

Chapter 2 – Theoretical foundations of research

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Introduction

Postgraduate and research students in applied social disciplines are often required to examine and explain their epistemological and ontological positions underpinning their research strategy. As a tutor, I have found myself working with students who have produced a whole range of responses to this requirement in the methodology chapter of dissertations and theses. Some of these responses are excellent, some are cursory, some are enquiring and some are conventional. There is a lot to think about in creating your own research outputs for the first time and many students find it easier to deal with the more concrete problems such as data collection and analysis. Generally, people find it hard to discuss ontology and epistemology and hard to make them relevant to their research process.

This chapter explores both value of such discussions and also seeks to make the task of discussing methodology at the theoretical level both easier and more productive.

In order to do this I intend to

- Highlight the role of theoretical thinking in the construction of research
- Clarify various uses of key terms such as ontology, epistemology and paradigm, and how these are described in the research methods literature

- Present a brief recent history of the use of these concepts in research, including some points where there is disagreement between different perspectives
- Identify some debates and anomalies that confound attempts to describe theoretical foundations effectively

The sections that follow are presented in this order.

In this chapter I make only brief mention of the meaning of different philosophical stances, doing so where it is necessary in order to progress the argument. General methodology texts such as those cited in this chapter, amply provide more specific guidance and, in turn, refer to more specialised texts that provide comprehensive treatment of the theories concerned.

The role of theoretical thinking in the construction of research

As outlined in the Introduction chapter, this book is aimed at researchers relatively early in their research career, particularly those looking at issues in the field of coaching. You may be undertaking a research project as a ‘capstone’ stage of a Masters-level qualification, working on a doctoral thesis, or perhaps undertaking research outside of a formal qualification as part of your own practice development. For people in this situation, there are three main reasons to think about the theoretical underpinnings of research, though there may be a slightly different emphasis for different people depending on their rationale for undertaking the research in the first place. Those three reasons to think about theoretical underpinnings relate to:

- The legitimacy of knowledge claims

- Criteria for understanding the quality of the research
- Demonstrating mastery of research as an activity in its own right

These criteria are important because they relate very directly to the principle of research supporting practice. As regards this overall objective, it follows that knowledge becomes useful when it emerges from the private space into some kind of shared space. Such sharing also implies some form of negotiation or agreement around what constitutes knowledge: about what is 'good' knowledge, and what its limitations are. Without this scrutiny, a knowledge claim is no more than a personal belief. And when it comes to advanced study (and the commitments and sacrifices that often entails), why would we want to plough on into a research process without knowing what counts?

However, an intention to examine our theoretical foundations is not necessarily a call to work from first principles on every occasion. There are a certain number of text book (or cook book) approaches to these questions that represent a distillation of a research community's approach. This can be a useful short cut for the novice researcher. For some purposes, it is quite reasonable to pick up an established recipe and to follow its instructions. Some institutions and some disciplines might teach in this way, specifying on the students' behalf what constitutes a reasonable strategy and what would conform or not conform to the standards of that strategy. (I have completed such a programme myself as a student). These standards may also be very widely agreed. Indeed, many published research papers leave their discussion of methodology at quite a practical level precisely because there is a wide consensus

around a particular strategy. However, not only is it a reasonable expectation of many programmes that postgraduate (particularly doctoral) researchers should develop more insight into the research process, but it is also the case that the same insight will help the researcher address the methodological problems that often crop up in the course of producing research. As noted in the Introduction to this volume, the discussions in Part Two outline some of the issues that do crop up in the course of producing research; in many cases it is precisely an understanding of the basic assumptions of the particular research strategy that has enabled the researcher to overcome problems when they have arisen.

Confusingly, different research communities have formulated the characteristics of legitimate knowledge in slightly different ways, reflecting different areas of interest as well as fundamental philosophical tenets. The research strategies outlined in Part Two of this book reflect some of those different formulations: ethnography, for example, is associated with an interest in meaning through social interaction; phenomenology is more interested in understanding the immediate lived experience of individuals; natural science-influenced approaches using quantitative techniques are interested in what can be understood as the most probable causal relationship between different regular events, characteristics and phenomena. So such strategies represent a pairing of theoretical underpinnings on what constitutes knowledge, along with specified ways of producing knowledge that conform to those theoretical underpinnings. The work these communities have already put in place for researchers, therefore, can be seen as immensely powerful, providing some of the 'recipes' mentioned earlier. They can also create naïve adherence to methodological authority, as well as some rather fixed attitudes and misunderstandings of other

communities (the so-called ‘paradigm wars’). We would like students and researchers to use the body of methodological work constructively and critically and we believe that this both enhances research and renders entrenched methodological positions unnecessary.

Elements of the theoretical landscape (and their nomenclature)

One of the most confusing things about exploring the theoretical underpinnings of social research is that there is are so many different terms used and different writers have historically used them in different ways. For example, does the term ‘realism’ refer to an ontological position (answer: it can do), or a paradigm (again, it can do). What then does realism contrast with? It might be ‘anti-realism’ (e.g. Searle, 1995), idealism (e.g. Howell, 2013) or relativism (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1994) depending on how each of these terms are understood.

It seems useful at this stage to set out some of these possibilities so that researchers can make an informed choice. I will return to some of the debates and controversies about the use of these terms in a later section of this chapter.

These discussions regularly rely on the following key terms which I will define briefly first, and then return to in relation to social research:

1. **Ontology** – ontology is ‘The branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being’ (*Oxford Dictionaries | English*, n.d.), or ‘the study of what things exist’ (Effingham, 2013: 1). The essential ontological question is ‘what exists?’

2. Epistemology – in contrast to ontology, epistemology is ‘The theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion’ (*Oxford Dictionaries | English*, n.d.). The essential epistemological question, is ‘how do we know?’
3. Paradigm – the term research paradigm is sometimes used to describe, ‘overarching philosophical systems denoting particular ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013: 11). The essential question for paradigm is ‘what kind of research do we do?’
4. Methodology – methodology refers to the broad collection of methods and principles inherent in particular research approaches or strategies. Crotty (1998: 3) calls methodologies, ‘research designs that guide a researcher in choosing methods and shape the use of the methods chosen.’ There is variation in the extent to which particular methodologies emphasise underlying principles as against the actual techniques used. Hence we come across questions in discussion forums asking, ‘is such and such an approach a methodology or a paradigm?’ The boundaries may be porous, but it is reasonable to say that it is more than just a method.
5. Methods – methods are the things the researcher ultimately does to create knowledge from their engagement with the world (such as interviewing, or measuring, or using statistical tests on data). Methods may pertain primarily to how data is collected, or how it is analysed.

These concepts can be seen the building blocks progressing from the theoretical foundations of research to the actions to be taken. Some elements are open to debate, and different writers on methodology populate this framework using different terms and sometimes different concepts. I will describe some of these variations after an outline of the concept of paradigm which has become quite pivotal in thinking about methodology.

The development of the concept of research paradigms

The discussion of the theoretical foundations of research in theses and in other reports tends to centre around the research paradigm; the idea of paradigm is often used as an agglomeration of ontology, epistemology and methodology. A review of the development of the concept of paradigm in research will be helpful in setting a clearer framework for researchers' decision making about how they address the issue. It also opens the possibility (to be discussed in the following section) that the construct of paradigm itself can, and perhaps should, be problematized.

The idea of research paradigms became an issue of debate in the late 20th Century as researchers sought to legitimise approaches to social research that did not rely on dominant assumptions that surround the scientific method. In particular, Lincoln and Guba (1985) adopted the term to present such research from the perspective of its own frame of reference, rather than as something that did not meet the strictures of 'science'. The term itself is drawn from Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argued that the work of science takes place in a framework of consensus about fundamental principles (paradigm). However, scientific advancement proceeds in discontinuous ways, with incremental change progressing

within the paradigm, alternating with more radical jumps. Such jumps occur when, through an accident of evidence or imagination, the existing framework of understanding is shattered. The result is scientific 'revolutions', 'the tradition shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science' (Kuhn, 2012: 6). At this point, the paradigm changes. Imagine the impact of the Copernican revolution, relativity and quantum theory: these are points where scientific revolution changes the paradigm.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) use Kuhn's concept of paradigm, not to describe a shift in the state of a discipline, but as way of legitimizing the possibility of different world views. They presented an extensive critique of positivism and post-positivism - the dominant paradigm of natural science - and formulated alternative principles to guide the kind of social research they were interested in. They labelled this alternative paradigm, 'naturalist'. By contrasting attitudes to key issues such as the neutrality of the observer, generalisability, causality, and the presence or absence of theory in observation, Lincoln and Guba constructed an alternative set of qualities and criteria for creating knowledge about human behaviour in its natural setting.

In later work Guba and Lincoln (1994) formalised a systematic description of the features of the research paradigm. Here they argued that paradigms can be differentiated by their adherence to particular theories of existence and reality (ontology), to theories of knowledge and truth (epistemology), and their position on questions of how best this knowledge/world should be explored (methodology). Although the term 'constructivism' only appears in passing in Lincoln and Guba (1985), in their later work it is the preferred label for the naturalist paradigm. Now,

between positivism and constructivism at opposite ends of their table, Guba and Lincoln placed post-positivism and critical realism. The terms they used to describe ontologies and epistemologies are set out in table 2.1.

	Positivism	Post-positivism	Critical theory*	Constructivism
Ontology	Naïve realism; objective external reality	Critical realism; objective reality which can be apprehended only imperfectly	Historical realism; a reality "consisting of historically situated structures that are [...] as limiting and confining as if they were real" (p. 111)	Relativism; "multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting, social realities" (p. 111)
Epistemology	Dualist, objectivist	Modified dualist, objectivist, embracing the uncertainty of apprehension	Transactional/subjectivist; "knowledge is value-mediated and hence value dependent" (p. 111)	Broader transactional/subjectivist; knowledge "created in interaction among investigator and respondents" (p. 111)
Methodology	Experimental; verification of hypotheses	Modified experimental; falsification of hypotheses	Dialogic/dialectical; reconstruction of constructions	Hermeneutic/dialectical; reconstruction of constructions.

* In full, Lincoln and Guba label this category "Critical theory and related ideological positions"

Table 2.1 – competing ontological, epistemological and methodological positions according to Guba and Lincoln (1994)

More recently, Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018) have identified the growth of a number of different interests that might sit within the ‘critical theory’ column (such as feminist studies and queer theory) as well as further alternatives to positivism and post-positivism, adding participatory research to their table. The comparison in this later edition has become extensive and the elaboration of the different positions more descriptive. At the high-level, the differentiation along ontological, epistemological and methodological lines remains essentially the same. The descriptions of positions relating to participatory research generally reflect a stance of co-creation and co-construction.

If the three versions of the discussion of paradigm that have been outlined here, give something of the sense of how ontology and epistemology are related to paradigm, it should also be noted that they also express something more than simply a choice or preference. Rather than a linear, hierarchical relationship, methodological, epistemological and ontological questions can be seen as a kind of system, located around the nexus of key characteristics of the research. I referred earlier to key issues discussed in Lincoln and Guba (1985) such as the neutrality of the observer, generalisability, causality, and the presence or absence of theory in observation. By exploring these issues the authors are able to assert other important characteristics of paradigm (focusing in their argument in this case on naturalist research). Therefore,

N (the naturalist) elects to carry out research in the natural setting or context of the entity for which study is proposed because naturalistic ontology suggests that realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 39)

With respect to the role of the researcher:

N elects to use him- or herself as well as other humans in the primary data-gathering instruments [...] because it would be virtually impossible to devise *a priori* a nonhuman instrument with sufficient adaptability to encompass and adjust to the variety of realities that will be encountered. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 39)

Key debates and differences

The brief history above sets out the logic of the concept of paradigm. However, on closer inspection, a number of complexities arise for developing researchers. Firstly, reading more widely, we come across a large number of different terms used to describe different elements of the paradigm, including labels for the paradigms themselves. Some terms overlap; some terms are used in conflicting ways or with conflicting meanings. I will outline, in turn, how different terms are used to describe ontology, epistemology and paradigms. I will then outline questions raised about the structure of 'paradigm' itself. Finally, there is an important debate, specifically from a pragmatist perspective, that the concept of paradigm is not itself useful. It is important to set out these complexities to help avoid the risk of picking up parts of arguments, or idiosyncratic uses of terminology which confuse the researcher and their readers.

The use of terms in methodological literature to describe ontologies.

Methodology literature presents to readers a confusing array of terminology. It would do well to establish what is meant by different authors in their use of particular terminology to describe differences of approach. Let us deal first with ontology.

Table 2.1 offers the terminology used by Guba and Lincoln (1994) with some indication of their meaning. Bryman (2015: 29) echoes these essential positions contrasting, in his section on ontology, 'objectivism' on the one hand, with now 'constructionism' on the other. Bryman says that objectivism 'implies that social phenomena confront us as external facts that are beyond our reach and influence'

while constructionism, ‘asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors’, noting that this position is ‘often also referred to as constructivism’ (Bryman, 2015: 29).

Howell discusses the problem of reality with reference to historical positions in Western European philosophy. Adopting the terms more commonly used in philosophy, Howell outlines that, after Hume, ‘realism identified that the object existed without the subject’ (Howell, 2013: 5), while, drawing more from Kant and Schopenhauer, idealism considers ‘the world and mind to be intrinsically linked’ (Howell, 2013: 4). It is important to note that this explanation of idealism does not imply a full blown relativism whereby every individual lives in a world of their own mental projection. Such a position has severe limitations and contradictions for the researcher in any case. Johnson and Duberley (2000: 150) argue that, ‘Relativism may well have the laudable aim of opposing positivists' naïvely objectivist epistemology, but the resultant sceptical alternative is devoid of any possible grounds for critique or intervention.’ For the time being, let us take idealism as at least allowing for the existence of ‘things’ in the mind rather than a more encompassing position that things are *only* in the mind.

Another strong influence on the way terms are used is the early work of Burrell and Morgan (1979) who use the terms realism and nominalism (where nominalism refers to the structuring of reality through language) and of Morgan and Smircich (1980). Morgan and Smircich describe six different positions along an axis of objective – subjective. At one extreme, they report ‘reality as concrete structure’ and the other,

‘reality as a projection of human imagination’. It is helpful to note the number and progression of intervening points. These are set out in Table 2.2.

Reality as a concrete structure	Reality as a concrete process	Reality as a contextual field of information	Reality as a realm of symbolic discourse	Reality as a social construction	Reality as a projection of human imagination
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Table 2.2. Different ontological positions along an axis of objective-subjective after Morgan & Smircich, 1980.

A broad range of terms, then, are used to describe ontological positions (summarized in Table 2.3). Students may wonder why so many different formulations persist and which ones to use in their own work. Crotty (1998: 10–11) argues that it is because writers on methodology tend to collapse ontology into epistemology. Indeed in the examples discussed above, we might detect some elasticity in the concepts being used. For example, the idea of an ‘objective external reality’ (see Table 2.1) uses a term – ‘objective’ – which appears to relate to the apprehension of that reality (an epistemological question) rather than its existence (the ontological question). Bryman uses the term ‘objectivism’ as an ontological position in its own right. Crotty cites a number of such examples, and on the basis of this presents a brief but interesting argument that the ontological question can be dispensed with. This is a discussion we will return to shortly.

Sample of terms used in ontological discussions		
Realism Objective/concrete External/realism Objectivism Realism	Nominalism Subjective/imagined Multiple/relativism Constructionism Idealism	Burrell & Morgan (1979) Morgan & Smircich (1980) Guba & Lincoln (1994) Bryman (2015) Howell (2013)

Table 2.3. Different terms used to describe the range of epistemological stances

Yet despite Crotty’s argument, it is possible to extract a logical structure to this variation of use of ontological terms. In order to do so, it is useful to attend to these labels (‘-isms’), not necessarily as schools of thought, but as ways of referencing the nature or substance of what is real. In table 2.4, I have extracted what might be considered the substance of each term. Hence, for example, ontological ‘objectivism’ can be seen to refer to reality being made of real objects rather than referencing the neutrality of the observer. The two concepts of ‘object’ (as substance) and ‘objective’ (as perspective) are closely related, and for this reason the use of ‘objectivism’ may be ambiguous, yet this simple analysis demonstrates its legitimacy as an ontological term.

Core substance of terms used in ontological discussions	
Material Object Real	Immaterial Construct Idea (idealism) Name (nominalism)
Other implicit and defining qualities	
External Extra-mental Independent of experience Independent of language	Projected Imagined Bound with experience Languaged

Table 2.4. Core concepts and defining qualities referred to by ontological terms

The use of terms in methodological literature to describe epistemologies

The previous discussion demonstrates an underlying problem which is reproduced in the terminology used to describe competing epistemologies in the research literature.

For ease of comparison, I will refer to the same authors as previously.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe the epistemological positions relating to their four paradigms as ranging from ‘dualist/objectivist’ which expresses the possibility of

understanding reality from a neutral stance, to ‘transactional/subjectivist’ which expresses the dependence of knowledge on an interaction between the observer (subject) and the world. We can see here that Guba and Lincoln use different vocabulary for epistemology than they do for ontology, but at the same time, their usage seems to cross over with other authors’ usage (for example Bryman’s use of ‘objectivist’ as an ontological stance). It is also worth noting that these epistemological stances are to some extent conceptually independent of the ontological stances, though they tend to become bundled together.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) had earlier used positivism to describe a group of positions that stress causality, the incremental growth of knowledge through the testing of hypotheses, and the possibility of a neutral observer: ‘Positivist epistemology is in essence based upon the traditional approaches which dominate the natural sciences’ (1979: 5). These positions are opposed by ‘anti-positivists’ who are both engaged in the world they research and see it as an essential position in order to develop an understanding of the social world. Objectivity is not possible. Burrell and Morgan discuss this under the rubric ‘the epistemological debate’.

Bryman (2015) similarly uses the term ‘positivism’ to describe the collection of principles that characterise natural science, similarly to Burrell and Morgan, under the heading ‘Epistemological considerations’. Bryman contrasts positivism with interpretivism: ‘a view that the subject matter of the social sciences – people and their institutions – is fundamentally different from that of the natural sciences’, and that ‘therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action’ (Bryman, 2015: 26).

Howell describes a range of different positions under the terms correspondence, coherence, pragmatic and consensus/constructivist. Correspondence theory of truth aligns to Guba and Lincoln's use of 'objectivist'. The term correspondence expresses the idea that truth and knowledge correspond with reality. By implication, knowledge claims can be tested by how well they fit, or correspond to, reality. It follows that particular notions of validity and reliability in the research context fall out of this position. A coherence theory of truth requires that 'truth, knowledge and theory fit with a coherent system' (Howell, 2013: 15). This position therefore allows for multiple legitimate conceptualisations. A pragmatic epistemology reflects the claims of pragmatic philosophers such as Dewey and Peirce who argued that knowledge claims were valid only insofar as they had the potential for impact in the world of action. Finally, according to a constructivist perspective, 'knowledge, truth, reality and theory are considered contingent and based on human perception and experience' (Howell, 2013: 16).

Morgan and Smircich (1980) plot different epistemological stances along the same objective-subjective continuum as they used to differentiate ontological stances. In their discussion, they refer to the 'objectivist view of the social world as a concrete structure' which 'implies a need to understand and map out the social structure, and gives rise to the epistemology of positivism' (1980: 493). In opposition, they describe a 'phenomenologically oriented perspective' (1980: 493) which rejects the externality of the thing to be known and focuses rather on, 'understanding the processes through which human beings concretize their relationship to their world' (1980: 493).

Sample of terms used in epistemological discussions		
Positivist Objective/positivist Dualist/objectivist Positivist Correspondence → Coherence	Anti-positivist Subjective/phenomenological Transactional/subjectivist Interpretivist → Pragmatic → Constructivist	Burrell & Morgan (1979) Morgan & Smircich (1980) Guba & Lincoln (1994) Bryman (2015) Howell (2013)

Table 2.5. Different terms used to describe the range of epistemological stances

The use of terms in methodological literature to describe paradigms

I turn to descriptions of paradigms last because some of the terminology makes more sense in the light of the preceding discussions. As noted previously, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) original contrast was setting naturalistic against positivist enquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1994) preferred 'constructivism' and added post-positivism and critical theory, with Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2018) adding different strands of critical theory and participatory research. Other authors, however, have found different divisions and used different terms.

Thomas (2013: 111) makes a similar contrast, but uses the terms positivism and interpretivism. For interpretivists, the research aim is to 'understand the particular, contributing to building a framework of "multiple realities"' identifying that the terms naturalistic, qualitative and idiographic are sometimes used 'often inaccurately' to describe different aspects of the approach. It is notable that these are the same terms, under the heading of paradigms, as those used by Bryman under the heading of epistemology. Furthermore, they are used to express largely the same idea.

Crotty (1998) does not refer to paradigm, preferring to talk about ‘theoretical perspective’. Under this heading, Crotty mentions positivism, interpretivism (specifying symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and hermeneutics as subdivisions), critical enquiry, feminism and postmodernism. This inclusion of postmodernism by Crotty is significant in that he associates it with a subjectivist rather than constructionist epistemology. He differentiates these with reference to the object: construction implies that the subject makes sense through their relationship with the object; subjectivism denies the engagement with any external object. Hence, in this model, postmodernist approaches are more interested in how people create social objects rather than how they make meaning of them.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015) use the term ‘paradigm’ for a different purpose, but describe five ‘major philosophies’ consisting of positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism and pragmatism. Critical realism is not the same as the critical enquiry delineated by Crotty, or critical theory in the earlier frameworks of Lincoln and Guba (and later editions). Critical theory is a perspective that highlights power and its maintenance. In this sense ‘critical’ research may seek to enable the emancipation of those seen as oppressed. It may take a strong interest in discourses as a mechanism of power (overlapping with some postmodernist research) or in the ways communities make sense of the world (overlapping with social constructionist research). In critical realism, it is the realism rather than the structure of society that is effectively questioned. Critical realism represents a stance that accepts a realist ontology, but questions the possibility of an objective experience of it. Thus the ‘objectivity’ of ontology and epistemology are delinked. As Searle (1995: 165) puts it, ‘The fact that alternative conceptual schemes allow for different descriptions of the

same reality, and that there are no descriptions of reality outside all conceptual schemes, has no bearing whatever on the truth of realism.’

The final term suggested by Saunders *et al* is pragmatism. Pragmatism’s driving principle is that truth and meaning are only relevant insofar as they are enacted in the real world. Abstract discussions of epistemology and ontology are argued to be irrelevant (indeed some pragmatists reject the very idea of paradigm) and the aim of research is to make a difference. These pragmatist positions and their impact will be described further in the next section.

The reason for outlining these overlapping and contradictory systems of reference is to provide researchers with some kind of map. It is easy to refer to a text book that describes things in a certain way, then to become extremely confused when other terms – or other meanings of terms – are introduced into the debate. I resist the temptation to present a ‘preferred’ structure here. The intention is to help researchers find their way, not to impose yet another structure.

Finally in this search for clarity there is a final question that lurks behind the discussion of foundations. Whether it is a useful or meaningful discussion at all.

Why not paradigms: critiques from pragmatist and critical realist perspectives.

A pragmatist perspective has been mentioned in the preceding sections on the nomenclature of both epistemology and paradigm. An adherence to the ideas of pragmatic philosophers such as Dewey, Peirce and James could suggest an altogether

different framework to that proposed by Guba and Lincoln: one that recognises the paradigm model itself as one of many ways of seeing things. Fishman (1999: 118/9) refers to the relativity of paradigms from a 'perspectivist' stance: '[The] idea that we are always looking at the world through a particular pair of "glasses" that creates a particular perspective.' Rather than offering a better worldview, Fishman positions pragmatic relativism as a stance which holds that different perspectives may be more or less useful for different purposes.

Morgan (2007) argues that there are inherent conflicts in the way paradigms have been conceptualised, emerging from Guba and Lincoln's focus on ontology and epistemology. Morgan labels this view of paradigms as a 'metaphysical paradigm' (that is, a metaphysically-based construction of the concept of paradigm). It is in the nature of the metaphysical paradigm that it is essentially foundationalist – that the frame of reference is built up from indisputable stages of logical inference (see Hughes and Sharrock, 1997: 4–5). Yet the process of successively revising the structure of paradigms itself undermines the foundationalist logic. Morgan also argues that it follows from this stance that logically paradigms should be entirely incommensurable. Yet at the level of data and methods this appears not to be the case. Indeed proponents of the metaphysical paradigm consistently argue that methods spring from the research question. For Morgan, this demonstrates that questions of ontology and epistemology do not provide answers to questions of method.

A different position can be seen in the critical realist literature which nevertheless results in a similar relativizing of the status of paradigm. (Note that in the literature

this is often labelled simply ‘realism’, creating yet another confusing overlap with terms used to refer to specifically ontological positions.) In various ways a number of critical realists suggest an understanding that makes use of the idea that the ontologically ‘real’ may arise in different ways. Common to these approaches is a commitment to treating social patterns of different types as real in their own right.

Maxwell (2012), for example, argues that the quality of the ‘real’ is not substance, but causality. Hence accounts of the world can legitimately include the influence of material and mental phenomena on each other, including cultural practices, meanings, and social structures. The legitimacy of this position is supported by two related ideas. Firstly, that immateriality and externality are not incompatible: ‘people’s interpretations and social practices themselves can be seen to constitute a “reality” that exists independently of what the researcher may have to say about it’ (Willig, 2016: 34). This principle is referred to in other realist works as ‘intransitivity’ (for example, Sayer, 2000). And secondly, that critical realism separates the ‘real’ expressing the potential for events, from the ‘actual’ expressing what happens, and also from what part of the actual might be experienced, namely the ‘empirical’ (Sayer, 2000). Willig expresses the way in which this more complex understanding can undermine the paradigm concept altogether:

It seems to me that realism and relativism are much more closely intertwined that we tend to acknowledge. They are wrapped around each other in a way that suggests that it is hard to exclude one or the other entirely from a research project. Willig (2016: 36)

Conclusion: Where does my paradigm come from?

The intention of this chapter has been to provide readers with a map rather than a destination. In it I have examined the history of the idea of being guided by paradigm in social research, highlighted the inconsistencies and complexities of the terminology used in discussions of research paradigm, and introduced some critiques. My hope is that readers are better able to articulate the three outcomes of this theoretical thinking which are mentioned in the introduction to this chapter:

- the legitimacy of their particular knowledge claims;
- meaningful criteria for understanding the quality of the research produced, and, where appropriate,
- mastery of research as an activity in its own right.

Doctoral supervisors regularly rehearse the mantra that methodological questions can only be answered with reference to the research question. This casts doubt on whether abstract questions such as ‘what exists?’ and ‘how do we know?’ are the right (or useful) points of departure. Gergen and Gergen’s (2003: 8) description of paradigm highlights both the strength and the limitation of this approach:

One of the things a scientific community acquires with a paradigm is a criterion for choosing problems that, while the paradigm is taken for granted, can be assumed to have solution. To a great extent theses are the only problems that the community will admit as scientific or encourage its members to undertake.

This seems to limit legitimate questions to those that fit a paradigm rather than those that occur in the world. Emerging from the discussion of pragmatism and critical realism in the previous section, I would suggest that there are two different ways of looking at the questions of ontology and epistemology that are more helpful. Firstly, we can address the questions not from a foundational position – that these must be resolved before moving forward – but from a more systemic position. This would suggest that such questions are important alongside other issues relating to the context of the study: its aims; the researcher’s commitments to the discipline in question; the researcher’s values. Secondly, they can be seen not as fixed rules but as ways of thinking about a problem. This sense of paradigm as a more holistic outlook can be seen in descriptions of philosophical underpinnings such as Duberley, Johnson and Cassell’s (2012) review. Duberley *et al* focus on research ‘traditions’ and the ontological and epistemological commitments they reflect, referring only in passing to paradigms in their suggestions of further readings.

Research students often find their curiosity frustrated by a complexity around the rationale for different research philosophies that increasingly seem to be, themselves, constructed. Nonetheless, the process of navigating a way through that bewildering literature can be satisfying in its own right. Not least because it can enable the student to arrive at a methodological strategy that feels right for the research question they wish to investigate. It can also provide a touchstone for methodological decision-making allowing the student to ask themselves, ‘if this is how I have framed the question, does it make more sense to use strategy A or strategy B in practice?’ I hope that the exposition in this chapter will help readers to find their own routes through this bewildering landscape and to make these decisions for themselves.

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