

Researching Contemporary Cosmologies: Introducing Qualitative Research



Overview

- Cosmologies and Personal Cosmology
- Positivism and Interpretivism
- Qualitative Research
- Qualia and the Hard Problem of Consciousness

Cosmology

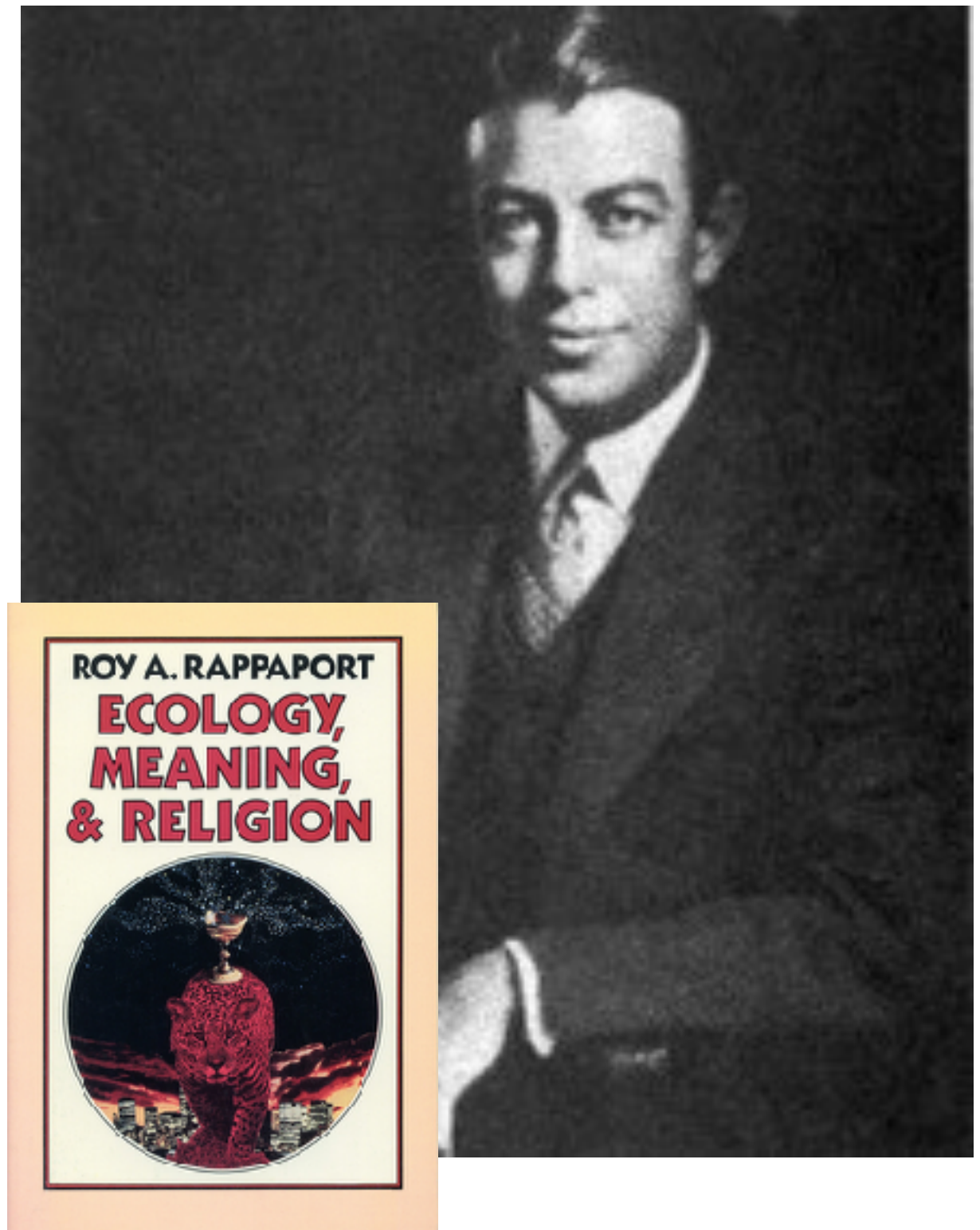
- Nick Campion suggests a distinction between **scientific** and **anthropological** cosmologies.
- “Anthropological cosmologies are based on the proposition that ideas about the cosmos are an integral part of human cultural and social systems...” (Campion, 2017).
- Fiona Bowie gives a useful definition of a cosmology as:

“...a theory or conception of the nature of the universe and its workings, and of the place of human beings and other creatures within that order” (Bowie, 2002, p. 119).
- There are many different cosmologies.



‘Language, Thought and Reality’

- Linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf argued that perception and experience of the world is filtered through language and conceptual categories.
- “Just as it is possible to have any number of geometries other than the Euclidean which give an equally perfect account of space configurations, so it is possible to have descriptions of the universe, all equally valid, that do not contain our familiar contrasts of time and space” (Whorf, 1956, p. 58).
- Our models of the universe impact the way that we behave in the world.
- Anthropologist Roy Rappaport: “Nature is seen by humans through a screen of beliefs, knowledge, and purposes, and it is in terms of their images of nature, rather than of the ‘actual structure’ of nature, that they act. Yet it is upon nature itself that they do act, and it is nature itself that acts upon them, nurturing or destroying them” (Rappaport, 1979, p. 97).
- But cosmologies are not *just* cultural or linguistic models - operating from the top-down - they are also personal models influenced by bottom-up processes.

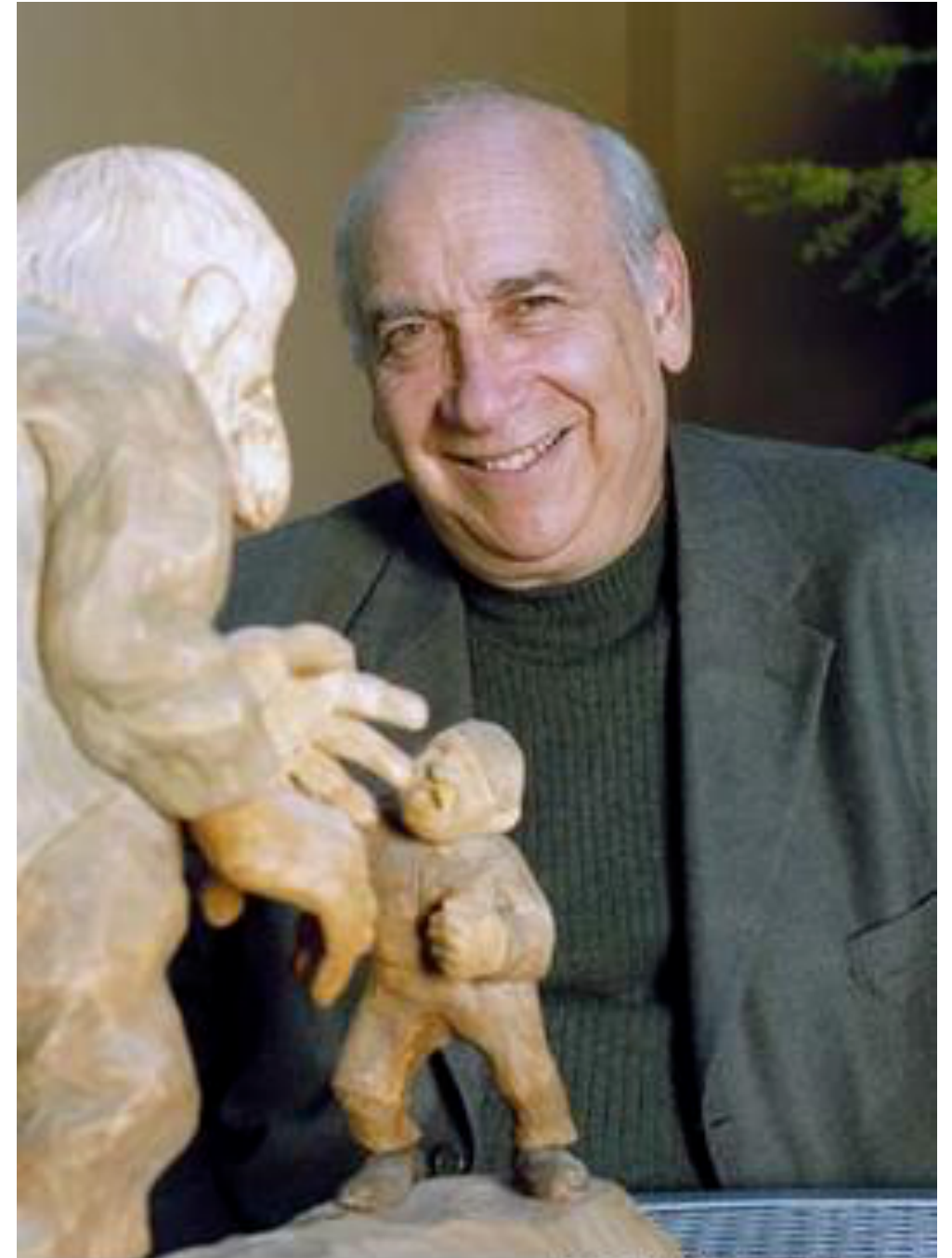


Folk-Ideas and Worldview

- Folklorist Alan Dundes:

“All cultures have underlying assumptions held by members of a given culture...it is these assumptions or folk-ideas which are the building blocks of worldview. Any one worldview will be based upon many individual folk ideas and if one is serious interested in studying worldview, one will need first to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of that worldview” (Dundes, 1971, p. 96).

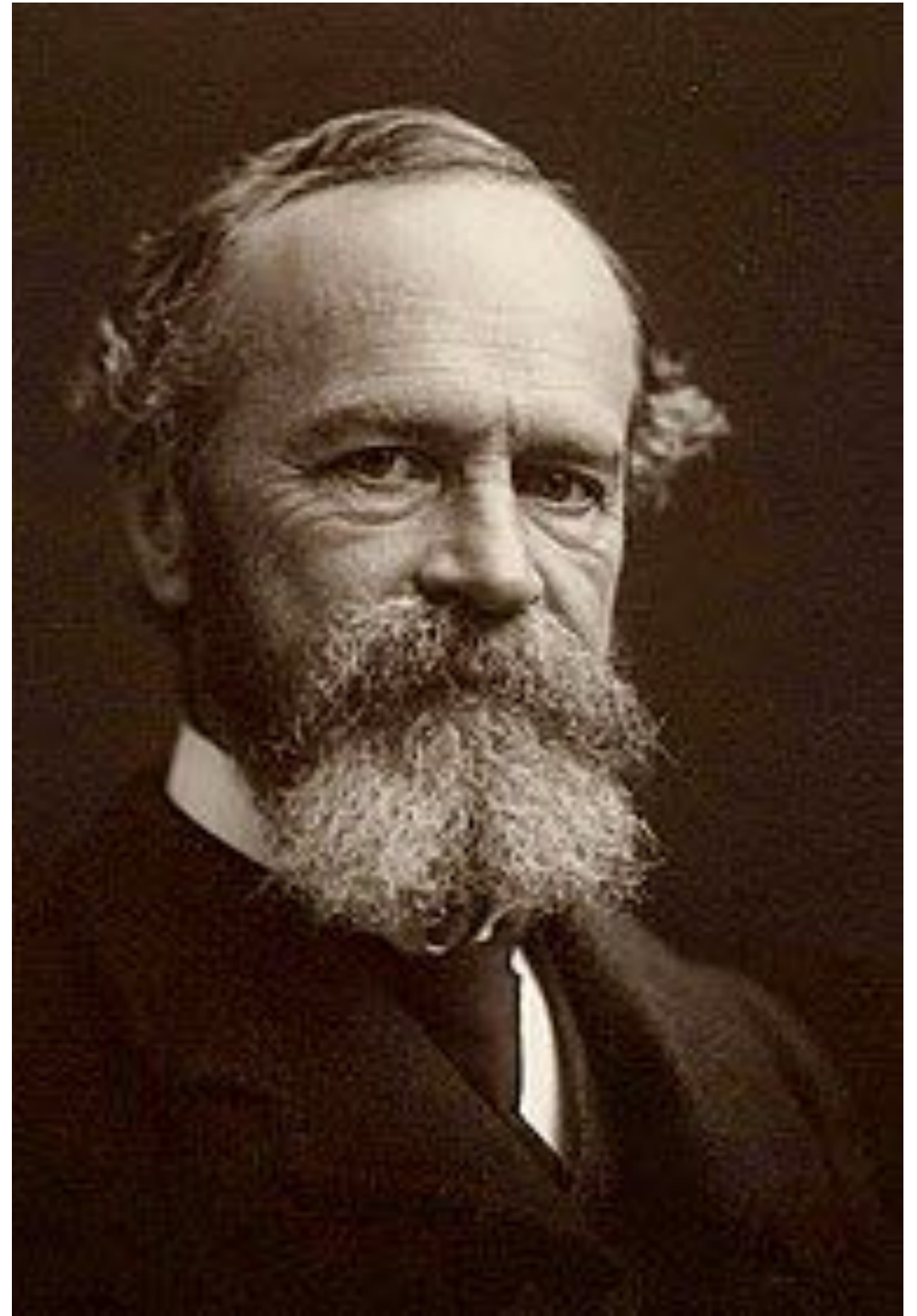
- We are ‘zooming in’ from the perspective of top-down structures, such as cultural models, religions, scientific cosmologies, etc., to the level of the individual - to the **folk-perspective**.



Chronicle / Gina Gayle, File

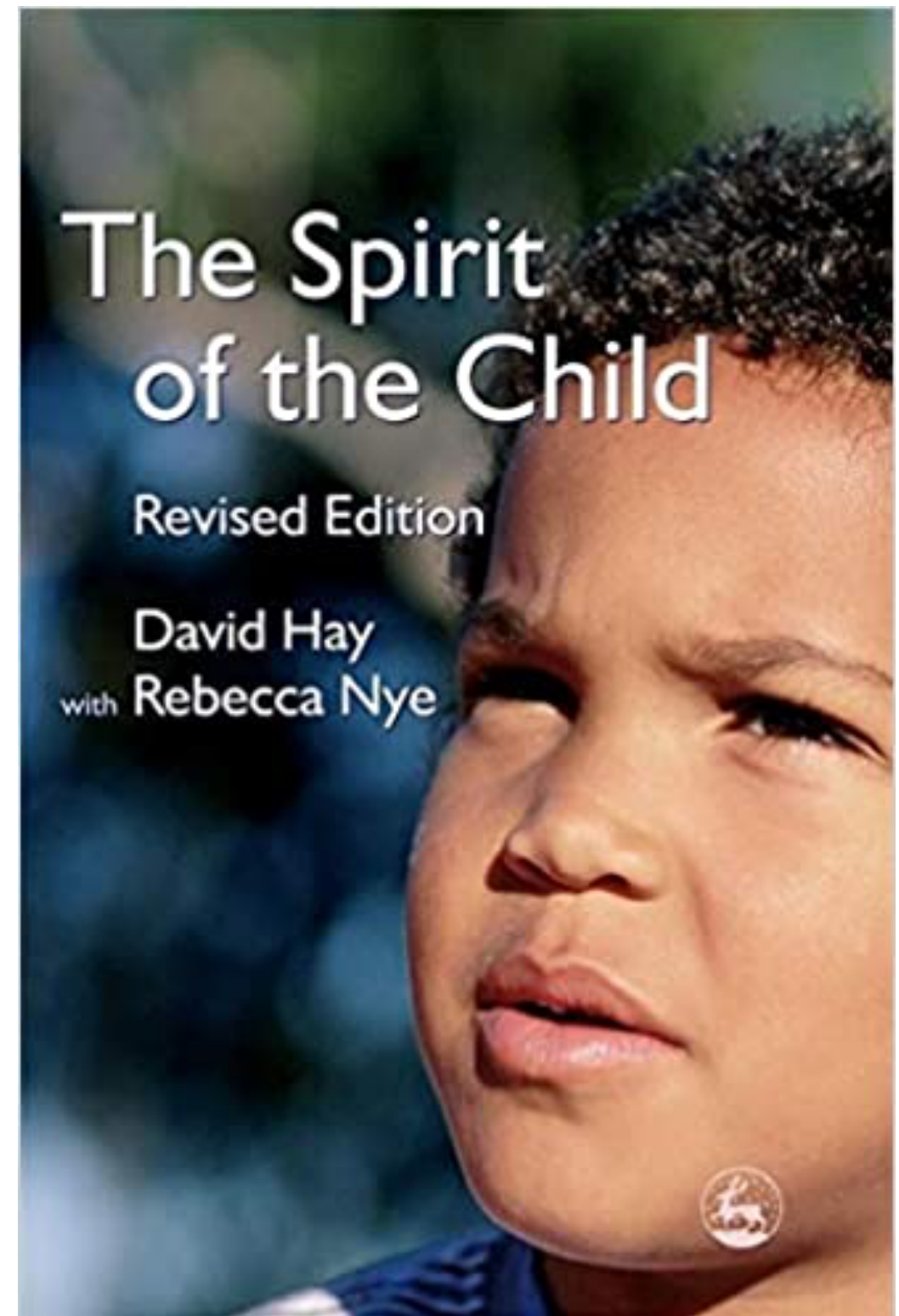
Personal Religion

- Philosopher William James was most interested in the phenomenology of religion – how it was experienced.
- In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) he discusses what he calls ‘personal religion.’
- “...the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine...” (James, 2004, p. 39).



Spirituality and Personal Cosmology

- David Hay and Rebecca Nye conducted research into children's spirituality.
- '...spirituality is the potential to be much more deeply aware of ourselves and our intimate relationship with everything that is not ourselves...' (2006, p. 22).
- Very open and inclusive view of spirituality.
- We might refer to this understanding of spirituality as 'worldview' or 'personal cosmology.'
- How do we study these personal cosmologies?



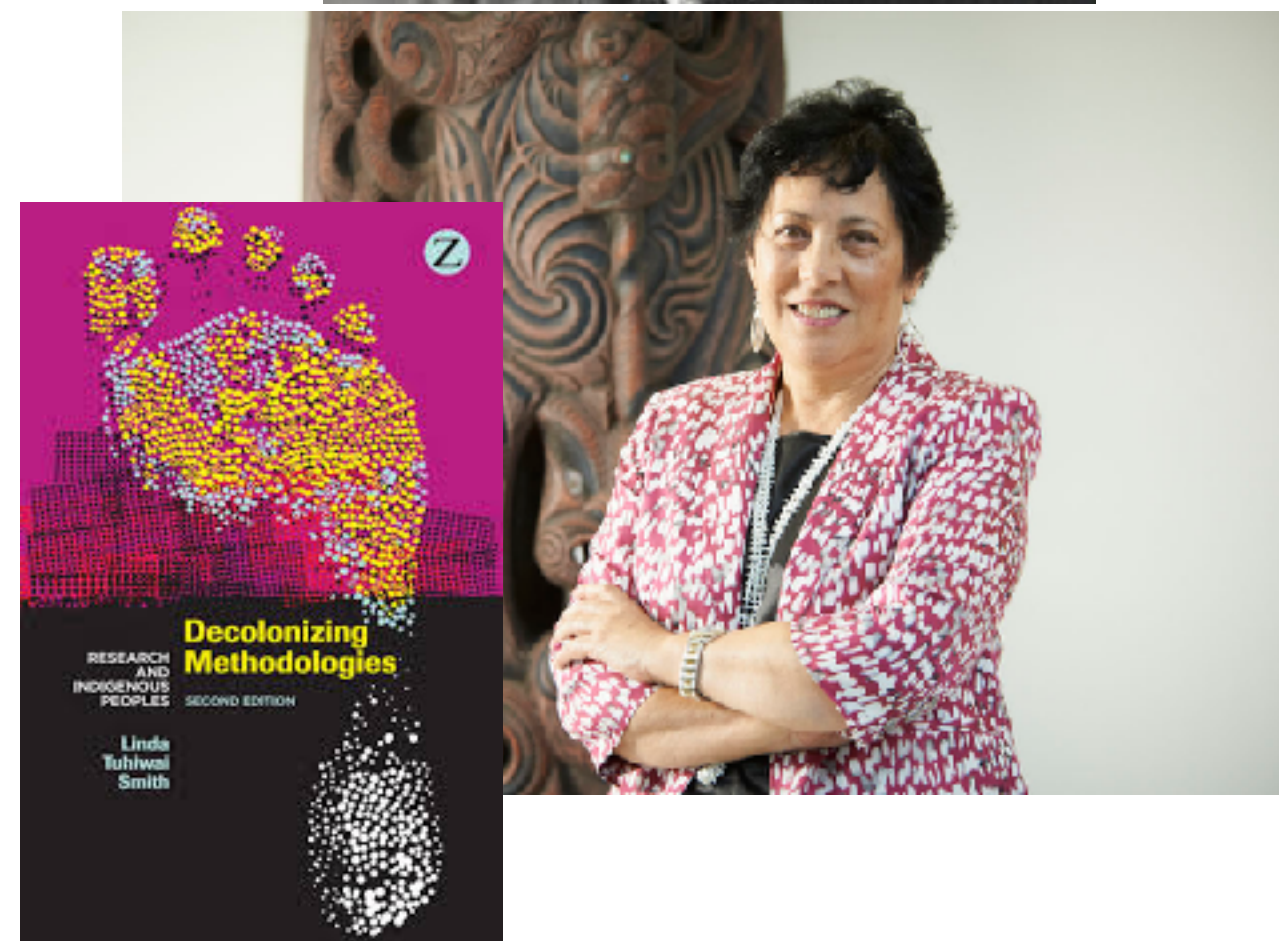
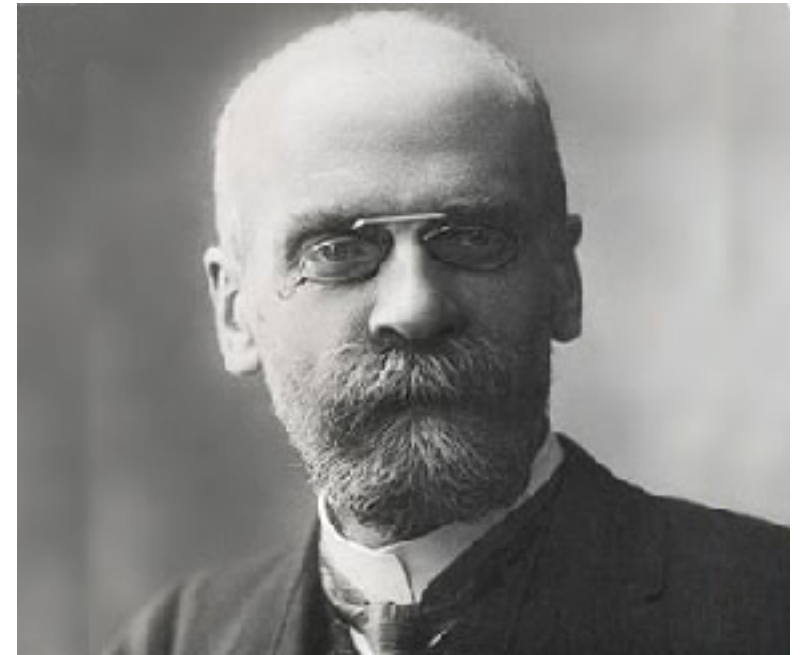
Positivism and Interpretivism

- In the Western academic tradition research approaches position themselves within this dichotomy.
- **Positivist** approaches favour **quantitative research** - collecting **objective** data that can be measured, counted, weighed, calculated, proven and repeated.
- **Interpretivist** approaches favour **qualitative research** - collecting data that is **subjective** that cannot be measured or weighed - feelings, emotions, opinions, beliefs.



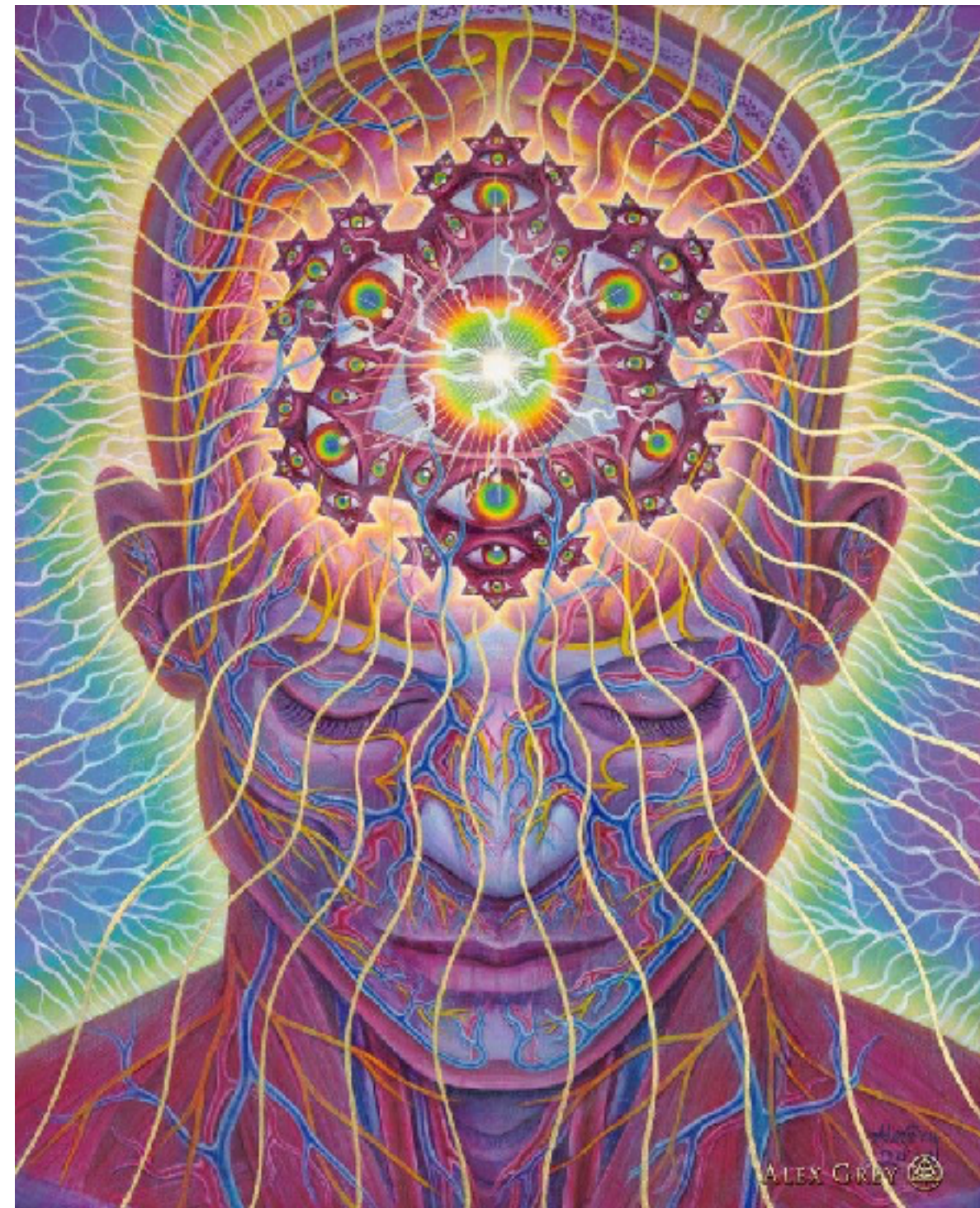
Positivism

- Positivists believe that it is possible to discover objective laws of cause and effect.
- The ideal form of data collection from a positivist standpoint would be the laboratory experiment.
- In the lab it is possible to control variables, have experimental and control groups, etc.
- The Durkheimian approach to sociology adopts a positivist approach - with an emphasis on objectivity.
- “From an indigenous perspective Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualisation of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialised forms of language, and structures of power” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 44).
- The attempt to achieve ‘objectivity’ is itself the product of a particular cosmological and metaphysical viewpoint.



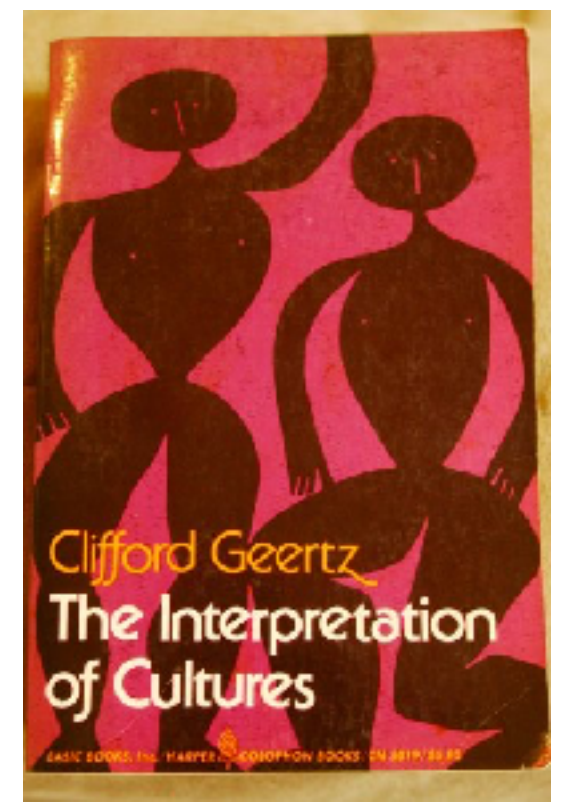
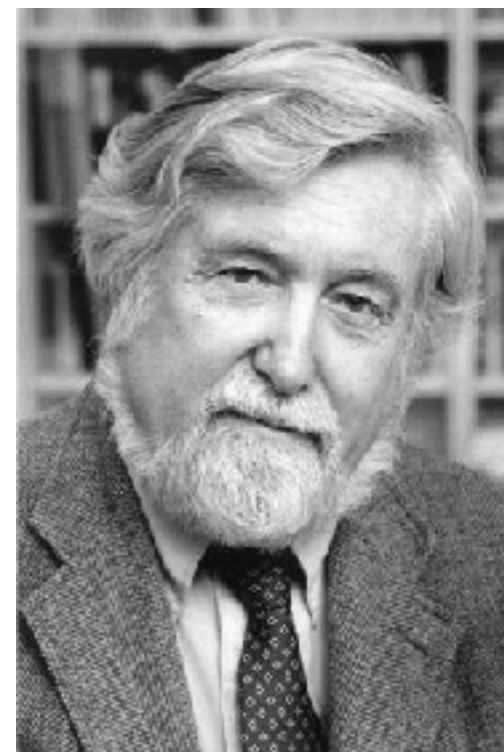
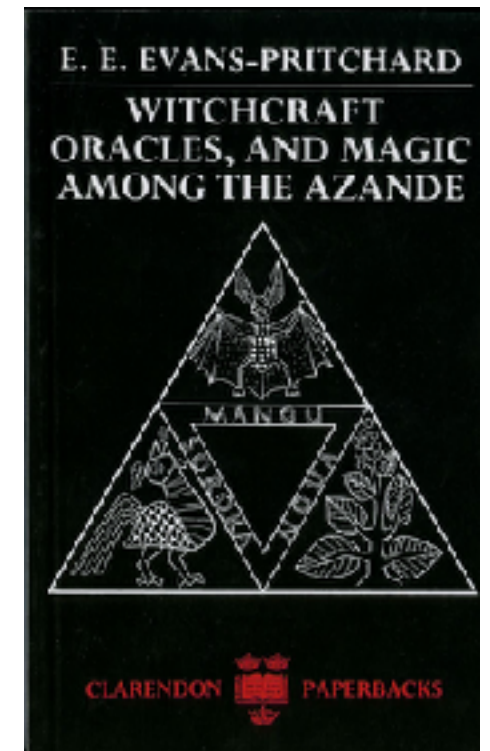
Interpretivism

- Interpretivists reject the ideal that the humanities and social sciences should be modelled on the natural sciences.
- They see social reality as consisting of **subjective meanings** internal to peoples' consciousness - meaning is created from the bottom-up, from the individual.
- We can only understand human worldviews by **interpreting** the **meanings** people give to their actions.



Interpretivism in Anthropology

- Alan Barnard suggests that the interpretive approach in anthropology comes through the lineage of Evans-Pritchard whose ethnographic writing - in particular *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1973) - are “attempts to understand and relate the inner thoughts of his subjects” (Barnard, 2000, p. 159).
- Clifford Geertz coined the term ‘Interpretive Anthropology’ in 1973 with the publication of *The Interpretation of Cultures*. The aim of which is to produce a ‘thick description’ of a particular worldview:
- “...ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with...is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [they] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render...” (Geertz, 1973, p. 10).



Qualitative Research

- “In broad terms, qualitative research is an approach that allows you to examine people’s experiences in detail by using a specific set of research methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content analysis, visual methods, and life histories or biographies” (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p. 10).
- Ethnography is also a qualitative approach - it is what anthropologists do...
- “...at the most down-to-earth, jungle field work levels of [their] activity: interviewing informants, observing rituals, eliciting kin terms, tracing property lines, censusing households...writing [their] journal” (Geertz, 1973, p. 10).
- We will be looking in greater detail at different methods later on in the module.
- What does quantitative research collect?



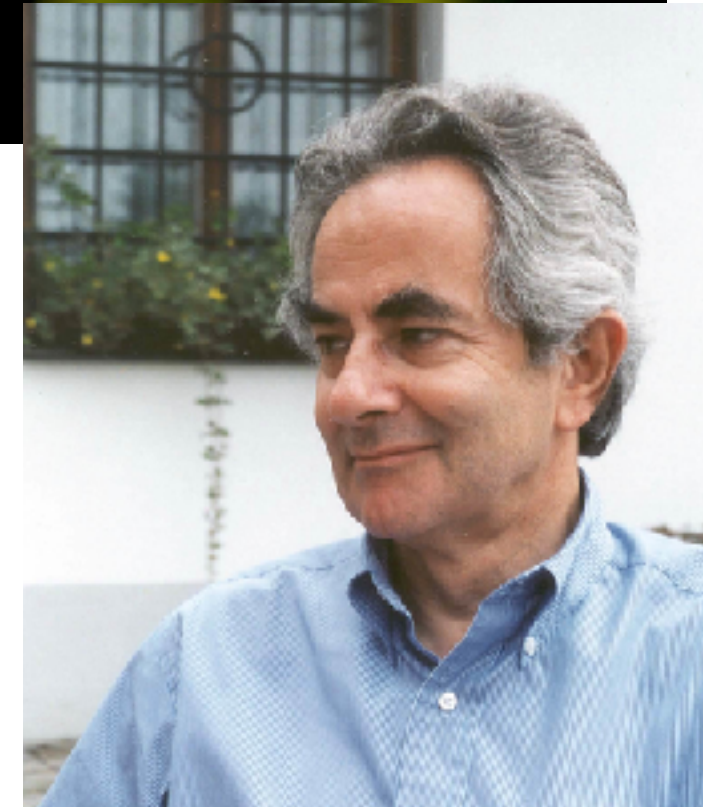
Qualia and the Hard Problem of Consciousness

- The plural of the word ‘Quale’ - a unit of subjective experience - referring “to the introspectively accessible, phenomenal aspects of our mental lives” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).
- Stories, experiences, beliefs, memories, feelings, emotions, moods, states of consciousness...
- “The hard problem...is the question of how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience. This puzzle involves the inner aspect of thought and perception: the way things feel for the subject. When we see, for example, we experience visual sensations, such as that of vivid blue. Or think of the ineffable sound of a distant oboe, the agony of an intense pain, the sparkle of happiness or the meditative quality of a moment lost in thought. All are part of what I am calling consciousness. It is these phenomena that pose the real mystery of the mind” (Chalmers, 1995, p. 80).
- Qualitative data is precious and mysterious stuff!



What is it like to be a bat?

- In 1974 philosopher Thomas Nagel published an influential paper in the philosophy of mind asking the question ‘What is it like to be a bat?’
- “...most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. We must consider whether any method will permit us to extrapolate to the inner life of the bat from our own case, and if not, what alternative methods there may be for understanding the notion” (Nagel, 1974, p. 438).
- The same may be said of the inner lives of our research informants.
- ‘What is it like to be...?’ is a good starting point for qualitative research.
- Edith Turner argues that we, as researchers, must “learn to see what the Native sees” (1993, p. 11).
- Also, what about perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro, 1998) - what insight do indigenous knowledge systems shed on Nagel’s question?



Concluding Thoughts: Qualitative Data Gets Weird

- Qualitative research is a way of gaining access to different worldviews.
- Qualitative data is challenging, precious and mysterious - it can also get very weird, and take you to places that you had not anticipated.
- What do we do with qualitative data that gets weird?
- Experiences and beliefs that challenge established models (e.g. paranormal experiences, but not just these).
- What happens if we consider their implications.
- The tendency has been to bracket out questions of 'reality.'
- We need to embrace the complexity of subjective experience, avoid attempting to reduce it down, try to understand it on its own terms...
- We will return to think about these issues later on in the module.



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