# INTRODUCING
# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
# IN PSYCHOLOGY

## Carla Willig / Fourth Edition

# Introducing Qualitative Research
# in Psychology

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## Fourth Edition

Carla Willig

McGraw Hill

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# Praise Page

"For many years I have recommended Willig's Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology to my students and this new and updated edition is no exception. I think that readers of this text will find it to be accessible, comprehensive and it will enable many people to become confident in conducting their own qualitative research."

*Alex Bridger, Senior Lecturer in Critical Social Psychology,*
*University of Huddersfield, UK*

"The clarity of Professor Willig's writing and her knowledge of qualitative research means that it is always a pleasure to read her work. This 4th edition of her comprehensive and essential guide to conducting qualitative research in psychology is no exception. It reflects the emergence of new methods, approaches, and applications of qualitative research in psychology in fully updated and detailed chapters, including several on theoretical foundations, and research evaluation. New additional chapters on pluralistic qualitative research and metasynthesis are particularly useful. Altogether, this book is a vital resource and a valuable reference, both for those new to research and for those looking to further develop their skills and knowledge of qualitative research in psychology."

*Nollaig Frost, Adjunct Professor, School of Applied Psychology,*
*University College Cork, Ireland*

*Carla Willig's book is the key authoritative introductory text which I use in my teaching and supervision. It addresses, in a clear and accessible manner, important aspects of qualitative research like epistemology and the role of interpretation, which are sometimes neglected in other texts. Each new edition helps keep readers in touch with the latest developments with pluralistic approaches and metasynthesis covered in this latest edition.*

*Professor David Harper, Programme Director (Academic) of the*
*Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the*
*University of East London, UK*

"This exceptionally well-written text deserves a place in every psychology researcher's toolkit, regardless of their career stage. Willig articulates key concepts, methods and terminology in a refreshingly accessible way for newcomers to qualitative research, while the 'how-to' guidance, real-world examples and critique of nine research approaches provides insightful practical assistance. Thoughtful critical reflection throughout ensures the text also makes a unique and valuable contribution to broader debates surrounding qualitative methodology and practice."

*Benjamin Gardner, Reader in Social Psychology,*
*King's College London, UK*

# Contents

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# About the author

**Carla Willig** is Professor of Psychology at City, University of London. Her publications are concerned with the theory and practice of qualitative research methodology. She is the author of *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology* and co-editor of *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* and *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health*.

With contributions from
**Dr Joanna Silver** is a counselling psychologist who specializes in eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder and other body image concerns. She currently is the Lead Therapist for Eating Disorders at Nightingale Hospital, London.

# Acknowledgements

It has been 20 years since the first edition of this book was published in 2001. The first edition had been inspired by the students who took part in my Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology module at Middlesex University which ran from 1994 to 1999. I very much enjoyed designing and teaching this module, and I loved introducing the students to a new way of thinking about research which, at that time, was still on the margins of the discipline of psychology. The students' perceptive questions (about matters such as what it means to know something and how subjectivity can be accommodated within the research endeavour) informed the approach and design of the first edition. The book's focus on epistemological concerns has remained a constant feature of all four editions. I think it's fair to say, therefore, that my greatest debt of gratitude is owed to those students.

A lot can happen in 20 years. The field of qualitative research in psychology has expanded considerably, both in terms of the prevalence, visibility and acceptability of qualitative research, as well as in terms of the emergence of novel approaches to qualitative research. I have tried to reflect these developments in subsequent editions and, as a result, the book has grown from 9 chapters in the first edition to 16 chapters in the current (fourth) edition. I would like to acknowledge the hard work of all those people whose commitment to qualitative research has achieved so much (including the formation of qualitative psychology sections in both the British Psychological Society and the American Psychological Association, as well as the establishment of new journals dedicated to qualitative research) in a relatively short period of time.

I have continued to learn about qualitative research and this, too, is reflected in the editions that followed the first. I gained further knowledge and experience in the use of phenomenological methods thanks to undertaking training in existential counselling psychology in the early 2000s. I would like to thank staff at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling at Regent's College, London, and in particular Ernesto Spinelli and Harriet Goldenberg for providing guidance and inspiration.

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# 1 Part

## Part contents

# From recipes to adventures

## ✓ Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

✓ the aims and defining features of qualitative research

✓ what differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research

✓ some key concepts from the philosophy of science and their relevance to qualitative research

✓ what it means to ask epistemological questions.

*'It involves opening up to new and possibly unsettling experiences.'*

*'It means venturing into new territory.'*

*'It's discovering something new and exciting; there's a little bit of danger.'*

*'It is exciting and unusual, out of the ordinary. There's a big element of enjoyment and there may be an element of challenge. It's something that will develop me as a person.'*

*'Enid Blyton stories … [laughs] … It's exciting, possibly involving a degree of risk to oneself; scary on occasion but it comes out all right at the end. You're glad you've had them.'*

*'An exploration involving new places, meeting new people and having new experiences outside of the norm. These could be both positive and negative in nature.'*

*'Adventures are sudden, surprise events which are pleasurable, because they are unexpected.'*

Talk of an 'adventure' captures the imagination. We want to know what it was like, how it felt, what happened next. We look upon the adventurer as someone who has been changed by the experience, someone who will

never be quite the same again. The definitions above were provided in response to my question, 'What does the term "adventure" mean to you?' Most of them include references to something 'new' and as yet unknown, something we have not experienced before. At the same time, the 'adventure' is generally perceived as a positive, if somewhat risky, enterprise. I suggest that we should think about the research process as a form of adventure. When I was an undergraduate student, I thought of 'research methods' as recipes. Research appeared to involve choosing the right ingredients (a representative sample, a standardized measurement instrument, the appropriate statistical test) and administering them in the right order (the 'procedure'). Having done our best to 'get it right', we would hold our breath, hoping that the experiment had 'worked' – much like hovering about the kitchen, waiting for the perfect cake to emerge from the oven. Now I look upon research in a different light. 'Research methods' have become ways of approaching a question. They are also ways of justifying an answer (this is where research methods meet *epistemology*, to be discussed below). Either way, my understanding of research has moved from a mechanical (how-to-apply-appropriate-techniques-to-the-subject-matter) to a creative (how-can-I-find-out?) mode. In the process, I have replaced the metaphor of research-methods-as-recipes with a view of the research-process-as-adventure.

In this chapter, I want to explore in some detail what 'research' is all about and how qualitative research methods in psychology fit into this picture. To do this, I need to introduce some key concepts from the philosophy of science, such as 'epistemology', 'positivism', 'empiricism' and 'hypothetico-deductivism'. In the process, I shall problematize familiar concepts such as 'science' and 'knowledge'. Very clear and helpful discussions of philosophy of science concepts and their relevance to qualitative research in psychology can also be found in Matthews (2014) and Robinson (2014) and elsewhere (Shadish 1995; Mackay 2003; Michell 2003; Hansen 2004). The aim of this chapter is to provide a context within which to place qualitative research methods in psychology and to identify the defining features of such research.

## How, and what, can we know?

*Epistemology* is a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge. It attempts to provide answers to the question, 'How, and what, can we know?' This involves thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, about its scope and about the validity and reliability of claims to knowledge. Research methods provide ways of approaching, and hopefully answering, our research questions. Research methods can be described as 'the way to the goal' (Kvale 1996a: 278). However, first we need to identify our goal and be able to justify our choice. We need to be clear about the objectives of our research and we need to have a sense of what kinds of things it is possible for us to find out. In other words, we need to adopt an epistemological position.

## Positivism

One epistemological position is *positivism*. Positivism suggests that there is a straightforward relationship between the world (objects, events, phenomena) and our perception, and understanding, of it. Positivists believe that it is possible to describe what is 'out there' and to get it right. Such a position is also referred to as the 'correspondence theory of truth' because it suggests that phenomena directly determine our perception of them and that there is, therefore, a direct correspondence between things and their representation. Kirk and Miller's (1986: 14) definition of positivism emphasizes positivism's assumption that 'the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing'. A positivist epistemology implies that the goal of research is to produce objective knowledge; that is, understanding that is impartial and unbiased, based on a view from 'the outside', without personal involvement or vested interests on the part of the researcher.

Positivism has a long history and few, if any, scientists and researchers today claim to be unreconstructed positivists. In fact, when the label is used in contemporary epistemological debates, it usually constitutes an insult. This is because it is now generally accepted that observation and description are necessarily selective, and that our perception and understanding of the world are therefore partial at best (for a clear discussion of the nature and limitations of scientific knowledge, see Chalmers 1999). What people disagree

about is the extent to which our understanding of the world can *approach* objective knowledge, or even some kind of truth, about the world. The different responses to this question range from naïve realism, which is akin to positivism, to extreme relativism, which rejects concepts such as 'truth' or 'knowledge' altogether. In between, we find positions such as critical realism and the different versions of social constructionism (see Parker 1998).

# Empiricism

*Empiricism* is closely related to positivism. It is based on the assumption that our knowledge of the world must be derived from 'the facts of experience' (see Chalmers 1999: chapter 1). In other words, sense perception provides the basis for knowledge acquisition, which proceeds through the systematic collection and classification of observations. These include experiments. According to this view, simple observations are combined to give rise to more complex ideas, and theory follows from observations. That is to say, theory is constructed to make sense of the data collected through observation. Again, few, if any, scientists and researchers subscribe to a pure form of empiricism nowadays. It is generally accepted that sense perception does not provide direct and uncontaminated access to 'the facts'. The more we know about a phenomenon, the more detail we perceive when we observe it. Perception is inevitably selective and people can be trained to observe the same phenomenon in different ways, depending on the purpose of the observation. However, modern-day empiricists would argue that knowledge acquisition depends on the collection and analysis of data. They do not believe that purely theoretical work can move us closer to the truth, and they propose that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data. At this point, it is important to differentiate between the terms 'empiricist' and 'empirical'. While 'empiricist' refers to the attitude that all knowledge claims must be grounded in data, 'empirical' is a descriptive term referring to research involving the collection and analysis of data.

# Hypothetico-deductivism

A number of serious practical as well as logical limitations of positivism and empiricism led to the development of alternative theories of knowledge. Karl Popper's critique of *inductivism* and subsequent formulation of *hypothetico-deductivism* constitute the most influential alternative. It now forms the basis of mainstream experimental psychology. Popper was aware of the fact that a collection of observations could never give rise to a categorical statement such as 'a follows b'. However many times we observe that a follows b, we can never be sure that our next observation will be the same again. There is always the possibility that the next occurrence will be an exception. This is the problem of *induction*. Popper was also unhappy about the fact that many influential theories appeared to be able to accommodate a wide range of observations, interpreting them as confirmation of the theory's claims. It seemed that no scientific theory could ever be conclusively verified. This is the problem of *verification*. To circumvent these problems, Popper proposed that instead of induction and verification, scientific research ought to rely upon *deduction* and *falsification*. Popper's *hypothetico-deductive method* does just that. Here, theories are tested by deriving *hypotheses* from them that can then be tested in practice, by experiment or observation. The aim of the research is to put a theory's claims to the test to either reject the theory or retain it for the time being. Thus, rather than looking for evidence that *confirms* a theory's claims, hypothetico-deductivism works by looking for disconfirmation, or *falsification*. In this way, we can find out which claims are *not* true and, by a process of elimination of claims, we move closer to the truth.

# Critique of the 'scientific method'

Popper provided science with a method that avoided the problems associated with induction and verification. However, Popper's hypothetico-deductivism, in turn, was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s for failing to acknowledge the role of historical, social and cultural factors in knowledge formation. The critique of hypothetico-deductivism includes the following charges:

## Hypothetico-deductivism does not provide sufficient space for theory development

Here, it is argued that the method's reliance on hypotheses generated by existing theories forecloses the possibility of generating completely new theories. If all we can do is test existing theories to either reject or retain them, we are unlikely to come across entirely new and unexpected insights in our research practice. To be fair, Popper (1969: 231) did propose that researchers should be adventurous and test 'bold conjecture(s)', since most is learned from mistakes; however, even the boldest hypotheses are based upon existing knowledge and expectations. What hypothetico-deductivism does not allow for is that the evidence overturns received wisdom and makes us see things in a completely different light.

## Hypothetico-deductivism is elitist

Since hypothetico-deductivism works with existing theories and relies upon deduction from existing systems of thought, it excludes those people who are not familiar with such theories and systems from its practice. The hypothetico-deductive method encourages the formation of communities of scientists and researchers who test their own and each other's theories. For the outsider or novice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to contribute to knowledge generation, if knowledge is defined as the rejection or retention of existing theories.

## Hypothetico-deductivism is a myth

Popper proposed that knowledge generation should be a piecemeal process. Through the rejection of false hypotheses, knowledge would grow, slowly but continuously. Individual scientists contribute to this process by testing their hypotheses to identify those theories that could be discarded. Thomas Kuhn ([1962] 1970) fundamentally disagreed. He argued that, in reality, theories are not really put to the test in this way. While scientists were attached to a particular theory, they did not reject it on the basis of experimental evidence. Instead, if the evidence did not support the theory, they assumed that the experiment had gone wrong in some way. Thus, failure was attributed to the scientist and the design of the experiment rather than to the inadequacy of the theory. Kuhn argued that science did not progress in an evolutionary, piecemeal fashion, as Popper had suggested, but that it developed in leaps, through scientific revolutions leading to *paradigm shifts*. Here, a paradigm – a particular conceptual framework – is stretched to accommodate all kinds of evidence. Anomalies and inconsistencies accumulate until wider socioeconomic and historical processes allow a new paradigm to emerge and to provide a legitimate alternative to the previous one. Once the new paradigm has gained the upper hand, it in turn will resist change for some time to come.

# Feminist critique of established epistemologies

Many of the problems and limitations associated with the established epistemological perspectives outlined above were identified by feminist scholars. In the 1960s and 1970s, they drew attention to the fact that women had been largely invisible in social scientific work and that where women had been 'studied', they had been found to be inferior to men in terms of attributes such as moral development, intelligence and conversational style. Such 'findings', feminists argued, were then used to justify and perpetuate existing inequalities between men and women in society. To challenge these inequalities and to end the oppression of women, feminist scholars questioned the epistemological (and methodological) foundations upon which sexist knowledge claims rested. This gave rise to an extensive critique of 'male science'. This critique includes the following key arguments.

## The male as the norm

The vast majority of studies using human participants were carried out with male subjects. This was partly due to opportunity (most researchers used university undergraduates as easy-access subjects and most of

these were men) and partly due to the assumption that men constitute the prototypical 'human subject'. As a result, findings based upon studies with (young, white, middle-class) male subjects were generalized to the population as a whole. In other words (young, white, middle-class) men set the standard against which other members of society were then measured. This meant that when women were later used as participants, their performance and behaviour were assessed against the male norm and found to be wanting. One of the most well-known critiques of the 'male as norm' approach in relation to moral development was formulated by Carol Gilligan (1982). Gilligan challenged Kohlberg's (1976) claim that, on average, women's moral development was less advanced than that of men. Kohlberg's claim was supported by many studies that had used his moral development scale. This scale places individuals somewhere between Level 1 (lowest) and Level 3 (highest) of moral development. The levels, and stages in between, represent a transition from basic moral considerations (e.g. in terms of the outcome for the individual) through those based on external approval to those involving personal conscience. The scale had been developed by presenting male subjects with a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas and by categorizing their responses. Gilligan argued that men and women were socialized to develop different moral orientations, whereby girls were encouraged to develop a care orientation and boys were encouraged to develop a justice orientation. Kohlberg's scale was based upon a justice orientation and was therefore bound to favour male participants. Gilligan conducted research that identified alternative patterns of moral reasoning used by female participants who faced a real-life moral dilemma (abortion). She argued that the women's moral considerations based around non-violence within a care orientation were just as advanced as Kohlberg's Level 3 (personal conscience). They were merely different.

## The God trick

'Male science' claimed to be, or at least aimed to be, 'objective'. This meant that researchers had to remain detached from and impartial towards their subject matter. Various procedures were developed to ensure that data collection and analysis were not 'contaminated' by the researcher. These included standardized instructions for subjects, minimization of contact between researcher and participants, blind or double-blind procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as various attempts to 'neutralize' the research environment (e.g. by removing any personal items from the laboratory or by having the researchers wear white coats). Feminist critics argued that the attempt to be 'objective' and the strategies adopted towards this aim did, in fact, serve to obscure the fact that the researcher's identity and standpoint do fundamentally shape the research process and the findings. They argued that it is impossible for a researcher to position themselves 'outside of' the subject matter because the researcher will inevitably have a relationship with, or be implicated in, the phenomenon that he or she is studying. Donna Haraway (1988) refers to attempts to pretend otherwise as the 'God's eye view'. A lack of acknowledgement of the standpoint of the researcher hides the fact that data never speaks for itself and that research findings are always the product of the researcher's chosen analytic and interpretative strategies (see Chapter 4 on *The role of interpretation* for more on this). For example, differences in psychometric measures (such as IQ or personality) between groups of people do not tell us anything about the groups of people in question until these differences have been accounted for by the researcher. This is done on the basis of theory, and the choice of a theory to explain the findings reflects the researcher's standpoint. When this process is not openly acknowledged and one theory is selected to account for the findings (e.g. the proposition that genetic factors are responsible for the observed differences) while other possible explanations are overlooked (e.g. the possibility that the differences are the product of inequalities), we are witnessing the 'God trick' in action. Teo (2008, 2010) draws attention to how as a result of such one-sided interpretations of social-scientific data entire social groups (such as ethnic minorities or women) can be constructed as inferior even though there are equally plausible interpretations available that do not involve the depreciation of these groups. This constitutes 'epistemological violence' which Teo (2010: 296) defines as a practice which constructs marginalized groups as inferior or problematic despite the fact that equally viable readings of the data are available. The alternative to the 'God's eye view' is for researchers to reflect upon their own standpoint in relation to the phenomenon they are studying and to attempt to identify the ways in which such a standpoint has shaped the research process and findings. This notion of *reflexivity* will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and will be returned to throughout this book.

Even though there can be said to be a general feminist critique of established epistemologies and 'male science', there is no one feminist epistemology or even methodology. Feminist scholars have responded in different ways to the problems and limitations associated with positivism, empiricism and hypothetico-deductivism. Among the various alternative approaches developed by feminist social scientists and philosophers are standpoint epistemology (e.g. Harding 1991), ethnomethodology (e.g. Stanley and Wise 1983) and various versions of feminist post-structuralism (e.g. Henriques et al. 1984; Haraway 1991). There are also postcolonial critiques of established psychological research practices and perspectives which have given rise to innovative and emancipatory approaches (see Macleod et al. 2017 for an overview).

## Social constructionism

In recent years, *social constructionism* has become an increasingly influential approach (see Burr 2015). Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically. That is, what we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions. This does not mean that we can never really know anything; rather, it suggests that there are 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge'. Language is an important aspect of socially constructed knowledge. The same phenomenon or event can be described in different ways, giving rise to different ways of perceiving and understanding it, yet neither way of describing it is necessarily wrong. An obvious example of this is the choice between describing a glass of water as 'half-full' or 'half-empty'; both descriptions are equally accurate, yet one of them provides a positive, optimistic gloss on the situation ('half-full'), whereas the other emphasizes absence and a lack ('half-empty').

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice. Social constructionist researchers in psychology, for instance, have critically examined psychological categories such as 'emotion' (e.g. Harré 1986), 'prejudice' (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987) and 'psychopathology' (e.g. Parker et al. 1995) to show how they provide a way of constructing reality rather than simply reflecting it.

## Ontology

Although qualitative researchers talk much more about epistemology than about ontology, it is important to be clear about the role of ontology in qualitative research. *Ontology* is concerned with what is there, with what exists in the world. Whilst epistemology engages with questions about the nature of knowledge and how we come to know about the world, ontology is concerned with what kinds of things exist and make up this world. So epistemology is concerned with theories of knowledge whilst ontology is concerned with theories of being. Every theory and every research question presupposes that certain entities or processes exist, and this is reflected in the concepts used in formulating theories and research questions. For example, the question 'How do people manage chronic pain?' presupposes that people have agency in relating to their pain and that pain is something that can be managed. These are significant assumptions about what it means to be a person. A researcher's ontology identifies the things they assume exist and, as such, ontology necessarily underpins epistemology. We do not often reflect on our most basic assumptions about the nature of being and what it means to be a person, and yet these assumptions inform everything else we do including formulating research questions and choosing methodologies. It is important for qualitative (and indeed all) researchers to engage in reflexivity in relation to both ontology and epistemology, and to demonstrate awareness of how their own ontological and epistemological positions shape their research projects.

## Epistemology and methodology

What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology? To what extent does the epistemological position we adopt prescribe which research methods we ought to use? To address these questions, we first

need to differentiate between 'method' and 'methodology'. Although often used interchangeably, the two terms do, in fact, refer to different aspects of doing research. Silverman (1993: 1) suggests that 'methodology' identifies 'a general approach to studying research topics', whereas 'method' refers to 'a specific research technique'. (A further distinction can then be made between methods of data collection and methods of data analysis; see Chapters 2 and 3.) It is helpful to differentiate between 'a general approach to studying research topics' and 'specific research techniques' because the former is much more directly informed by the researcher's epistemological position than the latter. For example, a researcher who takes a predominantly empiricist view of knowledge acquisition will approach research topics through the collection of data rather than through theoretical formulations. However, exactly *how* such data are collected (e.g. through observation, questionnaires, interviews) is another question, and it is not something that the researcher's empiricist epistemological position prescribes. Hypothetico-deductivism constitutes an exception here, since it offers the researcher both an epistemological position *and* a research method, namely hypothesis-testing through experimentation (but see Chapter 3 for the use of hypothetico-deductivism in case study research).

However, not *all* research methods are compatible with *all* methodologies. Even though there is some flexibility in relation to our choice of methods, a researcher's epistemological and methodological commitments do constrain which methods can be used. For example, a social constructionist methodology is not compatible with methods that are designed to measure variables in a population. This is because social constructionism problematizes given constructs such as 'psychological variables'; it questions their validity and it is concerned with exploring the various ways in which they are 'made real'. This cannot be achieved through an attempt to 'measure' such constructs. According to a social constructionist viewpoint, the measurement of psychological variables is itself one more way of making them real, of constructing them.

# Qualitative research

This book is about qualitative research in psychology. Having introduced the concept of epistemology and having considered, briefly, some major epistemological positions, it is now time to explore how qualitative methodology fits into this picture.

First, it is important to acknowledge that qualitative research methods can be, and are, used by researchers with quite different epistemological positions. For example, there are empiricist as well as social constructionist qualitative researchers. This means that, strictly speaking, there are 'qualitative methodologies' rather than 'qualitative methodology'. Chapter 2 discusses the most important differences in the ways in which qualitative researchers have approached the question of knowledge generation. However, qualitative researchers also share a number of concerns, and it is these that are commonly referred to as 'qualitative methodology'. In this section, I shall: (1) identify these shared concerns and provide a general characterization of 'qualitative methodology'; (2) introduce the 'little q/big Q' dichotomy; and (3) draw attention to epistemological differences between approaches to qualitative research.

## Shared concerns: 'qualitative methodology'

Qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with meaning. That is, they are interested in how people make sense of the world and how they experience events. They aim to understand 'what it is like' to experience particular conditions (e.g. what it means and how it feels to live with chronic illness or to be unemployed) and how people manage certain situations (e.g. how people negotiate family life or relations with work colleagues). Qualitative researchers tend, therefore, to be concerned with the quality and texture of experience, rather than with the identification of cause–effect relationships. They do not tend to work with 'variables' that are defined by the researcher before the research process begins. This is because qualitative researchers tend to be interested in the meanings attributed to events by the research participants themselves. Using preconceived 'variables' would lead to the imposition of the researcher's meanings and it would preclude the identification of respondents' own ways of making sense of the phenomenon under investigation. The objective of qualitative research is to describe and possibly explain

events and experiences, but never to predict. Qualitative researchers study people in their own territory, within naturally occurring settings (such as the home, schools, hospitals, the street). These are 'open systems' where conditions continuously develop and interact with one another to give rise to a process of ongoing change. Participants' (and researchers') interpretation of events itself contributes to this process. Therefore, 'prediction of outcomes' is not a meaningful goal for qualitative researchers. Instead, they ask questions about processes, such as 'What do people do when they form groups?', 'How do people manage change in the workplace?' or 'How do people live with chronic pain?'

## 'Little q' and 'big Q'

Kidder and Fine (1987) distinguish between two meanings of 'qualitative research'; 'big Q' refers to open-ended, inductive research methodologies that are concerned with theory generation and the exploration of meanings, whereas 'little q' refers to the incorporation of non-numerical data collection techniques into hypothetico-deductive research designs. For example, researchers may include an open-ended question in an otherwise forced-choice questionnaire and then use content analysis to 'score' the qualitative material. 'Little q' does not work from the bottom up. That is, 'little q' methods of data collection and analysis do not seek to engage with the data to gain new insights into the ways in which participants construct meaning and/or experience their world; instead, they start with a hypothesis and researcher-defined categories against which the qualitative data are then checked.

This book is about 'big Q' methodology. The nine approaches to qualitative research introduced here are all concerned with the exploration of lived experience and participant-defined meanings. They do take different positions in relation to *epistemology*, *reflexivity* and *critical language awareness* (see next section), but they can all be classified as 'big Q'. I have decided to exclude 'little q' methods because, although non-numerical in nature, they are characterized by the imposition of the researcher's meanings during data collection and analysis, and strict control over what can emerge from the analysis through the application of predetermined categories for coding. This is, in my view, not compatible with the spirit of 'qualitative methodology'.

## Epistemological differences: 'qualitative methodologies'

Silverman (1993: 1) argues that 'without theory there is nothing to research'. This statement draws attention to the role of theory in the interpretation of data (see Anfara and Mertz 2006 for a detailed discussion of the role of theory in qualitative research). For example, if our data consist of several pages of interview transcript, we need to decide what this transcript represents before we can analyse it (see Kvale 1996a: 278). It could represent a factual account of what happened to the interviewee. On the other hand, it could represent the interviewee's attempt to disclaim responsibility for what happened. Alternatively, it could be read as an expression of the interviewee's unconscious desires. Or it could provide insight into the interviewee's view of the world. Which view we take of what the transcript represents – that is, how we define the 'status of the text' (see Flick 1998) – will depend on the theoretical framework from within which we approach the text. And this framework, in turn, is informed by our epistemological stance. For example, if our epistemological position is a social constructionist one, we may approach the text using a discourse analytic framework. This means that the text is seen as a manifestation of available discursive resources that the interviewee is drawing upon to construct a particular version of events. If, however, our epistemological position is an empiricist one, we might use a version of the grounded theory method or interpretative phenomenological analysis to identify the categories of meaning used by the interviewee to make sense of events. In this case, the text is seen as a verbal expression of the interviewee's mental processes. In both cases, the analysis of the interview transcript would be qualitative. In a recent exhibition, French artist Sophie Calle provided a fascinating illustration of how a text (in this case, an email message ending a romantic relationship) can be read in innumerable ways, each one based upon the attribution of a different 'status' to the text. Calle invited 107 women of different backgrounds and professions (including a psychoanalyst, a forensic psychiatrist, a Talmudic scholar, a judge, an etiquette consultant, a social worker and a copy editor) to read and interpret the message that had been sent to her by her (then) boyfriend. The exhibition and companion text (Calle 2007) display these readings alongside one another, demonstrating

how what appears to be a simple message can be decoded in as many ways as there are professional (and personal) perspectives, leading to widely differing interpretations of one and the same text. Chapter 4 discusses the role of interpretation in qualitative research in more detail.

'Qualitative methodologies' can also be differentiated according to the extent to which they emphasize reflexivity and by the importance they place on the role of language. These two features are related. *Reflexivity* requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity, then, urges us 'to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (Nightingale and Cromby 1999: 228).

There are two types of reflexivity: personal reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. *Personal reflexivity* involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. *Epistemological reflexivity* requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and limited what can be 'found'? How have the design of the study and the method of analysis 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. Qualitative researchers differ in the emphasis they place upon reflexivity in their research. For some, both personal and epistemological reflexivity are central to the research process and form an integral part of the research report. Others acknowledge the importance of reflexivity but do not include an in-depth discussion of it in their research reports (see also Finlay and Gough 2003 for an in-depth discussion of reflexivity in qualitative research).

*Critical language awareness* (Fairclough 1995) forms part of reflexivity. The words we use to describe our experiences play a part in the construction of the meanings that we attribute to such experiences. Language has a constructive dimension; it does not simply mirror reality. This means that the categories and labels researchers use during the research process will shape their 'findings'. For example, certain answers are made impossible by certain kinds of question. If the researcher asks a respondent 'how she felt' during, say, a medical procedure, the researcher is invoking the category 'emotion'. This means that whatever the respondent chooses to say in response to the question, 'emotion' will have to be oriented to. It has been made salient and the respondent's answer will position her in relation to this construct, even when she denies its importance. Qualitative researchers take different views of the extent to which language constructs versions of reality. At one end of the continuum, researchers argue that language plays a central role in the construction of meaning and that it is the task of researchers to study the ways in which such constructions are produced, how they change across cultures and history, and how they shape people's experiences. At the other end of the continuum, we find qualitative researchers who believe that it is possible to describe, more or less accurately, 'what is going on' in a particular setting; here, language is simply a means to an end or a tool. In between, there are many degrees of critical language awareness (see also Willig 2012a for a fuller discussion of the role of language in the interpretation of qualitative data).

There are various ways in which we may classify qualitative approaches in order to highlight their epistemological differences. Readers will come across a number of different classificatory systems and terminologies in the literature, and this may be confusing at times. The important thing to remember is that in order to understand differences between approaches, we need to ask a series of questions of them. These will be discussed in the final section of this chapter and in more detail in Chapter 2.

## What can qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge?

Despite the fact that qualitative research addresses research questions that differ from those pursued by quantitative researchers, the aim of qualitative research in psychology is still to contribute to the

accumulation of knowledge that is relevant to the discipline of psychology. Research can be defined as an activity that involves a methodical process of investigation that seeks to arrive at new insights and understandings that constitute knowledge about the world (e.g. Langdridge 2004; Oxford Dictionary of Current English 2009; Weathington et al. 2010). The type of knowledge that qualitative research generates may be different from that produced by quantitative research (e.g. phenomenological knowledge or social constructionist knowledge as opposed to knowledge about cause–effect relationships or significant differences in psychometric measures) but the mission is the same: to increase our understanding of the human condition. And in producing this understanding, qualitative researchers are committed to using systematic, transparent procedures that extract meaning from data to provide answers to specific research questions.

So how does qualitative research contribute to psychological knowledge? As we have seen, it does not do so by identifying cause–effect relationships and laws of behaviour, or by offering predictions and generalizations. Instead, it focuses on experience and meaning-making within particular social contexts, and, as a consequence, qualitative research contributes to psychological knowledge on the basis of thick descriptions, critiques of existing conceptualizations and theory-building (see Willig 2019).

## Overview of the book

This book aims to introduce people unfamiliar with qualitative research methods to some of those methods that are most appropriate for qualitative research in psychology. Chapter 2 clarifies the epistemological bases for qualitative research and maps out a number of available positions from which to conduct qualitative research in psychology. Chapter 3 discusses key aspects of qualitative research design, including the formulation of a research question, the selection of suitable data collection techniques, as well as ethical considerations and reflexivity. Chapter 4 discusses the role of interpretation in qualitative research, available approaches to interpretation and their ethical implications. Part 1 of the book concludes with some guidance about how to put together a qualitative research proposal in Chapter 5.

In Part 2, Chapters 6–14 introduce nine approaches to qualitative research in psychology: thematic analysis, grounded theory, phenomenological methods, discursive psychology, Foucauldian discourse analysis, narrative analysis, visual and other non-linguistic methodologies, pluralistic qualitative research and metasynthesis. Each chapter introduces the approach and its procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data. It identifies its advantages and disadvantages, and it discusses ways of writing up the research. To facilitate comparison between the nine methods, I shall raise three epistemological questions in relation to each approach. These questions are identified in the next section. The final two chapters constitute Part 3 of the book, addressing the question of evaluation of qualitative research (Chapter 15) and the role of qualitative research within the discipline of psychology (Chapter 16). All methods chapters in Part 2 include interactive exercises designed to help readers put into practice some of the methodological thinking introduced in each chapter. Each methods chapter also presents current debates or controversies around the approach introduced in the chapter in a 'It's not as simple as all that' box at the end. The more conceptual chapters (in Part 1 and Part 3 of the book) conclude with discussion points in the form of questions which the reader is encouraged to debate with colleagues and peers. The book's companion website reproduces research reports of qualitative research conducted by trainees on the DPsych Counselling Psychology programme at City University London. These reports illustrate how qualitative research methods can be applied in practice, within the real-world constraints of a psychology training programme.

## Three epistemological questions

To be able to evaluate research in a meaningful way, we need to know what its objectives were and what kind of knowledge it aimed to produce. For example, there is no sense in criticizing a study for not identifying the cognitive precursors of a particular behaviour, when the aim of the study was to find out what it felt like to engage in the behaviour. On the other hand, a study concerned with the subjective quality of a particular

experience *can* be criticized for using methods that constrain participants' ability to express their feelings openly and in sufficient detail. To be able to compare methodological approaches with one another and to be able to evaluate the extent to which studies using these approaches have met their own objectives, we need to have a clear understanding of their epistemological basis and their methodological requirements. The following questions can help us identify a methodology's epistemological roots:

## What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?

Qualitative research can produce descriptions or explanations. It can aim to 'give voice' to those whose accounts tend to be marginalized or discounted. It can aim to interpret what people have said in order to explain why they may have said it. It can aim to make links between micro-processes, such as doctor–patient communication, and macro-structures, such as economic and social relations. It may be designed to capture the subjective 'feel' of a particular experience or condition, or it may wish to identify recurring patterns of experience among a group of people. What kind of knowledge a methodology aims to produce depends on its epistemological position (i.e. its view of what can be known and how). Epistemological positions commonly adopted within qualitative psychology range from radical relativist to naïve realist (Madill et al. 2000). A realist position entails the belief that the data we collect ought to provide us with information about the world, about how things really are. This means that the methods we use ought to be designed (and implemented) in such a way as to facilitate true and undistorted representations. For example, a study of the quality of life of elderly people in inner cities from a realist perspective would need to find ways of accessing the true feelings and experiences of a relevant group of participants. A key challenge for the researcher in this situation would be to find data collection methods that encourage participants to express themselves as freely and openly as possible. By contrast, a relativist position subscribes to the view that there is no such thing as 'pure experience' and that the aim of research ought to be an exploration of the ways in which cultural and discursive resources are used in order to construct different versions of the experience of ageing within different contexts. This type of research requires the use of methods that can identify and unpack such resources. Methods of data collection and analysis, in this case, would need to be sensitive to tensions, contradictions and variations in accounts. There is a range of positions in between the 'realist' and 'relativist' endpoints of the continuum. These include a perspective that combines the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going on in the world with the acknowledgement that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality. Such a position may be described as 'critical realist'. Another 'in-between' position is one that argues that while experience is always the product of interpretation and, therefore, constructed (and flexible) rather than determined (and fixed), it is nevertheless 'real' to the person who is having the experience. This position could be described as 'phenomenological'. While classification of methods along the realism–relativism continuum can be helpful, it is also clear that the terminology used raises as many questions as it answers (e.g. What does it mean for something to be 'real'? What is the relationship between truth and reality?). As a result, it is important that we do not get too hung up about the use of the correct labels; rather, what matters is that we identify, clearly and correctly, what type of knowledge we aim to produce and that we select a research methodology that is designed to generate that type of knowledge.

## What kinds of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?

This question takes us into the realm of *ontology*. Ontology is concerned with the nature of the world. While epistemology asks 'How can we know?', the question driving ontology is 'What is there to know?' It can be argued that ontological concerns are fundamental and that it is impossible not to make at least some assumptions about the nature of the world. For example, our starting point may be the assumption that events are generated by underlying structures such as socioeconomic relations. This would constitute a materialist ontology. Alternatively, we may assume that psychological phenomena are independent from such structures. This would be an idealist position. Ontological positions can be described as 'realist' and

'relativist'. A realist ontology maintains that the world is made up of structures and objects that have cause–effect relationships with one another. Materialism, for instance, subscribes to a realist ontology. A relativist ontology, by contrast, rejects such a view of the world and maintains instead that the world is not the orderly, law-bound place that realists believe it to be. A relativist ontology questions the 'out-there-ness' of the world and emphasizes the diversity of interpretations that can be applied to it. Idealism is an example of a relativist ontology.

## How does the methodology conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

All qualitative methodologies recognize that the researcher is, in one way or another, implicated in the research process. However, there are differences in the extent to which qualitative methodologies see the researcher as being the author, as opposed to the witness, of their research findings. Some methodologies (usually those with relativist leanings) see the researcher as the central figure in the research process because it is the researcher who constructs the findings. A helpful metaphor here would be to describe the researcher as a builder who constructs a house. The same bricks (the data) could be used to build a number of very different buildings. Other (usually more realist) methodologies, while acknowledging the importance of the researcher, do not perceive the researcher as the author of the findings. Instead, they see the researcher as someone who uses their skills to unearth the evidence. Here, the research process is perceived as a treasure hunt rather than a construction process.

These three epistemological questions will be raised again in relation to each of the nine qualitative method(ologie)s introduced in this book. They will provide a framework for discussion, evaluation and comparison of the nine approaches in the final chapter.

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### Discussion questions

1  What is 'knowledge'?
2  What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology?
3  What makes a research project 'qualitative'?

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## Further reading

Anfara, V.A. and Mertz, N.T. (2006) *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Burr, V. (2015) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, 3rd edn. London: Routledge.

Chalmers, A.F. (1999) *What Is This Thing Called Science?*, 3rd edn. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Curtis, B. and Curtis, C. (2011) *Social Research: A Practical Introduction*. London: Sage.

Frost, N. (2011) *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Harding, S. (1991) *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Kirk, J. and Miller, M. (1986) *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Kvale, S. (1995) The social construction of validity, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1): 19–40.

Willig, C. (2019) What can qualitative psychology contribute to psychological knowledge?, *Psychological Methods*, 24(6): 796–804.

Willig, C. and Stainton Rogers, W. (eds) (2017) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2nd edn. London: Sage.

**Online
Learning Centre**

When you have read this chapter, log on to the Online Learning Centre website at **https://www. mheducation.co.uk/professionals/open-university-press/olc/willig-qualitative-research** to explore study resources including chapter-by-chapter multiple choice questions, essay questions and chapter glossaries.

# Chapter 2

# Epistemological bases for qualitative research

## ✓ Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- ☑ three basic epistemological orientations (realist, phenomenological and social constructionist) and the types of knowledge they seek to produce
- ☑ their implications for the research process, including the formulation of the research question, choice of methods for data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of the data
- ☑ methodological pluralism as an alternative approach to knowledge generation
- ☑ how to identify a research design which is appropriate to one's research aims.

In Chapter 1 it was acknowledged that qualitative research methods can be used by researchers who adopt quite different epistemological perspectives. A brief introduction to some of the available epistemological positions was provided in the section on *Epistemological differences: 'qualitative methodologies'*. In this chapter, I want to extend this discussion and look in more detail at the ways in which qualitative researchers in psychology have approached the question of knowledge generation. I shall focus on three basic orientations (*realist; phenomenological; social constructionist*) and explore their implications for our choice of research methods and the research process as a whole (see also Willig 2012b). The chapter concludes with a look at *methodological pluralism* as an alternative approach to producing psychological knowledge.

As we will see, qualitative researchers can adopt a wide range of positions regarding the nature and status of the type of knowledge their research seeks to generate. In Chapter 1 we established that epistemological positions are characterized by a set of assumptions about knowledge and knowing. These provide answers to the question 'What, and how, can we know?' Interestingly, although we tend to think about research as being about finding answers to questions, the starting point of any research project must always be a set of assumptions. This is inevitable, and the important thing is that researchers are fully aware of the nature and content of the assumptions that they make (about the world, about people, about

knowledge, about research, and so on). This is not always easy as the most fundamental assumptions we make about the world are often unacknowledged and implicit, and we take them for granted. Often, they seem like 'common sense'.

In this chapter, I aim to map out the range of epistemological positions available to qualitative researchers and to discuss their relationships with one another. I also suggest ways in which researchers can identify and clarify their own assumptions.

As indicated in Chapter 1, the easiest way for a researcher to access the assumptions (s)he makes is to ask him- or herself a series of questions such as:

- What kind of knowledge do I aim to create?
- What are the assumptions that I make about the (material/social/psychological) world(s) which I study?
- How do I conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process? What is the relationship between myself and the knowledge I aim to generate?

Our responses to these questions will help us clarify our epistemological position in relation to the research we plan to conduct, and this in turn will allow us to adopt one of several available approaches to knowledge production.

# Three approaches to knowledge production

Broadly speaking, qualitative researchers can aim to create three types of knowledge. Let us refer to them as realist knowledge, phenomenological knowledge and social constructionist knowledge. In this section I shall characterize them each in turn, focusing on key differences between them and the approaches to knowledge production which they inform (see Willig 2012b for an expanded version of this discussion).

## Realist approach

Qualitative researchers can use qualitative research methods in order to obtain an accurate picture of (some aspects of) the social world or of human psychology. Here, the researcher seeks to generate knowledge that captures and reflects as truthfully as possible something that is happening in the real world. It is assumed that this 'something' exists independently of the researcher's, and indeed the research participants', views and/or knowledge about it. The sorts of things a researcher who aspires to generate this type of knowledge might study include social or psychological processes. An example of qualitative research concerned with understanding a social process might be a study that investigates what happens when a new member joins an established reading group. An example of research concerned with psychological processes might be a study of the way in which people who lost a parent at an early age approach intimate relationships. A realist approach to knowledge generation assumes that there are processes of a social and/ or psychological nature which exist and which can be identified. These processes are 'real' in that they characterize or even determine the behaviour and/or the thinking of research participants, irrespective of whether or not the research participants are aware of this. It is also assumed that these processes can be identified and described by the researcher. A realist approach presupposes that the world and what happens in it, how and why, can be understood provided that the researcher is skilled enough to uncover the patterns, regularities and structures of experience and behaviour which characterize human existence. The researcher can succeed or fail in this enterprise which means that realist research aspires to generate valid and reliable knowledge about a social and/or psychological reality which exists independently of the researcher's awareness of it. As such, this type of research is characterized by a discovery orientation (see Madill et al. 2000). The role of the researcher in this situation is akin to that of a detective who uses his or her skills, knowledge and experience in order to uncover what is really going on.

Realist aspirations to knowledge generation range from what is sometimes referred to as 'naïve' to more 'critical' varieties. 'Naïve' realist approaches assume that there is a relatively uncomplicated and direct relationship between what the researcher can see (the data, the evidence) and what is really going

on (the reality we want to understand). In other words, it is assumed that the data more or less directly represents reality. For example, if we wanted to find out how people make decisions about whether or not to have an HIV antibody test and we interviewed individuals who have recently made such a decision, a 'naïve' realist approach would suggest that we take our participants' accounts at face value and that we accept that their accounts constitute accurate descriptions of how they made their decision. The task of the researcher would, therefore, be (1) to ensure that participants feel safe and comfortable enough to provide the researcher with accurate and detailed accounts, and (2) to analyse the accounts in such a way as to produce a clear and systematic model of the decision-making process. It could be argued that the label 'naïve' implies that this approach lacks depth and sophistication, and that it should, therefore, be avoided. My view, however, is that there is some very valuable research which aims to 'give voice' to otherwise marginalized individuals and communities and which is underpinned by the assumption that what participants are telling the researcher about their experiences (e.g. of suffering, of exploitation, of oppression) reflects a social reality which needs to be exposed, acknowledged and understood. To call such research 'naïve' is to devalue research which clearly does have its uses and significance. Perhaps a less value-laden term such as 'direct' realism would, therefore, be preferable.

A critical realist approach differs from the more 'direct' (or 'naïve') version in that it assumes that although our data can tell us something about what is going on in the 'real' world, it does not do so in a self-evident, unmediated fashion. A critical realist approach does not assume that our data constitutes a direct reflection of what is going on in the world (like a mirror image); rather, it proposes that the data needs to be interpreted in order to further our understanding of the underlying structures which generate the phenomena we are trying to gain knowledge about. For example, if we want to find out why people smoke cigarettes, it may not be enough to ask people why they think they smoke and accept their answers at face value. From a critical realist perspective, it may be necessary to dig deeper and to interpret what the smokers have told the researcher in order to try to identify factors or forces beyond the individual smoker's knowledge and/or control which drive their smoking behaviour. Such forces could be social (e.g. peer pressure or social learning), physiological (e.g. addictive processes) or psychological (e.g. unconscious structures such as an oral fixation). So although the research participants are unlikely to be aware of what it is that really drives their behaviour, the underlying structures (forces, factors, mechanisms, etc.) which the researcher identifies are said to be 'real'. Critical realist research, however, does vary in the extent to which it proclaims the existence of the underlying structures and mechanisms identified by the researcher with anything approaching certainty.

## Phenomenological approach

Here, the aim of the research is to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of research participants. Although the phenomenological researcher still aspires to capture something that exists in the world – namely the participants' feelings, thoughts and perceptions which constitute their experience – (s)he does not make any claims about what causes these thoughts, feelings or perceptions. Phenomenological research is concerned with the quality and texture of experience (with 'what it is like' to have the experience). As such, it aims to understand experience rather than to discover what is 'really' going on or what causes social and/or psychological events to take place. It does not matter, therefore, whether what a research participant describes is an accurate reflection of what really happened to them because the type of knowledge the researcher is trying to obtain is phenomenological knowledge – that is, knowledge of the quality and texture of the experience itself. For example, a researcher might want to find out how a participant experiences the process of going through a divorce. Finding that a participant experiences himself as 'rejected by the whole world', for example, constitutes phenomenological knowledge irrespective of whether or not the participant really is being rejected by everyone he encounters. The aim of this type of research is to get as close as possible to the research participant's experience, and to enter their experiential world by stepping into their shoes and looking at the world through their eyes. The role of the researcher within this context resembles that of a *person-centred counsellor* who listens to the client's account of their experience empathically, with an attitude of unconditional, positive regard and without questioning the external validity of what the client is saying. Phenomenological research is interested in the experiential world of the participant rather than the 'real' (material, social or psychological) structures which may give

rise to particular experiences. This means that phenomenological research assumes that there is more than one 'world' which can be studied because, from a phenomenological point of view, what appears to be the 'same' event (e.g. a divorce, a diagnosis, an accident) can be experienced in many different ways, so that there are potentially as many (experiential) worlds as there are individuals. A researcher who attempts to generate this type of knowledge asks, 'What is the world like *for this participant*?'

There are differences in the extent to which phenomenological research concerns itself with the possible meaning (as well as the texture and quality) of experience. Some phenomenological researchers prefer to focus on the description of experience while others also want to understand more about its underlying meaning. Phenomenological approaches to knowledge generation, therefore, range from *descriptive* to *interpretative* varieties. Descriptive phenomenology is concerned with capturing experience 'precisely as it presents itself, neither adding nor subtracting from it' (Giorgi 1992: 121). Such an approach requires that the researcher stays as close as possible to the data, extracting the essence of the experiential quality of the experience from the account without attributing meanings to it which are 'imported' from outside of the account itself. For example, a descriptive phenomenologist might be interested in the phenomenon of 'being surprised'. Accounts of the experience of 'being surprised' from individuals who have recently experienced a surprise (such as winning a prize, being invited on an unexpected holiday, receiving a letter from a long-lost friend, etc.) would be analysed in order to generate an understanding of what characterizes the experience of 'being surprised'. Here, the researcher would want to know what it is that people experience when they are 'surprised'. Such a study's findings may tell us that the experience of 'surprise' involves a sense of a loss of control, of ambivalence, of uncertainty about how to respond, and perhaps also feelings of joy and excitement. Of course, we cannot know what characterizes the experience until we have conducted a phenomenological analysis of the data. The end product of a descriptive phenomenological study would, therefore, be an account of the structure of the phenomenon of 'being surprised' which is based entirely upon participants' accounts of their experience.

An interpretative phenomenological approach differs from this in that it does not take accounts of experience entirely 'at face value' in the same way; instead, it seeks to also understand the meaning of an account of experience by stepping outside of the account and reflecting upon its status as an account and its wider (social, cultural, psychological) meanings. As Larkin et al. (2006: 104) put it, such an interpretative phenomenological analysis 'positions the initial "description" in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context. This second-order account aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal "sense-making" activities.' For example, if we wanted to gain a better understanding of the experiences of women who have tried and failed to conceive with the help of IVF treatment, we could start by producing a description of the experience (based on the women's own accounts) which captures its quality and texture, and which portrays its structure and essence. We could then attempt to shed further light on the phenomenon by relating it to its wider context – for example, by reflecting on the social and economic structures within which the women experience reproduction, and/ or the social and cultural expectations and norms which prevail at the time of data collection. Through doing this we may be able to make sense of some aspects of the women's experience. For example, during our initial analysis of the accounts we may have been struck by the fact that many women feel compelled to provide reasons for the decision to pursue IVF. The women's experience of feeling the need to account for their decision may be better understood when looked at within the context of the prevailing notion that conception ought to be a 'natural act' and that any deviation from this requires strong justification. Interpretative phenomenological research, therefore, seeks to generate knowledge about the quality and texture of experience as well as about its meaning within a particular social and cultural context. In addition, while descriptive phenomenologists aspire to produce descriptions which capture and comprehend the experience as it presents itself to the participant, interpretative phenomenologists do not believe that it is possible to produce a pure description of experience and that description always involves a certain amount of interpretation.

## Social constructionist approach

Finally, a qualitative researcher can put aside questions about the true nature of social/psychological events (*realist* approach to knowledge) or the actual quality of experiences (*phenomenological* approach),

and focus on the way in which people talk about the world and their experiences. Such a researcher would be concerned with the social construction of 'knowledge' itself, and with how people construct versions of reality through the use of language. Here, the type of knowledge aspired to is not knowledge about the world or knowledge about how things really are, or even about how they are experienced by individuals, but rather knowledge about the *process* by which such 'knowledge' is constructed in the first place. Since language plays such an important part in the social construction of what we regard as 'knowledge', qualitative researchers who adopt a *social constructionist* orientation to knowledge generation tend to study discourses. For example, a researcher might analyse the language used in policy documents in order to understand how something like 'antisocial behaviour' is constructed within these documents. Of particular interest to a qualitative (social constructionist) psychologist might be how these documents construct those who are presented as the targets of proposed interventions and how such constructions position them (e.g. in relation to other people, the law, the police, etc.). Such an approach to research is based upon the assumption that in one way or another all human experience is mediated by language, that it is discursively constructed, and that there is, therefore, no such thing as 'pure individual experience'. From a social constructionist point of view, when research participants tell the researcher about their experiences, they are not simply describing an inner reality (as would be assumed in phenomenological research) or providing information about social/psychological processes (as would be assumed in realist research); rather, the social constructionist researcher approaches such accounts as providing information about how socially available ways of talking about the 'something' are deployed by the participant and with what consequences for those who are affected (that is to say, who are 'positioned') by these discursive constructions. Here, the role of the researcher can be compared to that of an architect who looks at the phenomenon of interest with a view to how it has been constructed and from what resources and materials.

The social constructionist perspective is often described as *relativist* because it rejects the idea that objects, events and even experiences precede and inform our descriptions of them. A social constructionist perspective replaces the notion of 'description' with that of 'construction' because it argues that language is a form of social action which constructs versions of reality for particular purposes. In other words, according to this view, it is language ('discourse') that constructs reality rather than reality that determines how we describe or talk about it. However, not all social constructionist researchers would describe themselves as relativists. There are more or less radical strands of social constructionism, with social constructionist approaches to 'knowledge' production ranging from *radical* to more *moderate* versions.

The radical version of social constructionist research tends to be particularly concerned with the ways in which speakers within very specific social contexts deploy discursive resources in order to achieve a particular interactional objective. Here, the researcher is not interested in the participants' inner experience or how they may feel or think about it. The researcher assumes that participants will construct different versions of events depending upon the social context within which they find themselves. The particular version a research participant constructs will be informed by the stake that they have in a particular conversation. This means that such a socially constructed 'reality' does not survive the context within which it has been constructed because a different 'reality' will need to be constructed to suit the next context. Radical social constructionist researchers aim to understand how and why discursive objects and positions are constructed in particular ways within particular contexts, and what they achieve within those contexts (e.g. how they may serve the interests of the speakers in a conversation). For example, a researcher might be interested in how people who have decided to start seeing a psychotherapist introduce themselves to the therapist in their first session. Suitable data for such a study would be recordings of first psychotherapy sessions which would need to be transcribed verbatim before analysis. The analysis would proceed by examining the ways in which the clients deploy discursive resources when they introduce themselves and explain why they are there, and how these are positioning them in relation to the psychotherapist. The researcher might find that many clients began their sessions by pointing out that they had waited as long as possible (using constructions such as 'I had reached the end of my tether', 'I couldn't take it any more', 'I had reached the end of the line' and so on) before deciding to approach a psychotherapist for help. The researcher might suggest that by doing this, clients were disclaiming an undesirable identity (of someone who is weak or needy, and cannot cope on their own). By emphasizing that they have never sought help before and that their current visit to the therapist is an exceptional event, they position themselves within a moral discourse, constructing themselves as responsible adults whose help-seeking is not a sign of weakness