

A JOURNEY THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

To our students

A JOURNEY THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

FROM DESIGN TO REPORTING

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&
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CHOOSING QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

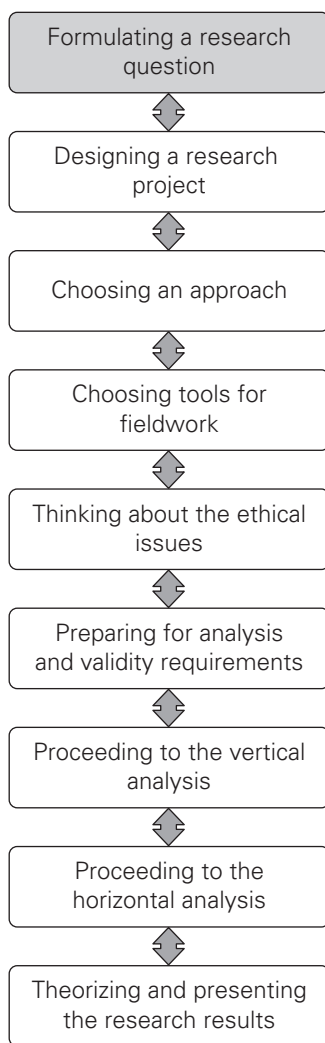


Figure 1.1 Where we are in the research process

IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To define qualitative inquiry as a knowledge production process based on iteration.
- To identify the different phases of an iterative research process.
- To formulate a qualitative research question.
- To understand different epistemological stances in qualitative inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

This book is not about following recipes, but about learning the art of creating your own. As great chefs, we need skills to choose, prepare and mix our ingredients as well as knowledge transmitted by our discipline to create new recipes. The creative process is endless. Qualitative research is a never-ending journey. There are always new phenomena to learn about, new **methods** to invent and new forms of knowledge to create.

The social is your object of study. Because it is complex, dynamic and inter-subjective, we believe it calls for a specific type of **research design**. In this first chapter, our aim is to help you design your project on the foundation of an **iterative process**. That is, a research activity that continuously moves from the **empirical** basis of your study up to its theoretical apparatus and down again to the empirical basis. In short, there is a continuous dialogue between research material and theoretical aspects of the research project.

In this chapter, we will address three important elements of your qualitative research project: (1) your ontological and epistemological beliefs; (2) their connections to your research question; and (3) the iterative-driven research process of a qualitative scientific production. In more epistemological terms, we are inviting you to understand the realm of knowledge production you are most comfortable working in: **realist**, **constructionist** or **constructivist epistemology**.

You might ask yourself: why are we discussing these theoretical questions at the beginning of a book on methodology? Talking about methodology is talking about how we observe reality, how we describe it, and how we create and organize our descriptions and explanations of social phenomena. Methodology is the reflection on methods, which are tools to observe the world. Moreover, methodology contributes to the creation of **scientific knowledge**. That is why it is so important to understand what is being created while using qualitative methods.

THE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION PROCESS

CREATING KNOWLEDGE IS ENACTING THE SOCIAL

By questioning and explaining the social, researchers are enacting it. This is a huge responsibility and an incredible experience of creative thinking! Because of the historical and dynamic world we try to describe, understand and explain,

it is very difficult (and not necessarily desirable) to create knowledge labeled as **universal**. By that, we mean producing explicit laws explaining the production of a phenomenon. For example, in natural science, we observed several times that the boiling point of water is 100°C. We can now predict, based on a universal law that water will evaporate at 100°C. It is almost impossible to find such a universally valid causal relationship in the social world among a **situation** (temperature), an element (water) and their consequence (evaporation).

Causal relationships are established in natural science by the observation of repetitions in an experiment.

Until now, no social scientist has succeeded in identifying such universal laws because the characteristics we observe differ significantly from those of nature. It is historically situated, it is a complex object, it can take several meanings and it is based on **subjective** relationships. It doesn't mean that there is no causality in social sciences. It means that causality has a different meaning. It is not a relationship based on constant consequences between element A and B as in natural science. It means that A is part of the process by which the phenomenon is produced.

In social sciences, a cause is an element that belongs to the constitution of the phenomenon. (Campenhoudt and Quivy, 2011)

Defining the 'social' is the cornerstone of any social science project. No one has the same answer, but many would agree that what is social is what results from relationships: relationships among humans, and among humans and non-humans. Also, social phenomena are historically situated. Thus, they remain mostly singular. They are created through relationships over time, shaped by the legacies of the generations, **institutions** and organizations that characterize particular societies. For example, the experience of being a female prisoner in a specific country is historically shaped by the laws, the prisons as architectural realities, the social policies and the training of the professionals working with that prisoner. That 'prisoner' depends on the institutional research (university and government) and the accumulated knowledge transmitted through the training and personal experience of those professionals.

The complexity of the social does not mean we cannot produce any knowledge about it. Many social scientists help us to develop a better understanding of our world. They create **localized knowledge**, knowledge that does not aspire to be universal but rather contextual to a time and a place and situated. It helps to improve society through better public policies, public programs or interventions. This localized knowledge leads us to enact the

social. For example, we create social realities by naming, describing and interpreting them. Creating new understandings of social realities can sometimes help to deconstruct taboos and empower people. Sometimes new solutions come with new **interpretations** of problems.

Because we enact the social, we have a responsibility both to ensure the **validity** and to identify the limitations of the knowledge we produce. As qualitative researchers, we first need to admit that the knowledge we produce cannot explain straightforward causal relationships. Thus, the value and strength of the qualitative inquiry is to ‘provide a rich understanding of complex social contexts – not its ability to provide a causal explanation of events’ (Pascale, 2011: 40).

INTERPRETATION AND EXPLANATION OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Any scientific knowledge production implies both explanation and interpretation of a particular phenomenon. For Bourdieu, interpretation and explanation are linked and might even occur concurrently (Bourdieu et al., 1983). For a pedagogical view, we will distinguish them as two ideal objectives of knowledge production. We would define an explanation as the demonstration of relationships between things, such as patterns or recurrences. Explanations are based mostly on a **hypothetico-deductive** process of knowledge production. Explanations based on **statistical generalization** are often considered more suited to objects observed in nature and less pertinent to the analysis of historical phenomena. However, many statistical analyses are able to identify strong causal relationships between social categories such as social class, gender and race. These types of knowledge help to explain large causal relationships, and inform us about deep social trends in societies. Even if these types of research mostly explain, reliable interpretation of social situations will tend toward **theoretical generalization** – which means that the knowledge produced could explain other similar cases even if we could not statistically generalize to a universal conclusion (Pires, 1997).

Sociologists such as Dominique Schnapper (1999) insist that good social research embodies a tension between explanation and interpretation, but one has to know from which pole one is working. The research objectives and the research question will determine if the aim of the research is more likely to produce an explanation – and rely on a linear knowledge production process. Or rather to provide an interpretation – and rely on an iterative production process (Figure 1.2).

If your aim is to observe a complex phenomenon such as culture, your research design should gravitate toward the interpretation pole and develop an iterative architecture. For example, in each society, cultural boundaries exist to delineate who belongs to ‘us’ (as a ‘community of identification’) and who belongs to ‘them’. In a society highly segregated by race, such as the United States, cultural groups might form around the historical black minority, the

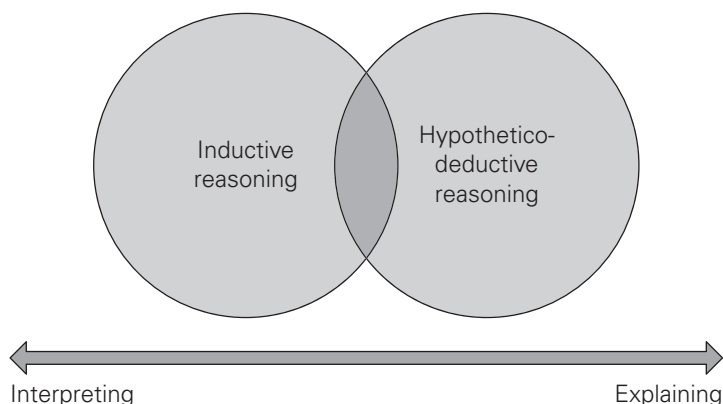


Figure 1.2 Interpreting and explaining

historical white majority and other groups (Latino, Asian, Arabic, etc.). Such boundaries can be found through interviews and historical analysis. No universal law can explain the changing cultural boundaries among the groups. In Table 1.1, we present the different aims of observation and description in iterative and linear research models. Here, we refer to observation in a general manner that covers any tool to gather or produce data (we will talk about observation in the strict sense in Chapter 4).

Table 1.1 The iterative and linear research models

	Iterative	Linear
Observations	<p>Observations are mostly multivocal (they are mostly co-constructed by the researcher and the participant)</p> <p>Observations are mostly qualitative but they can also be quantitative; however, they are not pre-established</p> <p>Researchers know the topic, want to study it but are always open to serendipity. They do not exactly know the type of information they will get from fieldwork</p>	<p>Observations aim to be univocal because they will be transformed into variables</p> <p>Observations can be qualitative or quantitative but are generally pre-established categories applied to what we see (gender, professions, number of children)</p> <p>Researchers know exactly what type of information they want to have</p> <p>Interview grids or questionnaires are standardized</p>
Descriptions	<p>Search for meanings and regularities</p> <p>Researchers work with self-analysis on their research process</p>	<p>Search for regular relationships among variables</p> <p>Researchers try to avoid interpretations</p>
Level of generalization	Localized/theoretical generalization	Statistically generalized to a population

METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

As we explained above, all knowledge is based on both explanations and interpretations, but qualitative methods are mostly aiming at producing interpretations of phenomena. What makes a valid body of knowledge is not a simple choice of methods and data. It is the coherence, the **rigor** and the transparency of a chain of scientific decisions related to the object of study, the problem related to this object, the research questions, the possible answers, the methods of data collection and analysis, and the conclusion. The hard thinking in this decision-making process is the methodology. In other words, methodology is the ‘analysis of the principles or procedures of inquiry in a particular field’ (*Merriam-Webster Online*, n.d.). In this book, we focus on qualitative methodology defined as an iterative process of knowledge production. Our conception of methodology is not based on a choice of data such as work or numbers, or a choice of methods, for example observation vs. questionnaire. Rather, it derives from a chain of decision-making that will help define your epistemological stance and your research design.

The first thing to do is decide whether a quantitative or qualitative methodology is the most suitable form of inquiry for the type of research problem you have. This decision is related to an epistemological and ontological position. **Ontology** is a discussion or a reflection ‘about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence’ (*Merriam-Webster Online*, n.d.) and **epistemology** is ‘the study ... of the nature and grounds of knowledge, especially with reference to its limits and validity’ (*Merriam-Webster Online*, n.d.).

What researchers believe to be reality and what they think is possible to be known is based on beliefs. Guba and Lincoln (2004) explain very well how academic researchers can convince others of the importance of their ontological–epistemological postures, but nobody ‘knows’ if one posture is better than another. The most we can say is that a posture might be more relevant for one research question than another. For example, if researchers want to test the efficiency of a particular vaccine to prevent tuberculosis, they would probably position themselves in a **realist ontology**. This means that they believe that molecules, atoms and fluids are objectively real; that is, they exist outside the perceptions and beliefs of the researchers. They will also have a **positivist epistemology**, which means that they believe that the role of science is to understand laws of the natural organization of the reality they define as real. For this, they need to observe data without influencing it and analyse patterns of causality in a hypothetico-deductive way. Considering the experience of cancer patients, one would most likely prefer receiving a drug treatment tested within a positivist epistemology.

However, if we want to understand how patients interpret their recoveries from cancer, we can analyse their experiences of the different types of therapies they underwent such as meditation, yoga, acupuncture, spiritual practices. We could also investigate the support they got from loved ones, the roles they attribute to positive thoughts about their physical health,

and so forth. With such questions, we are likely to believe that reality is constructed through our perception and experience of it and we will be interested in the lived experience of treatments and recovery. As cancer patients, we would prefer to be treated by practitioners open to **constructivist ontology** and epistemology in order to maximize the likelihood of our recovery.

Through these examples, we want to illustrate that one particular epistemology or methodology cannot be defined as universally better than another. There are only different types of research problems requiring different epistemologies and methodologies. In other words, certain methodological choices can be defined as better suited for certain types of research questions. In this book, we will focus on a qualitative methodology based on an iterative process that is distinct from what is recognized in a positivist epistemology. This specification has been made because some qualitative methods are used in a more positivist stance. In this book we will focus on iterative and inductive inquiries. Thus, we will focus on the realm of qualitative methodology and not expand on quantitative research design. Understanding of processes and meanings is usually the realm of qualitative methodology.

However, it is important for all researchers to understand the type of scientific culture we are living in because it influences our views on science and knowledge. Taking knowledge for granted – even **scientific paradigms** – represents a danger as it can obstruct new knowledge production. As we said before, we do not know, and it is impossible to prove whether one epistemology is better than another. In the same way, there is not one methodology better than the other. However, a methodology can be more appropriate and conducive for a certain type of knowledge. This being said, we are living in societies driven by technologies (related to economic growth) produced within a positivist epistemology and a realist ontology. There, we navigate each day within a positivist culture that influences our understanding of knowledge. This is why we need to be particularly vigilant regarding knowledge production: we need to delimitate what is scientific culture and what is research design and scientific production.

DECONSTRUCTING THE POSITIVIST SCIENTIFIC CULTURE

Positivism was the first form of scientism. That is why we often refer to it as a naive form of empiricism. Very few people adhere to it, even in natural sciences, but this epistemology is so deeply anchored in our beliefs and our modern culture that it influences our views of what can be known. That is why we began this chapter by deconstructing positivism as a ‘scientific culture’ and not as an epistemology per se. In the next section of this chapter, we will present the realm of different epistemologies within qualitative methodology. For now, we present positivism as a cultural artefact in order to help you choose the most appropriate research design.

Positivism was developed as a counterbalance to **metaphysics** and grand theories. In this paradigm, reality obeys laws, and the role of scientific knowledge is to link controlled and objective observations to universal laws. Thus, the aim of science is to verify or falsify theoretical claims. Positivism is poorly suited for the type of research questions and problems we are addressing in this book; we agree with the idea that science should be grounded on empirical facts. Phenomena that cannot be observed, that is apprehended somehow (even through partial indicators), cannot be a subject for scientific knowledge.

Within a positivist paradigm, the relationship between the observer and the object should be as neutral as possible in order to control for biases. For instance, objectivity is an imperative criterion to validate any positivist empirical analysis. The natural sciences widely share this stance. It has also historically dominated quantitative social research. We can readily identify it as a **hegemonic discourse** in popular and academic understandings of knowledge. Even undergraduate students often adopt this view by default in their qualitative methodology classes. They have been told that science is based on objectivity and hypothetico-deductive processes or linear processes of knowledge production as Figure 1.3 shows. However, as we have said, such understandings of knowledge production are often at odds with the research questions that interest them the most.

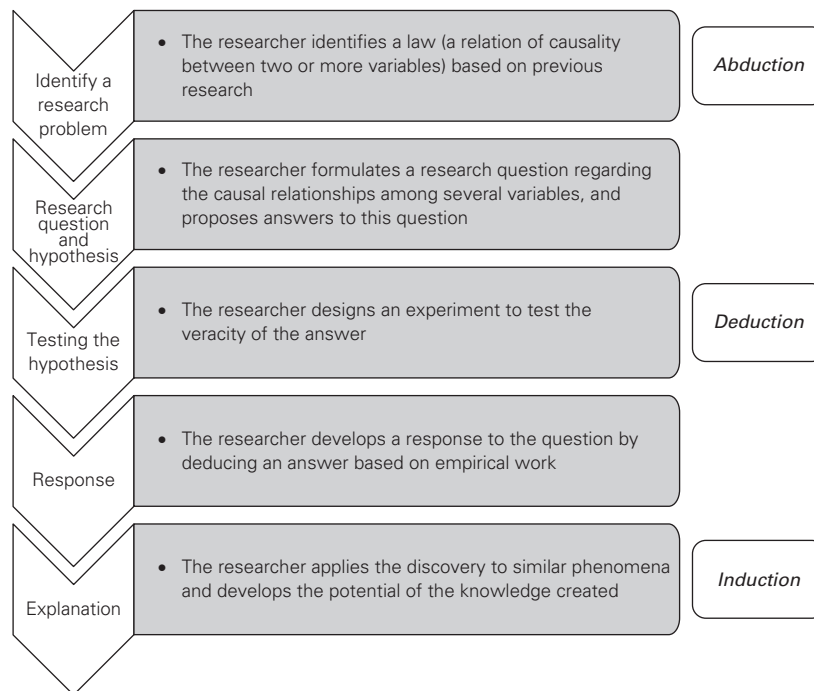


Figure 1.3 The linear process related to positivism

In the field of social sciences, students face the dominance of positivism. Recent developments in qualitative methods in the field of social sciences have articulated themselves against a backdrop of disciplines often historically rooted in positivist paradigms. The birth of social sciences, especially sociology, was facilitated by positivist thinkers such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. They both wanted to develop a scientific knowledge of social phenomena. As in natural science, they wanted to discover universal laws based on observations. For Durkheim (2013), societies operated through universal laws, the way nature did, but the role of sociology was to create inductively laws of causality based on the comparison of concomitant social phenomena. Merton (1968) reintroduced this belief but restricted the application of universality by developing the idea of middle-range theory, which is more appropriate to the purposes of social sciences.

These kinds of ontology and epistemology are derived from positivism and experimental science. It is important to understand this to establish a dialogue between researchers and also to be aware that this hegemonic discourse on science production is not necessarily legitimate in social sciences. We think that social sciences have their own ontology and epistemology because of the unique nature of the 'social' that is historically situated, complex, multifaceted and based on subjective relationships.

Thus, research questions seeking to understand a social phenomenon will be quite different from those that try to explain natural causal relationships. They will lead to iteratively driven processes throughout the inquiry and will mostly use qualitative data methods.

Qualitative research is defined by:

- the iterative process of knowledge production;
- the nature of its object of research, which is:
 - historically situated
 - complex
 - multivocal
 - based on subjective relationships.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

We think that the nature of the 'social' is more easily grasped by qualitative inquiries because it is complex, historically situated and can take several meanings based on the subjects' perspectives.

Each time we argue our research question, and we explain our methodology, we go through numerous interpretations. We build mysteries, and we solve them. This process explains why it is so important to keep the coherence of our research design. Research objectives, theoretical framework, epistemological stance, research question and methods should always be ‘talking’ to one another.

Deduction:

The process of deriving a statement from certain assumed statements by applying the rules of logic. (*McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific & Technical Terms*, 2003)

Induction:

A process of reasoning, used especially in science, by which a general conclusion is drawn from a set of premises, based mainly on experience or experimental evidence. The conclusion goes beyond the information contained in the premises, and does not follow necessarily from them. (*Collins Discovery Encyclopedia*, 2005)

The research question is the heart of your qualitative research design. In order to be epistemologically coherent with qualitative research, one has to ask oneself if one really wants to work in an iterative and interpretation-driven process of knowledge production. The temptation to develop a hypothetico-deductive design is always very strong. Often, while advising students in their research processes, we can see that they use qualitative data and methods, but they have learned to ask deductive questions and write as if they were describing universal social patterns. To avoid this pitfall, one must, at first, develop a question that leads to an iterative process of research. The formulation of the research question is vital to develop a good research proposal and to clarify one’s methodology.

Table 1.2 Question words and research questions

Hypothetico-deductive and linear knowledge production	Inductive and iterative knowledge production
Which, what	How
Who	
Why	Some why questions lead to interpretative and comprehensive knowledge
Where	
When	

As shown in Table 1.2, question words are key in the formulation of the research question and the research design. Most of the time, qualitative design will be constructed on a ‘how’ question. How can we define the experience of young adults? How can we understand the political involvement process? How do researchers construct ignorance? How do costume play practices tell us about Japanese pop culture? The how questions lead to rich context-based understandings and explanations, and also lead to the understanding of social processes. This is a type of knowledge impossible to obtain with deductive types of questions. Some research questions do not use the keyword ‘how’ but they refer to the idea of complex process. For example, what identity transformation process do young people go through during adolescence?

ITERATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

ABDUCTION

We would like to start with the foundation of qualitative research design, which is the coherence among an epistemological stance, a research problem, a question and a method. As a social researcher, you can be compared to a translator of social reality – you mediate your experience of social phenomena. Social researchers observe, describe, interpret and explain. As in natural science, they need to be rigorous and they need to validate the knowledge they produce. Charles Sanders Peirce, a pioneer in philosophy of sciences and inquiry methods, would say that any inquiry process begins with **abduction**, which means ‘inference to the best explanation’ (Dumez, 2012: 231, our translation). While writing a research proposal, a researcher needs to imagine the potential knowledge production results. The researcher also needs to imagine why the phenomenon to be studied needs explanations.

In an iterative process, the abduction period is especially important. As Alvesson and Karreman (2011) explain, the researcher builds a mystery while presenting the object of study, while in experimental science, originality can be judged based on the results of the research. For example, producing new data on breast cancer. In an iterative process, the construction of the research object is as important as the ‘new results’ themselves. The abduction is crucial because it is through this mental process that the researcher constructs the research object and research problem.

Based on this construction, the researcher may be able to propose new interpretations of reality. Wright Mills (1959), while talking about sociological imagination, was partly identifying this process even though he never talked about abduction. He was very critical about ‘Big’ theories and data-driven research. He taught that social scientists should rather propose new interpretations or ‘syntheses’ of what we already know rather than collect data without proposing a new interpretation of the problem itself.

Abduction is the first step of any scientific inquiry, but in qualitative methods the abduction process will often be used while interpreting the data.

INDUCTION

Induction means to create an explanation based on observations. It is a bottom-up process (data to theory). Researchers working within this induction process will observe patterns and try to establish explanations that could apply to other similar cases. Their goal is to understand and interpret in order to explain a ‘localized’ reality. This means that their explanation will produce ‘meaning’ and help to understand other similar situations, processes or **discourses**.

Qualitative methods are mostly based on induction. This does not mean that **deduction** or abduction is ignored. It means that the induction operation, or, more precisely, the abduction–induction mental operation, drives the whole process. It contrasts with the more positivist approach of science where knowledge is founded on the verification or falsification of claims mostly driven by a deductive mental operation.

DEDUCTION

Deduction is a logical operation based on universal premises from which we deduce specific information. It is a top-down process (theory to data). In this process we test our explanation: Does it make sense? Can we apply it to contrasting cases or similar situations? The classic example is the one used in Aristotle’s logical lesson. The universal statement is: (1) Humans are mortals (universal law or theory to be tested); (2) Socrates is human (empirical observation); consequently, we can conclude that (3) Socrates is mortal (which is our knowledge statement) based deductively on a universal law.

Scientific claims using deduction-driven processes start with the development of a **hypothesis** based on theory, then test the veracity of their hypothesis based on the observations. Falsification and verification can mostly be supported by statistical methods using representative **samples**. The knowledge claims created by these types of explanations will be called statistical generalization, which means that regularity is observed within a sample but this regularity applies to any population having the same characteristics of the sample. For example, observations on the prostate cancer symptoms of a small group of white males in North America can be generalized to all of the Canadian and American white male population.

To sum up, the qualitative research process starts with abduction. Abductive reasoning ‘begins with a puzzle, a surprise, or a tension, and then seeks to explicate it by identifying the conditions that would make that puzzle less perplexing and more “normal”’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 27). Researchers imagine how their research questions can be answered based on their readings and their empirical experience. They then try to explain – through an inductive process – the meaning of their data. They will then ‘test’ their explanations by deduction. However, the process will not end there (see Figure 1.4). They will come back to their data, imagine new answers and begin a new cycle of abduction–induction.

REALM OF QUALITATIVE EPISTEMOLOGIES

Within qualitative methodology, the research question and its iterative formulation are at the heart of the research design. As mentioned, coherence is an unavoidable quality indicator. It is key when one needs to explain its positioning toward knowledge production, ontology and epistemology.

Before beginning research, very few researchers ask themselves epistemological/existential questions such as: am I a critical realist, a constructionist or a constructivist? However, one needs to understand the diversity of qualitative epistemologies in order to position one's research proposal. In general, experienced researchers build their research questions and designs within distinct ontological and epistemological paradigms. That is because the validity of an analysis will often depend on the coherence of the epistemological paradigm, the method and the interpretation resulting from the research process.

Within social sciences that make use of an iterative process, we count numerous ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. Ontologies refer to what we think reality is, whereas epistemologies can be understood as what we think we can know about our world. In turn, methodologies encompass our construction of the research problem and the related tools and analysis that are used to 'apprehend' our research object.

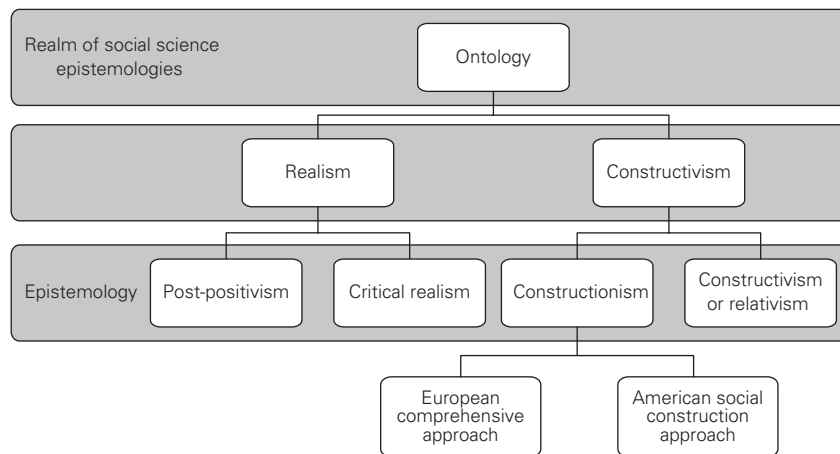


Figure 1.5 Realm of qualitative epistemologies

To clarify the differences between epistemologies, Figure 1.5 proposes a tree-shaped cartography based on ontological stance. In a very simple way, we can define two basic ontologies: realism and constructivism. The realist thesis is based on the belief that reality exists outside our perception of it. In contrast, the constructivist argument claims that reality is at least partially constructed from perceptions of it. From these ontologies, different epistemologies (beliefs regarding what can be known) are proposed. Although it could be said that many epistemologies exist because they are closely related

to theories (e.g. poststructuralist epistemology, feminist epistemology), we now present one commonly used by students and academics in social sciences.

REALIST ONTOLOGY

Researchers subscribing to a realist ontology believe that reality exists outside the observer. It is based on a Cartesian ontology that differentiates the subject and the object. This ontological view has been mostly dominant since the Enlightenment in the occidental world. Realism includes very different epistemologies, from positivism to critical realism. We are more interested here in understanding the role of positivism as a scientific culture rather than as understandings of what one can know about the world. We will therefore not define it in terms of an epistemology. On the other hand, we will present post-positivist epistemology because it has an important role to play in the development of qualitative methodology, even though we will not develop this perspective any further in the book.

POST-POSITIVISM

Post-positivism is a moderate view of positivism where researchers admit that reality exists, but ways of observing and describing it are imperfect. Post-positivists might use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. In the natural and health sciences, researchers often use this paradigm. They believe that reality can be known, but they will use probabilities to explain relationships among variables (correlations) in order to allow for the imperfection of knowledge. For example, research on the use of tobacco and breast cancer can result in this knowledge claim: smokers are more likely than non-smokers to develop breast cancer in later life. This knowledge claim is not universal – in contrast with those made by positivists, who would try to promote a universal causal law such as tobacco causes cancer.

In the social sciences, founders of qualitative research such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) are rooted in a post-positivist perspective. They believe an objective reality exists and they multiply their observations through tools such as interviews to test the ongoing analysis and theoretical explanation they develop. They have developed an inductive research process in accordance with the analytical induction methods developed by the Chicago school of sociology. An inductive process is to develop a theoretical generalization based on observations.

CRITICAL REALISM

Ontologically, critical realists believe that an objective reality exists outside of us, but the different types of apprehension of reality we have through our senses, our cognitive schemes and our knowledge are socially constructed. Epistemologically, critical realists are very close to constructionists.

Critical realists, among whom we include the materialists, defend the idea that the world exists through causal relationships, and social sciences have the task to explore this idea. Their conceptions of causal relationships are, however, quite different from those of positivists or post-positivists because causal relationships are inherent in things – they do not exist between things. Things, in the social world, are embedded in complex relationships, and they have power because they are in relations (Elder-Vass, 2012). For example, being a woman is to not an individual reality. It is related to a society's experience of sex and gender segregation. It is related to biological facts such as the fertility cycle that introduce different types of power relationships among men and women, children and adults. The British tradition of social science mostly developed this epistemological stance.

CONSTRUCTIVIST ONTOLOGY

We define two very different types of constructivist epistemology within the constructivist ontology. The first type is related to a soft ontology (constructionism) and the second to a highly critical view against realism (constructivism).

CONSTRUCTIONISM

We borrow the label 'constructionism' from Charmaz (2000). Social constructionists share the ontological belief that reality is subjectively constructed. For example, knowledge of what is a deviant depends on public discourses, culture, institutions. There is not one universal definition or existence of a social deviant. However, the ontological question is not as controversial an issue as it is for critical realists or constructivists. For example, Goffman (1961) in his well-known study of an asylum shows how interactions between patients and staff but also among patients are constructed in such a way that informal normative rules on how to behave can be identified. Even if Goffman analyses several types of interactions, some of them being influenced by power positions, he does not present a scientific problem and question informed by ontological position.

Some supporters of constructionist epistemologies have a very similar type of object of ontology. We will focus on two that have had strong influences on empirical research in social sciences: (1) a **comprehensive approach** based on a continental European tradition; and (2) social constructionism based on the American interactionist perspective.

The first is the European continental comprehensive approach. The richness of social science is foremost its capacity to 'understand', which means to interpret reality from the lived experience of subjects. Dilthey (1942) differentiated natural science from human and social sciences by the latter's aim to understand the profound meaning of human experiences. An important branch of French and German sociology is based on this epistemological perspective. In this, Weber would be the best known.

These authors do not advocate a relativistic interpretation of our social world. They believe that different types of science can exist. If we take the example of Passeron (2001), the creation of universal laws refers to one type of science. In social sciences, what is important is the comprehension of reality observable through human praxis. For instance, comprehensive researchers will consider actions as well as subjectivity. Their goal is to develop situated patterns such as typologies and the ideal typology. They are very close to critical realists, though they do not develop an ontological discourse on the nature of being. They focus on the capacity of social sciences to analyse and grasp empirical situations. They defend a scientific view of our social world based on different criteria of validity and **transferability**. In the American tradition, we would compare them to interpretivists.

The second is American social constructionism. We can identify Mead (1934/1963) and, more recently, Berger and Luckmann (1966) and their work *The Social Construction of Reality* as precursors of constructionism in social science. The latter two never developed and defended an ontological position (Andrews, 2012). Rather, they developed a pragmatic approach to social action. Their book was about knowledge and how we socially construct our relationship with reality. Their thesis, primarily inspired by the psychosocial theory of Mead, has paved the way to interactionism and a second wave of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Although they have not adopted an ontological position, we can position this tradition very closely to critical realists. Social constructionists, like critical realists, agree that their positions are very close (Andrews, 2012; Elder-Vass, 2012). For many social constructionists, reality exists both subjectively and objectively. Thus, they can be tagged as critical realists. However, we can note a slight difference between them depending on their research focus. For most social constructionists such as Goffman, the ontological issue is not the main focus. Above all, realists believe in the materiality of the social world because they think that this materiality creates power relationships; their object of focus will be on relations that include subjects as components of the material world. Their ontology leads them to position themselves relative to power while social constructionists will not put so much emphasis on this issue.

In social constructionism, importance will be given to reality (objects, bodies, places) as well as to subjective perspectives on this reality. For example, a social constructionist might be interested in how teenagers interact and how they define their interactions. The focus will be on the comprehension of teenage interactions as a phenomenon. A **critical realist** will study the evolution of these interactions and how they change in relation to power institutions (policies, institutions).

CONSTRUCTIVISM

We differentiate between constructionism and constructivism because they have very different philosophical and ontological roots. For constructivists, the

ontological question is crucial, and they defend a relativist ontology. What exists, for them, is socially created. Moreover, they situate themselves outside the Cartesian subject–object dichotomy on which all the other epistemologies we have presented are based. They challenge an essentialist perspective of reality by advocating that reality is created mainly through discourses. For them, language is performative and creates social categories.

Their epistemology is based on the belief that reality is fluid and knowledge about this fluidity is possible through discourse, social scripts and visual symbolism. Thus, any research based on this epistemological frame will define symbol (language, discourse, visuals) as the object of study. Some critical researchers such as alternative accounting researchers will consider tax files as an institutional discourse to study.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned that the first step of your research design is to clarify, for yourself, whether you prefer to interpret a singular ‘concomitant’ situation or to explain causal relationships using a hypothetical process. By choosing to interpret a situated social phenomenon, you are beginning your qualitative journey! In this chapter, you learned to define qualitative inquiry, to identify an iterative research question and to understand the abductive–inductive nature of the process you are embarking upon. Furthermore, you learned the different types of ontology and epistemology you are confronted with when you read qualitative research reports and articles. These foundations are necessary in order to write a research proposal (Chapter 2) and choose a qualitative approach (Chapter 3) coherent with your beliefs, your research objectives and the mystery you will build and solve.

Your project checklist

Now that you are more familiar with qualitative inquiry, you can:

- ✓ Choose a method (quantitative, mixed method, deductive–qualitative or iterative qualitative methodology) suited to your research question.
- ✓ Justify the choice of a qualitative method you have in mind.
- ✓ Draft a first version of your research question (make sure your research question is formulated with a ‘how’ question or a ‘why’ that suggests an interpretation).
- ✓ Justify your epistemological position.
- ✓ Start the design of your research project.

What you should read next

Alvesson, Mats and Dan Karreman. 2011. *Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Alvesson and Karreman explain how theory development remains an obvious result of qualitative inquiry. Qualitative researchers build mysteries throughout their problem contextualization. Their role is to find new mysteries and to present new ways of solving them. As innovators, qualitative researchers need to explain through their research report how they solve mysteries with their interpretation of data collection.

Pascale, Céline-Marie. 2011. *Cartographies of Knowledge: Exploring Qualitative Epistemologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- In this book, the author defines qualitative methods based on the inductive approach. She explains and maps the different epistemologies within qualitative research and she situates herself in the critical realm.

Website: <http://atlasti.com/qualitative-research/>

- In this website, the German qualitative research software atlas.ti offers a definition of qualitative methods and the epistemological perspective inspiring the software. A video on qualitative research and publication is embedded in the web page. A section titled 'Formulating A Qualitative Research Question' presents several examples of qualitative types of questions as a complement to this chapter.

YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsAUNs-IsSQ>

- A YouTube channel from the Center of Research Quality offers several videos on qualitative research. The one suggested here explains when and why to use qualitative methods in a research project. It gives specific information on educational research but it is relevant to any researcher. It gives a step-by-step procedure to develop a qualitative research project.

YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X-QSU6-hPU>

- Chris Flipp offers a clip on the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods which complete the information about deduction and induction in this chapter.

Want more support and inspiration? The online resources are here to help! Get to grips with key terms using **glossary flashcards**, see methods in action with a **library of SAGE cases and journal articles**, and follow analysis step-by-step with full transcripts of the sources discussed in the book.