

# Crafting Qualitative Research: Morgan and Smircich 30 Years On

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to revision Morgan and Smircich's typology, taking into account the changes in organization and management theory over the intervening 30 years. Developments in metatheoretical perspectives, organization theory, research methods, and ways of theorizing mean our choices about qualitative research have become more complex. In addition, the 1980 typology was based on a now contested subject-object distinction. I replace this continuum with three problematics—intersubjectivism, subjectivism, and objectivism—and examine the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of each. I offer examples and resources for qualitative researchers, arguing that considering our metatheoretical positioning provides a basis for building crafted, persuasive, consistent, and credible research accounts.

## Keywords

qualitative research methods, paradigms, interpretivism, subjectivism, objectivism, intersubjectivism

In 1980, the *Academy of Management Review* published Gareth Morgan and Linda Smircich's influential article "The Case for Qualitative Research." The crux of their argument was that placing method as the driving force in empirical work ignores the "wider and deeper context" (p. 491) of knowledge and reduces social research to a technique. They offered a framework for understanding "debates about rival methods in social science" (p. 491), situating qualitative methods within broader philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge. The article is still used today as a means of helping qualitative researchers situate their work in a more informed manner.

Since 1980, developments in organization and management theory (OMT) in terms of the topics we study and the range of theoretical perspectives and qualitative research methods, have resulted in a richer and more complex discipline. The interests of organizational theorists in the 1970s and 1980s mainly focused on structure, systems, management, group, and leadership processes, often studied using "scientific-based" methods and with the functionalist aim of increasing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Over the ensuing years, OMT has expanded to cover a broader range of topics including the development of new organizational forms (e.g., network and feminist forms);

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reconceptualizing organizational culture (as aesthetic, storied, or simulacra); critiquing normalized and ideological forms of managing organizations; examining processes of organizing, identity construction, narrating, and resisting; and focusing on issues such as sustainability, violence, race, gender, and the body. OMT has also mirrored developments in social theory, embracing interpretivist, poststructural, and critically informed ways of theorizing, and research that incorporates a cornucopia of qualitative methods ranging across narrative, discursive, psychoanalytical, and deconstructive methods. This pluralization of the field has opened up possibilities for new ways of studying and theorizing the complexity of organizational life but also meant that the terrain has become multifarious and contested, raising questions about what can be counted as “good” knowledge, legitimate methods, and valid theories. **Researchers now face choices about their work in terms of the myriad of metatheoretical and methodological options (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).**

If we are not careful, we can respond to this complexity by doing just what Morgan and Smircich caution against—reducing our work to a choice about method, which then obscures differences between perspectives and orientations to research. Although a number of scholars have addressed the issue of method (e.g., Buchanan & Bryman, 2007; Edmondson & McManus, 2007), it seems that the original typology has not been updated. This is the purpose of the article—to “revision” Morgan and Smircich’s typology so that as qualitative researchers we can come to terms with the increasing plurality of the field, be mindful about the choices we make, and situate our work in careful and informed ways. We may even explore new ways of researching and theorizing organizational life. The revision:

1. Reworks the original subject–object distinction as three “knowledge problematics” to reflect the more complex nature of the metatheoretical assumptions underpinning the social sciences.
2. Incorporates more recent ontological, epistemological, and methodological debates and developments to highlight the broader possibilities of qualitative research.
3. Positions qualitative research as a craft rather than a scientific endeavor.

A revisioning is important because in figuring out what and how we want to contribute to OMT, we need to understand the range of possibilities emerging from the various ways of studying and theorizing our world. In addition, to do this we need to understand how our philosophical commitments influence the logic behind our research methods and our knowledge claims and how we might use them to craft our research. I offer the revision as an updated “map of the field,” a basis for discussion and debate, rather than a complete typology, which would require a book to explicate.

## The Field Circa 1980: Four Paradigms and a Typology

Morgan and Smircich’s (1980) paper builds on the memorable book by Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis* (1979), which addressed the relationship between knowledge, theory, and research and challenged us to interrogate our academic practices. Burrell and Morgan claimed that knowledge is paradigmatic, encompassing a distinct worldview and rationality governing research strategies and methods. They identified four paradigms to locate studies of society and organizations—functionalist, interpretive, radical structuralist, and radical humanist—each paradigm based on a set of metatheoretical assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and human behavior. They controversially argued that because each paradigm was radically different and incommensurable with the others, that changing paradigms was rare—akin to a religious conversion. At the risk of oversimplifying the crux of their argument, there are no universal criteria with which to judge “good” knowledge; rather criteria are based on the assumptions underpinning work within a particular paradigm. Importantly, the book drew attention to the need for more philosophically informed and diverse ways of theorizing organizations that reflect broader developments within social science.

Over the ensuing years, the notion of what constitutes a paradigm, the nature of paradigmatic knowledge within OMT, and whether paradigms are incommensurable or commensurable has been contested and debated on a number of fronts (Alvesson, 1987; Clegg, 1982; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). So has the issue of whether OMT should be unified within one paradigm (Pfeffer, 1993, 1995) or be more pluralistic (Van Maanen, 1995a, 1995b). The four paradigms have been critiqued (Donaldson, 1985; Willmott, 1993), defended (Jackson & Carter, 1991), extended in terms of theory-building within and across paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990), reworked as four discourses (Deetz, 1996), and as a taxonomy of “camps” of producers and consumers (Hassard & Kelemen, 2002). A number of scholars have offered ways of dealing with the consequences of paradigms for research, including paradigm interplay (Schultz & Hatch 1996), metatriangulation (Lewis & Grimes, 1999), and multiparadigm research, or polytheism (Clegg, 2005; Hassard, 1991; Kirkwood & Campbell-Hunt, 2007; Morgan, 1997; Storberg-Walker, 2006). We have also been asked to work outside the bounds of paradigms (Connell & Nord, 1996; Davis & Marquis, 2005; Mir & Mir, 2002; Rhodes, 2000).

My intention here is to acknowledge the paradigm debate and move on to explore the implications for contemporary qualitative research and theorizing. Even though, as Willmott asks, “how often are sets of paradigmatic assumptions articulated in organizational analysis in such a pure form?” (1993, p. 685), it is important to understand these assumptions and their impact on methodology to make theoretically informed choices and craft our work carefully. I will begin by offering a brief overview of Morgan and Smircich’s typology followed by a critique and revisioning to include more contemporary issues, methods, and forms of theorizing.

### *Morgan and Smircich’s Typology*

Morgan and Smircich built on Burrell and Morgan’s ideas, arguing that researchers need to figure out their assumptions about **the nature of social reality and what it means to be human (ontology)** and **the nature and purpose of knowledge (epistemology)** before deciding which research methods might be appropriate. They provided a “rough typology for thinking about the various views that different social scientists hold about human beings and their world” (1980, p. 492) based on a subjectivist–objectivist continuum to highlight different forms of knowledge and theory-building.

As can be seen from Table 1, subjectivist assumptions view reality as imagined in and therefore a product of the human mind; believe humans are autonomous, give meanings to their surroundings, and are creative; that knowledge is personal and experiential; and therefore research methods need to explore individual understandings and subjective experiences of the world. Objectivist assumptions hold that reality is a concrete given, something that is external to, imposing itself on, and even determining individual behavior, and that knowledge is similarly “real” in the sense of having observable and measurable regularities, laws, and patterns. When viewed as an either–or binary opposition, researchers make choices about whether to take an objectivist approach focusing on structures, actions, behaviors, systems, and/or processes per se, or a subjectivist approach focusing on how people give meaning to, interact with, and construct their world. **Such choices influence whether one takes a quantitative or qualitative, positivist or interpretive, structure or agency focus.**

If we take the study of organization culture as an example, at the objectivist end of the typology researchers are interested in observing behavior, physical structures, and symbols to identify the rituals, traditions, norms, and values that constitute an organization’s culture, with the aim of determining the impact of culture on organizational performance and goals. Methods often include employee surveys, observation, questionnaires, coded interviews, or instruments measuring cultural dimensions (e.g., Al-Yahya, 2009; Chatman & Jehn, 1994; Gardner, Reithel, Foley, Coglisier, & Walumbwa, 2009). Subjectivist researchers explore the variety and layers of cultural meanings

Table 1. Network of Basic Assumptions

		Subjectivist Approaches to Social Science ↓		Objectivist Approaches to Social Science ↑	
Core Ontological assumptions	Reality as a projec- tion of human imagi- nation. <i>[Individual experience &amp; con- sciousness. Transcendental phenomenology &amp; solipsism.]</i> <sup>a</sup>	Reality as a social construction. <i>[Individuals create meanings through language, routines, symbols etc.]</i>	Reality as a realm of symbolic discourse. <i>[Meanings sustained in human action &amp; interaction. Subject to both rule-like activities &amp; change.]</i>	Reality as a concrete process. <i>[Comprised of constituent parts, observed in concrete behavior &amp; activities.]</i>	Reality as a concrete structure. <i>[Comprised of constituent parts, observed in concrete behavior &amp; activities.]</i>
Assumptions about human nature	Man as pure spirit, consciousness, being.	Man as social constructor, the symbol creator.	Man as an actor, the symbol user.	Man as an adaptor.	Man as a responder.
Basic epistemological stance	To obtain phenomenological insight, revelation.	To understand how social reality is created.	To understand the pattern of symbolic discourse.	To study systems, process, change.	To construct a positivist science.
Some favored metaphors	Transcendental.	Language game, accomplishment, text.	Theatre, culture.	Cybernetic.	Machine.
Research Methods	Exploration of pure subjectivity.	Hermeneutics.	Symbolic analysis. Social action theory.	Contextual analysis of Gestalten.	Historical analysis. Lab experiments, surveys.

Note: Adapted from "The case for qualitative research," by G. Morgan & L. Smircich, 1980, *Academy of Management Review*, 5, 491-500. Adapted from the original with italics added from Table 2 (1980, pp. 494-495).

created and enacted by organization members through language, symbols, interactions, and so on, the “webs of significance” (Geertz, 1973) within the organization. It is difficult to find a purely phenomenological study which would use an autoethnographic account to focus on an individual’s experience of culture (see Behar, 1993; Chin, 2006; Kondo, 1990; Yanow, 1998, for exceptions); **most fall into culture as socially constructed, where interpretive and ethnographic methods are used including unstructured interviews, participant observation, and narrative analysis** (e.g., MacLean, 2008; Miller, 2002; Watson, 2001).

Thus, our metatheoretical assumptions have very practical consequences for the way we do research in terms of our topic, focus of study, what we see as “data,” how we collect and analyze that data, how we theorize, and how we write up our research accounts. Morgan and Smircich underscored the need to walk the talk—to differentiate and substantiate (in the sense of giving good reasons for) our approach to research. I suggest that this shifts qualitative research from purely scientific method and technique to a craft. Crafting research means being careful about how we notice, bring to attention, and shape knowledge about organizational life. A revisioning of Morgan and Smircich’s typology can help us place ourselves in the debate, figure out a set of metatheoretical and methodological, and possibilities from which to craft our work and explore new ways of contributing to OMT.

## The Intervening 30 Years: Expanding and Enriching the Field

Given that OMT is now a more pluralistic, contested, and methodologically varied discipline, the typology has a number of limitations. Morgan and Smircich themselves acknowledge they only consider the **interpretive and functionalist paradigms (1980, p. 492)**—and there has been a subsequent growth of linguistic-based, critical, and poststructuralist work. In addition, the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism—which lies at the heart of the original typology—has been disputed, primarily in the fields of anthropology and sociology and to a limited extent in OMT (e.g., Bourdieu, 1994; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Deetz, 1996). Questions have also arisen as to whether linear mappings of research methodologies based on dualistic extremes positions knowledge as a tidy map of distinct features rather than a field of complexity and tension (e.g., Lather, 2006). Lather asked us to think instead in terms of knowledge problematics, “a cross-disciplinary sense of where our questions come from, what is thinkable and not thinkable in the name of social inquiry in particular historical conjunctions” (2006, p. 46). I aim to address these limitations by revisioning the typology based on three knowledge problematics and will justify this change by examining why the subjectivist–objectivist binary is unclear.

### *Why There Is No Longer a Clear Subject–Object Distinction*

It is important to begin by making a distinction between subjectivism–objectivism and subject–object because these terms are often confused—studying “subjects” does not necessarily mean we are taking a subjectivist approach to research. As we will see later in the discussion of the revisioned typology, while subjectivism/subjectivist and objectivism/objectivist incorporate the concepts of subject and object, the “ism” and “ist” represent a broader set of assumptions about reality, knowledge, and methodology—**how we view and enact the relationship between subject/object is crucial**.

A “subject” is generally conceived of as a reflective individual, an author of meaning or an actor, and is often conflated with **human agency**. The “object” is that which is perceived and thought about, a material artifact, symbol, text, a universal truth, law, or principle. **Objects are generally assumed to exist independently from perception**. The subject–object distinction is reminiscent of Cartesian dualism that mind–body, person–world, inner private–outer public self, individual–

society, and so on are separate. Subjects (human agents) perceive objects in the world (including phenomena such as structures, institutions, and artifacts) through an act of knowing. As Husserl says, “It is evident that intuition and the intuited, perception and the thing perceived, though essentially related to each other, are **in principle and of necessity not really essentially one and united**” (1931, p. 130). Conventional definitions of the subject–object relationship around the premise that while human perceptions may differ, objects remain unchanged, are challenged by **the structure–agency and determinism–free will debates**—whether we are born into an already existing society determining our behavior or we actively construct our society and social structures.

**These debates have been fuelled as organizational researchers have embraced poststructural, critical, ethnomethodological, hermeneutic, and other ways of theorizing, along with deconstructive, discursive, narrative, and reflexive-based research methodologies, which have blurred the distinction because they are neither clearly subjectivist or objectivist.** I offer a number of possible (by no means exhaustive) reasons why the subject/subjectivism and object/objectivism antonym has been eroded:

1. Subject and object are in some way mutually implicated. A number of scholars (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1979) argue that the dualism is erroneous because subject (agency) and object (structure and society) are entwined. Giddens (1984) for example, argues that while subject and object are separate entities, each produces enabling and constraining conditions that influence the other in social practice. This has resulted in researchers studying how everyday actions and institutions reproduce and change each other through the lens of institutional, enactment, and structuration theories. Institutional theorists posit organizations as relatively durable social objects shaping and constraining subjects (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), and enactment theorists argue that it is the regularized actions, interactions, and relationships of subjects that produce objectivized structures (Weick, 2001). Although institutional theories favor the structure part of the relationship and enactment theories position actors as the organizing force, structuration theorists privilege neither but attempt to reconcile the two through an iterative process (e.g., Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Orlikowski, 2000).
2. Not subjects but subjectivities. In contrast to the humanist view of subjects as reflecting, self-actualizing human beings, poststructuralists position subjects as “subjectivities,” sites, and products of various discourses (language systems, ways of thinking, and talking) of power and control that categorize us and are inscribed on our bodies and our actions. This is a paradoxically antihumanist view because the focus of study lies not on the person per se but on publicly performed identities, discourses, or bodies (as objects)—simultaneously socialized and alienated, coherent and fragmented, and conforming and resisting (see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Collinson, 1992; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).
3. Both subjects and objects have agency. Conventionally, the subject–object distinction attributes agency (personal volition) only to subjects. Yet developments within sociology, particularly in relation to actor network theory and theories of materiality, **span paradigm boundaries by imbuing both subjects and objects with equal agency (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004).** Objects (organizations) and subjects are both mediated texts in which “agency, the basis of organization, is fully explicable neither in purely subjective nor in purely objective terms, but is in essence a hybrid ... neither human nor nonhuman but rather a meld of the two” (Cooren & Taylor, 1997, p. 222). **From this perspective neither subject nor object is privileged—rather distinction is given to materiality and network relations.**
4. Subject becomes object. This occurs when we objectify humans as a set of traits, generalized identities, roles, or we study individual consciousness as a schema or a cognitive process or model (e.g., Sonenshein, 2007): an epistemological representation of an ontological subject. In this way, interpreting embodied subjects becomes interpreted categorized objects.



Thus, the idea that researchers take either a subjective or an objective stance, no longer holds: “subjects” may now refer to conscious individuals, discursive “sites,” subjective interpretations, or objective traits, and so on, and “objects” as materialities and agentic entities. This underscores the need to update the typology to incorporate ongoing debates within the social sciences, to extend the definitions of subjectivism and objectivism, **and to add intersubjectivity into the mix.** Neither Burrell and Morgan nor Morgan and Smircich offer an adequate conceptualization of intersubjectivity, nor address its importance for studying and theorizing organizations. Indeed, Morgan and Smircich (in line with most OMT conceptualizations of the time) saw the subject primarily as an intentional being separate from the world and with “dubious intersubjective status” (1980, p. 494). Yet for at least 40 years, anthropologists, sociologists, and phenomenologists, notably Garfinkel (1967), Geertz (1973), Merleau-Ponty (1962), Ricoeur (1992), and Schutz (1970) have argued in various ways for the need to consider social experience as intersubjective rather than subjective. I will move on to address these issues.

### **Morgan and Smircich’s Typology 30 Years On: **From a Continuum to Three Knowledge Problematics****

One way of revisioning the continuum is as three knowledge problematics—intersubjectivism, subjectivism, and objectivism—which draw attention to what is thinkable and not thinkable in relation to how we come to know and explain experience (Lather, 2006).<sup>1</sup> I will begin by explaining the ontological and epistemological characteristics of each problematic before moving on to discuss methodological implications. In line with the intention of Morgan and Smircich, the map is not a finalized apodictic representation, nor a claim that one approach is better than any other, it is a reflexive resource for understanding the relationship between our worldview and our ways of researching and theorizing—one I know is open to contestation.

Figure 1 maps the three problematics and their relationship to the theoretical and methodological developments that have become more prominent in OMT. I begin by offering expanded and updated definitions of subjectivism, objectivism, and intersubjectivism, based on six issues of relationality, durability, location of meanings, historicity, mediation, and associated forms of knowledge—issues culled from the literature that I suggest are defined and enacted differently by each problematic and somewhat consistently within each problematic. I depict the problematics as clouds to emphasize their shifting and fluid nature—as a multiplicity of connecting ideas and approaches with **permeable and transient boundaries** across which lie overlaps, tensions, and incommensurabilities. For this reason, the line between each explanation is also blurred.

#### ***Metatheoretical Assumptions: Ontology and Epistemology***

*The objectivism problematic.* Over the last 30 years, objectivism has been interpreted in more nuanced ways. What has since been termed naive realism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) relates to the objectivist end of Morgan and Smircich’s continuum, where reality is seen to exist independently from our interactions as an entity or phenomenon and researchers study the relationship between concrete structures, events, and entities, or between network elements and mechanisms. Such phenomena and objects have durability in that they exist through time and can be studied out of context to build generalized knowledge about systems, mechanisms, processes, patterns of behavior, and processes. Meanings, norms, structures, and knowledge also transcend time, and progress is seen as linear, building on past accomplishments. Knowledge is syntagmatic, with researchers theorizing what reality is—what it comprises, how it is structured, what its characteristics are—and also how it works, which means identifying causal mechanisms, variables, rules, or laws determining its structure and operation, with an emphasis on accuracy, explanation, and prediction. Knowledge can

	Intersubjectivism	Subjectivism		Objectivism		
<b>Relationality</b> — the nature of relationships.	Interrelationships emerging & shifting in a dialectical interplay between ourselves, others & our surroundings. Experienced differently by different people.  <i>Intersubjectivity.</i>	Relationships contextualized between people & their surroundings. People are reflexively embedded in their social world, influenced by and influencing discursive practices, interpretive procedures etc.  <i>Interactions.</i>	Relationships between entities in a pre-existing society, between network mechanisms & system/information processes, cognitive & behavioral elements. Or relationships between discourses (when treated as objects).  <i>Inter-network/objects/discourses.</i>  <i>Inter-textuality</i>			
<b>Durability</b> — of society, meanings, knowledge etc., across time & space.	<b>Social experience and meanings as ephemeral, fleeting moments.</b> Although some common 'sense' of social & linguistic practices play through our interactions.	Social realities, meanings, discourses, knowledge are contextual: constructed yet experienced as objective and relatively stable. Perceived, interpreted & enacted in similar ways but open to change.	Enduring social structures (e.g., class), institutionalized rules, norms, practices, appropriate behaviors, and traits, etc. Discourses and networks have relative stability but are subject to resistance and change.			
<b>Meanings</b> — what & where meaning is located.	Indeterminate. Neither fully in nor fully out of our control. Language is metaphorical & imaginative. Meanings in the moment between people.	Shared meanings immanent to the 'artful practices of everyday life', to discourses and texts. Negotiated & specific to time & place.	Common meaning situated in words, structures, roles, words, behaviors. Transcend time & space. Language is literal.			
<b>Historicity</b> — concept of time & progress.	We are inherently embedded & embodied in historical, cultural & linguistic communities. Time experienced in the present — in living conversations with others.	Time & place are subjectively experienced. Progress as a situated human accomplishment — potentially iterative, ruptured or hegemonic.	Time experienced sequentially & universally. Progress is linear, recursive, or emerging over time.			
<b>Mediation</b> — the place of the researcher in the research.	<i>Reflexive hermeneutic.</i> Research as a dialectical interplay between research participants. Focuses on experiences <i>between</i> people. <b>Embodied &amp; embedded researcher</b>	<i>Double hermeneutic.</i> Researcher embedded in the world, shaped by & shapes experiences & accounts, mediates meanings of actors. Experience <i>in</i> the world. Researcher as outsider or insider.	<i>Single hermeneutic.</i> Knowledge & researcher are separate from the world. Researcher observes, discovers facts & develops predictive theories. Experience <i>of</i> the world. Detached, sometimes critical researcher.			
Form of <b>knowledge</b> — epistemology.	<i>Pragmatic knowing:</i> in-situ, knowing-from-within. Transitory understandings and 'witness' thinking (Shotter, 2008). Micro level focus. Research as embedded and embodied.	<i>Pragmatic or syntagmatic:</i> common sense knowledge — naturally occurring actions, interactions, conversations. Mundane activities. Non-replicable knowledge, situated validity. Macro and micro level focus.	<i>Syntagmatic:</i> interdependent or dependent relationships between structural or linguistic elements. Sequences. Replicable or sharable knowledge leading to the accumulation of knowledge & social progress or emancipation. Mainly macro focus.			
<b>Core ontological assumptions of research methodologies</b> <i>(The nature of social reality)</i>	Social reality relative to interactions between people in moments of time & space. Relationally embedded. Social community.	Socially constructed realities, emerging, objectified, & sometimes contested in the routines & improvisations of people. Context is human action & interpretation.	Reality as symbolic & linguistic meanings & interpretations. Contextualized in a social site.	Discursive realities constructed by discursive & non-discursive practices & systems. Contested & fragmented. Discursively contextual.	Reality as process: interrelated actions, elements, structures, and systems. Generalizable or context-dependent.	Reality as concrete structures & behavioral patterns, subject to rules & laws. Structural integration or disintegration. Naive realism.
	← <b>Research as Craft</b> →					<b>Research as Science</b>
<b>Assumptions about human nature</b> <i>(How we relate to our world)</i>	Humans as intersubjective, embodied, relational, & reflexively embedded.	Humans as intentional & reflexive subjects, constructors & enactors of social realities within linguistic conventions or routines. Storytellers.	Actors, interpreters, sensemakers. Choosing linguistic resources, managing impressions.	Humans as subjectivities, products of discourse, contested & conflicted discursive sites.	Humans as an element in the process, adapting to & sometimes managing elements. Information processors & network coordinators.	Humans determined by their environment, socialized into existing social & institutional practices & requirements. Characterized by traits etc.



<b>Research Approaches</b> (Philosophical/theoretical underpinnings)	Hermeneutic phenomenology, relational constructionism, dialogism.	Ethnographic, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic. Constructionism & constructivism. Dialogic. Inductive.	Ethnomethodology, aesthetics, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutic, syntagmatic or pragmatic. Detached or involved researcher. Interpretive procedures.	Poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism. Syntagmatic. Detached researcher. A critical stance.	Systems & process theories. Critical realism. Critical theory. Institutional theories, Structuration theories, actor network theories.	Positivism, empiricism, functionalism, nomothetic science, statistical or structural connections. A-temporal laws & validity criteria. Rational choice models. Deductive approaches.
	<b>Interpretivism</b>			<b>Postpositivist/Positivist</b>		
<b>Research Methods</b> (Examples of methods used)	Narrative ethnography, reflexive autoethnography, dialogic action research, social poetics, dialogic analysis, poetry.	Narrative & discourse analysis, story, grounded theory, content analysis, poetry, participative inquiry, Autobiography.	Dramaturgy, story analysis, discourse & conversation analysis, symbolic analysis, grounded theory, content analysis, action research. Semiotics.	Semiotics, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, deconstruction.	Network & systems analysis, historical analysis, material semiotics, boundary object analysis, ideology critique.	Surveys, observation, structured/coded interviews, case studies, focus groups, grounded theory, action research.
	<b>Dialogic</b>			<b>Monologic</b>		
<b>Some linguistic features of research.</b> (Typical words used in research accounts)	Betweenness, living conversations, possible meanings, la parole (embedded speech & relationships), interpretive insights.	Narratives, talk, text, metaphor, culture, themes, multiple meanings, sense making, la parole/la langue (Saussure, 1959).	Scripts, plots, performances, roles, stage, mask. Symbolic meaning, artifacts. Managing impressions. Actor, actions, & talk. La langue. Social practices.	Discourses, marginalization, resistance, power, domination, colonization, suppression, subjectivity, body.	Materiality, objects, mechanisms, power, control, 'the system', 'the process mechanisms', emancipation.	Categories, norms, roles, properties, variables, schema, rules, structures, causality, patterns, efficiency, 'the organization', measurement. Progress.

**Figure 1.** Morgan and Smircich revised: Three knowledge problematics.

consequently be replicated and applied back to the world to improve it (the single hermeneutic). Objectivist research also tends to take a macro perspective, studying organizations at a structural, strategic, and societal/environmental level, and drawing generalizations about group and individual behavior.

More processual, critical, and fragmented objectivist ontologies now exist, each accepting the existence of a concrete reality, but with very different characteristics, as emergent (process approaches), contested (critical/discursive), or linguistically driven (discursive/symbolic). Toward the right-hand side of the objectivist problematic, process theorists, critical theorists, and critical realists believe that there is a real world which cannot be generally understood nor fully grasped because it is perceived from partial and positioned perspectives. These contemporary realists are particularly interested in inequalities, power relations, and processes of domination and resistance existing in real social and economic structures—with the aim of emancipation (Raelin, 2008).

Process theorists draw on an emergent objectivist ontology, but are less interested in structural characteristics than in how social phenomena emerge in the “sequence of individual or collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time” (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 338). They differ from naive realists in that they are interested in organizations as quasi-stable structures subject to a process of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).<sup>2</sup> For example, institutional theorists employ degrees of objectivism and determinism to explore the legitimating strategies and mechanisms of institutions and institutional actors in the ongoing relationship between organizations and their environment (e.g., Ball & Craig, 2010); critical theorists identify the historical shaping and impact of mechanisms of power and resistance; and actor network theorists (ANT) study how network organizing occurs. Although systems theorists and a number of institutional theorists take an essentialist perspective by assuming that systems and institutions have fixed and durable properties that can be identified, ANT approaches are anti-essentialist in that objects and networks are fluid and only gain meaning in

relation to each other. ANT researchers adopt a semiotics of materiality (Law, 1999) studying the relationship between objects or actants, which are human and nonhuman actors, for example, employees, organizations, technology, diseases (see Sarker, Sarker, & Sidova, 2006; Suchman, 2000).

Further to the left of the problematic, poststructuralists work from underlying assumptions of dis-junctured, fragmented, and discursively constructed realities and subjectivities. Such discourses, realities, and subjectivities are treated as objects and products rather than subjective human accomplishments but also as contested, mutable, and contextualized—situated within macro historical, social, and institutional discourses (Deetz, 1992). So while objectivist researchers may focus on sociality, human identity, behavior, and discourse, they are disembodied from lived experience and treated as objects or phenomena to be studied. Concrete, process, and discursive ontologies are linked to positivist and postpositivist epistemologies (see Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, for a comparison of positivist and postpositivist research in relation to corporate social responsibility).

*The subjectivism problematic.* Over the last 40 years, more thoughtful and substantive interpretations of subjectivism have emerged as historically, socially, and/or linguistically situated experience; as culturally situated understandings relative to particular contexts, times, places, individuals, and/or groups of people (relationality and durability); where there are “truths” rather than one truth; and where meanings, sensemaking, and knowledge are relative to the time, place, and manner in which they are constructed—in the everyday interactions of people (pragmatic commonsense knowledge). Researchers, therefore, need to ask research participants how they experience time, place, and progress (historicity) because these are human experiences accomplished in practices, interactions, or discourses in a variety of ways (recursive, ruptured, or hegemonic). This broader view of subjectivism challenges absolutism and favors pluralism, embeds knowledge and meanings in particular contexts, and because people have a reflexive relationship with the world around them (i.e., they both constitute and are constituted by their surroundings) emphasizes situated forms of knowledge and validity. Our research accounts are also subjectively situated: relative to our own and organizational members’ embedded experiences, which influence our observations, interpretations, and research accounts (the double hermeneutic). Research accounts are also partial because we do not see all the stories playing out in an organization at any one time (Boje, 1995). Consequently, social realities and knowledge are not durable in the sense of being replicable, generalizable, and predictive but instead offer contextualized understandings.

Because within the subjectivism problematic there is no independent reality to study, researchers explore constructions of social and organizational realities in a particular context and time and/or how we humanly shape, maintain, and interpret social realities through language, symbols, and texts. Although a subjectivist problematic subsumes social constructionist research, researchers differ in their ontological stance. Toward the right of the problematic, discourse-based researchers and symbolic interactionists see social reality as socially constructed but “objectified” (having a degree of commonality and stability) in situated routines, interactions, and linguistic practices—routines and discourses that people may resist and change. Thus, reality consists of social “facts” and commonly understood meanings which are interpreted and used by actors in particular situations—a position Searle (1995) calls ontologically subjective and epistemologically objective.<sup>3</sup> Toward the left, subjectivist ontologies are usually associated with interpretive approaches to social constructionism, where multiple realities are experienced, constructed, and interpreted in many ways.

Subjectivist researchers embrace ethnographic, ethnomethodological, dialogic, hermeneutic, constructivist,<sup>4</sup> and phenomenological approaches to research and may focus on micro-interactions (e.g., senior management strategy team meetings, work interactions) or more macro level organizational and societal discourses and their impact (e.g., on organizational identities/subjectivities).

In the fluid boundary between subjectivism and objectivism, discursive (e.g., Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008), symbolic (e.g., Burnier, 2005), and some social construction-oriented researchers

(e.g., Rosenthal & Pecci, 2006) study how people construct, are constructed by, and experience social reality as real and factual. Ethnomethodologists also study perceived objective “rules” (roles, norms, statuses, etc.) that are subjectively interpreted and enacted through commonsense knowledge. It is also important to note that a subjectivist researcher may study the same topics and use the same methods as an objectivist researcher but in very different ways. For example, ethnographers may work from a subjectivist or objectivist problematic, depending on how they go about doing their ethnographic work. Ethnography is about immersing oneself in the research site over a period of time as a means of studying culture and other organizational processes and issues. While subjectivist ethnographies explore how participants experience, give meaning to, interpret, and make sense of their lives in multiple ways, and are written from the perspective of a “room with a view” (Cunliffe, 2010), objectivist/realist ethnographies are dispassionate factual accounts of characteristics, process, values, and norms, and so on. Van Maanen’s (1991) account of how social order is maintained through the socialization process, emotional management, close supervision, and stage management at Disney is explicitly objectivist in that he reports “facts” based on his observations, whereas Watson’s (1995) tale of rhetoric and sensemaking is subjectivist in that he interweaves himself as a social actor into the sensemaking process. Organizational ethnographers, therefore, need to consider how their ontological and epistemological assumptions will play through their research design and practice.

*The intersubjectivism problematic.* Within this problematic lie various positions from the Habermassian (1984) notion that intersubjective agreement is the way we jointly construct a sense of community (Geiger, 2009) to the Ricoeurian (1992) notion that we are always selves-in-relation-to-others. Two early scholars known for their work in this area, Schutz (1970) and Garfinkel (1967), frame intersubjectivity as a commonly experienced and understood world of shared meanings, interpretations, and culture: **A commonsense knowledge enacted in social practice and studied through “interpretive procedures” such as turn taking or a reciprocity of perspectives (see Schegloff, 1992, and Gephart, 1993, for examples). I suggest this form of intersubjectivity lies at the boundaries of subjectivism and intersubjectivism because the focus often lies on subject interpretations theorized by researchers using “outside” academic constructs.**

Alfred Schutz (1970) did much to bridge the gap between subjectivism and intersubjectivism, arguing that while we experience and interpret the world from within our own biography as free actors, we also share our world with others in a mutual relationship, “This present, common to both of us, is the pure sphere of the ‘We.’ . . . the I appears only after the reflective turning” (p. 167). In other words, it is only after the moment of experience—which is always a shared experience—that we separate ourselves out as an “I.” For Schutz, “in the last analysis each actor remains **biographically unique**” (Heritage, 1984, p. 59). Similarly, Garfinkel’s (1967) problem of relevance is an individual issue of meaning, “namely, how does the member of society decide the meaning of a rule and its applicability?” (Leiter, 1980, p. 31). So while Schutz and Garfinkel gave ethnomethodology its rationale in terms of the interrelated nature of our individual biographies, the world is still a phenomenon socially constructed by intersubjective facts, observed and theorized from the outside in terms of schemes, procedures of sensemaking, stories, categories, and rules. Intersubjectivity is construed as cognitive (commonsense understandings), interactional (social and/or conversational practices), and theorized as a process of sensemaking at an individual or community level.

More contemporary hermeneutic and dialogical interpretations (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Shotter, 2008) construe intersubjectivity as ontology—a way of being in the world—where we are always embedded in an intricate flow of complexly entwined relationally responsive activities in which “the barrier between us and others is impalpable” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 174). Thus, we are always selves-in-relation-to-others. For Ricoeur (1991, 1992) we coexist and are copresent with other people rather than with social phenomena, and our identities and shared understandings of

our social world are shaped between us (intentionally and otherwise) in our everyday interactions and experienced differently (relationality). From this perspective, intersubjectivity does not just emphasize the “we” but also embedded and embodied interrelated experiences and in situ meanings (Cunliffe, 2003, 2008), which shift as we move through conversations over time and people (durability and meanings).

Ricoeur (1992) argues that we live in and construct each others’ narratives—narratives that have both temporality (in the sense of being ongoing by playing through our ways of speaking and acting)—but are also always new because “an utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing and outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable. . . . What is given is completely transformed in what is created” (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 119–120; durability and historicity). Thus, living conversation and relationships between people are important arenas of study: not in terms of identifying procedures or mechanisms but insights into how we relate with others. **What differentiates intersubjectivism from subjectivism is we-ness, our complexly interwoven, actively responsive relationships which are neither fully within nor outside our control as researchers or organizational members.** We create some sort of sense between us in fluid, relational, responsive, embedded, and embodied interactions (Cunliffe, 2008; Gergen, 2009), and so meanings are multiple, shifting, and always embedded in a time, place, and in relation to others. Researchers work with research participants from within conversations to explore how we ongoingly interpret, understand, and relate with others and our surroundings (a reflexive hermeneutic). This is not with the aim of developing theories or models by applying academic procedures or constructs, or analyzing the mechanics of conversation or language but exploring interpretive insights with organizational members into how we might see ourselves differently and change the way we engage in organization life (pragmatic knowing in situ). Shotter (2008) calls this “withness-thinking” because our research “must begin in quite a different way: we must study how, by interweaving our talk in with our other actions and activities, we can first develop and sustain between us, different, particular ways of relating ourselves to each other” (p.100)—that is, from within our activities and conversations.

Intersubjective researchers draw on hermeneutic phenomenology, relationally responsive social constructionism, and Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, that is, living utterances and the two-way movement of dialogue between people in particular moments and particular settings, in which meaning emerges in the interaction and struggle of back-and-forth conversation between people (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92). They focus on micro level conversations, relationships, and insights about specific issues, and their research accounts are transitory understandings shaped dialectically between all research participants, particular to a moment but which may offer interpretive insights for others.

To summarize, the key ontological and epistemological question “whether or not human beings can achieve any form of knowledge that is independent of their own subjective construction, since they are the agents through which knowledge is perceived or experienced” (Morgan and Smircich, 1980, p. 493) will, of course, depend on our problematic. Objectivists answer “yes,” researchers can be detached and neutral experts can use the scientific methods of positivism to accurately represent the underlying laws, generative mechanisms, discourses, systems of power, structures, and behaviors. They can ultimately predict what will happen and apply knowledge to practice because ontology and epistemology are distinct (single hermeneutic). Subjectivists answer “no,” both researcher and actor knowledge is contextual, situated in practice and oftentimes tacit—based on our perceptions and interpretations as we act and make sense of what is going on around us. Thus, ontology and epistemology are related in commonsense actions and constructions (Leiter, 1980) and reflect a double hermeneutic. Intersubjectivists also answer “no”—knowing is in situ, simultaneously used and created intuitively and deliberately between us as we go about living our lives: a knowing-from-within that is simultaneously retrospective/contemporaneous/prospective (Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004) in which ontology and epistemology are inseparable (a reflexive hermeneutic).

## *The Relationship Between Epistemology, Method, and Language*

Having examined the relationship between ontology and epistemology within each problematic, let us now address the remaining question of what research methods and accounts look like within each problematic. As can be seen from Figure 1, this is where the increasingly pluralistic nature of OMT means that approaches and methods span the boundaries of each problematic: The crucial difference lies in how our metatheoretical assumptions influence our method, theorizing and writing.

It is important to begin by differentiating between epistemology and methodology. The terms are often conflated, but they are different: Epistemology considers broader, more philosophical issues relating to the nature of knowledge, while methodology is concerned with the method of data collection and form of analysis we use to generate knowledge. Much of the preceding discussion regarding paradigms, typologies, and research perspectives is an epistemological one, concerned with whether we work from positivist, postpositivist, interpretivist, and so on, epistemologies. I will now move on to methodology.

A range of research methods are available, and while some are specific to a particular perspective because of their underlying suppositions, others can be used across problematics. Interviewing is a good example (see Dundan & Ryan, 2009). Within an objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology, structured interviews are used to discover “facts”; data are often coded, categorized, and analyzed statistically. Within a subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, semistructured and unstructured interviews are used to explore different meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of organizational members. Intersubjective “interviews” are conversations in which participants jointly reflect on issues and discuss insights (see Boje, 1991; Cunliffe, 2002; Ibarra, 1999, for contrasting uses of interviews).

Similarly, Locke (2001, pp. 12-13) notes that although grounded theory is historically situated in objectivism, it is also used by subjectivist researchers (see Charmaz, 2006, for a social constructionist approach; Gagnon, 2008, for a discursive approach; Grandy & Wicks, 2008, for an institutional theory approach and Fendt & Sachs, 2008, for a survey and critique). Case studies are also used across the objectivist problematic and the subjectivist problematic but written in very different ways as factual accounts, contested sites, or stories and narratives of organizational members’ experiences (see Faems, Janssens, Madhok, & Van Looy, 2008, for a positivist, Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008, and Maguire & Hardy, 2009, for a postpositivist, and Patriotta, 2003, for an interpretive approach).<sup>5</sup>

Whether using interviews, grounded theory, or case studies, objectivist researchers are concerned with discovering empirically verifiable facts—subjectivist researchers “with the understanding of local meanings and everyday symbolic worlds” (Prasad & Prasad, 2002, p. 7). In addition, while some subjectivist studies and most intersubjective studies focus on micropractices, everyday interactions within a context (e.g., Fletcher, 2007), other subjectivist studies take a macro perspective (e.g., Shenkar, Luo, & Yeheskel, 2009).

Language is important in crafting careful and consistent accounts, for example, talking about “the organization,” “identity,” and “norms” as existing and factual is more consistent with an objectivist than a subjectivist or intersubjectivist problematic where it is more appropriate to write in tentative ways about possible meanings and fluid interpretations potentially shared between people.

Below I will give examples of illustrative studies specific to a particular problematic and epistemological stance. I selected the particular studies for a number of reasons: (a) because they display one or more of the ontological issues of relationality, durability and so on, as well as differences in epistemology; (b) the authors explicitly state their underlying assumptions, theoretical positioning, and/or reasoning behind the choice of method; (c) they cover a range of OMT topics and research methods (as do the citations throughout this article); and (d) they exemplify the language and style of writing typical of the problematic. Readers should consult the full article for further elucidation. The

excerpts should not be taken as sole exemplars, because as we have seen, each problematic holds a cluster of different positions and methods. However, they are helpful in drawing attention to the link between ontology, epistemology, method, and language, and in flagging some of the differences in problematics highlighted in Figure 1. In the following section, I will identify a number of characteristics of each example; further characteristics may be noted through comparison with Figure 1.

### **The Objectivist Problematic**

**Reality as concrete—positivist epistemologies.** Naive realists adopt a positivist epistemology using scientific and naturalistic methods to accurately describe and predict the behavior of phenomena. Believing we can directly observe and measure reality, they used data collection methods such as surveys, structured interviews, focus groups, and observation so that facts can be discovered and data categorized or coded to form the basis for generalization and prediction. They often use multiple methods, triangulation, and possibly member checking to ensure the accuracy of data findings. Theory building takes place through the testing of hypotheses and propositions. In the two examples below, we find the research accounts are monologic—written in the third person, in language that is abstract/academic and definitive. Humans are dealt with as objects (“role models,” “external parties,” “employees”), in the second example determined by the exchange process. Knowledge is syntagmatic, providing a theoretical, cause–effect explanation of the relationship between behaviors, theoretical constructs, and variables. The first study proposes an adaptation model of identity construction and transition with antecedent factors and possible outcomes and the second study tests a number of hypotheses:

Role prototyping consists of discerning what constitutes a credible role performance. As the quotes in Table 3 illustrate, people direct their attention to exemplars . . . By observing successful role models, participants learned tacit display rules and ways of signaling important professional traits. (Ibarra, 1999, p. 774. *Interviews, data categorized through grounded theory*)

These findings can be explained by elements of JCT and social exchange theory. As expected, when both LMX quality and empowerment were low the most negative outcomes resulted, and in general, when both variables were high the most positive outcomes resulted. More interestingly, our results showed that when employees lack motivation in their jobs (low empowerment), the LMX relationship becomes more important. (Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, 2009, p. 379. *Surveys, factor analysis, regression analysis*)

The authors view the relationship between behaviors, parties, and actions as sequential (historicity), in the latter case LMX (Leader-member Exchange theory) quality leading to negative outcomes. Both studies exemplify the single hermeneutic with the researcher as an independent observer, theorizer, and predictor of behavior—yet as absent in the text. Note also the difference between the snapshot picture offered with the emphasis on emergence and action in excerpts 1 and 3 below.

**Reality as process—network and postpositivist epistemologies.** As we have seen, process, network, and critically based epistemologies cover a range of concerns, with positivist studies taking a functionalist perspective and postpositivist a critical stance. The common thread lies in viewing reality as a network of elements and a process of becoming. Methods such as ethnography, observation, interviews, grounded theory, and case studies are common to each, but the focus of attention differs: system studies address the effectiveness and functionality of organizational systems and/or the relationship with the environment, whereas ANT studies use boundary object analysis to study how artifacts and/or objects might be used differently and come together to create a network or macro actor. Critical realists often work from the Marxist perspective of historical materialism, using a



retroductive research strategy based on abstract analytical constructions and empirically observable behavior (Reed, 2005). They use texts and secondary data, interviews, case studies, and so on to identify the mechanisms influencing the development of socioeconomic and political phenomena (e.g., Burgoyne, 2009; Leca & Naccache, 2006). **Critical and ANT-based studies use postpositivist epistemologies, “holding that reality can be known only probabilistically, and hence verification is not possible”** (Gephart, 2004, p. 456). Critical theorists might use critical ethnography to expose the ideological nature of processes of production and consumption (e.g., Korczynski, 2005). The first example takes an institutional (macro) perspective to develop a framework for analyzing the environmental strategies of firms:

It also emerged that conformity to good environmental practice arises from the network dynamics both between MNCs and governmental agencies and among MNCs themselves. The MNCs actively generate isomorphism through the relational frameworks they enjoy with institutional bodies. They typically provide the technical knowledge relevant to new regulations and are often members of relevant advisory committees or working parties. (Child & Tsai, 2005, p. 116. *Institutional theory. Case studies, coded semi-structured interviews*)

The sub-configuration that constitutes a workforce with the tendency to resist control, co-exists simultaneously with the sub-configuration that constitutes a management team with the tendency to assert control. The outcome, however, depends upon the relative strengths of the tendencies. Notice, then, that it is *the generative ensemble as a totality, and not any of its individual components that generates the powers and, therefore, the tendencies the generative ensemble has*. (Hesketh & Fleetwood, 2006, p. 689. *Italics in original. Critical realism. Interviews*)

So what did the institutional entrepreneurs actually do? They *recruited, enrolled, translated the interests, and stabilized the connections*, just as actants and actors building a macro actor do. (Czarniawska, 2009, p. 438. *Actor Network Theory. Historical narrative analysis*)

You may notice that all the authors above study the issue/issues from an outside perspective (single hermeneutic); **examine the relationship between network objects, sub-configurations, and actants (nonhuman and human actors); and assume a degree of durability of structures, sub-configurations, and actions as they emerge over time.** The first two excerpts take a macro perspective, focusing on the relationship between organization and their environment and between HR (human resources) practices and organizational performance; both use interviews but analyze the data in different ways: coding versus retrodiction. Czarniawska carries out a historical narrative analysis of a single case, the London School of Economics, **using the process of translation as a theoretical frame.** Each takes a syntagmatic perspective but theorizes differently: Child & Tsai develop a predictive frame, Hesketh & Fleetwood robust explanations or tendential predictions, and Czarniawska constructs a “tentative theory of the phenomenon of institutional entrepreneurship” (p. 423) within a metaphor of institutions as anthills. All three excerpts imbue objects (sub-configurations, generative ensemble, the macro actor) with subjectivity or agency, for example, “The MNCs [object] actively generate [agency] . . .”.

*Discursive realities—poststructural and critical epistemologies.* Discursively based studies may take poststructural, postmodern, or postcolonial perspectives to expose how fragmented and contested realities, cultures, subjectivities, and processes of production and consumption are shaped by “d” discourse (talk and text) at the micro level and “D” Discourse (language systems) at the macro level (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Researchers analyze or deconstruct (exposing the binary, oppositional, contradictory, and ephemeral nature of language) D/discourse in the form of interview comments, e-mails, CEO statements, an organization’s website content, policy statements, media

representations, and so on. Although textual analysis focuses on language (e.g., Livesey, Hartman, Stafford, & Shearer, 2009), semiotic analysis is concerned with the impact of artifacts, signs, symbols, and visual images on organizational culture, employees, consumers, and so on (e.g., Hancock, 2005).

In the three examples below, note that the ontology is still objectivist: “the body,” the “text” influenced by a “discursive struggle” (rather than a fight between employees and management), and a “symbolic ideal” of vitality, and the subject is construed as a cyborg body (an inscribed object). The first two examples examine the relationship between body/systems and text/social action, with the aim of theorizing control and resistance strategies and legitimation processes (syntagmatic knowledge). In excerpt 3, the author is concerned with offering a “plausible account” of the relationship between artifacts and the reality of the subordinating role of organizations. It is interesting to note the change from the more objective language of the first two examples to the poetic language of the third, a way of writing consistent with the topic of aesthetics or sensory experiences (Strati, 2009). The third example also illustrates the tension lying at the boundary of the objectivist–subjectivist problematics, where the ontology is objectivist in that the artifact can mobilize action (typical of semiotic analysis), but the epistemology is the author’s subjective interpretation of the symbolism and meaning of the brochure.

Control strategies, therefore, address not the existence of a cyborg identity per se but the rates of flow of information, and code between the body and the system, and the writing of code that inscribes and recrafts the cyborg body. Politicizing resistance to body-surveillance entails disrupting flows of information and code, recodifying, rewriting and resignifying categorizations of flesh-made-information at local rhizomes (Ball, 2005, p. 102. *Poststructuralism, review of literature*).

This news report is a typical example of a discursive struggle over shutdowns. The genre of the focal text is business news, but the text is also an approving commentary on the “official” information given by Wärtsilä’s corporate communications. The text thus represents a hybrid genre, typical of contemporary media (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1990). On the whole, global capitalist discourse is the dominant discourse used . . . (Vaara & Tienari, 2008, p. 989. *Critical Discourse Analysis of text*).

. . . this cover image from a PricewaterhouseCoopers graduate recruitment brochure “beautifully” represents a symbolic and aestheticized ideal of the vitality of modern life. Energy, evident in the natural landscape, the gleaming sunshine and the dynamism of human technology that both dominates its environment yet, at the same time, appears integral [to] it, underscores this image at every level. (Hancock, 2006, p. 629. *Semiotic Analysis of documents*).

There is still a sense of durability in terms of a cyborg identity and the dominance of global capitalist discourse but in excerpt 3 meaning is contextualized to the artifact. In terms of historicity, time and progress are contested, hegemonic, and theorized as rupture across each study—very different to the Ibarra and Harris examples in the first section.

### **The Subjectivist Problematic**

*Reality as symbolically constructed—ethnomethodological and dramaturgical epistemologies.* Situated in the work of Garfinkel (1967), Goffman (1959), and Sacks (1963), who were each concerned with “human beings attending to each other and ostensibly ‘out-there’ inanimate objects in subtle, nuanced and fine-grained ways . . . [foregrounding] language use and members’ methods” (Samra-Fredericks &

Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008, p. 656), this way of studying organizational life explores how people interpret, make sense of, or manage roles, expectations, and impressions in their social interactions. Researchers study naturally occurring practices, events, and talk in meetings using observation, audio and audiovisual recordings, and sometimes interviews, analyzed using ethnomethods such as mundane reasoning analysis, conversation analysis, and dramaturgy (e.g., Marcon & Gopal, 2008).

Hindmarsh and Pilnick (below) carry out a microanalysis of anesthetists and operating department assistants at work, using interviews and videotaped interactions to study the verbal and embodied aspects of teamwork. Their account includes photographs, conversation analysis, and a description of the physical movements of the team consistent with their topic and their problematic. Although not seen here, Moeran offers a partly personal/partly academic story of the symbolic production of advertising authenticity and creativity, where the researcher's voice is clearly in the research (mediation). **This is typical of many interpretive studies where the researcher is positioned as another interpreting knowing actor rather than objective observer (double hermeneutic).** Both studies offer the thick interpretations and descriptions associated with the subjectivist focus on contextual and constructed meanings and subjectively experienced time and place (historicity): analyzing the relationship between action, language, and the mechanics of conversation (e.g., turn taking) to determine how organizational members create shared constructions of reality.

His practical knowledge of anatomy, laryngoscopes and of the embodied work of intubation provides him [the anaesthetist] with the resources to suggest that the student is looking too far towards the back of the throat—at the oesophagus rather than the trachea. Therefore, he cannot only recognize that the student is having difficulty but also give a sense as to where those difficulties might lie—that he is looking at the wrong hole. The anaesthetist's expertise is in making sense of the embodied conduct of the student in order to make available the seemingly "hidden"- and subjective perspective of the student. (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007, pp. 1411–1412. *Conversation analysis, interviews, videos.*)

This brings me to a discussion of the credibility performance of agency-client relations. In some respects the very structure of a corporation can be seen in how it arranges performances of the kind discussed here. Like an individual, a corporation may be seen as a performer—"a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too-human task of staging a performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 244). (Moeran, 2005, p. 917. *Dramaturgy, case study, participant observation*)

Both studies are concerned with the sensemaking process of reflexive human actors—the performance of interpreting and perceiving actors who in example 1 are people and in example 2 both individuals and organizations (*relationality*). The form of knowledge generated is both *pragmatic* in terms of everyday practices and *syntagmatic* in terms of theorizing the performance of actors.

*Socially-constructed realities—ethnographic, phenomenological, and hermeneutic epistemologies.* Researchers working from a social constructionist perspective explore how people use language, routinely and creatively, to shape and enact social realities, identities, and actions in their everyday conversations and actions (Watson, 2001). Their methods include ethnography (observing, participating, listening, asking questions); autobiography; unstructured interviews; narrative analysis of talk, media, and texts; and recording conversations, and so on.

The main difference between this and the previous epistemology is that the researcher is interested in participants' multiple interpretations and reflections. Thus, relationality lies in people rather than language per se and accounts are written to include participants' perspectives—stories incorporating feelings and reactions, similarities, and differences rather than variables or mechanisms because meanings are contextual, evocative, and negotiated. In both examples the authors interpret

the meaning-making activities of individuals, implicitly using an abductive approach where they move between theory (neutralizing, reframing, dialectics) and practice (participant accounts), each informing the other. Indeed, Watson uses “the technique of the *précis*, a concept of the ‘master trope’ . . . the deployment of a metaphor . . .” (p. 434)—which he likens to literary criticism—not to theorize, but to offer insights into identity work that may connect with reader experiences (pragmatic knowledge). This is in contrast to the deductive, theory-testing approach of positivism. The microanalysis adopted in both examples is consistent with social constructionist approaches, focusing on subjectively experienced events (historicity) offering insights into processes of social construction and sensemaking in specific contexts (durability, meanings):

They all tried to assimilate and adapt to this rhetoric, neutralizing, reframing or minimizing facts that counter the official narrative, or their understanding and interpretation of it. . . . Bruno appears to be a natural adopter of the official discourse, and to feel at ease reproducing it . . . Takashi, in turn, appears to experience greater trouble and seeks out a synthesis of his personal and professional values on the one hand and of the new discourse on the other. (Steuer & Wood, 2008, p. 583. *Narrative and Storytelling, in-depth interviews.*)

This story, and the reflection upon it, is in the most recent of Leonard Hill’s writings. It illustrates how a “narrating to self” (occasioned by a decision to write a life-reflection document for others) of events from the past can play its part in an integral part of identity work. It was not a matter of the story coming to mind first and the interpretive work following, Leonard explained in an interview. The story “came up to the surface” in the process of “writing my life reflections.” We are seeing here an example of the dialectical relationship between the internal/inward-facing aspect of identity work and the external/outward-facing aspect . . . (Watson, 2009, p. 463. *Narrative and Autobiography*)

In both examples, the authors talk about the subjective experience of individuals, their contextualized perceptions, actions, and stories (relationality, historicity). Although in the first example the researcher is an outside interpreter of participant actions, in the second example both Watson and Leonard are implicitly knowledgeable and reflexively embedded in the text through Leonard’s “reflexive and creative writing” (p. 444), an excerpt from their conversation, and Watson bringing the reader in by the use of phrases such as “we are seeing here . . .” (double hermeneutic). Watson is a mediator of meanings between Leonard and the (academic) reader. It is a very different form of research account to the previous examples, where the researcher’s voice is both absent (no use of “I” or “we”) yet powerfully present through neutral, expert observations. Watson’s account is consistent with the boundaries of the subjectivist and intersubjective problematics.

### *The Intersubjective Problematic*

*Relational realities—relational and reflexive epistemologies.* Intersubjectivism draws on a relational ontology to explore the relational, embodied, and intersubjective nature of human experience. Knowledge “is an embodied and intersubjective *knowing*, that may be understood through radically reflexive practice” (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 129, my italics). **The aim of relational research is insight—seeing their (and our) situation differently (McNamee & Gergen, 1998)—emerging from meaningful dialogue between participants (relationality).** The researcher is an integral part of meaning making both in and after the moment, and therefore acknowledges his or her role in the process (reflexive hermeneutic). Methods used include relational analysis (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2010); situated dialogic action research (Shotter, 2009); social poetics (Cunliffe, 2002); and a dialogic interpretation/analysis of the intersubjectivity of others (e.g., Beech, 2008). Note in the example below, the researcher (as

consultant) is intimately involved in the relational and situated moments of making sense (mediation). This is a longer excerpt than others to illustrate the relationally responsive nature of dialogue and the very pragmatic and reflexive nature of this form of research consisting of reflective dialogue *within a situation*:

This example offers an illustration of how a change in a person's relationship to her or his surroundings might occur, and how a uniquely new, shared understanding can be jointly created in a responsive, dialogical moment between research participants:

Tony (reflecting on his first 15 days in COMP, a very large global company): We're not professional here in the way we do stuff, so there is a real opportunity to make a difference.  
Consultant: What has been striking you that epitomizes where the issues and the opportunities are?

Tony: This very day, on day 15, I encountered it. We are trying to deliver cost savings to the CEO and VP-IT. We said we are going to reduce the amount of money we spend on IT. And they said, "Over our dead body! You can't do that to us. We need this technology to meet our business plans so we're going to spend what we said we are going to spend and you guys can't tell us anything different." And that's interesting, because it wouldn't happen in most other companies. Of course the segments have the power but usually they would consult the function, and we would say of course we can't tell you what you

Consultant: So how do you move things on? Can you say, "What we are looking for is an honest, frank account of what this is actually going to take. This is how we are going to find this difficult. This is what it looks like when it starts to move. As it begins to move this is what we are beginning to reap?" Not generalizations but real stories, real vignettes, when people in the room go . . .

Tony: . . . I GET IT! (Shotter, 2010, pp. 272-273. *Situated Dialogic Action Research, conversation*).

This example illustrates how all research participants make meaning between us in living conversation in the moment (meanings): where the researcher asks questions "What is striking you?" Tony thinks through what he sees as the issues, and the researcher offers suggestions that Tony "gets" and can move on (relationality, mediation). Intersubjectivism is notably different to objectivist and subjectivist problematics in terms of the form of knowing in-situ where all participants are implicitly knowledgeable and therefore work together in living conversation to shape meanings, insights, and a way of moving on (reflexive hermeneutics). All research participants, including the researcher, are embodied insiders (Cunliffe, 2003), and readers may take insights from what the conversation is about as well as *how* insights occur.

Each of the excerpts above offers a specific example of the concerns, methods, and language that research accounts take within each problematic. What should be noted is not just the focus or concern of each piece, but what is construed as "data," how data is analyzed and "theorized," the language used, and the style of writing. Within the objectivist problematic, the focus is on knowledge (the "what"); in the intersubjective problematic, the focus is on the process of creating meaning and insights ("how"); while in the subjective problematic, the focus could be both depending on the researcher's interests and positioning. The difference is perhaps most distinct between the first and the last—the Ibarra and Shotter excerpts—a difference that highlights the importance of crafting our research in line with our intellectual commitments.

## Conclusion

In updating Morgan and Smircich's influential typology, I have replaced the original subject–object continuum with three knowledge problematics, arguing that they better reflect the range of metatheoretical assumptions and blurred genres underpinning contemporary research and theorizing. The three problematics highlight the long heritage of qualitative research in social science and explicate the impact of contemporary debates about the nature of social experience on the ways in which we study organizations. Because OMT draws on this heritage, we need to be able to situate and legitimate our work within the broader field of scholarship, and knowledge problematics can help qualitative researchers “locate themselves in the tensions that characterize fields of knowledge . . . marked by multiplicity and competing discourses that do not map tidily onto one another” (Lather, 2006, p. 47). The key is not to ask “Are these the right categories or who fits in each? But: Are these differences that make a difference?” (Deetz, 1996, p. 191). In other words, to understand how the interplay and tensions within and between different problematics and methodologies inform, differentiate, and make our work significant.

But the revisioning is not just an intellectual task, it is also a political one. The paradigm debate still rages in the institutional practices of our discipline: Researchers have deep commitments to particular perspectives that drive their work—commitments influenced by the research traditions in which we have been trained, the research community we are a part of, personal preference and interest, and also the political choices we face in getting published, promoted, and tenured. After 30 years, the subject–object dualism is still inherently ideological with political and performative consequences (Deetz, 1996): Objectivism is privileged as more methodologically rigorous and scientific, subjectivism as pejoratively “anything goes,” where “there is no such thing as truth; everything is a matter of rhetoric and power; all viewpoints are relative; talk of ‘facts’ or ‘objectivity’ is merely a specious front for the promotion of specific interests” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 165). Although challenged by Prasad and Prasad (2002), who suggest there has been a coming of age for more subjectivist and interpretive forms of research, qualitative researchers working from subjectivist perspectives still find themselves having to justify their methodology and conform to journal norms of “acceptable” (often syntagmatic, positivist/neopositivist) qualitative work.

One purpose of my revisioned map is to offer a countervailing resource to these institutional forces, to show how an understanding of each problematic can help us recognize and engage with its unique contribution to OMT. I am for pluralism—there is no one best problematic; each has something different to offer and together they can provide a more fully developed understanding of the complexities of organizations and organizational life. Insights from objectivist- and subjectivist-based research, statistical and narrative methods can help create a fuller understanding of organizational practices (see the October 2008 issue of ORM for examples relating to strategy).

The revisioned map also provides researchers with an ontological, epistemological, and methodological “logic” for exploring different and uncommon approaches and methods in their discipline, such as the use of autoethnography in their study of international management by Karra and Phillips (2008). For this reason, I offer examples that cover a wider range of OMT disciplines (including accounting, organizational behavior, information systems, entrepreneurship, marketing, strategy, and human resource management), topics (e.g., culture, identity, and technology), and methods than the 1980 typology.

Finally, I have argued that a revisioned map based on problematics can provide a basis for crafting our research in consistent, careful, thoughtful, and informed ways. But what does this mean? In a world where the objectivist problematic and scientific models of research still prevail, many researchers are interested in developing new ways of studying organizations and new forms of knowledge. Morgan and Smircich asked us to do justice to the nature of the social research by embracing different approaches and methods, and Daft (1983) urged us to move beyond sheer scientific techniques to experiment and learn the craft of research. The difference between technique



and craft is crucial. Methods are systematic techniques, efficient, measurable, and valid ways of gathering and analyzing data. If we are driven by method, we may end up shaping our research around methodological obligations and the need to fit “data” to technical requirements, rather than being sensitive to what is going on around us. Craftwork is construed as the more exploratory expressions of embedded and aesthetic forms of knowledge typical of subjectivist (some) and inter-subjectivist problematics:

Craft is a starting place, a set of possibilities.

It avoids absolutes, certainties, over-robust definitions, solace.

It offers places, interstices, where objects and people meet.

It is unstable, contingent.

It is about experience. It is about desire.

It can be beautiful. (de Waal<sup>6</sup>)

Of course, we do not typically think of our research as needing to be beautiful—we think of the need for rigor, legitimacy, and validity. Yet one does not necessarily negate the other. Scientific rigor is about “experimental control, planning, and the anticipation and removal of uncertainties that could upset the research blueprint” (Daft, 1983, p. 540), where beauty lies in a neatly fitting study with no extraneous variables. From an interpretive perspective rigor and beauty are about telling authentic and plausible stories (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993) that are elegant and may even be poetic.<sup>7</sup> I suggest beauty and rigor lie in crafting our research carefully and persuasively, being open and responsive to the possibilities of experience, people, ideas, materials and processes, and understanding and enacting the relationship between our metatheoretical position, our methods, our theorizing, and their practical consequences. The revisioned map provides a way of understanding the various philosophical and methodological possibilities open to us as qualitative researchers.

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### Notes

1. The table and discussion are based on a much expanded version of an idea proposed originally in Cunliffe's (2010).
2. In contrast to the original typology of Morgan and Smircich, I have collapsed reality as process (focusing on the system) and reality as contextual fields (focusing on system–environment relationships) into systems and process-based epistemologies, suggesting that despite the differences, the common threads are “process,” “change,” and “relationships” between entities and objects.
3. For examples and further explanation see the 2008 *Organization Studies* special issue and Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004.

4. Constructivists see construction as an individual cognitive process influenced by social relationships. They explore how individuals make sense of their social situations and generate theoretical explanations from their empirical work.
5. See the argument for a polyvocal approach to case studies by Buchanan and Dawson (2007).
6. [http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/contemporary/crafts/what\\_is\\_craft/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/contemporary/crafts/what_is_craft/) (Accessed May 4, 2009).
7. See Lee & Hubona (2009) for an alternative perspective.

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## Bio

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