

**T**<sub>HE</sub>  
**FOUNDATIONS**  
**OF SOCIAL**  
**RESEARCH**

Meaning and perspective  
in the research process

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# INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

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. . . many arrows, loosed several ways,  
Fly to one mark . . .

William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

They call it 'scaffolded learning'. It is an approach to teaching and learning that, while careful to provide an initial framework, leaves it to the learner to establish longer term structures.

What is presented here is offered in this spirit. It is to be seen as in no way a definitive construction of the social research process but merely a framework for the guidance of those wishing to explore the world of research.

Research students and fledgling researchers—and, yes, even more seasoned campaigners—often express bewilderment at the array of methodologies and methods laid out before their gaze. These methodologies and methods are not usually laid out in a highly organised fashion and may appear more as a maze than as pathways to orderly research. There is much talk of their philosophical underpinnings, but how the methodologies and methods relate to more theoretical elements is often left unclear. To add to the confusion, the terminology is far from consistent in research literature and social science texts. One frequently finds the same term used in a number of different, sometimes even contradictory, ways.

In response to this predicament, here is one reasonably clear-cut way of using terms and grasping what is involved in the process of social research. It is obviously not the only way in which these terms are used,

nor is it being suggested that it is the only defensible way to use them. Equally, it is not the only way of analysing and understanding the research process. This is scaffolding, not an edifice. Its aim is to provide researchers with a sense of stability and direction as they go on to do their own building; that is, as they move towards understanding and expounding the research process after their own fashion in forms that suit their particular research purposes.

#### FOUR ELEMENTS

As a starting point, it can be suggested that, in developing a research proposal, we need to put considerable effort into answering two questions in particular. First, what methodologies and methods will we be employing in the research we propose to do? Second, how do we justify this choice and use of methodologies and methods?

The answer to the second question lies with the purposes of our research—in other words, with the research question that our piece of inquiry is seeking to answer. It is obvious enough that we need a process capable of fulfilling those purposes and answering that question.

There is more to it than that, however. Justification of our choice and particular use of methodology and methods is something that reaches into the assumptions about reality that we bring to our work. To ask about these assumptions is to ask about our theoretical perspective.

It also reaches into the understanding you and I have of what human knowledge is, what it entails, and what status can be ascribed to it. What kind of knowledge do we believe will be attained by our research? What characteristics do we believe that knowledge to have? Here we are touching upon a pivotal issue. How should observers of our research—for example, readers of our thesis or research report—regard the outcomes we lay out before them? And why should our readers take these outcomes seriously? These are epistemological questions.

Already our two initial questions have expanded. We find ourselves with four questions now:

- What *methods* do we propose to use?
- What *methodology* governs our choice and use of methods?
- What *theoretical perspective* lies behind the methodology in question?
- What *epistemology* informs this theoretical perspective?

At issue in these four questions are basic elements of any research process, and we need to spell out carefully what we mean by each of them.

- *Methods*: the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.
- *Methodology*: the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.
- *Theoretical perspective*: the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.
- *Epistemology*: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.

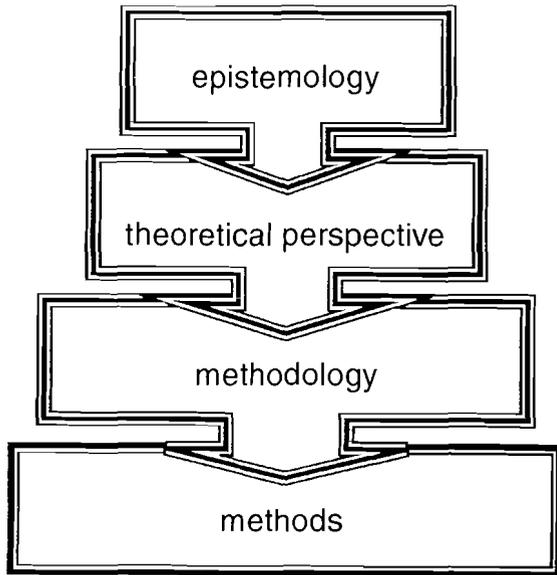
In social research texts, the bulk of discussion and much of the terminology relate in one way or another to these four elements. What one often finds, however, is that forms of these different process elements are thrown together in grab-bag style as if they were all comparable terms. It is not uncommon to find, say, symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism simply set side by side as ‘methodologies’, ‘approaches’, ‘perspectives’, or something similar. Yet they are not truly comparable. Lumping them together without distinction is a bit like talking about putting tomato sauce, condiments and groceries in one basket. One feels compelled to say, ‘Hang on a moment! Tomato sauce is one of many forms of condiment. And all condiments are groceries. Let’s do some sorting out here’. Similarly, one may feel urged to do some sorting out when confronted by items like symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism all slung together.

Ethnography, after all, is a *methodology*. It is one of many particular research designs that guide a researcher in choosing methods and shape the use of the methods chosen. Symbolic interactionism, for its part, is a *theoretical perspective* that informs a range of methodologies, including some forms of ethnography. As a theoretical perspective, it is an approach to understanding and explaining society and the human world, and grounds a set of assumptions that symbolic interactionist researchers typically bring to their methodology of choice. Constructionism<sup>1</sup> is an *epistemology* embodied in many theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism as this is generally understood. An epistemology, we have already seen, is a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know. What all this suggests is that symbolic interactionism, ethnography and constructionism need to be *related* to one another rather than merely set side by side as comparable, perhaps even competing, approaches or perspectives.

So there are epistemologies, theoretical perspectives and methodologies.

If we add in *methods*, we have four elements that inform one another, as depicted in Figure 1.

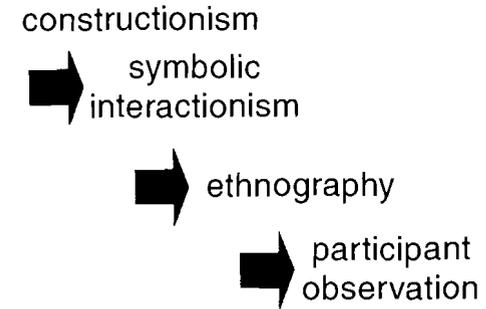
Figure 1



One or other form of constructionism is the epistemology found, or at least claimed, in most perspectives other than those representing positivist and post-positivist paradigms. As we have just noted, the epistemology generally found embedded in symbolic interactionism is thoroughly constructionist in character. So, if we were to write down the four items we are talking about, we would be justified in drawing an arrow from constructionism to symbolic interactionism to indicate this relationship. Ethnography, a methodology that sprang in the first instance from anthropology and anthropological theory, has been adopted by symbolic interactionism and adapted to its own purposes. For that reason, our next arrow may go from symbolic interactionism to ethnography. Ethnography, in turn, has its methods of preference. Participant observation has traditionally been accorded pride of place. So, out with the pen for yet another arrow. Here, then, we have a specific example of an epistemology, a theoretical perspective, a methodology and a method, each informing the next as suggested in Figure 2.

The textbooks describe several epistemological positions, quite a number of theoretical stances, many methodologies, and almost countless

Figure 2



methods. An attempt to list a representative sampling of each category might result in something like Table 1. (But note the several 'etceteras' occurring in this table. It is not an exhaustive listing.)

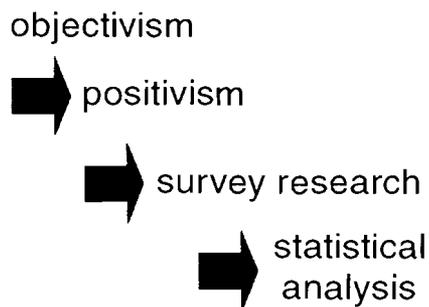
To denote another typical string, an arrow could start with 'objectivism'. Objectivism is the epistemological view that things exist as *meaningful* entities independently of consciousness and experience, that they have truth and meaning residing in them as objects ('objective'

Table 1

Epistemology	Theoretical perspective	Methodology	Methods
Objectivism Constructionism Subjectivism (and their variants)	Positivism (and post-positivism) Interpretivism • Symbolic interactionism • Phenomenology • Hermeneutics Critical inquiry Feminism Postmodernism etc.	Experimental research Survey research Ethnography Phenomenological research Grounded theory Heuristic inquiry Action research Discourse analysis Feminist standpoint research etc.	Sampling Measurement and scaling Questionnaire Observation • participant • non-participant Interview Focus group Case study Life history Narrative Visual ethnographic methods Statistical analysis Data reduction Theme identification Comparative analysis Cognitive mapping Interpretative methods Document analysis Content analysis Conversation analysis etc.

truth and meaning, therefore), and that careful (scientific?) research can attain that objective truth and meaning. This is the epistemology underpinning the positivist stance. Research done in positivist spirit might select to engage in survey research and employ the quantitative method of statistical analysis (see Figure 3). Once again the arrows go across the columns from first to last.

Figure 3



What purpose can these four elements serve?

For one thing, they can help to ensure the soundness of our research and make its outcomes convincing. Earlier we recognised the need to justify the methodologies and methods employed in our research. Setting forth our research process in terms of these four elements enables us to do this, for it constitutes a penetrating analysis of the process and points up the theoretical assumptions that underpin it and determine the status of its findings.

How might we outline our research proposal in these terms?

## RESEARCH METHODS

First, we describe the concrete techniques or procedures we plan to use. There will be certain activities we engage in so as to gather and analyse our data. These activities are our research methods.

Given our goal of identifying and justifying the research process, it is important that we describe these methods as specifically as possible. To this end, we will not just talk about 'carrying out interviews' but will indicate in very detailed fashion what kind of interviews they are, what interviewing techniques are employed, and in what sort of setting the interviews are conducted. We will not just talk about 'participant observation' but will describe what kind of observation takes place and what degree of partici-

pation is involved. We will not just talk about 'identifying themes in the data' but will show what we mean by themes, how the themes emerge, how they are identified, and what is done with them when they do.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We now describe our strategy or plan of action. This is the research design that shapes our choice and use of particular methods and links them to the desired outcomes.

What is called for here is not only a description of the methodology but also an account of the rationale it provides for the choice of methods and the particular forms in which the methods are employed. Take ethnographic inquiry, for instance. Ethnographic inquiry in the spirit of symbolic interactionism seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people's overall worldview or 'culture'. In line with this approach, the researcher strives to see things from the perspective of the participants. It is this that makes sense of the researcher's stated intention to carry out *unstructured* interviews and to use a *non-directive* form of questioning within them.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Next we describe the philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology. We attempt to explain how it provides a context for the process and grounds its logic and criteria.

Inevitably, we bring a number of assumptions to our chosen methodology. We need, as best we can, to state what these assumptions are. This is precisely what we do when we elaborate our theoretical perspective. Such an elaboration is a statement of the assumptions brought to the research task and reflected in the methodology as we understand and employ it. If, for example, we engage in an ethnographic form of inquiry and gather data via participant observation, what assumptions are embedded in this way of proceeding? By the very nature of participant observation, some of the assumptions relate to matters of language and issues of intersubjectivity and communication. How, then, do we take account of these assumptions and justify them? By expounding our theoretical perspective, that is, our view of the human world and social life within that world, wherein such assumptions are grounded.

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective that grounds these assumptions in most explicit fashion. It deals directly with issues such

as language, communication, interrelationships and community. As we shall see in more detail in Chapter 4, symbolic interactionism is all about those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community, becoming persons in the process. At its heart is the notion of being able to put ourselves in the place of others—the very notion we have already expressed in detailing our methodology and have catered for in the choice and shaping of our methods.

## EPISTEMOLOGY

Finally, we need to describe the epistemology inherent in the theoretical perspective and therefore in the methodology we have chosen.

The theoretical perspective we have described is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It involves knowledge, therefore, and embodies a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing, that is, *how we know what we know*. Epistemology deals with ‘the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis’ (Hamlyn 1995, p. 242). Maynard (1994, p. 10) explains the relevance of epistemology to what we are about here: ‘Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate’. Hence our need to identify, explain and justify the epistemological stance we have adopted.

There are, of course, quite a range of epistemologies. For a start, there is objectivism. Objectivist epistemology holds that meaning, and therefore meaningful reality, exists as such apart from the operation of any consciousness. That tree in the forest is a tree, regardless of whether anyone is aware of its existence or not. As an object of that kind (‘objectively’, therefore), it carries the intrinsic meaning of ‘tree-ness’. When human beings recognise it as a tree, they are simply discovering a meaning that has been lying there in wait for them all along. We might approach our piece of ethnographic research in that spirit. Much of the early ethnography was certainly carried out in that spirit. In this objectivist view of ‘what it means to know’, understandings and values are considered to be objectified in the people we are studying and, if we go about it in the right way, we can discover the objective truth.

Another epistemology—constructionism—rejects this view of human knowledge. There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning

without a mind. Meaning is not discovered, but constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Isn’t this precisely what we find when we move from one era to another or from one culture to another? In this view of things, subject and object<sup>2</sup> emerge as partners in the generation of meaning.

We will be discussing objectivism in the context of positivism and post-positivism. We will deal with constructionism at some length (Chapter 3) since it is the epistemology that qualitative researchers tend to invoke. A third epistemological stance, subjectivism, comes to the fore in structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist forms of thought (and, in addition, often appears to be what people are actually describing when they claim to be talking about constructionism). In subjectivism, meaning does not come out of an interplay between subject and object but is imposed on the object by the subject. Here the object as such makes no contribution to the generation of meaning. It is tempting to say that in constructionism meaning is constructed out of something (the object), whereas in subjectivism meaning is created out of nothing. We humans are not that creative, however. Even in subjectivism we make meaning out of something. We import meaning from somewhere else. The meaning we ascribe to the object may come from our dreams, or from primordial archetypes we locate within our collective unconscious, or from the conjunction and aspects of the planets, or from religious beliefs, or from . . . That is to say, meaning comes from anything *but* an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed.

Much more can be said about possible epistemological stances, and the three we have referred to are not to be seen as watertight compartments. Hopefully, enough has been said here for us to recognise that epistemology bears mightily on the way we go about our research. Is there objective truth that we need to identify, and can identify, with precision and certitude? Or are there just humanly fashioned ways of seeing things whose processes we need to explore and which we can only come to understand through a similar process of meaning making? And is this making of meaning a subjective act essentially independent of the object, or do both subject and object contribute to the construction of meaning? Embedded in these questions is a range of epistemological stances, each of which implies a profound difference in how we do our researching and how we present our research outcomes.

## WHAT ABOUT ONTOLOGY?

In the research literature there is frequent mention of ontology and you might be wondering why ontology does not figure in the schema developed to this point.

Ontology is the study of being. It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such. Were we to introduce it into our framework, it would sit alongside epistemology informing the theoretical perspective, for each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding *what is* (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding *what it means to know* (epistemology).

Ontological issues and epistemological issues tend to emerge together. As our terminology has already indicated, to talk of the construction of meaning is to talk of the construction of meaningful reality. Because of this confluence, writers in the research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually. Realism (an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind) is often taken to imply objectivism (an epistemological notion asserting that meaning exists in objects independently of any consciousness). In some cases we even find realism identified with objectivism. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) certainly posit a necessary link between the two when they claim that 'if, for example, a "real" reality is assumed, the posture of the knower must be one of objective detachment or value freedom in order to be able to discover "how things really are" and "how things really work"'. In the chapters that follow, you and I will be listening to a large number of scholars who disagree with this position. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, for instance, frequently invoke a 'world always already there', but they are far from being objectivists.

True enough, the world is there regardless of whether human beings are conscious of it. As Macquarrie tells us (1973, p. 57): 'If there were no human beings, there might still be galaxies, trees, rocks, and so on—and doubtless there were, in those long stretches of time before the evolution of *Homo sapiens* or any other human species that may have existed on earth'. But what kind of a world is there before conscious beings engage with it? Not an intelligible world, many would want to say. Not a world of meaning. It becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it.

From this point of view, accepting a world, and things in the world, existing independently of our consciousness of them does not imply that meanings exist independently of consciousness, as Guba and Lincoln seem to be saying. The existence of a world without a mind is conceiv-

able. Meaning without a mind is not. Realism in ontology and constructionism in epistemology turn out to be quite compatible. This is itself an example of how ontological issues and epistemological issues arise together. Given that state of affairs, it would seem that we can deal with the ontological issues as they emerge without expanding our schema to include ontology.

This is borne out when we look at literature that plays up the importance of the ontological dimension in research. In many instances the authors are not talking about ontology at all. Blaikie (1993, p. 6), for example, acknowledges that the 'root definition of *ontology* is the "science or study of being"'. However, 'for the purposes of the present discussion', he takes ontology to mean 'the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social enquiry makes about the nature of social reality' (p. 6). This, in itself, is unexceptionable. We need to recognise, however, that this is no longer ontology in its philosophical sense. Blaikie's use of the term roughly corresponds to what you and I are calling 'theoretical perspective'. It refers to how one views the world. Blaikie tells us that positivism 'entails an *ontology* of an ordered universe made up of atomistic, discrete and observable events' (p. 94). He tells us that, in the ontology of critical rationalism (the approach launched by Karl Popper), nature and social life 'are regarded as consisting of essential uniformities' (p. 95). He tells us that interpretivism 'entails an *ontology* in which social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which social actors together negotiate the meanings for actions and situations' (p. 96). This is stretching the meaning of ontology well and truly beyond its boundaries.

It would seem preferable to retain the usage of 'theoretical perspective' and reserve the term 'ontology' for those occasions when we do need to talk about 'being'. This is something you and I cannot avoid doing when we come to grapple with, say, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, for that is a radical ontology and needs to be dealt with in strictly ontological terms. Happy days ahead!

In the Middle Ages, the great ontological debate was between realists and nominalists and concerned the extramental reality, or irreality, of 'universals'. Are there, for example, just individual human beings or does 'humankind' have real existence too? Does humankind as such denote a reality in the world or is it just something that exists only in the mind? In more recent centuries, the major ontological debate has been between realists and idealists and concerns the extramental reality, or irreality, of anything whatsoever. While neither debate is without relevance to an analysis of the research process, it still seems the case that ontological

issues can be dealt with adequately without complicating our four-column schema further by expressly introducing ontology.

## IN ALL DIRECTIONS

Back we go to our arrows. We have been drawing arrows from left to right—from one item in one column to another item in the next column to the right. We should feel very free to do this.

First of all, there are few restrictions on where these left-to-right arrows may go. Any limitations that exist would seem to relate to the first two columns. We need to rule out drawing an arrow from constructionism or subjectivism to positivism (or, therefore, post-positivism), since positivism is objectivist by definition. Without a thoroughly objectivist epistemology, positivism would not be positivism as we understand it today. Nor would we want to draw an arrow from objectivism or subjectivism to phenomenology. Constructionism and phenomenology are so intertwined that one could hardly be phenomenological while espousing either an objectivist or a subjectivist epistemology. And postmodernism well and truly jettisons any vestiges of an objectivist view of knowledge and meaning. Other than that, as we draw our arrows from column to column, it would seem that 'the sky's the limit'. Certainly, if it suits their purposes, any of the theoretical perspectives could make use of any of the methodologies, and any of the methodologies could make use of any of the methods. There are typical strings, to be sure, and we have noted two of them in Figure 2 and Figure 3, but 'typical' does not mean 'mandatory'.

Secondly, we can draw arrows from a particular item to more than one item in the column to the right. Historically, objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism have each informed quite a number of different perspectives. Similarly, one theoretical perspective often comes to be embodied in a number of methodologies. Symbolic interactionism is a case in point. It has informed both ethnography and grounded theory and we might well draw arrows from that theoretical perspective to each of those methodologies. Again, while critical inquiry will certainly be linked to action research, we can also draw an arrow from critical inquiry to ethnography. Yes, the critical form of inquiry has come to be embodied in ethnography too, transforming it in the process. Now it is no longer a characteristically uncritical form of research that merely seeks to understand a culture. It is critical ethnography, a methodology that strives to unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces. In the same way, there can be a feminist ethnography or a postmodernist ethnography.

Still, we should not be so carried away with our sense of freedom in drawing arrows from left to right that we forget to draw arrows in other directions as well. Our arrows can fly from right to left too. In terms of what informs what, going from left to right would seem a logical progression. At the same time, in describing our piece of research, we found our starting point in methods and methodology. This suggests that, to mark the chronological succession of events in our research, the arrows may need to be drawn from right to left as well.

Certainly, they may. Not too many of us embark on a piece of social research with epistemology as our starting point. 'I am a constructionist. Therefore, I will investigate . . .' Hardly. We typically start with a real-life issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be solved, a question that needs to be answered. We plan our research in terms of that issue or problem or question. What, we go on to ask, are the further issues, problems or questions implicit in the one we start with? What, then, is the aim and what are the objectives of our research? What strategy seems likely to provide what we are looking for? What does that strategy direct us to do to achieve our aims and objectives? In this way our research question, incorporating the purposes of our research, leads us to methodology and methods.

We need, of course, to justify our chosen methodology and methods. In the end, we want outcomes that merit respect. We want the observers of our research to recognise it as sound research. Our conclusions need to stand up. On some understandings of research (and of truth), this will mean that we are after objective, valid and generalisable conclusions as the outcome of our research. On other understandings, this is never realisable. Human knowledge is not like that. At best, our outcomes will be suggestive rather than conclusive. They will be plausible, perhaps even convincing, ways of seeing things—and, to be sure, helpful ways of seeing things—but certainly not any 'one true way' of seeing things. We may be positivists or non-positivists, therefore. Either way, we need to be concerned about the process we have engaged in; we need to lay that process out for the scrutiny of the observer; we need to defend that process as a form of human inquiry that should be taken seriously. It is this that sends us to our theoretical perspective and epistemology and calls upon us to expound them incisively. From methods and methodology to theoretical perspective and epistemology, then. Now our arrows are travelling from right to left.

Speaking in this vein sounds as if we create a methodology for ourselves—as if the focus of our research leads us to devise our own ways of proceeding that allow us to achieve our purposes. That, as it happens, is precisely the case. In a very real sense, every piece of research is

unique and calls for a unique methodology. We, as the researcher, have to develop it.

If that is the case, why are we bothering with the plethora of methodologies and methods set forth for us so profusely that they seem like William James's 'blooming, buzzing confusion'? Why don't we just sit down and work out for ourselves how we are to go about it?

In the end, that is precisely what we have to do. Yet a study of how other people have gone about the task of human inquiry serves us well and is surely indispensable. Attending to recognised research designs and their various theoretical underpinnings exercises a formative influence upon us. It awakens us to ways of research we would never otherwise have conceived of. It makes us much more aware of what is *possible* in research. Even so, it is by no means a matter of plucking a methodology off the shelf. We acquaint ourselves with the various methodologies. We evaluate their presuppositions. We weigh their strengths and weaknesses. Having done all that and more besides, we still have to forge a methodology that will meet *our* particular purposes in *this* research. One of the established methodologies may suit the task that confronts us. Or perhaps none of them do and we find ourselves drawing on several methodologies, moulding them into a way of proceeding that achieves the outcomes we look to. Perhaps we need to be more inventive still and create a methodology that in many respects is quite new. Even if we tread this track of innovation and invention, our engagement with the various methodologies in use will have played a crucial educative role.

Arrows right to left as well as left to right. What about arrows up and down? Yes, that too. Renowned critical theorist Jürgen Habermas carried on a debate with hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer over many years and out of that interplay there developed for Habermas a 'critical hermeneutics'. Here we have critical theory coming to inform hermeneutics. In our four-column model, the arrow would rise up the same column ('theoretical perspective') from critical inquiry to hermeneutics. Similarly, we can talk of critical feminism or feminist critical inquiry, of postmodernist feminism or postmodernist critical inquiry. There is plenty of scope for arrows up and down.

## THE GREAT DIVIDE

In the model we are following here, you will notice that the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research occurs at the level of methods. It does not occur at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective. What does occur back there at those exalted levels is a

distinction between objectivist/positivist research, on the one hand, and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other. Yet, in most research textbooks, it is qualitative research and quantitative research that are set against each other as polar opposites. Just as the student of Latin is taught very early on via the opening lines of *Caesar's Gallic Wars* that 'All Gaul is divided into three parts', so every beginning researcher learns at once that all research is divided into two parts—and these are 'qualitative' and 'quantitative', respectively.

Our model suggests that this divide—objectivist research associated with quantitative methods over against constructionist or subjectivist research associated with qualitative methods—is far from justified. Most methodologies known today as forms of 'qualitative research' have in the past been carried out in an utterly empiricist, positivist manner. This is true, as we have already noted, of the early history of ethnography. On the other hand, quantification is by no means ruled out within non-positivist research. We may consider ourselves utterly devoted to qualitative research methods. Yet, when we think about investigations carried out in the normal course of our daily lives, how often measuring and counting turn out to be essential to our purposes. The ability to measure and count is a precious human achievement and it behoves us not to be dismissive of it. We should accept that, whatever research we engage in, it is possible for either qualitative methods or quantitative methods, or both, to serve our purposes. Our research can be qualitative or quantitative, or both qualitative and quantitative, without this being in any way problematic.

What would seem to be problematic is any attempt to be at once objectivist and constructionist (or subjectivist). On the face of it, to say that there is objective meaning and, in the same breath, to say that there is no objective meaning certainly does appear contradictory. To be sure, the postmodernist world that has grown up around us calls all our cherished antinomies into question, and we are invited today to embrace 'fuzzy logic' rather than the logic we have known in the past with its principle of contradiction. Nevertheless, even at the threshold of the 21st century, not too many of us are comfortable with such ostensibly blatant contradiction in what we claim.

To avoid such discomfort, we will need to be consistently objectivist or consistently constructionist (or subjectivist).

If we seek to be consistently objectivist, we will distinguish scientifically established objective meanings from subjective meanings that people hold in everyday fashion and that at best 'reflect' or 'mirror' or 'approximate' objective meanings. We will accept, of course, that these subjective meanings are important in people's lives and we may adopt

qualitative methods of ascertaining what those meanings are. This is epistemologically consistent. It has a downside, all the same. It makes people's everyday understandings inferior, epistemologically, to more scientific understandings. In this way of viewing things, one cannot predicate of people's everyday understandings the truth claims one makes for what is scientifically established.

If we seek to be consistently constructionist, we will put all understandings, scientific and non-scientific alike, on the very same footing. They are all constructions. None is objective or absolute or truly generalisable. Scientific knowledge is just a particular form of constructed knowledge designed to serve particular purposes—and, yes, it serves them well. Constructionists may indeed make use of quantitative methods but their constructionism makes a difference. We need to ask ourselves, in fact, what a piece of quantitative research looks like when it is informed by a constructionist epistemology. What difference does that make to it? Well, for a start, it makes a big difference to the truth claims proffered on its behalf, all the more so as one moves towards subjectivism rather than constructionism. No longer is there talk of objectivity, or validity, or generalisability. For all that, there is ample recognition that, after its own fashion, quantitative research has valuable contributions to make, even to a study of the farthest reaches of human being.

Is this scaffolding proving helpful? If so, let us go on to examine the items in some of its columns. We will confine ourselves to the first two columns. We will look at epistemological issues and issues relating to theoretical perspectives.

As already foreshadowed, the epistemological stance of objectivism will be considered in the context of positivism, with which it is so closely allied. Constructionism, as the epistemology claimed in most qualitative approaches today, deserves extended treatment. Our discussion of the constructionist theorising of knowledge will set it against the subjectivism only too often articulated under the rubric of constructionism and found self-professedly in much structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodernist thought.

After our discussion of positivism, the theoretical perspectives we go on to study are interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism and postmodernism. Thinking about postmodernism will make it necessary for us to delve also into structuralism and post-structuralism.

As we discuss these perspectives and stances, we should remind ourselves many times over that we are not exploring them for merely

speculative purposes. You and I will allow ourselves to be led at times into very theoretical material indeed. Nevertheless, we will refuse to wear the charge of being abstract intellectualisers, divorced from experience and action. It is our very inquiry into human experience and action that sends us this far afield. The long journey we are embarking upon arises out of an awareness on our part that, at every point in our research—in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers—we inject a host of assumptions. These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying.

Performing this task of explication and explanation is precisely what we are about here. Far from being a theorising that takes researchers from their research, it is a theorising embedded in the research act itself. Without it, research is not research.