

- loosely, so as to draw attention towards diverse aspects of the same phenomenon, or more tightly to show how the aspects link together; and
- narrowly, to home in on specified aspects of a particular phenomenon, or more broadly to show how shared aspects explain links between phenomena – often causally.

The matrix in Figure 9.2 captures a loose or tight linkage between concepts (the left- and right-hand columns) and a narrow or broad focus (the upper and lower rows). Each cell depicts a combination of linkage and focus. The four combinations have each been given their own term: label, model, perspective, theory – though, of course, not all authors will use these terms in exactly the way that we do here. So we can illustrate further the notion of a ‘stipulative definition’ by outlining below what we mean by each of those four terms.

		Linkage between concepts	
		Loose	Tight
Breadth of focus	Narrow	LABEL	MODEL
	Broad	PERSPECTIVE	THEORY

Figure 9.2 Ways of grouping concepts together

What are labels?

Stipulatively, we are defining *labels* as the term for loose groups of concepts that have a narrow focus (Figure 9.2). For example, a researcher who is concerned with the impact on literacy of poverty, family instability and parental drug abuse might not only discuss these concepts individually but also bundle them under the collective label of ‘social problems’. This tactic enables the author to refer in a loose way to the narrow set of concepts that is central to the argument being developed.

What are perspectives?

When several concepts are loosely grouped together but the focus is broader, they can be said to form a *perspective*. A broad focus does not mean no focus. Some phenomena or aspects of them are still highlighted; others are excluded. A cultural perspective, for example, brings together a range of concepts associated with a particular pattern of cultural behaviour (e.g., tradition, language, rituals, religious beliefs). Meanwhile, it downplays other factors, such as the psychological motivations of individuals within that culture, even though they, too, will determine how a person behaves.

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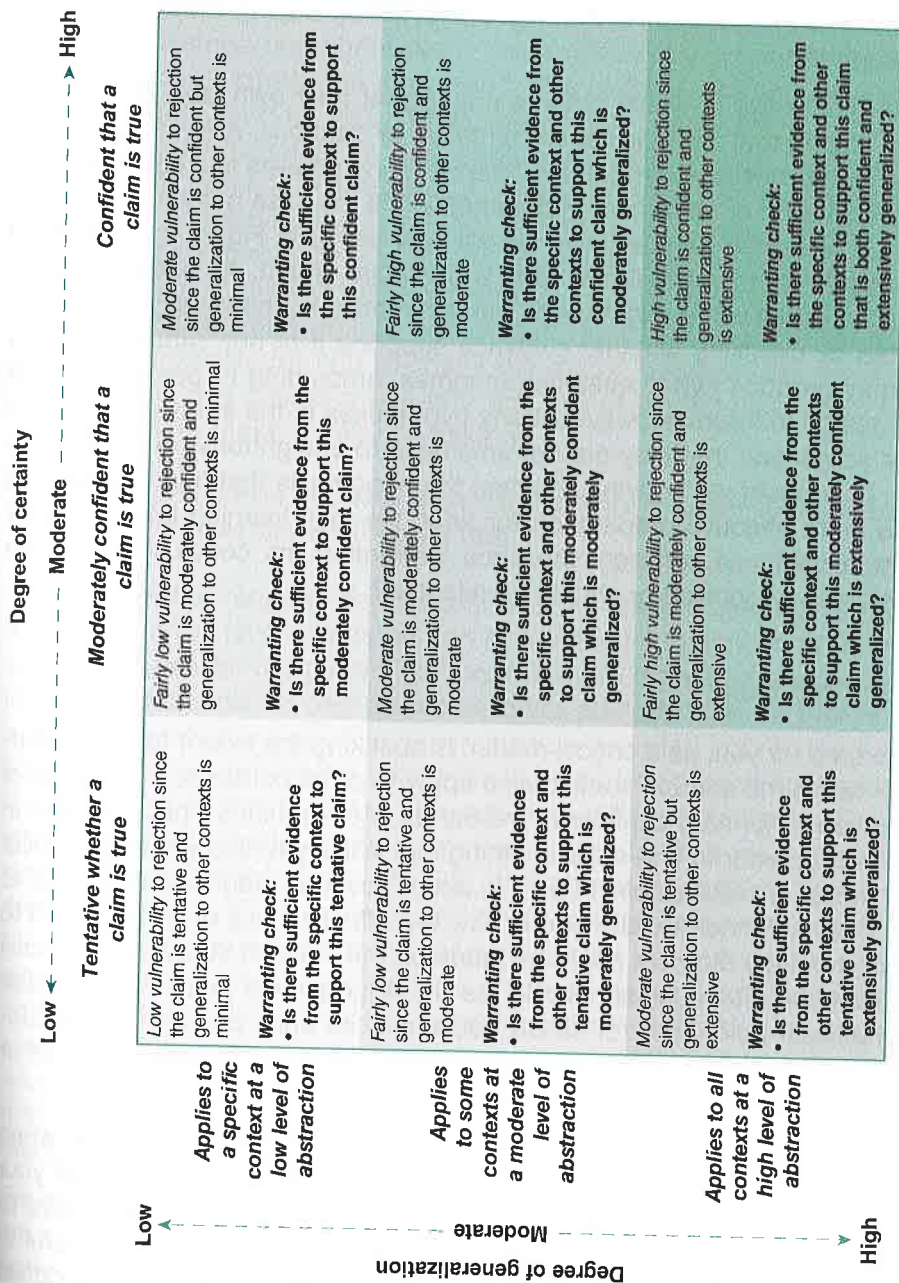


Figure 11.3 Characteristics of knowledge claims and their vulnerability to rejection

Table 9.1 Fundamental problems reflected in assumptions that inform methodological concerns

Fundamental problem	Branch of philosophy	Type of assumption	Implications for study methodology
What exists?	Ontology	Descriptive	What can be studied?
How can we know what exists?	Epistemology	Descriptive	What methods can be used to generate evidence, and from which sources?
What is right or wrong about what exists?	Axiology	Value	What is worth studying to make an impact, and on whom?
What is right or wrong about ways of studying what exists?	Axiology (ethics)	Value	How should any people involved or affected by research be treated?

What are philosophical positions?

A word of warning: the following account is very simplified. Our modest purpose here is to alert you to some common philosophical positions in the social sciences as part of your map for navigating the literature. To enable yourself to make best use of the map you need also to study the philosophy of the social sciences in greater depth elsewhere, such as in a research methods textbook. Common philosophical positions in the social sciences include:

- *Positivism* – studying an observable social reality.
- *Realism (and critical realism)* – studying an underlying social reality that must be inferred from perceptions.
- *Interpretivism* – studying perceptions and actions taken in the light of these *perceptions*.
- *Post-structuralism* – studying how discourses frame perceptions and actions.
- *Pragmatism* – studying both an observable social reality and perceptions informing actions.

Table 9.2 summarizes these philosophical positions and shows how they relate to the three philosophical approaches – ontology, epistemology and axiology – that were introduced earlier. In particular, note how each position is linked to particular ontological assumptions about what exists and epistemological assumptions about how we can know. However, the axiological emphases differ widely between the positions. Some concern researchers' values about how to conduct a study; others concern researchers' values about the phenomena they study. The set of ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions for each philosophical position informs the main methods that the researcher uses for generating evidence.

Table 9.2 Common philosophical positions, their underlying assumptions and methods

Philosophical position	Assumptions			Methods
	Ontology: What we know about what is	Epistemology: How we find out about what is	Axiology: What is right or wrong with what is, and how we find out about it	
Positivism	Social entities and their meanings exist objectively – there is a single reality external to and independent of social actors being studied and to the researcher, who has direct access to it	Data can be gathered about observable social facts that exist independently of the detached researcher, focusing on causality and law-like generalizations that explain observations, reducing phenomena to the simplest terms	Research is conducted in a value-free way. Research is objective because it is independent of the data	Highly structured, large samples, measurement, but may also use qualitative data
Realism (and critical realism)	Social entities exist objectively and meanings exist subjectively – social entities are external to, and shape social actors' meanings, but social entities are inferred from these meanings	Data can be gathered about observable social phenomena and their meanings (including meanings for the researcher) to infer underlying causal mechanisms that produce particular outcomes in specific contexts	Seeking underlying mechanisms implies criticism of common sense beliefs. Critical realists value the emancipation of less powerful groups from the domination of more powerful ones	Qualitative and quantitative
Interpretivism	Social entities and their meanings exist subjectively – there are multiple socially constructed realities based on 'common sense' meanings of actors, continually evolving	One can identify the range of actions (meaningful behaviour) and related perceptions of actors, including those of the researcher, to develop a contextualized understanding (as experienced and interpreted by the researcher)	The researcher's values inform the focus of study and its interpretation, and are made explicit through reflexivity about the impact of the researcher on the phenomenon being studied	Qualitative – naturalistic fieldwork (since phenomena occur in the social world) that observes a small sample of actors, narratives, case studies, etc.

Assumptions

Philosophical position	Ontology: What we know about what is	Epistemology: How we find out about what is	Axiology: What is right or wrong with what is, and how we find out about it	Methods
Post-structuralism	Social entities and meanings exist subjectively, but are shaped by social discourses, and also shape them, so discourses are constitutive of social reality	One can identify the content and evolution of discourses shaping the meanings of actors, and how actors shape discourses	Researchers' values inform a focus on domination through discourses	Qualitative – analysing texts to show how they may generate multiple meanings for different readers, and how the discourses employed may reflect relationships of power between groups
Pragmatism	Social entities and their meanings exist both objectively and subjectively through intersubjectivity – there is a single reality and actors have different interpretations of it	Data can be gathered about social patterns that are independent of actors' meanings. Information can also be gathered on these actors' meanings and associated actions. The transferability of knowledge derived from one context to others must be established empirically	The researcher's values on generating useful knowledge inform the focus, as does the researcher's reflexivity about his or her impact on the phenomenon being studied	Mixed qualitative and quantitative, theorizing observations, and assessing the application of a theory to a social setting

Table 10.1 Four intellectual projects for studying aspects of the social world

Intellectual project for studying an aspect of the social world			
	Knowledge-for-understanding	Knowledge-for-critical evaluation	Knowledge-for-action
Reasons for undertaking the study	To understand policy and practice through theory and research	Critically to evaluate policy and practice through theory and research	To inform policy-makers' efforts to improve practice through research and evaluation
Typical mode of working	Social science-based basic research and theory	Social science-based basic research and theory	Applied research, evaluation and development activity
Value stance towards an aspect of the social world	Relatively impartial towards policy and practice	Negatively critical of policy and practice	Positive towards policy and the possibility of improving practice
Value governing the significance of the focus	Positive, because it is intrinsically interesting to understand how policy and practice operate	Positive, because it is instrumentally important to show how policy and practice benefit some groups at the expense of other groups	Positive, because it is instrumentally important to find practical ways of making policy and practice work as well as possible
Values about what is right or wrong	Neutral towards any group advantages or disadvantages resulting from the behaviour of the different groups involved	Negative towards advantages that the behaviour of some groups gives them over others Positive towards changing policy and practice to minimize advantages or disadvantages for any group	Positive towards (or not noticing) any advantages that the behaviour of some groups gives them over others Positive towards (or not noticing) the help that advantaged groups may get from the practical intervention to sustain or increase their advantage over others

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Table 10.1 (Continued)

Intellectual project for studying an aspect of the social world

	Knowledge-for-understanding	Knowledge-for-critical evaluation	Knowledge-for-action	Training
Typical question about the social world	What happens, and why?	What is wrong with what happens, and why?	How effective is what happens, and how may it be improved?	How may my programme improve practice?
Place of theoretical knowledge in the study	Informed by and generates social science theory	Informed by and generates social science theory	Informed by and generates practical theory	Largely atheoretical, informed by a practical theory of training
Common types of published literature produced	Academics' social science-based theory and research (reference may be made in associated policy literature)	Academics' critical social science-based theory and research	Informed professionals' practice and academics' applied research (reference may be made in associated policy literature)	Trainers' and consultants' practice literature (reference may be made in associated policy literature)
Main target audience to influence through published literature	Policy-makers, academics, practitioners on advanced education programmes	Policy-makers, academics, practitioners on advanced education programmes	Policy-makers, academics, trainers, practitioners on advanced education programmes	Practitioners, other trainers, practitioners on education and training programmes
Fictional example of a leadership study	A comparison of perceptions as leaders and followers in different groups	A study of the inhibitory impact of childrearing on women's career chances as business leaders	Measuring the impact of senior managers' leadership behaviour on organizational performance	Development of a diagnostic tool for identifying individuals' potential as business leaders, marketed to the human resources departments of companies

So this example of academic literature relates unequally to all three kinds of knowledge. At the top of the hierarchy are Wallace's claims to research knowledge. For this reason, we judge it to be research literature. But he also draws upon theoretical knowledge and claims to have developed his own (in the form of his perspective and model). And he makes normative claims about profitable directions for practitioners to develop more effective practice knowledge through changes in practice.

Communicating knowledge claims in different types of literature

Identifying what type of literature a text conforms most closely to can help you to check for limitations affecting the validity of the knowledge claims it contains (see Table 11.1). You can thus alert yourself to what you should look for, when deciding how convincing the claims are.

Table 11.1 Types of literature and indicative limitations of claims to knowledge expressed in them

Type of literature	Common features	Some potential limitations of claims to knowledge
Theoretical (emphasizes theoretical knowledge)	Academic theorists develop a system of related concepts and apply them, in order to understand an aspect of the social world. Sometimes they subsequently advocate improvement in practice or policy	• Key concepts may not be defined • Concepts may not be mutually compatible • Concepts may not be linked together logically • Assumptions about the social world may be false • Attention may be drawn away from important features of the social world • A supposedly impartial theory may be affected by implicit values reflecting a particular ideology • Explicit values underlying any advocated improvement may be unacceptable • Evidence from the social world may not support the theory
Research (emphasizes research knowledge)	Academic researchers or practitioners report on the outcomes of a systematic investigation into an aspect of the social world.	• The focus of the research may be diffuse • The research may be atheoretical or employ theoretical ideas unsystematically • Any conceptual framework may not be rigorously applied to inform data collection and analysis

Type of literature	Common features	Some potential limitations of claims to knowledge
	Sometimes they subsequently make recommendations for improving practice or policy	• The design and methods may not be given in sufficient detail to check the rigour of the investigation • The design and methods may be flawed • Generalizations about the applicability of the findings to other contexts may lack sufficient supporting evidence • The findings may contradict those of other research investigations • Recommendations for improving practice and policy may not be adequately supported by the findings • Values connected with an ideology about the aspect of the social world under investigation may affect the choice of topic for investigation and the findings
Practice (emphasizes practice knowledge)	Professionals, trainers or experienced practitioners offer an account of lessons for good practice in an aspect of the social world, based on personal experience or on the evaluation of others' practice	• Significant factors affecting the capacity to improve practice may be ignored • Criteria for judging the quality of practice may be implicit and unjustified • Generalizations about the applicability of any advocated practice and means of improvement to other contexts may lack sufficient supporting evidence • Values connected with an ideology about good practice and how most effectively to improve it may influence recommendations for improving practice • The evidence base may be flimsy, narrow and impressionistic
Policy (emphasizes practice knowledge)	Policy-makers and their agents articulate a vision for improved practice in an aspect of the social world and the means of achieving their vision	• Implicit or explicit assumptions about the need for improvement and the content of the vision may be based on values connected with a political or economic ideology which is open to challenge • Any analysis of the current situation, the vision and means of achieving it may be under-informed by research and may contradict research findings

These potential limitations underline how open to challenge and alternative interpretation our knowledge of the social world can be. Becoming a critical reader entails developing the habit of questioning whether such limitations have