This choice between theory testing and theory construction may be influenced by the state of knowledge on a research problem. Alternatively, it is possible to postulate one or more explanatory mechanisms and try to establish their existence (the Retroductive RS). In these RSs, knowledge is advanced by working 'top down': that is, by trying out the researcher's ideas – concepts, theories or mechanisms – on the research situation in the hope that they represent the way reality works.

The alternative is to work 'bottom up': that is, by deriving concepts and theory from the situation. In using the Abductive RSs, and in the initial stages of the social constructionist version of the Retroductive RS, the researcher works 'bottom up'.

The early advocates of social research, but, as we shall see, the

In addition to the basic choices are discussed by the researcher and the researcher in the type of involvement

In trying to generate a kind of relationship with the kind of role they play in extreme positions. The phenomenon being observed the researcher is thoroughly immersed in the experiences as a basis

The choice is between research participants and the former, the researcher is engaged with the point of becoming a researcher allows him or her may also have an influence

The social researcher being an *expert* or a problem armed with theory, and/or previous ideas influence the ways in which answers the researcher aims to the research participants of their social world. RQs emerge from the scientific knowledge

Normally, these two and the researched world there is a range of involvement

The early advocates of the Inductive RS claimed it to be a 'bottom up' procedure, but, as we shall see, it turns out to be 'top down'.

## Researcher's Stance

In addition to the basic choices of research problem, RQ(s) and RS(s), three other choices are discussed here. They have to do with the relationship between the researcher and the researched, with the stance that the researcher adopts regarding the type of involvement she or he has with the research participants.

### Outsider or insider

In trying to generate new knowledge, social researchers have to choose both the kind of relationship they wish to have with the people they are researching and the kind of role they will take. The choice has to be made somewhere between two extreme positions. The first requires the researcher to stand back from the social phenomenon being investigated, and to use methods that allow him or her to observe the phenomenon as an *outsider*. The second requires the researcher to be thoroughly immersed in the social situation and to use these *insider* and personal experiences as a basis for understanding what is going on.

The choice is between either maintaining a 'professional' distance from the research participants or becoming thoroughly immersed in their social world. In the former, the researcher remains aloof and separate, while in the latter, the researcher is engaged in close relationships with the research participants, even to the point of becoming an accepted member of that group or community. The researcher allows him or herself not only to be influenced by those researched, but may also have an influence on them.

### Expert or learner

The social researcher has to choose between another two extremes: between being an *expert* or a *learner*. In the former role, the researcher approaches the problem armed with relevant existing knowledge in the form of concepts and theory, and/or previous research findings. These social scientific concepts and ideas influence the way the research problem and RQ(s) are formulated, and the ways in which answers are sought. On the other hand, in the role of learner, the researcher aims to set aside existing social scientific knowledge and to help the research participants reveal how they conceptualize and understand that part of their social world of interest to the researcher. In this case, the answers to the RQs emerge from this learning process, rather than from a body of social scientific knowledge.

Normally, these two choices concerning the relationship between the researcher and the researched will coincide as 'outside expert' or 'inside learner'. Of course, there is a range of intermediate positions between these two extremes. This choice



has a bearing on how objectivity is viewed in social research, and is a matter to which we will return in chapter 2.

### On, for or with people

Running parallel to the two choices just discussed is another that concerns the social researcher's relationship with the research participants. Research can be done *on* people, *for* people or *with* people. In the first case, the researcher is the expert, and the researched are merely subjects or respondents; the research may be undertaken primarily for the benefit of the researcher, e.g. to satisfy curiosity. While the results may have some benefit for the research participants, or 'society' more generally, this is not the primary purpose. In the second case, the researcher is still the expert, but acts as a consultant; the researcher does the research for a client group, to provide them with the knowledge they need. The client(s) and the researched can coincide, or they may be different. In the third case, the clients are in charge of the research, and the researcher is a facilitator; she or he assists them in conducting their own research on *their* situation, usually to solve some problem, to evaluate some programme, or to bring about some change.

These three relationships between the researcher and the researched do not exhaust all possibilities (see Blaikie 2000: 52–6 for an elaboration). There is one position that could be added here to the combinations of 'outside expert' and 'inside learner', to signal other possibilities. It is associated particularly with Critical Theory and feminist research (see chapter 5), where the researcher is committed to the emancipation of oppressed groups. This may consist in helping them to understand better their oppressed situation, as well as finding their way out of it. In such cases, the researcher is a *reflective partner*, or a *conscientizer*.

It is clear that researchers are faced with a number of choices in the way they relate to research participants. While the type of relationship adopted may be influenced by the nature of the research topic, invariably, experienced researchers have strong commitments regarding it. They can give methodological and ideological reasons for their choice, and these are likely to have a bearing on their choice of RS. This is because it is easier to put these commitments into practice in some RSs than in others. For example, it is easy to be an outside expert when working with the Deductive RS and an inside learner when working with the Abductive RS. The reverse is not the case.

## Research Paradigms

Research strategies are located within the broader frameworks of theoretical or philosophical perspectives, commonly referred to as *paradigms*. We shall review ten different Research Paradigms (RPs)<sup>2</sup> in some detail in chapters 4 and 5, and review and critique them in chapter 6. However, in the meantime, we need to discuss the two distinguishing characteristics that form their core and on which they differ: namely, the assumptions made about the nature of the social reality that is investigated (ontological assumptions) and a related set of assumptions

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another that concerns the participants. Research can be in the first case, the researcher is the respondent; the research may be done for her, e.g. to satisfy curiosity. In the second case, the researcher is the participant, or 'society' as a whole. In the third case, the researcher is the client, or the client's need. The client(s) and the researcher are the clients in the third case, the clients are the researchers; she or he assists them in order to solve some problem, or to bring about change.

and the researched do not (see also the elaboration). There is one more case, that of 'outside expert' and 'insider', associated particularly with research where the researcher is committed to helping them, or as finding their way out of a difficult situation, or a conscientizer.

Some of the choices in the way they work, or the relationship adopted may be different. Usually, experienced researchers bring their methodological and ideological commitments to have a bearing on their practice in order to be an outside expert when working with the

frameworks of theoretical or methodological paradigms. We shall review these in chapters 4 and 5, and in the meantime, we need to know their core and on which they are based, the nature of the social reality they are related to, and the related set of assumptions

about the way in which knowledge of this reality can be obtained (epistemological assumptions).

The fundamental methodological problem that faces all social researchers is what kinds of connections are possible between ideas, social experience and social reality. Ideas refer to the ways of conceptualizing and making sense of experience and reality – such as concepts, theories, knowledge and other interpretations. Social experience refers to individual conduct, social relationships and cultural practices in everyday life, and to the everyday interpretations and meanings associated with these. Social reality refers to the material and socially constructed world within which everyday life occurs, which can have an impact on people's lives, in terms of both providing opportunities and imposing restrictions (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002: 9).

The various RPs present different ways of making connections between ideas, social experience and social reality. To a large extent, this is expressed in the ontological and epistemological assumptions they adopt: that is, their particular way of looking at the world, as well as their ideas on how it can be understood.

It will become evident as we go along that it is difficult to discuss ontological and epistemological assumptions separately (see Crotty 1998: 10; Williams and May 1996: 69). Assertions about what constitute social phenomena have implications for the way in which it is possible to gain knowledge of them. And the reverse is also true. They are discussed separately at this stage, in order that their characteristics and the range of alternatives can be highlighted.

### Ontological assumptions

*Ontology* is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of what exists. In the social sciences, ontologies answer the question: 'What is the nature of social reality?' Each RP embodies a view of the world that is underpinned by ontological assumptions. In their domain of interest, RPs implicitly or explicitly make different claims about what kinds of things do or can exist, the conditions of their existence, and the ways in which they are related.

Theories about the nature of social reality are frequently reduced to two opposed, mutually exclusive categories: *idealist* and *realist*. An *idealist* theory assumes that what we regard as the external world is just appearances and has no independent existence apart from our thoughts. In a *realist* theory, both natural and social phenomena are assumed to have an existence that is independent of the activities of the human observer.

The idealist/realist distinction has a long history in philosophy. More recently, the contrast is made between *relativist* and *realist* ontologies. However, as these dichotomies are now too crude for understanding the variety of ontological assumptions used in the social sciences, to be useful in understanding the nature of social enquiry, it is necessary to elaborate them.

The set of categories discussed here has been derived from a variety of sources, particularly the work of Bhaskar (1978, 1979, 1986) and his exponents, such as Collier (1994). The categories are not intended either to be exhaustive or to cover

all subtle variations in the literature. The titles of the categories are not universal; the literature abounds not only with alternative categories, but also with different categorizations. My set of categories has been developed to help understand the range of commonly used RPs in the social sciences, and their accompanying RSs, to be discussed in later chapters.<sup>3</sup> The categories are: *shallow realist*, *conceptual realist*, *cautious realist*, *depth realist*, *idealist* and *subtle realist* (see fig. 1.1). What they all have in common is that they assert the existence of some kind of reality. The pertinent questions are: 'What is the nature of this reality?' and 'Where do we look for it?'

To the extent that researchers adopt ontological assumptions, they are most likely to do so implicitly and may not be able to articulate the assumptions they use. Ontological assumptions are embedded in the theoretical ideas that are used to guide research and in the RSs and methods that are adopted.

### Shallow realist

The *shallow realist* ontology entails an unproblematic belief in an external reality, consisting of things and/or events and/or states of affairs, which are controlled by natural or social laws. This external reality consists of nothing more than objects or events that can be observed. This view is also referred to as *naïve realist*, *empirical realist* or *actualist* (Bhaskar 1979; Collier 1994: 7–11). It assumes that what we can observe is what exists, and is all that exists: 'What you see is what is there.'

This ontology asserts that there are patterns or sequences in these observable events, and that the challenge for science is to discover and describe them. They are referred to as empirical regularities, and descriptions of them are known as universal generalizations. The latter achieve the status of scientific laws when they have been observed across time and space, without exception: e.g. the temperatures at which pure water changes from liquid to either a solid or a gas.

This *shallow realist* ontology implies that there is nothing behind observed events that has a hand in their production. It is assumed that the world is made up of 'observable atomistic objects, events and regularities among them, as if objects had no structure or powers, and in particular, no unobservable qualities' (Sayer 2000: 11). Only that which can be observed, i.e. experienced by human senses, can be regarded as real and, therefore, as worthy of the attention of science. *Human activity* is understood as observable behaviour taking place in observable, material circumstances. *Social reality* is viewed as a complex of relations between events, and the causes of human behaviour are regarded as being external to the individual.

A *shallow* or *naïve realist* ontology 'assumes not only that the phenomena we study are independent of us, but that we can have direct contact with them, contact which provides knowledge whose validity is certain' (Hammersley 1992: 50). We shall come back to this in the discussion of the epistemology of *empiricism* later in this chapter.

This version of realist ontology is often associated with the doctrine of *naturalism*, which claims that because there is little difference between the behaviour of

inanimate objects and the natural sciences

### Conceptual realist

This ontology offers reason rather than the independent of human mind. human capacity of able to discover it is referred to as *object*

This type of realization of a social com consciousness. It exists individual; it is gen structure of ideas, a human beings. '[S]e which stands "out up, such as individ et al. 1984: 149). He contradiction (Jolo

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### Cautious realist

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inanimate objects and that of human beings, the logic of enquiry appropriate to the natural sciences can also be used in the social sciences (see Introduction).

#### *Conceptual realist*

This ontology offers an alternative to *shallow realist* ontology by appealing to reason rather than experience. While reality is seen to have an existence independent of human minds, it is argued that it can be known only by the use of the innate human capacity of thought and reason. Any rational, thinking person should be able to discover it for themselves. It is for these reasons that this ontology is also referred to as *objective conceptual realism* (Bhaskar 1986: 8).

This type of reality is not the property of any individual; nor is it the construction of a social community. Rather, it is like a collective mind, or a collective consciousness. It exists in the realm of ideas, but is above and beyond the ideas of any individual; it is general, but not material. It is not directly observable, being a structure of ideas, separate from individual thoughts, but shared by a collective of human beings. '[S]ociety is a real and general phenomenon; it is a thing-in-itself which stands "outside" of, and is independent of, all those elements that make it up, such as individuals, their consciousness, and their circumstances' (Johnson et al. 1984: 149). The ultimate criterion of validity or truth is the absence of logical contradiction (Johnson et al. 1984: 151).

The *conceptual realist* ontology can be regarded as an odd version of realist ontology (a non-material yet independent reality), but could just as easily be regarded as an idealist or non-realist ontology. However, while 'non-realists may in the end turn out to be realists about something, they have a characteristic position, in that they deny that there is anything knowable that is independent of mind' (Collier 1994: 12).

It is worth noting that the cognitive process by which an idea is regarded as referring to something real is known as reification. *Reification* occurs when human beings believe that the social forms they have created are natural, universal and absolute. They forget that they are the producers and treat the products of human activity as being facts of nature or the result of divine will (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 89). For example, the notion of 'society', which may be regarded as referring to a reality that has an independent existence, is, according to this view, nothing more than a conceptual or theoretical tool.

#### *Cautious realist*

This ontology shares the view of the *shallow realist* ontology, that there is an independent external reality, but claims that it is impossible for humans to perceive it accurately because of the imperfections of the human senses and the fact that the act of observing is an interpretive process (see the discussion in chapter 4 on the theory dependence of observations). This ontology is called 'cautious' *realist* because researchers 'need to be critical about their work precisely because of these human frailties. But, although one can never be sure that ultimate reality has been uncovered, there can be no doubt that reality is "out there." Realism remains the central concept' (Guba 1990b: 20).

### Depth realist

In the *depth realist* ontology, reality is seen to consist of three levels or domains: the empirical, the actual and the real (Bhaskar 1978). The *empirical* domain is the world that we experience through the use of our senses; the *actual* domain includes events whether or not anyone is there to observe them; and the *real* domain consists of the processes that generate events. It is implied that the empirical domain is superficial, as it is concerned only with what can be experienced; that the real domain is substantial, as it refers to the structures and powers of objects; and that the actual domain 'refers to what happens if and when those powers are activated, to what they do and what eventuates when they do' (Sayer 2000: 12). In the real domain of reality, the ultimate objects of scientific enquiry are considered to exist and act independently of scientists and their activity. As in the *shallow realist* and *cautious realist* ontologies, it is assumed that there is a reality 'out there' that exists whether or not it is being observed.

Seeing reality as consisting of these three domains, ranging from what can be observed to an underlying domain of causal structures and mechanisms, suggests the idea of ontological depth, of the stratification of reality that is independent of our knowledge of it (Bhaskar 1979: 16; 1986: 63). It is for this reason that this ontology is called *depth realist*. The aim of a science based on this ontology is to explain observable phenomena with reference to underlying structures and mechanisms.

Structures are regarded differently in the natural and the social sciences. Social structures do not exist independently of the activities they influence or social actors' conceptions of what they are doing in these activities. They are also less enduring than natural structures (Bhaskar 1989: 78).

When used by social scientists, this ontology takes two forms. Social reality is viewed either as social arrangements that are the products of material but unobservable structures of relations (Bhaskar 1979) or as a socially constructed world in which social episodes are the products of the cognitive resources that social actors bring to them (Harré 1977). This means that these two traditions seek explanations for observed phenomena in different places.

### Idealist

In the *idealist* ontology, the external world consists of representations that are creations of individual minds. Whatever is regarded as being real is real only because we think it is real; it is simply an idea that has taken on the impression of being real. Reality is what human beings make or construct; it is the activities of creative subjects that constitute the world of objects. In other words, these subjective ideas refer to something that is regarded by the believers as real. This view of reality is different from both the *shallow realist* external world and the world of reason associated with *conceptual realism*.

The variety included within the category of *idealist* ontology can be identified in the following subcategories. At one extreme are the *atheistic idealists* who deny the existence or at least the relevance of an external world. In a way, this category represents the ideal-typical form of *idealist* ontology. At the other extreme are

*perspective idealists* who perceive and make reality through their perspective-based realizations.

Between these two extremes are those who accept that there are opportunities on the social constructions called *constrained idealisms* to deny the existence of what might exist beyond what they talk it, write it or think it.

The *idealist* position is that natural and social phenomena are not out there but live in a world of our interpretation but, instead, my interpretations create reality for them. Social actors produce and reproduce reality.

### Subtle realist

This ontology shares with the *depth realist* ontologies, a belief in an attempt to overcome the *idealist* ontology. It has been suggested that *depth realism*, *subtle realism* and *atheistic idealism* that have adopted one or the other or they accept the realities. In the former, social scientists, as in both, is seen to be a product result from putting the

This subtle realism is independent, knowable and accessible to those phenomena, and in denying is uniquely appropriate knowledge is based on rejects [the] ... phenomena. Perhaps of the notion that knowledge is uncertain. (Harré)

*perspective idealists* who regard constructions of reality as just different ways of perceiving and making sense of an external world. While the assumption that there is an external world runs counter to pure *idealist* ontology, the status of perspective-based realities is still in the realm of ideas.

Between these two extremes are a variety of other views. They include views that accept that the existence of an external world places both constraints and opportunities on the reality-constructing activities of social actors, but regard social constructions as having a high level of autonomy from it. They could be called *constrained idealists*. Others, such as *agnostic idealists*, neither affirm nor deny the existence of a world 'out there' (Gergen 1994). They have no interest in what might exist beyond the way in which social actors constitute their world as they talk it, write it and argue it (Potter 1996: 98).

The *idealist* position claims that there are fundamental differences between natural and social phenomena; that humans, unlike things in nature, have culture and live in a world of their shared interpretations. *Social action* is not mere behaviour but, instead, involves a process of meaning-giving. It is the meanings and interpretations created and maintained by social actors that constitute social reality for them. *Social reality* consists of the shared interpretations that social actors produce and reproduce as they go about their everyday lives.

#### *Subtle realist*

This ontology shares a major feature of the *shallow realist* and *cautious realist* ontologies, a belief in the existence of an external social reality. It has emerged as an attempt to overcome some of the deficiencies of both the *shallow realist* and the *idealist* ontologies. However, while having some elements in common with *depth realism*, *subtle realism* does not take on board the idea of ontological depth. It has been suggested by Hammersley (1992) as being appropriate for ethnographic research to deal with the incompatible positions of realism and relativistic idealism that have come to dominate such research. Ethnographers tend to adopt one or the other; they either believe in an independent, knowable reality, or they accept the idea of multiple and incommensurate, socially constructed realities. In the former, reality is seen to exist independently of the activities of scientists, as in both *shallow* and *depth realist* ontologies, and, in the latter, reality is seen to be a product of the interpretations of social actors, and the changes that result from putting these interpretations into practice over time.

This subtle realism retains from naïve realism the idea that research investigates independent, knowable phenomena. But it breaks with it in denying that we have direct access to those phenomena, in accepting that we must always rely on cultural assumptions, and in denying that our aim is to reproduce social phenomena in some way that is uniquely appropriate to them. Obversely, subtle realism . . . [recognizes] that all knowledge is based on assumptions and purposes and is a human construction, but it rejects [the] . . . abandonment of the regulative idea of independent and knowable phenomena. Perhaps most important of all, subtle realism is distinct . . . in its rejection of the notion that knowledge must be defined as beliefs whose validity is known with certainty. (Hammersley 1992: 52)

Before leaving our discussion of ontology, it is important to note that it is one thing to examine how philosophers and social scientists view social reality, and quite another to discern lay views of the world. Lay people who are unfamiliar with philosophical views are unlikely to hold sophisticated ontologies of the kind discussed here. They are most likely to have some kind of *shallow* or *naïve realist* view about the status of the social world. While an expert may hold some kind of idealist ontology, social actors may be staunch realists. Such experts have solved this inconsistency by claiming that the lay view of the social world is a consequence of reification; that is, what is really a social construction is regarded as having an independent existence. Idealists could also make the same accusation against other experts who hold realist ontologies.

### Epistemological assumptions

An *epistemology* is a theory of knowledge, 'a theory or science of the method or grounds of knowledge'. It is a theory of how human beings come to have knowledge of the world around them (however this is regarded), of how we know what we know. An epistemology provides a philosophical grounding for establishing what kinds of knowledge are possible – what can be known – and criteria for deciding how knowledge can be judged as being both adequate and legitimate (Crotty 1998: 8). In the social sciences, epistemologies offer answers to the question: 'How can social reality be known?' They make claims about which scientific procedures produce reliable social scientific knowledge.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, two alternatives to religious faith and revelation were offered as the foundations of knowledge: reason and experience (Benton 1977: 20). Reason, or rationalism, was concerned with being able to distinguish between what is true and what is false. Early rationalists, such as Descartes, believed that all humans have this capacity, in particular, to subject everything that is normally taken for granted to a process of systematic doubt. It was assumed that this critical process would reveal the truth. However, the problem was to be able to be certain about such judgements.

An alternative to the use of reason was to base knowledge of the world on human experience. 'Seeing' with one's own eyes was regarded as the ultimate way of establishing what the world looks like and how it works. In other words, only when evidence can be produced from the use of the human senses can knowledge of the world be regarded as certain.

Another way of thinking about epistemology is in terms of the relationship between researchers and the 'things' of which they wish to have knowledge. As we have discovered already, these 'things' or objects can be regarded very differently, fundamentally as either real or ideal, as having an independent existence or simply as being ideas. Researchers or observers give meaning to these 'things' in three basic ways. *Objectivism* views 'things' as having intrinsic meaning. The researcher's role is to discover the meaning that already resides in them. For example, a tree is a tree regardless of who observes it or whether it is observed at all; its meaning is independent of human consciousness and is simply waiting to be discovered. The thing takes precedence over the observer. Hence, all observers should discover the same

meaning, the same thing. Things make no sense in isolation; there is no interplay between things. This means that the objects have different meanings by different observers. A shelter. *Constructivism* is not discovered; it is created. The observer plays a role in the process. The process is constrained by the result of the observer's previous understandings of it that have been learned.

The first two of these are *empiricism* and *rationalism*, respectively. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the relation and faith with the world. These early beginnings have emerged, of course, and are reviewed here including as well as three other forms.

Again, the range of views that capture the diversity of thought over years or so. Variations in the literature.

### Empiricism

*Empiricism* is more concerned with what it can be seen to be. It is often contrasted with *idealism* (William James) that knowledge is produced from 'observing' the natural world objectively. It is claimed that the evidence produced by these methods and processes can be a neutral observation, a matter of accurate reporting, attempting to understand without bias that could lead to error.

Crude empiricism is often presented in the name of objectivity without philosophical reflection.

This epistemology is *rationalist* because it determines when knowledge is discovered in the external world. Knowledge is 'out there' by the object.

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meaning, the same truth about such things. The reverse is the case in *subjectivism*. Things make no contribution to their meaning; the observer imposes it. As there is no interplay between the observer and the thing, the thing plays no part in the meaning that the observer gives to it. Hence, things may be given quite different meanings by different observers. What one observer calls a tree, another might call a shelter. *Constructionism* rejects both of these views. On the one hand, meaning is not discovered; it is constructed. Rather than the meaning residing in 'things', the observer plays an active role in its creation. On the other hand, this creative process is constrained by the nature of the things themselves; their meaning is the result of the observer's engagement with them and, we need to add, the understandings of it that already exist (Crotty 1998: 8–9).

The first two of these epistemologies are commonly referred to as *empiricism*, and *rationalism*, respectively, and represent attempts of philosophers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to replace the authority of tradition, divine revelation and faith with a rational or scientific foundation for knowledge. From these early beginnings in the physical sciences, a number of other epistemologies have emerged, of which *constructionism* is one. The types of epistemologies reviewed here include these three – *empiricism*, *rationalism* and *constructionism* – as well as three others – *falsificationism*, *neo-realism* and *conventionalism*.

Again, the range of theories of knowledge presented here is but one attempt to capture the diversity of epistemologies that have held some sway over the past fifty years or so. Variations within categories, and combinations of them, can be found in the literature.

### *Empiricism*

*Empiricism* is most clearly associated with the *shallow realist* ontology, although it can be seen to have some affinities with the form of representation associated with *idealism* (Williams and May 1996: 42, 70, 80). It is based on the key idea that knowledge is produced by the use of the human senses, that knowledge comes from 'observing' the world around us. It is assumed that, by observing this external world objectively,<sup>4</sup> we can correctly represent it in scientific concepts and theories. It is claimed that knowledge has a sure and certain foundation in the evidence produced by the scientifically trained researcher properly applying reliable methods and procedures. These methods are supposed to allow the researcher to be a neutral observer, to have undistorted contact with reality; knowledge is a matter of accurate representation. 'The scientist is thus viewed as a *subject* who is attempting to understand an *object* and is trying to be objective by eliminating the bias that could lead to inaccuracy' (Doyal and Harris 1986: 2).

Crude empiricism is the popular view of scientific research amongst people without philosophical training. It is also implicit in the views of science commonly presented in the media (Doyal and Harris 1986: 2).

This epistemology is sometimes regarded as being *representationalist* and *foundationalist* because it claims that there are certain final, ultimate criteria that can determine when knowledge is a true representation of this – assumed to exist – external world. Knowledge is said to be true when it reflects or mirrors what is 'out there' by the direct, unmediated contact with it by an observer. Language is



assumed to provide a 'pictorial description or conceptual representation of an external reality' (Schwandt 2000: 196).

A central tenet of *empiricism* is that, apart from analytic statements that are true by definition, anything we claim to know about the world is true only if it can be put to the test of experience. Any scientific idea that cannot be confirmed by observation is meaningless and has no role in science. Metaphysical ideas, those that have no observable manifestations, must be left out of scientific accounts of the world. Such accounts can only be derived from and verified by observations made by means of the human senses.

Explanations are achieved by generalizing from observed regularities between events. These 'constant conjunctions' are all that are needed to explain or predict an event. This is known as the 'pattern model' of explanation. The occurrence of an event, such as a juvenile crime, can be explained if the event that precedes it has already been established as a regularity, such as, 'juvenile delinquents come from broken homes'. Similarly, it can be predicted that juveniles who come from broken homes will become delinquents. Of course, such universal generalizations as this cannot be established in the social sciences to the same extent as they can in the natural sciences. However, this is the form of explanations advocated in *empiricism*.

In spite of the weaknesses that this epistemology contains, it is important to remember that empiricism was once part of a great liberating movement that rejected the authority of tradition, 'of established laws and customs, ancient texts, and so on, in favour of turning to "the great book of the world", and judging for oneself' (Collier 1994: 71).

### Rationalism

The second epistemology, *rationalism*, is associated with the *conceptual realist* ontology. This ontology leads to an epistemology in which the direct examination of the structure of thought itself, a structure of 'mind' that is shared by all human beings, is the only path to knowledge of the real world (Johnson et al. 1984: 200).

[W]hile the empiricists, for example, 'look at' the world in order to know it, on the grounds that what they can see or might see is all that exists, rationalists 'think' about the world in order to know it, on the grounds that behind the world that can be 'seen' or is given to the senses, there lies a world of thought; a structure that is innate, universal, and shared. (Johnson et al. 1984: 150-1)

Because rationalists believe that social reality is made up of ideas – that is to say, has the same character as our own thoughts – and because they also believe that the empirical world of objects is a reflection of (to be explained by) this ideal reality, they conclude that the *direct* examination of thought is the only route to knowledge of the real world. (Johnson et al. 1984: 150)

The epistemology of *rationalism* looks for evidence of this unobservable reality, either in the consequences it has on people's lives or in thought processes and structures of the mind itself. The ideas that make up this kind of reality are

assumed to determine behaviour.

Until quite recently, these two epistemologies were rival and mutually exclusive. Their exponents were often in conflict. The claims of scientific realists used logic and mathematics, while the claims of empiricists relied on observation.

Unlike *empiricism*, *rationalism* was initially opposed to empirical science. The differences between the two epistemologies in the natural and the social sciences emerged. Three of the major epistemologies were initially seen to apply to the social sciences.

### Falsificationism

*Falsificationism* is the epistemology that has developed in the 1930s. It is a form of epistemology of *empiricism*.

According to Popper, the method of the natural sciences, consisting of proposing solutions in the form of hypotheses, is not open to criticism. It is necessary to attempt to refute the hypothesis by appropriate measurement. If the hypothesis is not accepted temporarily, it can be accepted temporarily after testing. Hence, according to Popper, attempts to solve problems are open to criticism. The so-called *falsification* method.

Popper argued that, in the social sciences, it is never possible to prove a theory. The only thing that can be done is to eliminate a theory by proposing a theory that is more likely to be true, and some tentatively accepted as truth as possible, but not as a final truth.

*Falsificationism* is based on observations, not derived from the observations of scientists waiting for nature to reveal its secrets on the world. Although the theory is not explained, their role at the time is explained. However, the testing of theories, in a

assumed to determine both the consciousness of individuals and, therefore, their behaviour.

Until quite recently, *empiricism* and *rationalism* were regarded as being exhaustive and mutually exclusive epistemologies in the philosophy of the natural sciences. Their exponents produced their new conceptions of knowledge in defence of the claims of science as a (or the) source of genuine knowledge. Whereas rationalists used logic and mathematics as the standards whereby to judge knowledge claims, empiricists relied on observation and experiments.

Unlike *empiricism*, *rationalism* is now mainly of historical interest. While it was initially opposed to *empiricism*, social scientists are now more interested in the differences between *empiricism* and *constructionism*. As philosophies of both the natural and the social sciences have developed, other epistemologies have emerged. Three of these – *falsificationism*, *neo-realism* and *conventionalism* – were initially seen to apply to the natural sciences, but have also been used in the social sciences.

### *Falsificationism*

*Falsificationism* is the epistemology associated with the *cautious realist* ontology and what has come to be known as the ‘hypothetico-deductive method’. It was developed in the 1930s by Karl Popper (1959) to deal with deficiencies in the epistemology of *empiricism*.

According to Popper (1961), the logic of the social sciences, like that of the natural sciences, consists in trying out tentative solutions to research problems; solutions in the form of a theory are proposed and then criticized. A theory that is not open to criticism must be excluded as unscientific. The ultimate criticism is to attempt to refute the proposed theory by collecting appropriate data, by making appropriate measurements. If the theory is refuted, either it can be modified or another presented and tested. However, if the theory withstands the testing, it can be accepted temporarily, although it needs to be subjected to further criticism and testing. Hence, according to Popper, the method of science is one of tentative attempts to solve problems, by making conjectures that are controlled by severe criticism. The so-called objectivity of science lies in the objectivity of the critical method.

Popper argued that while science is a search for truths about the world or universe, it is never possible to establish whether these theories are true. All that can be done is to eliminate false theories by this process of conjecture and refutation, by proposing a theory and then trying to falsify it. Some theories will be rejected, and some tentatively accepted (corroborated). This allows us to get as near to the truth as possible, but we never know when we have produced a true theory.

*Falsificationism* is based on the idea that theories are invented to account for observations, not derived from them, as is the case in *empiricism*. Rather than scientists waiting for nature to reveal its regularities, they must impose regularities on the world. Although observations will usually precede the development of a theory, their role at this stage of research is to establish what it is that needs to be explained. However, the primary role of observation, or data collection, is in the testing of theories, in attempts to reject false theories, not in theory development.

### Neo-realism

The epistemology of *neo-realism* is associated with the *depth realist* ontology. *Neo-realism* rejects *empiricism's* pattern model of explanation: that explanation can be achieved by establishing regularities, or constant conjunctions, within phenomena or between events. According to *neo-realism*, establishing such regularities is only the beginning of the process. What is then required is to locate the structures or mechanisms that have produced the pattern or relationship. Mechanisms are nothing more than the tendencies or powers of things to act in a particular way. The capacity of a thing to exercise its powers, or the likelihood that it will, depends on whether or not the circumstances are favourable.

It may be necessary to postulate entities and processes that have never been observed in order to get beyond surface appearances to the nature and essences of things. In *neo-realism*, 'a scientific theory is a description of structures and mechanisms which causally generate the observable phenomena, a description which enables us to explain them' (Keat and Urry 1975: 5).

This view of causation allows for the possibility that competing or cancelling mechanisms may be operating when no event or change is observed; i.e. lack of movement may be due to opposing forces at work. Therefore, the independence of an event and its associated structures or mechanisms can be demonstrated.

Both *rationalism* and *neo-realism* entail the idea of an underlying reality, and both attribute causal powers to this reality. However, the former is a reality of shared, innate ideas, while the latter is an external, independent reality. Further, the causal powers of the underlying *conceptual realist* reality are seen to determine the behaviour of individuals, while the domain of the real in *neo-realism* is responsible for producing what happens in the empirical or surface domain. Hence, not only are the conceptions of reality very different; the influences on the inhabitants of this reality are to be found in different places.

### Constructionism

*Constructionism* is associated with the *idealist* ontology. As we have already seen, *constructionism* provides an alternative to *empiricism* and *rationalism* by claiming that knowledge is neither discovered from an external reality nor produced by reason independently of such a reality. It is the outcome of people having to make sense of their encounters with the physical world and with other people.

This process of meaning-giving can be seen as either an individual or a social activity. Hence, *constructionism* has two branches: *constructivism* and *social constructionism*. The former, also known as radical constructivism, refers to the meaning-giving activity of the individual mind, to cognitive processes, while the latter refers to intersubjectively shared knowledge, meaning-giving that is social rather than individual (Schwandt 1994: 127). The focus of *social constructionism* is the collective generation and transmission of meaning (Crotty 1998: 58). As this book is about *social enquiry*, in all further discussion *constructionism* is intended to refer to *social constructionism*, not *constructivism*, as defined here.

The notion of *constructionism* can be applied to both social actors and social scientists. Social actors socially construct their reality. They conceptualize and

interpret their own actions. From this same perspective, the knowledge of social actors' reality is a function of social actors and of the relationship between these actors and the world concerned.

*Constructionism*, as *pragmatism*: namely, that the world is a representation of an external reality because it is impossible to know if one exists at all – and that our knowledge and past experiences, and our actions, are all that matter. There can be no theory of reality without constructing knowledge through social practices and language, and without ways of being. In short, knowledge is a free knowledge (Denzin 1990: 10).

Consequently, *constructionism* argues that it is not possible to know whether knowledge can be discovered, only criteria available and used in the argument, by a community of people under certain conditions. This is the ontology of *conventionalism*.

While *constructionism* is concerned with the structure of ideas, they are not the source lies in the universe. The source is the product of social beings in their everyday interactions and structures or communities (Denzin 1990: 10).

### Conventionalism

Another epistemology is associated with *conventionalism*. This is the case for RPs that are reviewed and criticized of the RPs discussed in this book to the natural sciences.

As an epistemology, *conventionalism* is a social activity. In order to overcome the conditions, *conventionalism* uses the most convenient tools to deal with the world to achieve the desired results. Hence, the representations of the world are not the better of the world or which is the better of the world. It is not possible to

interpret their own actions and experiences, the actions of others and social situations. From this same perspective, social scientists socially construct their knowledge of social actors' realities, their conceptions and interpretations of the actions of social actors and of social situations. As we shall see in chapter 3, it is the relationship between these two levels of construction with which the Abductive RS is concerned.

*Constructionism*, as practised by social scientists, rejects the claims of *empiricism*: namely, that the use of the human senses can produce a certain or true representation of an external world. Constructionist social scientists argue that because it is impossible for fallible human beings to observe an external world – if one exists at all – unencumbered by concepts, theories, background knowledge and past experiences, it is impossible to make true discoveries about the world. There can be no theory-free observation or knowledge. The activities involved in constructing knowledge occur against the background of shared interpretations, practices and language; they occur within our historical, cultural and gendered ways of being. In short, as all social enquiry reflects the standpoint of the researcher, and all observation is theory-laden, it is impossible to produce theory-free knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 872).

Consequently, constructionists are *anti-foundationalists* or *non-foundationalists*, in that they argue that there are no permanent, unvarying criteria for establishing whether knowledge can be regarded as true, and there are no absolute truths. The only criteria available are those that can be agreed upon, through negotiation and argument, by a community of scientists, at a certain time, in a certain place, and under certain conditions. In this regard, constructionists hold some ideas of the epistemology of *conventionalism* (see next section).

While *constructionism* and *rationalism* share the view that social reality is a structure of ideas, they differ in the source of these ideas. For *rationalism*, the source lies in the universal innate structures of mind. For *constructionists*, the source is the product of the intersubjective, meaning-giving activity of human beings in their everyday lives. These ideas cannot be innate, because different cultures or communities are likely to have different constructions of social reality.

### *Conventionalism*

Another epistemology to emerge out of dissatisfaction with *empiricism* is known as *conventionalism*. This epistemology is not explicitly adopted by any of the RSs or RPs that are reviewed in chapters 3–5, but it is the basis of some of the criticisms of the RPs discussed in chapter 6. It has been discussed mainly with reference to the natural sciences.

As an epistemology, *conventionalism* regards knowledge generation pragmatically. In order to overcome the problem of establishing the truth of scientific propositions, *conventionalism* argues that scientific theories are created by scientists as convenient tools to deal with the world. These tools are justified if they produce the desired results. Hence, there is no need to worry about whether they are true representations of the empirical world. Decisions about what are good theories, or which is the better of two competing theories, is a matter of judgement, not proof. It is not possible to rely on agreed facts to determine this, as theories are

'underdetermined' by data. In other words, theoretical claims go beyond what available data can determine. *Conventionalism* therefore undermines commonly held views on objectivity and rationality; science is viewed sociologically or psychologically, rather than logically. 'Conventionalists agree with empiricists on the origin of knowledge, but reject empiricism as a norm that allows us to justify all accepted judgements by appealing to experience, conceived as a sufficient criterion of their truth' (Kolakowski 1972: 158). The result is that whatever is regarded as reality is a consequence of the theory that is used; theories do not describe reality, they determine what is considered by the scientist to be real.

In summary, in *conventionalism*, as in *constructionism*, reality is regarded as a human creation. However, whereas in *constructionism* social reality is assumed to be produced by social actors as they conduct their everyday lives, in *conventionalism* reality is assumed to be an invention of the scientist. In both types of ontological assumptions, realities are regarded as serving particular purposes, either to cope with social life or to solve particular scientific or technical problems, and not as representing any absolute external reality. This clearly distinguishes these two epistemologies from *empiricism*, *falsificationism* and *neo-realism*.

## The Status of Knowledge

Epistemologies can be distinguished in terms of the status of the knowledge that they claim to produce. Adherents of *empiricist* epistemology believe that it produces *absolute* knowledge. It is claimed that objective facts are arrived at by the direct observation of an external reality by the unencumbered use of the human senses. Such knowledge, it is argued, has a sure and certain foundation.

*Rationalism* is also seen by its adherents as producing *absolute* knowledge based on the innate human capacity to apply universally valid rational principles. 'For rationalism, knowledge-claims are valid to the extent that they conform to the deductive standards of proof already established in mathematics' (Benton 1977: 101).

In *falsificationism*, knowledge in the form of tested theories is always regarded as *tentative*. There is no way of knowing when a theory matches reality. All that can be done is to reject those theories that definitely do not match reality, in so far as the data we use allow us to do this. Theories that survive rigorous tests are all that can be relied on.

*Neo-realism* accepts that knowledge of structures and mechanisms is always *tentative*. Knowledge obtained of the domain of the empirical, and the models that are produced to discover structures and mechanisms, must be regarded as *tentative* (transitive) rather than absolute. This knowledge is constrained by the limitations of humans to be able to represent definitively both the surface and the hidden domains. This is due to the fact that our observations and measurements are always theory-dependent; we cannot eliminate the effects of language and culture, preconceptions and expectations, and scientific perspectives and theories, on the way we both see and interpret the world around us.

A *constructionist* epistemology is regarded as producing *relative* knowledge. This means that there is no one truth, but the possibility of a plurality of truths

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associated with different constructions of reality. This type of knowledge has no sure foundations. Whether each view of reality is granted equal status, or whether it is considered that 'rational' debates about their respective merits are appropriate, is a matter of considerable contention.

For *conventionalism*, the truth status of the theories used to understand and manipulate the world of objects and events is not important. Rather, it is what such theories allow us to do that matters. If a scientific perspective assumes that the earth is at the centre of the universe, and theories and measurements based on it allow us to successfully navigate the oceans using stellar observations, then the truth status of the theory is irrelevant. If it works, use it. Hence, *conventionalism* is a form of pragmatism.

### Relationship between ontological and epistemological assumptions

Table 1.2 cross-tabulates the six ontological positions against the six epistemological positions. The question is: 'What combinations make logical sense, and what combinations occur in practice?' The answers are those shown in the table. The *subtle realist* ontology and the epistemology of *conventionalism* do not go together. They are alternatives to some of the others, and will be used in chapter 6 to deal with the criticisms that have been made of many of these assumptions.

Discussion of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of both the RSs and RPs must wait until after their elaboration in later chapters (chapter 3 for the former, and chapters 4 and 5 for the latter). The different types of assumptions have been reviewed here to set the scene for these later chapters. It is impossible to think about differences between the RSs and RPs without referring to differences in their ontological and epistemological assumptions.

It is important to note that it is not possible to establish by empirical enquiry which of the ontological and epistemological claims is the most appropriate. The proponents adopt a position partly as an act of faith in a particular view of the world. All that can be done is to debate their respective strengths and weaknesses. The important point is to be aware of the assumptions that are embedded in RSs and RPs, and the consequences that they have for research practice and outcomes.

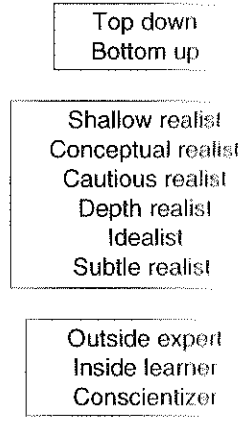
It is possible to regard ontologies as being more relevant to life in general than to the conduct of research. For example, the categories could be used to understand how both research participants, and researchers in their non-professional lives, view the world. However, in the context of this book, they are presented as different sets of assumptions made by researchers *per se*. In addition to being embedded in the RSs and RPs that researchers employ, they can also influence the choice of research methods and how they are used to answer RQs.

### Research Paradigms and Research Strategies

As we shall discover in later chapters, each RS, or logic of enquiry, is associated with one or more RPs. It is the overlap in their ontological and epistemological assumptions that creates an association between them. In order to review what has

**Table 1.2** Combinations of ontological and epistemological categories

Ontology	Epistemology					
	Empiricism	Rationalism	Falsificationism	Neo-realism	Constructionism	Conventionalism
Shallow realist	✓					
Conceptual realist		✓				
Cautious realist			✓			
Depth realist				✓		
Idealist						✓
Subtle realist					✓	



**Figure 1.1** Choices

been discussed so far. Figure 1.1 summarizes the choices for a research project. The choices are related to the research project. While I have discussed the choices, it is necessary to move back and forth between the choices.

The horizontal axis represents the relationship between or amongst various positions are required in research (Blaikie 2000). The dimensions, and the positions, are located in the figure.

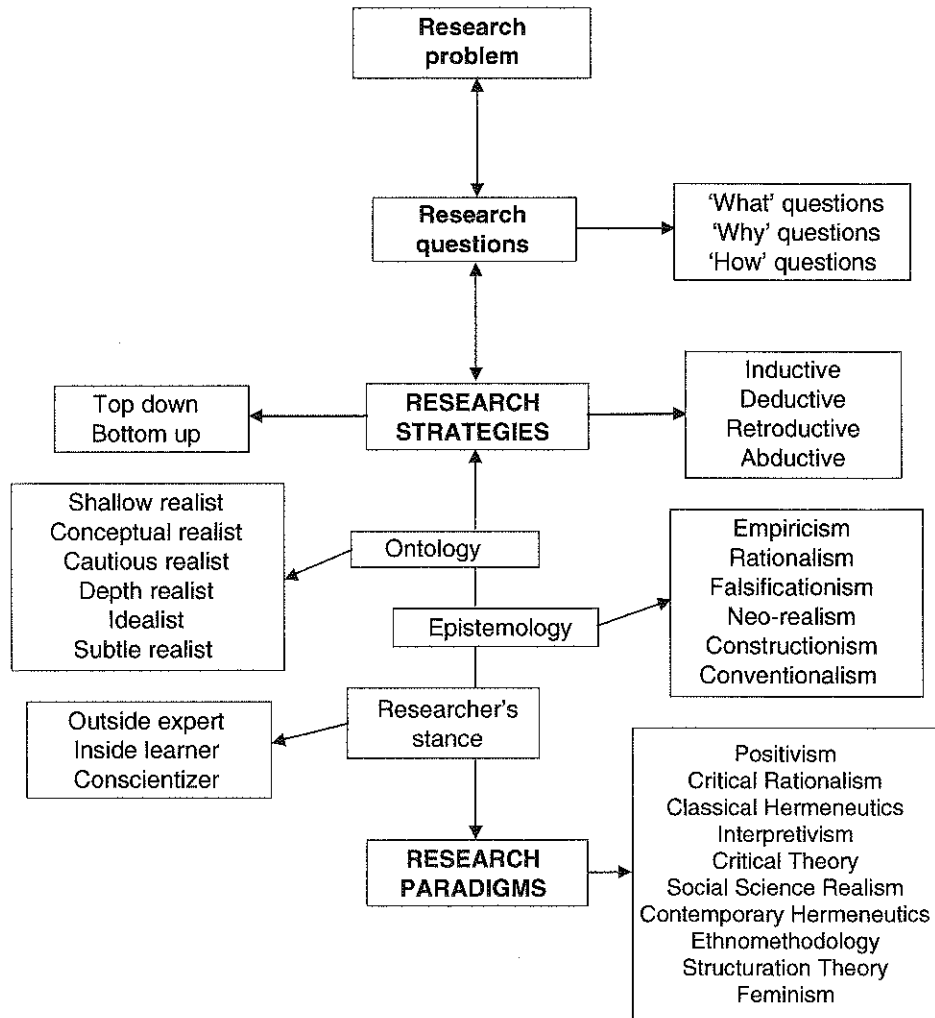


Figure 1.1 Choices

been discussed so far, and to anticipate what will be covered in later chapters, figure 1.1 summarizes the basic choices a social researcher has to make on any research project. The double-headed vertical arrows indicate that the decisions regarding the research problem, the RQs and the choice of RS and RP, are interrelated. While I have discussed them in a logical order, in practice, it is usually necessary to move back and forth between them before the decisions can be finalized.

The horizontal arrows indicate, for each area of decision, the basic categories between or amongst which choices need to be made. Of course, many more decisions are required in designing and conducting social research (in particular, see Blaikie 2000). The decisions regarding ontological and epistemological assumptions, and the posture the researcher adopts toward the people being researched, are located in the figure between RSs and RPs. Choices regarding all three are



heavily influenced by the nature of the research problem and the way it is expressed in RQs.

## Chapter Summary

- Social researchers need to make choices about the problem to be investigated, the research question(s) to be answered, the research strategy or strategies to answer these questions, and the posture to be adopted towards the researched.
- A research problem needs to be translated into one or more research questions that define the nature and scope of the research.
- There are three main types of research questions: 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions.
- 'What' questions require descriptive answers in the form of characteristics and/or patterns of association; 'why' questions seek causes or reasons for the existence of these characteristics and/or patterns; and 'how' questions are concerned with intervention and practical outcomes.
- Research questions form a sequence: answers to 'what' questions normally precede 'why' questions, and answers to both of these types of questions precede 'how' questions.
- Whether a researcher sets out with all three types of research questions will depend on the nature of the research problem and the state of knowledge in the field.
- Research strategies are logics of enquiry that are used to answer research questions, the choice of which is the most important decision in any research project.
- The four main research strategies – Inductive, Deductive, Retroductive and Abductive – provide different ways of answering the different types of research questions; they advance knowledge by solving intellectual puzzles and practical problems in different ways.
- The research strategies differ in their ontological assumptions, starting points, steps, use of concepts and theory, styles of explanation or understanding, and the status of their products.
- In selecting a research strategy, researchers are also choosing:
  - whether to work 'top down' or 'bottom up' in attempting to advance social knowledge; and
  - the type of posture they want to adopt towards the researched, to be an *outsider* or an *insider*, to be an *expert* or a *learner*, or to do research *on* people, *for* people or *with* people.
- Research strategies are located within theoretical and philosophical perspectives, or research paradigms.
- Research paradigms, and, therefore, research strategies, differ in their ontological assumptions – their view of the nature of social reality – and their epistemological assumptions – their view on how knowledge of this reality can be obtained.

- Six major ontologies are *realist*, *conceptual realist*, *realist* ontologies; and the *tionism*, *neo-realism*, *con*
- The status of knowledge, these epistemologies can (*falsificationism* and *neo-ventionalism*).
- Most of the ontological pairs: *shallow realist* with *ti*, *tious realist* with *falsifi*, with *constructionism*.
- The *subtle realist* ontolo emerged as alternatives th

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- Six major ontologies and epistemologies have been presented: the *shallow realist*, *conceptual realist*, *cautious realist*, *depth realist*, *idealist* and *subtle realist* ontologies; and the epistemologies of *empiricism*, *rationalism*, *falsificationism*, *neo-realism*, *constructionism* and *conventionalism*.
- The status of knowledge of social reality that is produced on the basis of these epistemologies can be absolute (*empiricism* and *rationalism*), tentative (*falsificationism* and *neo-realism*), relative (*constructionism*) or pragmatic (*conventionalism*).
- Most of the ontological and epistemological positions are closely related in pairs: *shallow realist* with *empiricism*; *conceptual realist* with *rationalism*; *cautious realist* with *falsificationism*; *depth realist* with *neo-realism*; and *idealist* with *constructionism*.
- The *subtle realist* ontology and the epistemology of *conventionalism* have emerged as alternatives that can overcome the deficiencies of some of the others.

### Further Reading

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