

POST-POSITIVIST APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

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Introduction

This chapter outlines the philosophical thinking behind this book. Take your time reading it and don't be put off if you encounter words and terms that are unfamiliar to you. These terms will become clearer as you read on. The chapter outlines the background and assumptions for many of the techniques and suggestions put forward in later chapters. Without some knowledge of philosophy or context, technique can become an empty process. Philosophy provides principles that can act as a guide when procedural advice does not address a particular issue. You might like to read this chapter at the start of your thesis process, but it is also likely that you will dip into it from time to time, as certain questions arise out of the process of researching and writing the thesis.

In this chapter, we briefly examine positivist ideas about research: what they are, where they come from, why they dominate the general view of research and why there is a need to move beyond their limitations. We go on to discuss the alternatives that exist for doing social research, which are associated with the post-positivist stance.

Along the way, we introduce ideas surrounding modernity, epistemology, quantitative and qualitative methods and grounded theory. We then go on to review key issues for post-positivist research: discourse, power, narrative and reflexivity.

Post-positivist research principles emphasise meaning and the creation of new knowledge, and are able to support committed social movements, that is, movements that aspire to change the world and contribute towards social justice.

Post-positivist research has the following characteristics:

- Research is broad rather than specialised – lots of different things qualify as research;
- Theory and practice cannot be kept separate. We cannot afford to ignore theory for the sake of 'just the facts';

- The researcher's motivations for and commitment to research are central and crucial to the enterprise (Schatz and Walker, 1995: 1, 2);
- The idea that research is concerned only with correct techniques for collecting and categorising information is now inadequate (Schatz and Walker, 1995: 3).

Positivist views of research

What enters your head when you think about research? When we discuss this question with student researchers, they usually come up with words like facts, figures, statistics, writing, evaluation, objectivity, science and logic. Traditionally it was thought that there was a single, correct set of procedures for investigating phenomena and presenting findings, based on a scientific model of research. People sometimes still think that social research should model itself on research in the natural sciences.

Public discussions (think, say, of *Morning Ireland* on RTÉ radio) about social research are usually set in this scientific framework. They centre on questions such as, what is the hypothesis? How big is the sample? How representative is the sample? How can you generalise if you have a small sample? Was there a control group? The validity of a piece of research is assessed by how well it meets these scientific criteria.

Using scientific method and language to investigate and write about human experience is supposed to keep the research free of the values, passions, politics and ideology of the researcher. This approach to research is called positivist, or positivist-empiricist and it is the dominant one among the general public.

Positivist researchers believe that they can reach a full understanding based on experiment and observation. Concepts and knowledge are held to be the product of straightforward experience, interpreted through rational deduction.

The dominance of positivist assumptions about research has at least two effects. First, it leads people to assume that if social research is done properly it will follow the model of the natural sciences and provide a clear, unambiguous road to the causes of certain social or psychological phenomena. Some assume that it can predict social trends and can even be used to control events. It was at one time assumed that positivist-empiricist modes of enquiry could produce a science of society. This assumption was in turn made possible by the assumption that there were one-to-one correspondences between social phenomena and their causes. Most people rightly treat assumptions about causes with caution, recognising that it is rarely possible to show a direct cause for some aspect of the

social world. But even when people recognise the complexity of social phenomena and the difficulty of pinning them down in a scientific way, assumptions may persist about how research should be carried out.

Second, the idea that the only way to do social research is to follow a scientific model can lead to the dismissal of research as a valuable tool in understanding the rich complexity of social life. This scientific approach which positivism espouses is rightly thought to be inadequate when it comes to learning about how people live, how they view the world, how they cope with it, how they change it, and so on.

The context for positivism

Each one of us lives out our lives in the context of a worldview, which influences how we think and behave and how we organise our lives, including how we approach research. But worldviews often go unarticulated or unnoticed, and we often fail to realise that the assumptions we carry about research are related to a particular worldview or mental model. We need to uncover our worldviews and subject them to scrutiny. This is especially important for those doing research. As social researchers, we work within, not outside, broader historical, social and theoretical contexts. These contexts serve as the scaffolding for the questions we ask and how we go about answering them. The bigger scaffolding that supports positivism is a modernist worldview.

Modernism

A modernist outlook is the cumulative outcome of four foundational movements in European thought – the Renaissance, The Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment (Spretnak, 1999: Chapter Two). Within modernist ways of knowing the world, only certainty and empirical knowledge are valid, and the rational is valued over other ways of knowing, such as intuition. Positivism seeks to reduce everything to abstract and universal principles, and tends to fragment human experience rather than treat it as a complex whole. (For further reading on modernity, see Goodman, 2003; Spretnak, 1999; Tovey, 2001.)

Modernity led to a split between science and literature as different ways of understanding human experience. The natural science model came to dominate in social research. This became known as positivism or positivist-empiricism. Positivist research places faith in quantification and on the idea that using correct techniques will provide correct answers. It is also concerned to some extent with prediction and with control.

Positivism

The foregoing review represents classical positivism and there are many variations of it. It is, therefore, more appropriate to think of *positivisms*. We should not forget that a modernist worldview has played a large part in the development of ideas concerning liberation, justice and freedom. Spaces exist within positivism for radical practice. Many Irish and international researchers have used positivist research approaches in the drive to create a more equal and just society. Setting up positivism and post-positivism in opposition to each other does not adequately represent the more messy on-the-ground realities of how research proceeds. Most studies in the natural sciences do not in fact proceed in a defined linear fashion, but are the product of web-like and cyclical thinking. The way they are written up however often makes it seem as if they proceeded in a linear manner. Positivist visions of science do not always reflect the actual practice of doing science (cf Mishler, 1990; Kuhn, 1962).

Epistemology

The ideas, assumptions and beliefs associated with positivism and modernism constitute what is called an epistemological base.

Epistemology is a study of how people or systems of people know things and how they think they know things (Keeney, 1983: 13, cited in Scully, 2002: 10). It is thus concerned with the nature of knowledge, what constitutes valid knowledge, what can be known and who can be a knower.

In recent decades, increasing attention is falling on the limitations of the epistemological base of positivism. Within positivism, knowledge has been treated as follows:

- What counts is the means (methodology) by which knowledge is arrived at. These means must be objective, empirical and scientific;
- Only certain topics are worthy of enquiry, namely those that exist in the public world;
- The relationship between the self and knowledge has been largely denied – knowledge is regarded as separate from the person who constructs it. The political is separate from the personal;
- Maths, science and technical knowledge are given high status, because they are regarded as objective, separate from the person and the private world;

- Knowledge is construed as being something *discovered*, not *produced* by human beings.

What has prompted a move away from positivism?

Opposition to positivist epistemologies has come from feminism, post structuralism, critical psychology, anthropology, ethnography and developments in qualitative research. Critiques of positivism are implicit in other movements for social change, as well as in the knowledge of Eastern, Asian and indigenous societies, who see all events and phenomena as interconnected. This kind of knowledge, for so long despised by the Western scientific tradition, has now been revitalised. This has come about because the movements and peoples concerned have:

- emphasised that there is no neutral knowledge;
- shown the inadequacies of dualistic, that is, either/or, or black/white thinking;
- emphasised the ethical aspects of research.

In addition, complexity science has challenged the dominance of reductionist scientific models.

Recognition that there is no neutral knowledge

Critics of positivist epistemologies have insisted that divisions between objectivity and subjectivity, or public and private knowledge, or scientific and emotional knowledge, are socially constructed. Just as important, these artificial divisions, or dualistic ways of viewing the world, are used to control ideas about what knowledge is legitimate. Knowledge cannot be divorced from ontology (being) and personal experience.

Collapse of faith in dualistic thinking

There has been a collapse of faith in dualistic thinking. Post-positivist values in research are not about being either subjective or objective, nor do they prefer subjectivity over objectivity. They emphasise multiplicity and complexity as hallmarks of humanity. Post-positivist approaches are interpretive and this has led to an emphasis on meaning, seeing the person, experience and knowledge as 'multiple, relational and not bounded by reason' (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine, 1998: xviii).

Ethical considerations

Post-positivism has also reawakened questions about the uses and purposes of research, research practice and research knowledge, which are at least as much ethical as they are technical (Schratz and Walker, 1995: 125). No longer is it good enough for the researcher to see the people s/he is researching simply as research subjects from whom information is 'extracted' (see Chapter Five, on the information-extraction model for collecting data). The emphasis is on good principles, adequate for working with human participants in all their complexity. Procedures, techniques and methods, while important, must always be subject to ethical scrutiny. (For more on ethics, see Chapter Five.)

Complexity science

This historical period is not the first in which a challenge was mounted to the reductionist approach of positivism. In the eighteenth century, 'a few prophetic members' (Spretnak, 1999: 21), of the western scientific tradition, such as Goethe and von Humboldt, tried to resist the reductionism and mechanistic outlook of the developing natural sciences. Later, systems theory, drawing on organic biology, gestalt psychology and theoretical ecology, studied 'organised complexity'. But interest was withdrawn from these theories after World War Two, because their concepts could not be expressed mathematically (Capra, 1996, cited in Spretnak, 1999: 22).

However, the natural sciences themselves have today been able to take up those ideas again, facilitated by the development of fast computers (Capra, 1996, cited in Spretnak, 1999: 22). Complexity science has shown that 'various properties of a system emerge through its dynamic behaviour and interactions. Such properties cannot be predicted mechanistically at the outset from knowledge of the component parts' (Capra, 1996, cited in Spretnak, 1999: 23). The most challenging themes and theoretically exciting questions are not reached by the logico-deductive scientific method. Instead they are reached by a process that resembles artistic imagination. Einstein imagined that he was riding on a moonbeam, looking at the earth, as part of his work.

Positivism: challenged but not gone

Much work in the natural sciences could now be said to be post-positivist. The ideas that the personal is political, that the subjective is a valid form of knowledge (not necessarily more valid than the objective, but of equal validity), and that all people are capable of naming their own world and constructing knowledge, represent a shift away from modernism. Nevertheless, the modernist worldview or paradigm is still strong. Positivism, although challenged, is still the dominant public model for research. Researchers can still

find it difficult to get funding for post-positivist projects. The mechanistic view of the natural sciences continues to dominate the public perception of science, and in turn it affects views of what social research should be.

What do post-positivist insights mean for the researcher?

You investigate your own epistemology

Insights about the limitations of positivism and modernity imply that you have to understand your own place in the world and what you are bringing to the research by way of assumptions about knowledge. Investigating your own epistemologies and understanding how they affect you as a researcher is an essential part of the post-positivist approach. As part of this investigation, you come to some understanding of how people construct and maintain perceptions of the world. Examining your epistemology involves looking at the underlying assumptions you use to make sense of our day-to-day lives. 'You cannot claim to have no epistemology. Those who so claim have nothing but a bad epistemology' (Bateson, 1977: 13, cited in Scully, 2002: 10).

The post-positivist stance asserts the value of values, passion and politics in research. Research in this mode requires an ability to see the whole picture, to take a distanced view or an overview. But this kind of objectivity is different from 'just the facts', devoid of context – it does not mean judging from nowhere (Eagleton, 2003: 135). It requires a fair degree of passion (Eagleton, 2003: 134) – especially passion for justice and the ability to subject one's own assumptions to scrutiny. This requires patience, honesty, courage, persistence, imagination, sympathy and self-discipline alongside dialogue and debate.

Take up a learning rather than a testing role

The post-positivist social researcher assumes a learning role rather than a testing one (cf Agar, 1988:12). One of the opportunities and challenges posed by this approach is that the researcher recognises the common humanity that connects researchers and the people who participate in research. We regard ourselves as people who conduct research *among* other people, learning *with* them, rather than conducting research *on* them (cf Wolcott, 1990: 19).

Positivist researchers believe that their research methods and data mirror reality. Post-positivist researchers believe that positivist research methods predominantly mirror the representational ideology of the positivist researchers. Where the positivist researcher might strive to discover objectively the truth hidden in the subject's mind, post-positivists strive to disrupt the predictability that can occur in traditional interviews. Rather than an

interviewee providing prepared/manufactured responses to standard questions designed to be unbiased and neutral, we strive to engage in social construction of a narrative with our participants. In this way we hope to activate the respondent's 'stock of knowledge'. (Richie and Rigano, 2001: 744)

Value problem-setting rather than problem-solving

Post-positivist researchers do not see themselves as inevitably solving the problems they set out to investigate. Research can answer questions and indicate causes (problem solving), but equally, research can be about problem setting – coming up with the right questions (these may themselves lead to empirical research). This does not mean that we go off conducting research without an idea of what is to be investigated – as Wolcott puts it (1990: 31), 'empty-headedness is not the same as open-mindedness'.

Research can have an open-ended, exploratory character. This reflects the fact that problems sometimes have to be *discovered*. Furthermore, obvious problems should not always be taken at face value. Discovering the right way to formulate a problem is often as important in the advance of knowledge as hypothesis-testing. (Hammersley, 2000: 456, original emphasis).

Problem-setting is an intrinsically valuable scholarly activity. Good research is something that opens up the nature of problems and sticks with hard questions. It is acknowledged that research may indeed reach valuable conclusions, but these are always regarded as partial and revisable. There are no universal solutions to problems, therefore conclusions may change over time. Many of the problems that we wish to investigate do not lend themselves to ready answers, but are more appropriately addressed by research outcomes that offer thoughtful guidelines, principles and acknowledgements.

You are not looking for one overall truth

A critical post-positivist stance suggests that we cannot simply aggregate data in order to arrive at an overall 'truth'. This does not mean, however, that post-positivist researchers do not take a political or moral stand, or that they avoid taking action. But it does mean that they recognise the complexity of the web of life and experience. They may write with some authority, but they keep it reflexive and avoid dogma or authoritarian tones.

In post-positivist research, truth is constructed through a dialogue; valid knowledge claims emerge as conflicting interpretations and action possibilities are discussed and negotiated among the members of a community. Researchers don't ask themselves 'is this the truth?' Rather, we talk about the issues raised during the interviews, the participants' reactions, and our interpretations of these interwoven ideas. In this context, it seems right to open up the interpretive discussions [to our respondents], not for them to confirm or disconfirm them, but to share our thinking and how the ideas might be used. (Richie and Rigano, 2001: 752)

If you are a novice researcher, it may seem that if you follow these principles, you will never be able to reach conclusions. Chapter Seven offers some guidance on doing so.

Doesn't all this simply mean that we do qualitative rather than quantitative research?

It is often assumed that positivism and quantitative methods go together, and that post-positivism and qualitative methods are one and the same thing. It is not that straightforward.

Quantitative methods have, it is true, been largely underpinned by positivist principles, and they have contributed more than anything else to the over-simplification or reduction of human experience (reductionism) and the objectification of the human person within social research. Sometimes, however, they are appropriate, and this depends very much on the question one wants answered. So if you want to know how many people have installed burglar alarms, a quantitative approach is appropriate. If you want to know how many people *report* a fear of being burgled, a quantitative approach will do. But the key word here is 'report'. Respondents may report a fear of burglary, and this can be quantified, but it does not tell us anything about how the fear of burglary developed in the first place (cf Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Nor does it tell us how strong the fear is or how close people are to acting on their fear. These are much more subjective issues.

Quantification can be useful, because it can

- provide a broad familiarity with cases;
- examine patterns across many cases;
- show that a problem is numerically significant;
- often be used as the starting point for a qualitative study;
- provide readily available and unambiguous information.

However, it

- cannot look at individual cases in any detail;
- is usually highly structured, which prevents the researcher from following up unexpected outcomes or information.

Quantitative research has positivist features when it:

- tries to link variables (features which vary from person to person);
- tries to test theories or hypotheses;
- tries to predict;
- tries to isolate and define categories before research starts and then to determine the relationships between them.

Qualitative research

- seeks to provide an in-depth picture;
- generally deals with smaller numbers than quantitative research;
- tries to interpret historically or culturally significant phenomena;
- can be used to flesh out quantitative data;
- tries to isolate and define categories during the process of research;
- is appropriate when the questions posed by the researcher are difficult for a respondent to answer precisely;
- tries to illuminate aspects of people's everyday lives;
- values participants' perspectives on their worlds;
- often relies on people's words as its primary data².

² Neither of these lists of features of qualitative or quantitative research is complete – lots of points could be added or debated.

Selecting a method

The appropriateness of quantitative or qualitative methods depends on the questions being asked or the issues being explored. One should use methods appropriate to the questions.

Key tools of post-positivist research

In the search for meaning, which can lead to value-led social change, we wish to emphasise four main tools at the disposal of post-positivist researchers:

- the concept of discourse
- the concern with power
- the value of narrative
- the need to be reflexive

The concept of discourse

The post-positivist emphasis on meaning and the relationship between language and meaning is addressed in the concept of discourse. A discourse is a web of statements, categories and beliefs, habits and practices. Discourse is used to filter and interpret experience and the discourses available at a certain historical moment construct the ways that people can think, talk about, or respond to phenomena. Discourses 'invite' us to be human in certain ways, or to respond to others in certain ways. They produce certain assumptions (about, for example, women, men, economics, work, childcare, or money) and they provide subject positions from which people speak and act.

Productivity discourse

A contributor to a radio discussion on childcare provision in the December 2005 budget said that parents were 'wasting time' worrying about childcare and caring for their children, when they could be 'productive in business'.

The contributor, who remains unidentified, because the focus is on the discourse rather than the person who is using it, was drawing on a discourse of 'productivity'. The central premise of this discourse is that every citizen should be productive, meaning that they should do paid work. Children, retired people and others who are not in paid work are unproductive. This discourse invites us to see human beings in a utilitarian way – we are valuable only while we can contribute to the visible economy. Children are asked what

they will be, meaning what they will earn money at. Older people are seen as no longer 'productive'. Their primary relevance is as consumers of services that target the elderly. Migrants are welcome if they 'contribute to the economy', narrowly defined as helping to increase GDP.

Every time we talk about these issues in this way, we are drawing on some version of a discourse of productivity. Alternatively, if we talk about the importance of unpaid caring and voluntary work, and the need to acknowledge the invisible economy, we are challenging the discourse of productivity and drawing on other discourses, even if they are muted in society.

Discourse theory has features in common with the concepts of constructs and meaning frameworks, but is distinguished from them by its political emphasis, and its ability to account for ideology. Discursive practice refers to all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities (Davies and Harré, 1990: 45).

From this perspective, discourse, language and visual imagery do not simply 'reflect' or describe reality, but play an integral role in constructing reality and experience, the ways that we know and understand the world, and what we assume to be natural or normal. The elaboration of meaning involves conflict and power and the power to control meaning in a particular field can often reside in claims to (scientific) knowledge.

Discourses are regimes of knowledge constructed over time. They include the common-sense assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas, belief systems and myths that groups of people share and through which they understand each other. Discourses articulate and convey formal and informal knowledge and ideologies. They are constantly being reproduced and constituted, and can change and evolve in the process of communication.

A discourse is a shared grid of knowledge that one or more people can 'enter' and through which explicit and implicit meanings are shared (Mama, 1995: 98). In the example above, the radio interviewer did not suggest that there were other ways to understand childcare, apart from seeing it through the lens of productivity. The interviewee took up a certain position from the outset, thus 'inviting' the interviewer to share that position. Nevertheless, multiple discourses exist, all competing for influence and explanatory power. There are other ways to view the issues, which challenge the dominant discourse of productivity.

When we use discourses we position other people, we take up positions ourselves, and in turn other people position us. People are simultaneously positioned in and take up positions in a range of discourses, including those surrounding gender, class, race, age and

ability. These positions can be contradictory; discourses cut across each other, and cannot always be neatly resolved. (For more on discourse, including examples and guidelines for using it as an analytic tool, see Chapter Six.)

The concern with power

The discourses available at a certain historical moment condition the ways that people can think or talk about, or respond to phenomena. Post-positivist research emphasises the struggle for meaning, and the construction of new meanings and knowledges. The concept of discourse shows how the fixing of meaning is never a neutral act, but always privileges certain interests. Discourse is responsible for reality and not a mere reflection of it. Thus, the question of what discourses prevail and whose interests they serve are most important (Weedon, 1987: 11). This is not to discount the importance of material issues, economics or law, but to emphasise the equal importance of culture and discursive power. The production of knowledge is political and has real effects.

Discursive forms of power are less visible than legal and material ones, but are equally important in regulating people, and therefore in the drive for change. An example is the production of knowledge about rape and sexual abuse. In the past rape was perceived as a sexual crime; now it is also perceived as an abuse of power.

The value of narrative

Davies (1999: 64) points out that people make sense of their lives, for the most part, in terms of specific events, and sequences of events. Most people do not articulate how the sociological categories of race, gender, class and ethnicity, and so on have shaped their subjectivities, learning and experience, or how the larger historical processes, such as social movements or demographic transitions, have affected them. Yet, what is remembered is remembered precisely because it is socially significant (Stephenson, Kippax and Crawford, 1996).

Social structures and phenomena are experienced and understood at the level of the individual subjectivity, and expressed in stories about lives. Narratives can show how people actively (and sometimes knowingly) take up positions in certain discourses, and how they are (interactively) positioned by other people, and by social structures and discursive practices.

Narrative is essential to the writing-up of post-positivist research. The researcher tries to balance theoretical interpretation with an evocative presentation. This means taking the

reader into a story and imparting its mood through linguistic style and narrative exposition. This strategy removes the writing from the scientific modes, but without transforming the final product into fiction, drama or poetry. Key definitions and distinctions are framed in words that reproduce the tempo and mood of the experience. The theory remains embedded in the narrative in its many stories. Immediacy draws the reader into the story. A mix of concrete detail with analytic categories connects the familiar with the unfamiliar (O'Donnell, 2004).

Narrative and discourse analyses are often criticised as being just about words: the implication is that such an approach has no practical use. But virtually all of anyone's understanding of the social world is mediated by discourse in the form of conversations, newspapers, novels, TV, stories and so on. For example, none of us has 'seen' the Health Service, or the educational system, or the social partnership approach, or the community development movement, or the Celtic Tiger, or the local employment service, or consumerism, or quality of life, or any of the phenomena we might be researching. Yet we all have conversations about them, read about them, and have opinions about them.

The concept of discourse is relevant to all considerations of the social world, from broad international relations, institutional relations, to intimate and familial relations. Attention to narrative and discourse can create awareness of the constructive nature of the media, and of state and social apparatuses, institutions and practices. It can also draw attention to the importance of who gets to tell what stories about different groups and can help popularise new and muted discourses.

The need to be reflexive

While promoting post-positivist approaches we recognise that there are many competing discourses, which give rise to contradictions. We have to embrace these contradictions and the tensions they engender. We examine them rather than try to control or resolve them. That endeavour gives rise to a tension and creative energy that is not always easy to live with.

Post-positivism is not trying to substitute a more secure and firm foundation as an alternative to positivism (cf Lather, 1991: 7). Rather, it strives to 'produce an awareness of the complexity, historical contingency and fragility of the practices that we invent to discover the truth about ourselves' (cf Lather, 1991: 7). It is thus much more than 'post' – it is actually extra-positivist, because it provides vantage points from outside positivism, from which you can approach research.

This is why a reflexive attitude is so important. This means sticking with the contradictions and tensions that arise in the course of our research and not flinching from the challenges inherent in them.

Ongoing reflexivity on the part of the researcher means that we must look critically at what is assumed in any approach that assumes that we can 'empower' somebody else. As Lather (1991: 7) points out, even 'an intendedly liberatory pedagogy might function as part of the technology of surveillance and normalisation'. The same could be said of research.

Post-positivist researchers also recognise that there are limits to research. Research and the analysis in which it engages are explicit – both provide *evidence* for conclusions. The need for evidence means that research is not always able to access areas of human experience that are more intuitive or ontological. Also, research can be used as an excuse for not acting. We say we need more information before we can proceed. But often this is just procrastinating, when our intuition – broadly defined as extra-rational ways of knowing, honed from experience – tells us what needs to be done. Poetry, visual arts, novels, and drama also try to make the familiar strange and can often do that extremely well. The post-positivist mode is nothing if it does not also recognise the value of other forms of enquiry.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the philosophical approach of the authors, which underpins the chapters that follow. Aspects of the post-positivist approach are developed throughout the book. In this chapter, we have set out some important characteristics, and outlined the context in which post-positivism has come about. You can return to this chapter and/or specific sections of it, throughout the thesis process.