

SOCIAL RESEARCH

Issues, methods and process

THIRD EDITION

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Preface to the third edition

When this book was first published in 1993, it was my belief that it could fill a gap in the literature on social research. It aimed to do this by bringing together, in one volume, a discussion of the issues, methods and processes of social research. While it could never be exhaustive and I was very uncertain whether it would be successful it was, contrary to the expectations of those few persons who sought to support my endeavours by telling me that there were 'plenty of books' already on the market, a success. Then, with the publication of a second edition and following substantial revision, sales increased even further and I received communications from people who were very complimentary and supportive of the book. Now, as I write the third edition, I am delighted that people still find it a book worth reading.

As with the second edition, I approached the revision of this book with some trepidation. After all, the structure and content clearly appeal to a wide audience, with varying degrees of research experience, across a range of disciplines. At the same time, it is necessary that its content reflects the developments that have occurred within the interdisciplinary field of social research. Given this, I have undertaken a number of revisions to reflect these changes.

In the first part of the book, revisions and additions have been made in order to reflect new ways of thinking about the relationship between theory and research and values and ethics in the research process. This takes onboard advances in post-empiricist thinking, as well as the relations between values, objectivity and data collection. Also, where necessary, recommended readings have been updated, as well as references to studies that form the bases of discussions throughout the book. With the valuable help of my friend and colleague, Malcolm Williams, additions have been made to the chapter on questionnaires (a method that, since the second edition, I have again utilized in employing what is known as Delphi-style questionnaires), while discussions on research on the internet,

narratives, case studies and new technologies, among others, have been introduced in the second part of the book. The reader will also detect many other changes, the intention of which is to aid understanding by keeping up-to-date with the latest innovations in social research.

In making these changes, I hope that you find a third edition that is richer in insight, but retains the original philosophy that motivated me to write the book in the first place: that is, to further our understanding of ourselves and each other and explain the relations and dynamics that are generated in and through societies, we need to produce and maintain reflexive and disciplined practices in the social sciences. The overall purpose of this is to enable an engagement with social issues in order that people are better able to understand one another within improved conditions for all.

Introduction

Research methods are a central part of the social sciences. They constitute an important part of their curricula and provide a means through which their intellectual development is enhanced. Indeed, their status as 'sciences' is often justified by alluding to the technical aspects of research methods, while the very term 'science' carries with it ideas of areas of study which are accessible only to those who have undergone a lengthy training process in order to understand their inner workings. At the same time there are also those within these disciplines who might characterize themselves as 'theorists' rather than 'researchers'. The latter concentrate on the process of research, while the former might argue that they gain an advantage in having a distance from the empirical world in order to reflect upon those processes and their products.

There is merit in both of these views for they are not the opposites that their respective protagonists often claim them to be. As we shall see, both innovative thinking and a meticulous attention to the detail of data gathering inform the practice of social research. Theory, methodology and methods are all part of the issues and processes that surround and inform the discipline. These differences, however, frequently lead to disputes, as well as confusions, over the nature of research and the methods which it should employ in pursuance of its aims. For this reason, in the first three chapters of this book, there is an examination of the ways in which we gain our knowledge of the social world, the relationships that are held to exist between theory and research, and the place of values and ethics in research practice. While these issues are complicated, they are also fundamental to an understanding of research methods. Without this, issues and methods can become separated and practitioners left with the impression that they simply have to learn various techniques in order to undertake research. The purpose of this first part, therefore, is one of clarification.

A narrow attitude to research practice perpetuates the idea that theory, ethics, values and methods of social research are distinct topics and that researchers, despite living and participating in the societies that they study, are somehow distinct from the social world which is the object of their investigations. This distance between them and the subjects of their study permits a limited notion of value-freedom to be maintained. As will become evident, this is open to considerable debate for our very membership of a society, it can be argued, is a necessary condition for understanding the social world of which we are a part, as well as being a fact of life from which we cannot escape. Indeed, such participation may be a prerequisite of objectivity. In having an understanding of these debates and the applicability of different methods of research, improved research and more inquiring and confident researchers will be the end result. To this extent, it is important to be aware of not only the strengths of particular methods of social research, but also their limitations.

THE AIM OF THE BOOK

Discussions of issues forms the starting-point for the philosophy which underlies this book: that is, that issues and methods cannot be simply separated and that we, as researchers, will produce more systematic understandings of the social world by being aware of these debates, their implications for research and our place within them. That noted, this book is also written for those who do not have a detailed knowledge of the issues within social research and its practices. As such, these debates are presented in a way that does not assume a detailed prior knowledge on the part of the reader, while additional readings are provided for those who have the inclination and time to pursue issues in greater depth.

The book itself is divided into two parts. Part I examines the issues and Part II discusses the methods used in research. Because the aim is to produce an accessible text, there is a limit to which the connections between Parts I and II can be developed. For this reason both sides of a debate are presented and parallels are drawn between Part II and the earlier discussions in Part I. Nevertheless, all too often reading can be a passive exercise in which we, as the readers, act as the recipients of the text, but do not engage with it by criticizing, analysing and cross-referencing the materials covered (May 1999a). To assist in this process, questions appear at the end of each chapter that are intended to assist you in reflecting upon its content.

AN OVERVIEW OF PART I

Part I introduces the debates involved in and around the research process. This part of the book is based on the belief that values, prejudices

and prior beliefs affect the way we all think about an event, object, person or subject. An awareness and consideration of how these relate to the research process is thus taken to be able to sharpen and focus our decisions and choices in research work.

Towards this end, Chapter 1 covers the different perspectives which exist on social research by examining their arguments and intellectual foundations. To use a building analogy, if we do not understand the foundations of our work, then we are likely to end up with a shaky structure! Terms such as 'realist', 'empiricist', 'idealist', 'positivist', 'subjective', 'objective', 'postmodern' and 'poststructuralist' require clarification in order to consider their implications for research practice. Towards this end, Chapter 1 also introduces you to the wide-ranging criticisms that have been made of methodology from feminist perspectives.

Chapter 2 develops the points raised above by examining the relationship between social theory and social research and Chapter 3 discusses the place of values and ethics in social research. These topics are often thought to present such intractable problems for the researcher that they take a backstage position in the research process. The development of theory, however, is a necessary part of the intellectual development of social research and vice versa, while ethics are a fundamental component of the idea of a 'discipline' and the confidence which people have in the actions of its members. The place of values in social research is also central and an understanding of the nature and effect of values a necessary part of its practice. As I hope will become evident, ignoring these issues does not mean that they are no longer an influence, for they routinely inform and affect research practice.

AN OVERVIEW OF PART II

The first chapter in Part II (Chapter 4) begins by considering the main sources of official statistics that researchers use, followed by an account of their strengths and weaknesses. By tracing the issues which surround the production of crime statistics, the questions regarding their place in contemporary social research and, more generally, the use of other official statistics, can be considered.

Chapters 5–8 examine the process and methods of analyses involved in the major techniques used in social research. These cover questionnaire design, interviewing, participant observation, case studies and documentary research. In order to provide for ease of comparison between these different methods, each of the chapters follows a similar structure. First, the chapter begins with a discussion of the place of the method in social research which makes links with the discussions in Part I. Second, there is an examination of the actual process of undertaking research using the method, and third, the techniques of data analysis for each

method are discussed. My intention in following this structure is to enable you to consider the different ways of approaching your data and to direct you to specific sources for further investigation of the topic. Therefore, should you decide to utilize the method for your own research, you will be aware not only of the ways in which the data are collected, but also of the methods employed for their analysis. Finally, each of these chapters ends with a critique of the method. By comparing this last section in each of the four chapters, together with the other sections and the issues covered in Part I, the advantages and disadvantages of each method can be assessed.

Chapter 9 serves as an introduction to comparative research. While the idea of comparison has long been used in the natural and social sciences, a growth in information technology and institutions such as the European Union has led to an increase of interest in comparative research. As such, there are important developments taking place in this field. Awareness of both the potential and problems involved in these developments and the methods of comparative research is, therefore, an important part of social research.

Throughout the text there are references to other works on and around social research. The bibliography is thus a resource for you to use in exploring themes and topics in greater depth. I hope by the end of the book you have gained a sense that research is an exciting and fundamental part of the practice and future of the social sciences, as well as core to an understanding and explanation of human relations. As we now turn to Part I, it remains for me to say that I hope you find that this book provides you with a greater understanding of the methods and issues involved in social research.

Part I Issues in social research

I

Perspectives on social scientific research

Schools of thought in social research

- Objectivity
- Positivism
- Empiricism
- Realism
- Subjectivity
- Idealism
- Building bridges
- Postmodernism

Feminisms and research

- Challenging the scientific cloak
- Reason and emotion
- The critique of 'disengagement'
- Biography
- Feminist epistemologies
- Women, race and research

Summary

Suggested further reading

This chapter introduces perspectives that assist in understanding the aims and practice of social research. These perspectives do not determine the nature of the research process itself, for there is a constant interaction between ideas about the social world and the data collected on it. That noted, a discussion of the main debates between these schools of thought, together with the key terms employed, will enable a consideration of their arguments and the assumptions that each make about how we can know the social world and what properties it contains. These may then be linked with Part II where we discuss the actual practice of research methods.

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

A science is often thought of as being a coherent body of thought about a topic over which there is a broad consensus among its practitioners. As Alan Chalmers (1999) notes of the popular view of science:

When it is claimed that science is special because it is based on the facts, the facts are presumed to be claims about the world that can be directly established by a careful, unprejudiced use of the senses. Science is to be based on what we see, hear and touch rather than on personal opinions or speculative imaginings. If observation of the world is carried out in a careful, unprejudiced way then the facts established in this way will constitute a secure, objective basis for science.

(Chalmers 1999: 1)

Yet the actual practice of science shows that there are not only different perspectives on a given phenomenon, but also alternative methods of gathering information and of analysing the resultant data. While these differences do affect the natural sciences, we are concerned here with the history and practice of the social sciences (see M. Williams 2000).

To have differences of perspective in a site of activity such as social research appears to be problematic. Quite simply, if there is no one established way of working then surely that undermines the idea of a scientific discipline? Perhaps, though, we should challenge the idea that science is an all-embracing explanation of the social or natural world beyond our criticism, or that unity of method is necessarily a good thing. Instead, perhaps these matters are contested in both justification and application because there are political and value considerations which affect our lives? These are not within the power of science to alter, nor in any democracy should they be (see Fuller 2000). Its role is to understand and explain social phenomena, to focus attention on particular issues and to challenge conventionally held beliefs about the social and natural worlds. Social research, however, does differ from natural sciences, in that researchers are able to ask questions of those they study:

Unlike objects in nature, humans are self-aware beings who confer sense and purposes on what they do. We can't even describe social life accurately unless we first grasp the concepts that people apply in their behaviour.

(Giddens 1997: 12–13)

We shall also find theories that challenge our understanding of the social world as part of social research practice. In sum, therefore, the social

sciences are more complicated (and more exciting) than any single definition of their activities could encompass: for example, what constitutes a 'science', the nature of its methods and the types of data which it should collect are open to dispute. In order to see how this arises, it is necessary to describe the main ideas and debates within social science before we move on (in Chapter 2) to examine the relationship between social theory and research.

Objectivity

The Introduction noted that objectivity, along with generalization and explanation, were considered as fundamental characteristics of a science. After all, if we are to hold to the view that social science research offers us knowledge about the social world which is not necessarily available by other means, then we are making some privileged claims about our work. Research thus becomes more than a reflection of our opinions and prejudices: it substantiates, refutes, organizes or generates our theories and produces evidence which may challenge not only our own beliefs, but also those of society in general.

It is at this point that the debate over objectivity in the social sciences enters. It is often assumed that if our values do not enter into our research, it is objective and above criticism. Objectivity is therefore defined as

the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness.

(Bernstein 1983: 8)

Many people accept what scientists say is the 'truth'. On the other hand, the subject matter of the social sciences is social life itself. People are obviously fundamental to social life and the question is now raised that as social researchers and as members of a society, is it possible or desirable for us to suspend our sense of belonging? Different perspectives have provided answers to this question.

Positivism

We may argue that people react to their environment much as molecules which become 'excited' when heat is applied to a liquid. Clearly, science does not have then to ask the molecules what they think. So is it necessary that we, as social scientists, ask people? We may, of course, be interested in people's opinions in terms of their reactions to events that

affect their lives, but only in so far as they are reacting and we wish to explain and predict their behaviour accordingly. However, don't we all believe that we possess something called free-will? That is we can, to some extent, control our own destinies rather than have it controlled, like the molecules, by a change in our environment. In other words that we can 'act on', as well as behave in 'reaction to', our social environments.

Some experiments in the natural sciences take the form of altering the environment and seeing how people react to it. The problem here is one of controlling the inputs into experimental situations in order to see what changes cause particular alterations in behaviour. There are problems with this approach, hence the idea of 'quasi-experimentation' as an approximation towards this model of research. In some approaches to evaluation research, for example, a group is selected who will be subject to the programme which is to be evaluated. This treatment group will then be compared to those who have not been subject to the programme. Nevertheless, we must ask: is social life really like that? Are experiments in a laboratory artificial and so do not reflect the complications, decisions and contradictions involved in social life?

If we believe ourselves to be the product of our environment – created by it – then to some extent we are the mirror image of it. It defines our nature, or our being. We do not have to ask the people themselves because we can predict how they will behave through reference to environmental factors alone. Simply expressed, this is the position of two schools of thought in social research: behaviourism and positivism. However, it should be noted that positivism refers to varied traditions of social and philosophical thought and given that the term is often used in a pejorative sense without due regard to its history, it runs the risk of being devoid of any specific meaning (Bryant 1985).

For one author inclined toward positivism, the social scientist must study social phenomena 'in the same state of mind as the physicist, chemist or physiologist when he probes into a still unexplored region of the scientific domain' (Durkheim 1964: xiv). Objectivity is then defined by being the same as that of natural science and social life may be explained in the same way as natural phenomena. This tradition may therefore be characterized in terms of the prediction and explanation of the behaviour of phenomena and the pursuit of objectivity, which is defined as the researcher's 'detachment' from the topic under investigation. The results of research using this method of investigation are then said to produce a set of 'true', precise and wide-ranging 'laws' (known as covering laws) of human behaviour. We would then be able to generalize from our observations on social phenomena to make statements about the behaviour of the population as a whole. Positivism thus explains human behaviour in terms of cause and effect (in our example above,

heat is the cause and the effect is the molecules becoming excited as the temperature increases) and 'data' must then be collected on the social environment and people's reactions to it.

Empiricism

If the aim of positivism is to collect and assemble data on the social world from which we can generalize and explain human behaviour through the use of our theories, then it shares with empiricism the belief that there are 'facts' which we can gather on the social world, *independently* of how people interpret them. As researchers, we simply need to refine our instruments of data collection in order that they are neutral recording instruments much as the ruler measures distance and the clock, time. The fundamental difference between empiricism and positivism, however, lies in the realm of theory. As will be developed in Chapter 2, data within positivism is theory-driven and designed to test the accuracy of the theory. Empiricism, on the other hand, is a method of research which has not referred explicitly to the theory guiding its data collection procedures. It is thus characterized 'by the catchphrase "the facts speak for themselves"' (Bulmer 1982b: 31).

It is important, as happens all too often, not to confuse the words empirical and empiricism. The word empirical refers to the collection of data on the social world to test, generate or interact with the propositions of social science, while, as Martin Bulmer's quote indicates, the empiricist school of thought believes that the facts speak for themselves and require no explanation via theoretical engagement. While there are differences between positivism and empiricism, the former does rely on the methods of the latter. They also both assert that there are facts about the social world which we can gather – *independent of* variations due to interpretation. Objectivity is then defined in terms of researchers' detachment from the social world, as well as the accuracy of their data collection instruments. Quite simply, there is a world out there that we can record and we can analyse independently of people's interpretations of it. This follows the 'correspondence theory of reality' which holds that a belief, statement or sentence is true as long as there is an external fact that corresponds to it.

Realism

Realism shares with positivism the aim of explanation. Beyond that similarity the parallels end. A branch of realism, known as 'critical realism' (the two are frequently, and wrongly, conflated), has enjoyed a particular boost in the social sciences with the works of Roy Bhaskar (1998; Archer *et al.* 1998) who states:

Normally to be a realist in philosophy is to be committed to the existence of some disputed kind of being (e.g. material objects, universals, causal laws; propositions, numbers, probabilities; efficacious reasons, social structures, moral facts).

(Bhaskar 1993: 308)

Realism has a long history and may be associated with the works of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud (see M. Williams and May 1996: 81–8). Marx, for example, constructed his typology (a method of classification) of capitalism on the basis that there are certain essential features which distinguish it from other economic and political systems. Within this economic system there exist ‘central structural mechanisms’ and the task of researchers is ‘to organize one’s concepts so as to grasp *its* essential features successfully’ (Keat and Urry 1975: 112, original emphasis).

In referring to underlying structural mechanisms, an important argument within this perspective is being employed. If researchers simply content themselves with studying everyday social life, such as conversations and interactions between people, this will distract them from an investigation of the underlying mechanisms which make those possible in the first instance (Collier 1994; Sayer 2000). The task of researchers within this tradition is to uncover the structures of social relations in order to understand why we then have the policies and practices that we do. Similarly, Sigmund Freud argued that our consciousness was determined by our subconsciousness. Thus people’s neuroses are the visible manifestations of their sexual and aggressive desires that are repressed in their subconscious. Freud’s single contribution to social thought may thus be said to lie ‘in the idea that culture is reproduced through a repressive structuring of unconscious passions’ (Elliott 1994: 41). While people may not be directly aware of the causes of these experiences, they still affect their actions.

Realism argues that the knowledge people have of their social world affects their behaviour and, unlike the propositions of positivism and empiricism, the social world does not simply ‘exist’ independently of this knowledge. Given this, causes are not simply determining of actions, but must be seen as ‘tendencies’ that produce particular effects. Yet people’s knowledge may be partial or incomplete. The task of social research, therefore, is not simply to collect observations on the social world, but to explain these within theoretical frameworks which examine the underlying mechanisms which inform people’s actions and prevent their choices from reaching fruition: for example, how schools function to reproduce a workforce for capitalism despite the resistance that may take place in the classroom (P. Willis 1977). As Bob Carter puts it in his examination of the relationship between realism and racism: ‘realism is

resolutely post-empiricist in its stress on the theory-driven nature of social scientific knowledge' (Carter 2000: 171).

The aim of examining and explaining underlying mechanisms cannot use the methods of empiricism as these simply reflect the everyday world, not the conditions which make it possible. Therefore, along with others in this tradition (Sayer 1992), Keat and Urry (1975) argue that realism must utilize a different definition of science to positivism. In particular, a realist conception of social science would not necessarily assume that we can 'know' the world out there independently of the ways in which we describe it. That is not to say, however, that social reality is not stratified: for example, into individual, interactive and institutional levels. Access to these different layers of reality is the task of a realist research programme and bringing to the attention of people how they affect their actions in a situation of dialogue and cooperation. It is this philosophy, in contrast to other approaches to evaluation (see Clarke with Dawson 1999), that underlies Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley's (1997) recommendations for the conduct of programme evaluation. Furthermore, as Dave Byrne puts it in his exposition of complexity theory, it too shares with critical realism an 'insistence on the emergent material character of understanding in particular and social action in general' (Byrne 1998: 51).

Given the above, there are those within this tradition who have built bridges between the idea that there is a world out there independent of our interpretation of it (empiricism and positivism) and the need for researchers to understand the process by which people interpret the world. Before discussing those who have attempted this, I shall first examine the perspectives which argue, contrary to positivism and empiricism, that there is no social world 'beyond' people's perceptions and interpretations.

Subjectivity

Up to now, we have spoken of the ways in which our environment or its underlying structures – of which we are not necessarily aware – structure us, or create us as objects (positivism) or subjects and objects (realism). Perhaps you are not happy with the idea that you are created or formed in this way. We like to believe that we exercise free-will and make judgments which alter the courses of our lives. Positivism does not pay much attention to the detail of people's inner mental states. Realism, on the other hand, may refer to people's consciousness in so far as it reflects the conditions under which they live, how structures are reproduced and their desires and needs are frustrated.

When we refer to people's consciousness we are concerned with what takes place – in terms of thinking and acting – within each of us. These subjective states refer to our 'inner' world of experiences, rather than the world 'out there'. To concentrate on subjectivity we focus on the *meanings*

that people give to their environment, not the environment itself. Contrary to the contentions of positivists we, as researchers, cannot know this independently of people's interpretations of it. The only thing that we can know with certainty is how people interpret the world around them. Our central interest, as researchers, is now focused upon people's understandings and interpretations of their social environments, part of which has been termed a 'phenomenological' approach to researching the social world (see Moustakas 1994).

Idealism

Some schools of thought emphasize our creation of the social world through the realm of ideas, rather than our being simply conditioned or created by it. They would argue that our actions are not governed by cause and effect, as in the case of molecules in a test tube, but by the rules which we use to interpret the world. As natural science deals with matter which is not 'conscious', researchers of this persuasion argue that its methods cannot deal with social life and should therefore be discarded from its study. To speak of cause and effect is not applicable to researching social life for people contemplate, interpret and act within their environments. For these reasons, the methods of the social sciences are fundamentally different from, but *not* inferior to, the natural sciences. It is the world of ideas in which we are interested as social researchers: 'Such a viewpoint suggests that human activity is not behaviour (an adaption to material conditions), but an expression of meaning that humans give (via language) to their conduct' (Johnson *et al.* 1990: 14).

Rules exist in social action through which we produce society and understand and recognize each other. Rules, of course, are often broken and also subject to different interpretations. For that reason, we cannot predict human behaviour but people still act as if they were following rules and this makes their actions intelligible. People are constantly engaged in the process of interpretation and it is this which we should seek to understand. In other words, researchers should concentrate upon *how* people produce social life. Social life can be understood only through an examination of people's selection and interpretation of events and actions. Understanding these processes and the rules which make them possible is the aim of research for schools of thought within this tradition. It is not explaining why people behave in certain ways by reference to their subconscious states or environmental conditions, but how people interpret the world and interact with each other. This process is known as *intersubjectivity*. The idea of an external social 'reality' has now been abandoned because the meanings which we attach to the world are not static, nor universal, but always multiple and variable and

constantly subject to modification and change. Our accounts of the social world must therefore be 'internalist': that is, arising from within the cultures we are studying. As one advocate of this view puts it in relation to meaning and language use: 'To give an account of the meaning of a word is to describe how it is used; and to describe how it is used is to describe the social intercourse into which it enters' (Winch 1990: 123).

There are those within this tradition who argue that researchers need to employ 'hermeneutic principles'; hermeneutics referring to the theory and practice of interpretation. We are no longer proclaiming our 'disengagement' from our subject matter as a condition of science (positivism), but our 'commitment' and 'engagement' as a condition of understanding social life. Our sense of belonging to a society and the techniques which we use for understanding are not impediments to our studies. The procedures through which we understand and interpret our social world are now necessary conditions for us to undertake research. In the process we both utilize and challenge our understandings in doing social science research and the social researcher stands at the centre of the research process as a requirement of interpreting social life. The idea of science is now very different from positivism and empiricism. For these reasons, as will be noted in Part II, there is a tendency in this tradition of social thought to prefer methods of research such as participant observation and focused interviewing.

Building bridges

There are those who have attempted to synthesize some aspects of these major perspectives. One social theorist, in particular, has argued that our everyday actions are meaningful to us, but they also reproduce structures which both enable and constrain our actions (Giddens 1976, 1984, 1996), a position shared by Roy Bhaskar, whose work was noted earlier. Pierre Bourdieu is also a thinker whose work has been driven by empirical interests and so has developed a series of 'tools' for researching and thinking about the social world (for example, see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu with Saint Martin 1995; Bourdieu *et al.* 1999). The insights of psychoanalysis and linguistics have also been employed to argue that while human actions are meaningful and variable, this does not mean that we cannot then agree on what is valid or 'true' about the social world. This bridge-building attempt fuses the twin aims of 'how' (understanding) and 'why' (explanation) in social research (Habermas 1984, 1987, 1989, 1990).

There is also the school of 'poststructuralism', which includes the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, as well as Michel Foucault until his death in 1984. Foucault's thought, in particular, evolved in reaction to both

the subjectivism of some social science perspectives and the naive empiricism imported from the natural sciences (Foucault 1977, 1980). His work is thus characterized as moving beyond structuralism and hermeneutics, towards an 'interpretive analytics' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). In the process, Foucault considers knowledge and power to be constructed within a set of social practices. The result is to question the concept of truth as separable from the exercise of power. As interesting and provocative as these ideas are, they have often been discussed at a socio-theoretical and philosophical level. Yet Foucault himself was a careful social researcher and while he used his research sources in different ways, it is possible to interpret his work for the purposes of doing social research and to draw parallels with the actor network theory of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour (see Kendall and Wickham 1999; Law and Hassard 1999).

While an exposition of these ideas and their implications for research are well beyond the stated aims of this book, I have deliberately included them so you can refer directly to their works, or studies about their works (see Morrow with Brown 1994; May 1996; M. Dean 1999). They demonstrate the ingenuity with which social thinkers have attempted to tackle issues which are so central to social research.

Postmodernism

Before moving on to the section on feminist research, we need to consider a perspective about which there is much discussion, but often little clarification. As we shall see later on, postmodernism shares with feminist relativism the belief that knowledge is both local and contingent and there are no standards beyond particular contexts through which we may judge its truth or falsity.

Although there are those who are labelled as postmodernists who exhibit clear differences in their perspectives, postmodernism refers to a cultural perspective or movement and/or epistemology, while postmodernization relates to a process that is said to lead to the historical epoch known as postmodernity (see Lyon 1999; Delanty 2000a). Therefore, it is important to note that one does not necessarily have to become a postmodernist in order to accept some of its insights regarding the changing times through which we are living. Indeed, 'postmodernism' is often used as a convenient label around which to base a series of observations on contemporary issues (Bauman 1997).

Postmodernists are anti-foundationalist. Whether talking about implosions of meaning with the consequence that the world becomes devoid of any meaning (Baudrillard 1983a), or of the computer age and the severing of the link between knowledge and legitimacy (Lyotard 1984), or of the potential for dialogue within a liberal consensus in which scientific

claims to truth about the social and natural worlds have little place (Rorty 1989), postmodernists exhibit the same underlying tendency: that is, that there are no universal standards against which science may lay claim in order to validate its standards. Quite simply, objectivity gives way to relativism with the result that not only science, but also truth, goodness, justice, rationality, and so on, are concepts relative to time and place: 'Since every act of cognition necessarily occurs within a particular perspective, relativism claims that no rational basis exists for judging one perspective better than any other' (Fay 1996: 2).

What have been termed the 'repressed rivals' of science – religion, folk knowledge, narrative and myth – are now said to be returning to 'take their revenge' (Seidman 1998). It is significant that it is within the humanities and the area of cultural studies that these views have found their greatest legitimacy. Yet how this translates into a practical research programme, without contradiction and retaining the relevance of research, is a matter of some considerable difficulty, let alone dispute. Take, for example, the idea of truth which underlies research. Must not all communities, including those conducting research, assume a truth which lies beyond that which they propagate in order to legitimize their beliefs and practices in the first instance? If so, relativism must presuppose the existence of something beyond itself. Throughout the book, I shall return to issues such as these in order to render what are important, but difficult debates, more intelligible.

In considering all of the above perspectives, the waters are far muddier than suggested. For instance, Durkheim is often termed a positivist but would not simply deny the place of subjectivity in social life, nor would an idealist necessarily deny objectivity defined as 'detachment' from the social world, while Foucault in discussing the implications of his work noted that if these meant 'one is a positivist, then I am happy to be one' (Foucault 1972: 125). However, there remain differences; in particular whether the social science are the same or different from the natural science and whether human actions, unlike the observed effects of phenomena in the physical world, are meaningful and intentional.

FEMINISMS AND RESEARCH

All of the thinkers whom I have discussed so far have been men. Is this important? If men have produced valid ideas and research results that have enabled us to understand social relations, it would remain a matter of concern if more women wished to become theorists and researchers, but were prevented from doing so because men, either intentionally or otherwise, stood in the way of their aspirations. Yet, what if the ideas and practices of men did not advance understanding, but reflected a bias which defines society and science in terms of particular values? Not only

would the aims of research then be incomplete, but also its results would be a distortion of the social world. What we take to be science would then reflect this state of affairs and so perpetuate certain views of women by providing a 'scientistic cloak' which is no more than prejudice.

These contentions form the starting-point of feminist criticisms of science. Perhaps the first point which should be made is that, like the social sciences in general, feminist perspectives are not simply a unified body of thought and it is more accurate to talk of 'feminisms'. However, in the following discussions it should be borne in mind that they do share several beliefs. First, women and their fundamental contributions to social and cultural life have been marginalized and this is reflected in research practice. Second, the norms of science perpetuate and disguise the myth of the superiority of men over women and reflect a desire to control the social and natural worlds. Third, gender, as a significant social category, has been absent from our understandings and explanations of social phenomena in favour of categories such as social class. Clearly, these characterizations do not convey the depth and sophistication of arguments employed by different schools of feminism (see Meyers 1997; Kourany *et al.* 1999). At the same time, these cogent criticisms cannot be ignored. Therefore, in order to add to our understanding of social life in general and research methods in particular, it must occupy a centre-stage position in any discussion of research perspectives.

Challenging the scientistic cloak

Our notions of the roles, relations and forces within society are, according to feminist critiques, built upon unexamined assumptions about women which are then reproduced in our theories about society. When the roles of women are considered in social life, they are characterized as passive and emotional. Although this assumption has long been challenged by groups of women, a selective reading of historical events lost their voices (Spender 1982). In particular, there is the reference to something called 'human nature': that is, a belief in the fundamental characteristics of people regardless of their history or social context. Social thinkers have provided many a justification for the belief that social roles are natural, rather than the product of social and political manipulation by men over women. An influential philosopher, John Locke (1632–1704), for example, believed people to be innately 'reasonable' (a view of human nature). At the same time he saw a need for a 'social contract' so that order could be brought to what would otherwise be a chaotic social and political world (Jaggar 1983).

From these positions of 'reasonableness' and the need for a social contract, he then took a leap to argue that because of their reproductive capacity, women were 'emotional' and were also unable to provide for

themselves so were 'naturally' dependent on men. As in contemporary western societies, property rights were crucial in Locke's ideas and due to women's natural dependence, he argued that they do not then possess such rights. Marriage was a contract they entered in order to produce sons who can then inherit property. The contract of marriage thus ensures that property rights are stable within society and men have sons in order to perpetuate their lineage.

As feminist scholars have noted (Sydie 1987), Locke equated 'rights' with the capacity to be reasonable which he then argued that women did not possess. This splitting of so-called natural differences, feminists argue, occurs throughout western thought and provides the foundation upon which we base our thinking and scientific practice. Buried within these assumptions are not scientific statements, but deep-rooted biases against women by male thinkers. The German philosopher Hegel (1770–1831), for instance, believed that women's position in the family, as subordinate to men, was the natural realm for their 'ethical disposition'. Similarly, Darwin (1809–82) believed he had found a scientific basis for traditional assumptions about the division of labour between the sexes. Again, we are led to believe that these are natural differences. If we believe them to be natural, then tampering with them would upset the 'natural order of social life'. However, this is precisely the point of contention. Feminists argue that women's position within society is not a natural phenomenon, but a social, political and economic product which is reflected and perpetuated by the bias of 'science' (S. Harding 1991).

According to feminist critiques, economics, politics, sociology, social policy and other social sciences have, like the natural sciences, perpetuated this myth (J. Dale and Foster 1986; Sydie 1987; Stanley and Wise 1993; Gibson-Graham 1996; Pascall 1997). For instance, in the earlier studies on the family and work, before feminist research had some impact on dominant practices, women were 'wives', 'mothers' or 'housewives', but not people in their own right. The American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–79) appeared to believe that the major 'status' of an urban, adult woman was that of a housewife. Her status in this domestic sphere was, in turn, determined by the status of the husband or, as he is also commonly referred to, head of household. The positivist Emile Durkheim, who so adhered to the idea of a natural science of society, did not in fact produce a scientific account of society, but a moralizing one hidden behind the guise of science. His views on the family were, according to what is probably the most authoritative study of his life and work, an 'alliance of sociological acumen with strict Victorian morality' (Lukes 1981: 533). The use of the term 'family' in social policy research is also problematic for omitting women's interests (Pascall 1997).

If our claims to theorize about social life simply function to disguise such moralizing, they will be distortions of the social world. In the

separation of the 'public' from 'private' social worlds, men have become the people of action in the public realm, while women are subordinated to the private realm of the family and their status determined accordingly. For feminists, perspectives on social life have either reflected this political phenomenon or attempted to justify it as a natural state of affairs (Walby 1997).

This silencing of women's voices and the perpetuation of particular and narrow ideas of science thereby limit our understanding of social life. Social research often focuses selectively in the public realm: it is men who paint pictures, men who think about the world, men who make money and men who shape our destiny. If the contribution of women is acknowledged, it is in terms of being the 'power behind the throne', 'the boss in the house' or what has been described as 'drawing-room manipulation'. In research on the world of work, for example, we operate according to definitions which remain unchallenged and so it is

clear that sex segregation persists in the workforce. The stark occupational data confirm that women and men are still segregated into distinct careers, despite the reduction in the overall amount of such segregation in the past few years.

(DeLaat 1999: 5)

Not only have researchers provided evidence for some changes to this dominant model of work (Hörning *et al.* 1995), but also its gendered nature and relationship with sexuality is of central importance (Adkins 1995). Theories of the social world and practices of research are thus argued to be *androcentric*. What we call science is not based upon universal criteria which are value-free, but upon male norms and, in particular, the mythical separation of reason (men) and emotion (women):

From an androcentric perspective women are seen as passive objects rather than subjects in history, as acted upon rather than actors; androcentricity prevents us from understanding that both males and females are always acted upon as well as acting, although often in very different ways. Two extreme forms of androcentricity are gynopia (female invisibility) and misogyny (hatred of women).

(Eichler 1988: 5)

Reason and emotion

There is a tendency to assume that men are capable of reason, while women are emotional. Yet groups in certain ways interpret definitions of words and their political translation takes subtle forms. The nature of

this is rendered highly problematic by the fact that women are excluded from scientific practices by virtue of men saying they are incapable of 'reason'. As Lloyd (1984) puts it: 'our ideas of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and . . . femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion' (quoted in Whitford 1988: 110). From this idea we then base science upon reason and reason is based upon truth. Feminists, on the other hand, argue that you cannot separate reason and emotion in simple ways. Therefore, certain ideas of disengagement, or aloof detachment by the researcher from the researched, are criticized by feminist thought.

The critique of 'disengagement'

The idea that 'rigorous research' involves the separation of researchers from the subject of their research simply reflects the idea that reason and emotion must be separated. Instead of seeing people in the research process as simply sources of data, feminists argue that research is a two-way process. Frequently, however, textbooks speak of not becoming 'over involved' with participants. Over-identifying with the 'subject' of the research is said to prevent 'good' research. The researcher should be detached and hence objective. According to feminists, this is not only a mythical aim, but also an undesirable one which disguises the myriad of ways in which the researcher is affected by the context of the research or the people who are a part of it.

Biography

In much the same way as the ideas of disengagement and objectivity are challenged, so too is the idea that a researcher's biography is not important or relevant to the research process. Both the researcher and those people in the research carry with them a history, a sense of themselves and the importance of their experiences. However, personal experience is frequently devalued as being too subjective, while science is objective. There is much to be gained from exploring the lives and experiences of women in understanding society and correcting the silence which surrounds women's voices (Griffiths 1995). As will be apparent in Part II, this is a fundamental aspect of research methods in, for example, interviewing and oral histories. Researchers should be aware of the ways in which their own biography is a fundamental part of the research process. It is both the experiences of the researched *and* researchers which are important. Despite this, it is a subject in social research frequently reserved for separate publications (see C. Bell and Newby 1977; C. Bell and Roberts 1984; Roberts 1990; D. Bell *et al.* 1993; Hobbs and May 1993; Jupp *et al.* 2000).

Feminist epistemologies

We now have the critique of disengagement, the critique of the absence of gender as a significant social category in social research and the critique of the nature and methods through which science is constructed based upon a male perspective and limited ideas of what constitutes reason. These add up to a considerable indictment of the practice of science. A question now remains: what alternatives have feminists proposed which are of importance to us as researchers? This brings us round to questions of *epistemology* and *ontology*.

These are complex subjects, but for the purposes of our discussion, they refer to the ways in which we perceive and know our social world and the theories concerning what 'exists'. Therefore, without explicitly saying as much, we have examined the epistemologies and ontologies of positivism, empiricism, realism and idealism. Feminists, on the other hand, start with the above critiques of science and their responses may be considered under three headings: empiricist, standpoint and relativist epistemologies.

Standpoint feminism has developed in contrast to many of the dominant ways of viewing knowledge (Hartsock 1987; Smith 1993, 1999). Its basis lies in taking the disadvantage of women's exclusion from the public realm by men and turning that into a research advantage. Because women are 'strangers' to the public realm and excluded from it, this provides them with a unique opportunity for undertaking research: 'The stranger brings to her research just the combination of nearness and remoteness, concern and indifference, that are central to maximizing objectivity' (S. Harding 1991: 124).

A female researcher is thus able to operate from both an oppressed position as a woman and a privileged position as a scholar (J. Cook and Fonow 1990). A woman's biography and experiences become central to the production of unbiased accounts of the social world. However, it is not experience itself which provides the basis of claims to objectivity by standpoint feminists. While experience is a fundamental starting-point, experiences themselves are reflections of dominant social relationships. Experience is a beginning point to research, but for standpoint feminists this must then be situated within the wider context of women's lives in general. However, male-scientism overrides experience. Thus, in order that the theorist does not then become the expert on people's lives, as is the usual hierarchical way in which scientism proceeds, any thinking about women's lives by the researcher must take place in a democratic and participatory way through involving other women.

Two emphases within standpoint epistemology are apparent from this discussion. First, women's experiences are an excellent starting-point upon which to base research as they occupy a marginalized position

within society and can therefore 'look in' as the stranger might to a new social scene. As Sandra Harding puts it, the aim 'is not so much one of the right to claim a label as it is of the prerequisites for producing less partial and distorted descriptions, explanations, and understandings' (Harding 1987b: 12).

Second, an emphasis on the scientific study of society whose aim is to place women's experiences within a wider theory of their location in society. For this reason, there are parallels between feminist standpoint epistemologies and realism (Cain 1990). Although the idea of science is maintained, its norms have changed. It becomes a feminist stance and one which does not marginalize, but promotes the cause of women in general.

These two contentions form the starting-point for the differences between feminist standpoint and feminist relativist epistemologies. First, feminist relativists, and these would include those influenced by post-modernism, would reject the idea of any type of science for this would be just another way in which women's experiences are sequestered by those who claim to be experts. To treat people's experiences as 'faulty' is argued to be a dominant approach to theory. Second, they would also reject the view that knowledge or 'truth' about women's position in society is possible. Instead there are many versions of social reality, all of which are equally valid. Women's experiences become a starting *and* finishing point for research which aims to assist the process of 'breaking out' of a positivist paradigm with the aim of producing a 'fractured foundation' for research methods:

'Reality' is shown to be multidimensional and multi-faceted.
But 'reality' is constructed as one reality, simple and unseamed.
And thus the necessity to suppress, distort, use, oppress, women's
differences.

(Stanley and Wise 1993: 183)

To impose some theoretical idea on the social world conspires with this suppression of difference. Women's experiences and feelings are not limited in this perspective, but are valid in themselves. The means by which research is undertaken should then be made available for all to see as part of this process of validating experiences. However, are all experiences equally valid and not limited and/or biased? Is the opinion of the middle-class woman who says women are not oppressed, the same as the working-class woman who says they are?

For some feminists, the answer to assessing this question has been to accept the basis of science, but to move away from its male-centred perspective and place women at its centre. With the tension between difference and essentialism and relativism and objectivism in mind,

particularly when it comes to the actual practice of feminist research (Acker *et al.* 1991), there are those who now argue for a 'fractured foundationalism' (Stanley and Wise 1993), a 'strategic essentialism' (Grosz 1994), an 'interactive universalism' (Benhabib 1992) and a return to 'middle range' theory (Maynard 1998).

Those feminists who fall under the category of feminist empiricism would 'see themselves as primarily following more rigorously the existing rules and principles of the sciences' (S. Harding 1991: 111). Margrit Eichler's (1988, 1997) work, for example, provides a series of technical steps that the researcher should avoid in order to produce research which does not fall into the four 'traps' of malestream research. These are androcentric practices, the over-generalization of research findings which are based solely on men's experiences, an absence of explanations for the social and economic influences of gender relations and finally, the use of 'double standards', for example, in terms of language the use of 'man' and 'wife', when we should refer to 'man' and 'woman'. The aim is to produce less partial and more accurate accounts of social life. In other words, its criticism is focused not so much on the *foundations* of science, but upon its *practice*. For this reason, it has been criticized for replicating male norms of scientific inquiry which, according to other feminist epistemologies, should be both challenged and changed.

There are, as with research perspectives in general, a number of viewpoints from which feminists approach issues in social research. Nevertheless, we can take the following lessons for research practice. As researchers, we should seek to avoid the age-old fallacy of a woman's reproductive capacity as being a hindrance to her participation in society. The important questions are first, how the fact of women's reproduction is manipulated in the organization of social life. Second, how women are marginalized in the public sphere. Third, a greater understanding of the fundamental contribution which women make to cultural, political and economic life. Fourth, the implications of feminist analysis for research in particular and social life in general. Fifth, a general challenging not only of androcentric thought, but also of heterosexist assumptions within our society. For these reasons:

feminism does not start from a detached and objective standpoint on knowledge of the relations between women and men. Even the most moderate advocates of women's rights must take the view that men have rights which are unjustly denied to women. This commitment does not mean that feminist knowledge is not valid knowledge, but it does entail asking what we mean by knowledge, and why some forms of knowledge are seen as more valid than others.

(Ramazanoglu 1990: 9)

Women, race and research

Feminisms, while correcting the class-based accounts of research, have faced similar criticisms as research in general, for its neglect of the issue of race. Researchers have documented the ways in which sexual and racial stereotypes cut across each other (Ackers 1993). An exclusive concentration on gender and class within research, however, is to the detriment of differences which exist between women on ethnic and racial lines:

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know those boundaries. To deal with one without ever alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

(Lorde 1992: 139)

Angela Davies (1981) documents the racism of the early women's movement with its assumptions concerning the intellectual inferiority of black men and women. Class-based accounts of society, on the other hand, have been criticized for being economically determinist and ignorant of the political dimensions of gender and race. In our research and within the limits of our power, we should be aware of these issues and how they relate to the research process (see Phoenix 1994; Reynolds 2002). What is most important to frame in the context of these criticisms is the interaction between these elements without the assumption that one simply speaks in the name of *the* truth. Instead, a recognition of the partiality and situated nature of knowledge can provide for the possibility of enhancing understanding by challenging dominant ways of thinking. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it:

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge . . . Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate knowledge claims that in turn justify their right to rule. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect.

(Collins 2000: 270–1)

Taking such criticisms into the workings of disciplines and how they view the social world, Marcia Rice notes of criminology that it has been both racist and sexist in a 'machocentric' frame of reference which she defines as masculinity being 'the primary defining characteristic' (Rice 1990: 68, n.1). Not only does she consider that criminology is male-centred, but also she criticizes feminism for its ethnocentricity. She then

moves on to suggest the following ways of overcoming the limitations of this approach.

First, researchers should avoid racist stereotypes and ethnocentric approaches to research for this is not only an inaccurate representation of the social world, but also ignores important differences between people's experiences. This would avoid what Fiona Williams (1989) calls the 'danger of homogenization' whereby the use of terms such as 'blacks' and 'women', which do not specify their composition, assumes such categories are universal and therefore does not allow for the diversity of people's histories, cultures and experiences. Second, there should be an increase in research which examines the ways in which 'gender roles and differential opportunity structures are affected by racism as well as sexism' (Rice 1990: 68). Third, an increase in comparative studies of the dimensions of race, class and gender would assist in our understanding of the operation of power and discrimination within society. Fourth, empirical studies, in order to enhance understanding, should be situated within a wider sphere of social, political and economic contexts. Finally, as with feminism in general, the experiences of those researched should not be separated from the researchers. An exchange based on consultation and participation should take place in which each learns from the other.

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an introductory tour of major perspectives in social research. We have moved from the idea that social science should reflect the aims and methods of natural science, through a critique of these methods as inapplicable to social research, to feminist criticisms of the foundations and aims of science as being male-centred and hierarchical, finishing on a critique of research practice as ethnocentric and racist.

The debates themselves are complicated, but no less important for that. Yet we should note that these perspectives do not simply dictate the nature of research itself, or how it is conducted; although the issues will inform how the aims, methods and process of social research are considered. As Jennifer Platt has written in a history of research methods in North America:

research methods may on the level of theory, when theory is consciously involved at all, reflect intellectual *bricolage* or *post hoc* justifications rather than the consistent working through of carefully chosen fundamental assumptions. Frequently methodological choices are steered by quite other considerations, some of a highly practical nature, and there are independent methodological traditions with their own channels of transmission.

(Platt 1996: 275, original italics)

That said, research which not only is aware of the issues raised in this chapter, but also then acts reflexively, is more likely to produce an enhanced and systematic study of social life.

Questions for your reflection

- 1 What are the differences between positivism and realism?
- 2 What is an 'interpretivist' approach to the practice of social research?
- 3 Why have feminist researchers been critical of social research and science in general?
- 4 After reading this chapter, what four main issues would inform your practice as a researcher and why?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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- Alvesson, M. and Sköldberg, K. (2000) *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Reinharz, S. (1992) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sayer, A. (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Williams, M. and May, T. (1996) *Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Research*. London: UCL Press.