



Philosophies of Qualitative Research

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CHAPTER

3 British Philosophies of Qualitative Research: Positivism and Realism

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Abstract

In this chapter, the British traditions of positivism and realism, which have been important for different strands of qualitative research, are discussed. Positivism is often misunderstood by qualitative researchers and presented as a form of realism, but it is actually an anti-realism that reduces knowledge claims to what we may positively verify in experience. Causality consequently becomes constant conjunction in experience. In contrast to this, realist positions argue that science should go beyond immediate experience to study working mechanisms that generate the phenomena that we in fact experience. Philosophers today disagree about the existence of such mechanisms when it comes to human psychological and social life. Some constructionists argue that there are no causally effective mechanisms in our social life, whereas others, especially critical realists, argue that social science should be all about identifying such mechanisms.

Keywords: [positivism](#), [realism](#), [critical realism](#), [anti-realism](#), [British philosophies](#)

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p. 47 in a modern society, influenced by and even dependent on scientific knowledge, it seems intuitively important that the work of researchers should be as reliable and objective as possible. Political decisions are often made with reference to scientific studies, for example, so these should be transparent and trustworthy. For many people, this also means that the results of researchers' studies should not be tied to the subjectivity of the individual researchers. If something is true, it is not so simply because John Smith says it is true—or because of his authority or background—but because of certain facts in the world that can be discovered by the use of scientific methods. These methods ideally enable others to conduct a study similar to John Smith's and to assess the objectivity (and the validity and reliability) of what John Smith has said.

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The previous paragraph probably represents many people's spontaneous understanding of scientific practice. At least since the Enlightenment, philosophers and scientists in the Western world have developed this idea of science, and it has become common sense today. It is this kind of approach to scientific work that positivism has tried to purify and translate into methodological procedures. It turns out, however, that attempts at doing so quickly run into problems, as discussed later. Also, critical realists, who are partly very critical of positivism, have sought to articulate an approach to qualitative research along the scientific lines that many people intuitively share: The goal of scientific practice is to go beyond what is immediately present, including common opinions and prejudices, in order to arrive at a truer understanding of reality. This is what Noblit and Hare (1988) call "making the hidden obvious."

Positivism

The term *positivism* figures in most—if not all—qualitative research textbooks that I have ever read. However, it is very rare that the authors of these textbooks provide concrete references to positivist philosophers, and the term itself usually appears as a simple term of abuse, signifying "what we are against" as qualitative researchers. *They*—the positivists—are objectivist, realist, and solely employ quantitative methods, whereas *we*—the qualitative researchers—give voice to individual experience, are anti-realist, and are ethically superior. This is misguided in more than one way, as discussed later. First, it is simplistic—and in several cases simply wrong—to claim that positivist philosophy cannot incorporate qualitative methods. Second, it is problematic to claim that positivism is a form of realism. In fact, philosophers of science often characterize it in the exact opposite way—as a form of anti-realism. One can even say that realism as a philosophy of science explicitly emerged, in the British tradition, out of a critique of positivism (Harré & Madden, 1975), namely in an attempt to say that positivism misses *the real* that is hidden behind the world that we experience. But let us now focus directly on this *bête noire* of positivism.

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Positivism could have been placed in the track of French ideas because its founder, Auguste Comte (1798–1857), was French. It could also have been placed in the German track because its most influential 20th-century representatives—the Vienna circle positivists—spoke German. But it nonetheless makes sense to place it in the British tradition because its great grandfather was British, or more precisely Scottish, and bears the name David Hume. I introduced Hume in Chapter 2 as one of the most important modern philosophers to come after Descartes. Hume was an iconoclast who generally proceeded philosophically with Occam's razor in his hand. As already mentioned, Hume saw no need for God, the self, or an idea of causality beyond human experience. And it is this third point that makes him the great grandfather of positivism. For positivism is distinguished among the philosophies of science by its insistence that the only legitimate knowledge claims are those that refer directly to experience—that is, to what can be positively verified. And just as we do not experience a self in our various experiences, according to Hume, so we do not experience causality. We experience events of type B regularly happening after events of type A, and that is all we can really mean by saying that A is the cause of B, according to the positivists. This, in a nutshell, is positivism. Scientific practice should consequently proceed by using systematic methods to study the constant conjunctions in our experience between different kinds of events (e.g., A's and B's). This applies to the human and social sciences just as much as to the natural sciences.

But let us take a step back and ask where the term positivism itself comes from. It was created by Comte, the first positivist proper, who founded not only positivist philosophy but also the science of sociology. His positivist philosophy reacted against religious dogma and metaphysical speculation and advocated a return to what is positively observable—the data—and he famously argued that human knowledge passes through three different stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific or positive stage (Comte, 1830/1988, p. 1). In the first theological stage, "the human mind directs its researches mainly toward the inner nature of beings" (p. 2) rather than "abstract forces" (the metaphysical stage) or "the connection

established between different particular phenomena and some general facts” (the positive stage) (p. 2). The movement away from what Comte calls theology represents the transition from an Aristotelian worldview, where things are thought to move according to their inner natures, through a metaphysical approach that postulates transcendent forces beyond human experience, to finally arrive at positivism and its emphasis on direct observation of connections between various events in experience.

p. 50 Comte argued for the need of social engineering on a scientific basis to establish social order under the beginning anomic conditions of modernity. Once we know about the laws that govern social life, we can begin to make use of our knowledge to make society better. This meant that he had to ask about the direction ↴ in which society was to move; he had to inquire into values and human morality, for what does improvement actually mean? Comte begun, but never finished, a grand work on the science of *la morale*—concerning values and morality—but it was certainly not in the burgeoning science of psychology that he would look for answers. It was Comte’s general conviction that there are two classes of phenomena of interest to human scientists: biological/organic, on the one hand, and societal/collective, on the other hand. The first class of phenomena was to be dealt with by biology, whereas the second class was the province of “social physics” or “sociology” (the word itself was Comte’s invention)—and this left nothing for psychology to study (Cahan & White, 1992). There is, according to Comte, no ontological realm of individual mental phenomena to be studied by psychology between the biological and the sociological sciences. In that way, he was as starkly anti-subjectivist as many of today’s post-structuralists (see Chapter 6), who have argued that the philosophy of the subject, humanism, or the philosophy of consciousness is dead.

Comte never wrote his treatise on the science of *la morale*, but we know that he called this science-to-be “a sacred science” (Samelson, 1974, p. 221) and found that “science proper is as preliminary as are theology or metaphysics, and must finally be eliminated by the universal religion” (p. 222). The science of *la morale* was to culminate in a form of communitarian, human religion, emphasizing “the dependence of man on society (humanity in its historical totality), [and it] considered the isolated individual a false abstraction” (p. 222). It is quite clear that Comte’s *morale*, like his positivism in general, contained much more than pure methodology, and he did not take the stance of a value-free or politically neutral scientist but, rather, resembled Marx in his insistence on the importance of the historical situatedness of human behavior. I mention this in order to underscore the richness, even occasional intellectual wildness, of much of the theorizing that went on among the original positivists, especially Comte.

p. 51 The influence of positivist sociology can be seen in the later work of Emile Durkheim, an early sociologist who gave penetrating qualitative analyses of social phenomena (the following reworks passages from Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). And it is also clear that positivism had an extended influence on the arts of the 19th century, inspiring a move from mythological and aristocratic ↴ themes to a new naturalism, depicting in detail the lives of workers and the bourgeoisie (for some of this history, particularly in the British context, see Dale, 1989). In histories of music, Bizet’s opera *Carmen*, featuring the lives of cigarette smugglers and toreadors, has been depicted as inspired by positivism, and Flaubert’s realistic descriptions of the life of his heroine in *Madame Bovary* warrant a characterization as a positivist novel. Impressionist paintings, sticking to the immediate sense impressions, particularly the sense data of pointillism, also drew inspiration from positivism. Michel Houellebecq is a contemporary French author who explicitly acknowledges his inspiration from Comte’s positivism, and Houellebecq has written the preface for a recent volume on Comte today (Bourdeau, Braunstein, & Petit, 2003). The early positivism was also a political inspiration for feminism, and it was the feminist Harriet Martineau who translated Comte’s *Positive Philosophy* into English. In philosophy, the founder of phenomenological philosophy, Husserl, stated that if positivism means being faithful to the phenomena, then we, the phenomenologists, are the true positivists. It can even be argued that the insistence in Comte’s positivism to stay close to observed phenomena rather than engaging in metaphysical speculation about theoretical entities comes close to a postmodern emphasis

on the importance of staying close to observable surface phenomena rather than postulated deep structures. For positivists as for postmodernists, the surface has become the essence (see Chapter 6).

p. 52 I have tried to present the birth of positivism with Comte as a much more vibrant and many-sided philosophical project than what is usually thought of when the term positivism is mentioned. After Comte, however, positivism traveled back to Great Britain, especially with the philosophy of John Stuart Mill. Mill was a very influential philosopher, both in ethics and in political philosophy in which he developed a utilitarian position, but also in the philosophy of science. He was the first to coin the term “moral science,” which became very influential in 19th-century discussions about the human sciences. *The Logic of the Moral Sciences* was originally part of his magnum opus, *A System of Logic*, from 1843 (Mill, 1843/1987), but it was subsequently published separately. It was translated into German in 1849 by Schiel, and the word he chose was “*Geisteswissenschaften*” (Kessen & Cahan, 1986, p. 649), which became hugely important for the subsequent hermeneutic thinkers. ↪ Some scholars also consider Mill to be responsible for having created a modern scientific psychology (Gazzaniga & Heatherton, 2003; Miller, 2004), significantly inspired by Hume’s Newtonian and mechanical science of the mind. Mill argued that the backward state of “the moral sciences” could be remedied only by applying to them the methods of physical science (Mill, 1843/1987, p. 19), which was in direct continuation of Hume’s imperative to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects. Unlike Comte, Mill thought that there in fact could be such a thing as scientific psychology. Its subject matter would be “the uniformities of succession, the laws, whether ultimate or derivative, according to which one mental state succeeds another—is caused by, or at least is caused to follow, another” (p. 38). This is a reiteration of Hume’s approach, according to which psychologists and other human scientists should study the causal chains of experienced phenomena.

The open approach of Comte’s classical positivism, and to some extent that of Mill, was gradually lost in the methodological positivism of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s. Philosophers from the Vienna Circle, such as Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath, are probably the names that many contemporary scholars think of in relation to the term positivism. Neurath’s (1929/2003) statements in *The Scientific World Conception* are illustrative: The goal of scientific practice is to arrive at “unified science,” which means to “harmonise the achievements of individual investigators in their various fields of science” (p. 31). Thus, ultimately, what goes on in physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology, and so forth can (and should) all be put coherently together, and some “physicalists” would even claim that all knowledge will in the long term be reducible to physics and be expressed in its language. Other remarks from Neurath are interesting—for example, when he writes about positivism:

Neatness and clarity are strived for, and dark distances and unfathomable depths rejected. In science there are no “depths”; there is surface everywhere: All experience forms a complex network, which cannot always be surveyed and can often be grasped only in parts. Everything is accessible to man; and man is the measure of all things. (p. 31)

p. 53 The last sentence is a reference to the pre-Socratic sophist, Protagoras, who claimed that man is the measure of all things. ↪ The almost poetic valorization of surface rather than depth is also close to postmodernism and the Wittgensteinian insistence that “nothing is hidden.” For us positivists, Neurath continues, “something is ‘real’ through being incorporated into the total structure of experience” (p. 33). Although coming from a very different paradigmatic background, this is not far from the broad phenomenological outlook of many qualitative researchers, who focus on “lived experience.” For a positivist such as Neurath, knowledge must be grounded in the experience of human beings and not in anything metaphysical or transcendent behind or beyond our experiential realm.

Sometimes this is formulated by linguistically oriented positivists as the principle of verification: A sentence is meaningful insofar as it can be verified with reference to human experience. According to positivists, this excludes metaphysical and theological sentences from being meaningful. A. J. Ayer, the

main protagonist of positivism in the United Kingdom, wrote the classic *Language, Truth and Logic* (Ayer, 1936/1990), “which founded logical positivism—and modern British philosophy,” according to its book cover. It simply begins with a chapter brutally titled “The Elimination of Metaphysics.” Ayer expressed the fundamental principle of verificationism very clearly: “We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express” (p. 16). Thus, only if one knows which observations that will lead one to accept a proposition as true does one know what the proposition means. The sentence “the cat is on the mat” is meaningful because one may undertake certain operations in order to identify a cat, a mat, and the structural relation between them (one being “on” the other). Other sentences, such as “God is a trinity” or “John is fixated in an Oedipal conflict,” are not similarly meaningful because it is not (Ayer argues) possible to verify them experientially. In addition to statements that can be verified in experience, positivists also believe that logical statements, or so-called analytical statements, are meaningful. These are sentences that are logically derived from other sentences. Strictly speaking, these are tautological, which means that they do not teach us anything substantially new (e.g., from the sentence “the cat is on the mat,” we may infer that “a mammal is on the mat” because a cat is by definition a mammal). As Neurath (1929/2003) summed up, “The scientific world-conception knows only empirical statements about things of all kinds, and analytic statements of logic and mathematics” (p. 33).

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Needless to say, this provides for a very narrow approach to science and meaningful statements, excluding not only theological and metaphysical sentences but also ethical and aesthetic ones. And, even more problematic for the positivists, it seems to exclude their own philosophical statements, including the verification criterion itself, from the realm of meaningful sentences. This kind of critique—that is, an immanent critique based on the assumptions of what one is criticizing—has often been raised against positivism. “If *this* is how you define meaningful statements,” one can say to the positivist, “then your own definition is meaningless, because it cannot be verified in experience!” Or, in relation to the positivists’ exclusion of values from rational discussion and scientific practice, one can say, “If you define science as value-free, because you believe that it should strive for objectivity and reliability, then you forget that objectivity and reliability are *also* values!” (this, in effect, is Putnam’s (2002) critique of the fact/value dichotomy often invoked by positivists).

In my account of positivism so far, I have tried to show that it has emerged historically in at least two or three waves. First, in the early and rather “wild” form with Auguste Comte. Here, there was little or no opposition to what we would today refer to as qualitative research. Comte believed that social phenomena were too complex to be subjected to mathematical analysis, and the application of mathematical analysis was in any case not necessary for a positive science: “Our business is to study phenomena, in the characters and relations in which they present themselves to us,” Comte said, “abstaining from introducing considerations of quantities, and mathematical laws, which is beyond our power to apply” (quoted in Michell, 2003, p. 13). What Joel Michell has called “the quantitative imperative” in psychology and related sciences does not come from positivism (not even from the later versions of Carnap or Neurath) but is connected to a bureaucratic culture that is obsessed with quantitative evidence and a whole “what works” ideology (Kvale, 2008). Thus, my argument is that despite problematic features of positivist philosophy (some of which are addressed by the later realist philosophers), qualitative researchers should be careful not simply to dismiss a straw man when rejecting positivism out of hand. A careful study of especially Comte will reveal a much more open and complex philosophy than what we conventionally think of in relation to positivism. The inductive approach of positivism, which strives for a gradual creation of human knowledge through increasingly more experience, is actually in line with much qualitative research. And of course the focus on experience itself—what is sometimes called *phenomenalism* because of the belief in immediate phenomenal experience as foundational for human knowledge—is also close to qualitative researchers’ respect for experience.

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Positivism has today been transformed from a philosophy of science into a more bureaucratic procedure of producing and applying knowledge. The whole movement toward “evidence-based knowledge” and the “what works” agenda in the human and social sciences—finding inspiration in the Cochrane movement in medicine from the 1970s onward—can be considered a kind of “bureaucratic positivism,” which is probably a much greater threat to qualitative research than the original positivism of Comte and also the second-wave positivism of the Vienna Circle. For the politics of evidence that is part of bureaucratic positivism often sidelines and excludes qualitative studies of “what there is” in the world in favor of randomized controlled trials of “what works” according to quantitative measures, and sometimes even claims that only the latter kind of study is scientific.

Realism

After positivism followed a broad and exciting range of responses in the world of philosophy of science. The theory of science developed by Karl Popper from the mid-1930s onward accepted much of the positivist agenda, albeit with some significant adjustments (Popper, 1959). Popper famously argued that scientific truth cannot be asserted through verification. The kind of verificationism posited by the positivists could not lead to genuine knowledge, Popper asserted, because of the problem of induction: No matter how many instances of something that we positively observe, we will never be in a position to arrive at general knowledge. Often, philosophers use the example of the white swans to explain this. Even if all observed swans have been white, we can never know if all swans are actually white (and in fact they are not) and will remain white in the future. So, if science proceeds in accordance with positivist principles through verification and inductive inference, it means that no secure and general knowledge exists. Popper’s solution to this problem was to insist that scientific practice does not in fact work inductively but, rather, deductively. Scientists formulate bold conjectures of a general kind, which are then subjected to empirical investigation. And those conjectures that survive critical study are maintained until further notice. Those conjectures that are falsified should be abandoned. Thus, Popper replaced verification with falsification as the mark of scientificity. A statement or theory is not scientific because it can be verified in experience but, rather, because we may (in principle) falsify it. Popper believed that Marxist and Freudian theories were unscientific because they could never be falsified. If the Freudian analyst presents an interpretation to the patient, for example, and the patient agrees, then this is taken as verification of the interpretation. But if the patient disagrees, then this is taken as a kind of denial, which also verifies the interpretation. At least this is the caricature of Freudian psychoanalysis that Popper had in mind, which guards it from being falsified.

Unlike the positivists, Popper was a scientific realist. His falsificationist theory of science led him to deny that scientific theories can be absolutely true, but there is no doubt that he believed that the objects of science have an existence beyond human theories and representations, and this makes him a scientific realist (Leplin, 2007). This is also what aligns him with the critical stance of “making the hidden obvious,” and Popper himself referred to his philosophical position as critical rationalism. Positivism and realism are often confused today. But if realism is the view that there are working mechanisms in the world that cause more superficial aspects to appear and become observable, then most positivists were quite starkly anti-realists. They argued that we should stick to what can be positively observed and verified in experience (sometimes referred to as phenomenalism), which led them to distrust theories about underlying mechanisms or transcendent metaphysical structures. Causation on the positivist interpretation, as we have seen, simply meant constant conjunction in experience. For Popper and the later realists, this was not satisfactory because it made the scientific enterprise too relative and dependent on human experience.

Before moving on, we should pause and consider some of the other notable critiques of positivism that emerged in the mid-20th century. One of these was based on the idea that all observations are theory-laden. This was already voiced by Popper, but it is more often associated with the likes of Hanson, Quine, and

Kuhn. In *Perception and Discovery*, Hanson (1969) referred to basic perceptual phenomena to argue that what we see in our scientific practices is not just “what is there” (as elementary positivist “sense data,” for example) but also results from our theoretical interpretations. “There is more to seeing than meets the eye” is a slogan from Hanson’s work. According to Hanson, it is not possible to draw a firm line between what we see and what we believe about what we see, for the latter influences the former. Before this, Quine (1951) had already argued against what he called the “dogmas of empiricism”—that is, the central tenets of positivist philosophy—that it is not possible to make a clear distinction between so-called analytic and synthetic statements. The former are statements that are logically true, whereas the latter are true because they correspond to matters of fact. Again, Quine’s argument went against the positivists’ neat separation of different kinds of statement, and Quine introduced the idea that the same set of empirical observations may result in two equally coherent theories that are nonetheless logically incompatible. Thus, we simply cannot move in a simple way from empirical observations to theory-building. Scientific data “underdetermine” scientific theories, which means that our observations are infused with theory and vice versa. Finally, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1970) developed the notion of scientific paradigms as central to scientific practice. Paradigms are whole sets of theories and practices that enable something to emerge as an observation or a scientific fact. Thus, what counts as a fact or an observation is relative to the paradigmatic context in which it occurs, and the positivist idea of elementary sense data is thereby discarded. Notably, Kuhn referred to paradigms as entire “worldviews” and argued quite controversially that scientists live in a different world after a paradigm shift. This is so because what counts as the essential properties of the universe that can be observed may change after a paradigm shift. The Aristotelian natural philosopher saw teleological movement when looking at the stones and stars, whereas the post-Newtonian scientist saw mechanical movement effectuated by gravitation. Many subsequent philosophers of science have interpreted Kuhn as a kind of anti-realist social constructionist, but it is quite clear that Kuhn himself wanted to defend a version of realism (see Niiniluoto, 1996). According to Kuhn, there is a world independent of human sayings, doings, and interpretations, but this world shows itself in different ways relative to how we approach it with our various paradigms. Thus, Kuhn may be said to combine an epistemological relativism or perspectivism with ontological realism—quite like the critical realists that I return to later.

The post-positivist philosophers of science—such as Popper, Hanson, Quine, and Kuhn—are mainly relevant for qualitative researchers because of their critiques of positivism. They were mostly engaged with understanding the natural sciences. But there is a more explicitly realist line of thinking in philosophy that is more immediately relevant for human and social scientists. This line of thinking adheres to the dictum of Karl Marx mentioned previously that “all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided” (Marx, 1894). For Marx, science is needed to go beyond appearance or the surface to critically uncover a truer reality. This goes directly against positivism, which was very skeptical about underlying essences of things.

The most common realist philosophy of social science in recent years has been *critical realism*, originally associated with Roy Bhaskar (1975/2008). Critical realism in Bhaskar’s version is a dialectical theory, which builds on both Hegel and Marx, and which is concerned with not only epistemology but also ontology proper. Bhaskar saw positivism as nothing but an updated version of Hume’s empiricism, and he also read Popper’s critique of positivism as operating within the same set of fundamental assumptions that Popper had himself criticized. The starting point for critical realism, therefore, is a critique of the tendency to put human experience in the center of scientific knowledge, as represented by both the positivists and the phenomenologists (see Chapter 4). Instead, science should aim to study those structures and mechanisms that allegedly *generate* the phenomena that we experience. Bhaskar thus outlined an ontology that involved three levels or domains in the world: the *empirical* (our observations and experiences), the *actual* (events and phenomena), and the *real* (structures and mechanisms that operate causally).

p. 59 In the world of human culture and society, the deepest domain of the real consists of generative mechanisms that are independent of minds and concrete societies. These mechanisms do therefore not change relative to how we choose to describe them—for example, in our scientific theories. It is thus possible to obtain genuine theoretical knowledge about them (cf. Aristotle’s categories of knowledge depicted in Table 1.1). Thus, what Hacking (1995) has called “the looping effect of human kinds”—the interaction between how we describe humans and their actions, on the one hand, and the humans that are described, on the other hand—is rejected. There is a domain of the social world that is independent of how it is described and analyzed. The social world is not experiential or interpretative “all the way down,” for, ultimately, we can reach a level of causal mechanisms that simply are what they are, and the most important goal of social science is to formulate an explanation of these. Unlike positivists, who (like Hume) reduced causality to “constant conjunction” in experience, and also unlike phenomenologists and interpretivists, who reject the idea that the social world is to be explained causally in the first place (see Chapter 4), critical realists maintain that qualitative social science needs to search for causal mechanisms when studying the world. What this means might become clearer in the next sections, which discuss different ways in which the British traditions of positivism and realism have influenced qualitative research.

Positivism in Qualitative Research

Although very few, if any, qualitative researchers self-identify as “positivists” today, much standard qualitative work can be labeled “qualitative positivism.” As I have tried to show previously with particular reference to Comte, this is not a contradiction in terms because there need not be an opposition between qualitative inquiry and positivism. Quite the contrary in fact, given the experiential and phenomenalist focus among many positivists. If we understand positivism as the idea that researchers should stick to what it is possible to positively verify in experience, and with the related idea that specific scientific methods are what enable researchers to develop reliable and valid knowledge about various phenomena, then a positivist approach is extremely widespread among qualitative researchers.

p. 60 A key aspect of positivism is that methodological procedures rather than subjective judgment or theoretical frameworks are said to determine scientific truth. In qualitative work, there are some varieties of grounded theory (but certainly not all of them) that come close to this. The ambition of grounded theory is to build knowledge through induction by using methods of coding and categorization of one’s empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Especially the early formulation of grounded theory, as led by Barney Glaser, has been interpreted as involving a rather strong positivist outlook (see Bryant, 2003). There is quite clearly an emphasis on how to “collect data” and analyze them through “coding” and “categorization,” with the ideal being a process that can be relatively independent of the persons doing the work.

In many contemporary applications of CAQDAS—that is, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software—often developed along the line of grounded theory methodology, there are inbuilt presuppositions that resemble positivism. The idea that data are in principle separable from the contexts in which they were produced, from the persons producing them, and from theoretical frameworks that are used to make sense of them seems to apply to many uses of CAQDAS. Increasingly, “data collection” is conducted in research teams, and when the data are uploaded to the computer system, they can be coded and analyzed by many different people. This kind of objectification and depersonalization of data (for lack of a better word) has emerged out of a positivist approach to research and is very different from phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches (as will be discussed in Chapter 4), in which analysis and understanding are related to a “fusion of horizons” between different people, which means that personal and contextual features become much more prominent.

Realism in Qualitative Research

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The realist critique of positivism and the critical realist alternative has been well articulated by Maxwell (2012) in his idea of a realist approach to qualitative research. Unlike the anti-realism inherent in the phenomenism of positivism, Maxwell's critical realism combines a realist ontology (the world contains entities and properties that exist independently of us) with a constructivist epistemology (our knowledge is constructed through human activities). In this sense, critical realism is a very general philosophy, but when applied to qualitative research specifically, the central argument is that we need to accept a causal role for meanings (p. 20). Meanings are not just contingent and socially constructed interpretations but also a real force in social life that can operate beyond human awareness. As we have seen, the positivists denied an ontological status to causes, but the realists affirm the concept of cause as referring to the inner workings of some process or phenomenon (p. 37).

For positivists, data are whatever we collect from experience and analyze, but for (critical) realists, data are understood as "*evidence* for real phenomena and processes (including mental phenomena and processes) that are not available for direct observation" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 103). We thus see very clearly how scientificity for realists is connected to "going beyond" what is immediately observable, or—to use Noblit and Hare's (1988) terminology—making the hidden obvious. The methods for doing this are conventional qualitative methods, according to Maxwell: Participant observation, narrative inquiry, intervention, and comparative studies are mentioned as methods for causal inference (p. 43). Almost anything goes methodologically, as long as the chosen method directs the researcher to the generative working mechanisms of the social world. Maxwell thus argues for what he calls validity based on an understanding of the phenomena rather than validity based on specific research procedures as in positivism (p. 144). Realists are not content to discover *that* some A causes some B to happen but, rather, argue that the scientific task is to explain *how* A causes B to happen. Maxwell highlights the key "realist principle" that "mechanism + context = outcome" (p. 164). It is not enough to describe and understand what happens in contextually framed situations. For the realist, the goal is to go beyond the situation and pinpoint the mechanism that causes something to happen, given specific contextual features. A classic example of this is unfolded in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1 Realism and How to Make the Hidden Obvious

Critical theory is a broad approach in the social sciences originating with Horkheimer and Adorno and followed by Habermas, Honneth, and other so-called Frankfurt school scholars. Critical theory combines empirical social science with philosophical reflection and is in line with critical realism as outlined here. Arguably the most famous qualitative research project conducted by critical theorists is the study of the authoritarian personality by Adorno and co-workers (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). In the wake of World War II, the researchers were interested in understanding the rise of anti-Semitism and fascist ideology and why it was so widely accepted in many European countries. The study, which employed qualitative psychoanalytic interviews, used a sophisticated interplay of open qualitative interviews and highly structured questionnaires for producing and validating data (see the description in Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). An important part of the investigation consisted of psychoanalytically inspired interviews, in which the researchers used therapeutic techniques to circumvent their subjects' defenses in order to learn about their prejudices and authoritarian personality traits. In the interviews, the freedom of expression offered to the interview person was seen as the best way to obtain an adequate view of the whole person because it permitted inferences of the deeper layers of the subjects' personalities behind the antidemocratic ideology. An indirect interview technique, with a flexible interview schedule, consisted of "manifest questions," suggestions for the interviewer to pose in order to throw light on the "underlying questions," derived from the project's theoretical framework. These underlying questions had to be concealed from the subject so that undue defenses would not be established through the subjects' recognition of the real focus of the interview, namely to uncover the personally rooted causes of anti-Semitism.

The whole setup of the study was based on the realist idea that there is a "working mechanism" (a certain style of upbringing, which leads to a problematic personality structure) that—given the right context—leads to an outcome (in this case, the spread of fascism). Of course, the study—like all realist studies—is vulnerable to the objection that the latent or hidden mechanism that is said to generate the outcome could be illusory. Its validity in this case rests on the validity of psychoanalytic theory, which was widely accepted at the time of the study but much less so today. Furthermore, there are also potential ethical problems inherent in the ambition of "going beyond" people's self-understanding in order to uncover a truer reality behind their own experiences. I discussed this in Brinkmann and Kvale (2005), and, using an expression from Fog (2004), the application of psychoanalytic knowledge of defense mechanisms in the study by the Adorno group served as a "Trojan horse" to get behind the defense walls of the anti-Semites. When studying sensitive issues such as authoritarianism and anti-Semitism, it is difficult to obtain informed consent because this would likely render the study impossible. Thus, today, with our ethical standards, the Adorno project would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out. In any case, it may here serve as an illustration of how a realist approach can look—with the stated goal of "going beyond" what is manifestly experienced to uncover the hidden structures and mechanisms that causally generate some phenomenon of interest. The method—interviewing—was in this case uncontroversial, but the theoretical interpretations that led to the production of knowledge were more debatable.

Summary

p. 62 In this chapter, I have depicted a development in philosophical ideas from positivism to realism, including its so-called critical variety. Positivism is often misunderstood by qualitative researchers and ↵

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presented as a form of realism, but it is actually an anti-realism that reduces knowledge claims to what we may positively verify in experience. Causality consequently becomes constant conjunction in experience. In contrast to this, realist positions argue that science should go beyond immediate experience to study working mechanisms that generate the phenomena that we in fact experience. Philosophers today disagree about the existence of such mechanisms with regard to human psychological and social life. Some constructionists argue that there are no causally effective mechanisms in our social life (Harré (2002) thus tries to debunk what he calls the myth of social structure), whereas others, especially critical realists, argue that social science should be all about identifying such mechanisms.

p. 64 I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter how positivism in qualitative research lives on in the practices informed by CAQDAS in particular (although it is certainly possible to work with these ↵ software programs without subscribing to positivism), whereas realism is influential in a number of other ways. Realism in particular employs the strategy of making the hidden obvious, and this can be seen as more than an intellectual commitment for, if Hadot is correct that philosophy should be considered as a way of life, it also represents a kind of existential stance to the world and other human beings. The notion that the world has “depth,” and that other people live lives in their own right and are affected by forces that they might not be aware of, is important as a basic scientific credo and also as a moral commitment to uncover the hidden realities in order, perhaps, to help people with emancipation. This has been the agenda for the Frankfurt school of critical theory (Horkheimer, Adorno, Habermas, Honneth, etc.) and also for influential social scientists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977). In that sense, the British traditions (as I call them here in a somewhat simplifying manner) live on in very significant ways in today’s qualitative research communities.