

Third Edition

# Reflexive Methodology

New Vistas for Qualitative Research



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# Praise for Previous Editions

'*Reflexive Methodology* is a textbook indispensable to any young researcher. It does not tell its readers how to do research. It does something much more important: It shows how research has been done in the qualitative tradition, thus encouraging the readers to make their own choices.'

Barbara Czarniawska, Goteborg University, Sweden

'I would go so far as to argue that this book should be on the reading list of all social scientists and philosophers with an interest in the theory and practice of research.'

Prometheus

'The quality coverage of theoretical and methodological approaches in previous chapters will give most researchers the tools to be able to attempt a reflexive interpretive process... There is a sense of richness, depth and argumentation that should satisfy most readers. Admirably, the narrative drive of the volume is never lost under the collective weight of the different approaches covered. The authors' argument that qualitative researchers should be open to recognising and utilising a multiplicity of approaches is compelling, and in their framework for reflexive interpretation, they offer a persuasive and largely usable tool for doing so.'

*Qualitative Methods in Psychology*



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# Introduction: The Intellectualization of Method

Traditionally research has been conceived as the creation of true, objective knowledge, following a scientific method. From what appears or is presented as data, facts, the unequivocal imprints of ‘reality’, it is possible to acquire a reasonably adequate basis for empirically grounded conclusions and, as a next step, for generalizations and theory-building. So the matter has long been conceived, and no doubt many empirically oriented researchers in the social sciences still conceive it so, irrespective of whether they are examining ‘objective reality’ (social facts), exploring people’s subjective or intersubjective experiential worlds (meanings), or analysing discourse (text).

This view has been subjected to a good deal of criticism, however, much of which appeared towards the end of the 1960s and was directed against ‘positivism’. But there has since been further criticism applying also to diverse variants of the qualitative method, sometimes automatically seen as ‘anti-’ or at least as ‘non-positivist’. For the moment we will mention only such critique that emphasizes the ambiguous, unstable and context-dependent character of language, the dependence of both observations and data on interpretation and theory (interpretation-free, theory-neutral facts do not, in principle, exist), and the political–ideological character of the social sciences. One line of argument here starts from the notion that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower (Steedman, 1991: 53). Data and facts, as we will demonstrate, are the constructions or results of interpretation: we have to do something with our sensory impressions if these are to be comprehensible and meaningful. Alongside this general critique of the objectivist scientific view and the heavy focus on empirical data, more specific criticism is raised about various methodological conceptions and methods. The methodological conceptions and methods of the social sciences

have been exposed to such a barrage of objections that one might have expected empiricists to lose their self-confidence and consider turning to some other branch of study instead.<sup>1</sup> But in fact the big risk seems to be that practising researchers stick in the same old rut, either repressing the criticism altogether or remaining more or less unaware of it. Many of the critics, on the other hand, tend to go to the opposite extreme and cut out empirical reality altogether – although exactly how they do this depends on their particular scientific orientation. Not infrequently they study something that carefully avoids statements about anything other than narrative or discourse or social constructions in interviews, thereby ducking many if not most important and interesting aspects of social reality.

In the social sciences – to which we largely limit ourselves in this book – there is a clear division between the great mainstream of empirically oriented research and various currents that are critical of ‘empiricism’ on diverse philosophical or theoretical grounds. To some extent this division overlaps with the dichotomy between scholars who adopt a robust and objectivist ontological approach and those with a consciousness- and experience-oriented, interpretive view of ontology and epistemology (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). But there are certain differences, since some representatives of this second approach are drawn towards the empiricist line – for example, some phenomenologists and other advocates of rigorous qualitative method assume that the very stringency of the method guarantees good research results. The critics of empiricism – ranging from historians of science, sociologists of knowledge, psychologists of science and linguistic scholars to ideological critics and philosophers – claim that culture, language, selective perception, subjective forms of cognition, social conventions, politics, ideology, power and narration all, in a complicated way, permeate scientific activity. These elements leave their mark on the relation between empirical reality and/or attempts to force segments of reality into the research texts, so that the relation between ‘reality’ and ‘text’ (the research results) is at best uncertain and at worst arbitrary or even non-existent. To find support for this thesis we need only consider that, despite the wealth of different theories that exist in most fields in the social sciences, empirical results are generally found to ‘agree’ – at least in part – with the researcher’s own premises, and that most researchers seem disinclined to change their point of view simply because a researcher with another theoretical base has presented empirical ‘data’ which contradict their own point of view.

A variety of ideas about how social reality is constructed – not just how it is represented – by the researcher will be investigated in this book. We believe, with the ‘anti-empiricists’, that empirical social science is very much less certain and more problematic than common sense or conventional methodological textbooks would have us think. The great array of books on the ‘qualitative method’ does not differ decisively from the quantitative literature on this score.

Nor as a rule are the former ‘qualitative enough’, in the sense of being sufficiently open to the ambiguity of empirical material and the complexity of interpretations. The focus on procedures and techniques implies an imitation of the quantitative methodology textbooks, and draws attention away from fundamental problems associated with such things as the role of language, interpretation and selectivity in research work, thus underrating the need for reflection. On the other hand, there are also certain risks involved in a too strong emphasis on this need. By problematizing research, we may come to overrate its difficulties, which leads in the long run to a defeatist reaction, and perhaps even to asking ourselves whether empirical social science has any reasonable function at all.

But we do not give up so easily, despite our ambition to take account of doubts about the ability of empirical material (data) to provide crucial input into research. We are not convinced that the opposite pole to methodological textbook wisdom – where it is claimed in a spirit of postmodernism or post-structuralism, for instance, that empirical reality can be ignored altogether – is in any way preferable. Nor is the phobia of empirical matters that characterizes much hermeneutic and critical theory to be recommended. It is our experience that the study of a confusing and contradictory, but often surprising and inspiring, empirical material has much to offer. It is precisely this combination of inspiration from the philosophy of science and empirical interests that provides this book with its *raison d’être* and, we believe, makes it unique. Most of the literature in the relevant field – broadly defined as ideas about how to conduct good social science research – is either empirically oriented or gives unequivocal priority to theoretical and philosophical considerations, which tends to make empirical research look odd, irrelevant, naive or even feeble-minded. We try instead to manoeuvre between these two conventional – and safe – positions, which appear to us rather as a kind of methodological Scylla and Charybdis.

In our dealings with empiricism – broadly defined here as all research in which ‘pure data’ or uninterpreted ‘facts’ are the solid bedrock of research – we try to take account of the objections which have been raised by hermeneuticians, critical theorists, poststructuralists, linguistic philosophers, discourse analysts, feminists, constructivists, reflectivists and other troublemakers who render life difficult for the supporters of either quantitative or mainstream qualitative methods. Against these troublemakers – who explicitly or implicitly leave their readers despairing and irresolute vis-à-vis empirical research – we stubbornly claim that it is pragmatically fruitful to assume the existence of a reality beyond the researcher’s egocentricity and the ethnocentricity of the research community (paradigms, consciousness, text, rhetorical manoeuvring), and that we as researchers should be able to say something insightful about this reality. This claim is consistent with a belief that social reality is not external to

the consciousness and language of people – members of a society as well as researchers (who, of course, also are members of a society).

Before proceeding with our distinct approach to methodology, we relate it to and ground it in a broadly accepted thesis in philosophy of science: that how we interpret phenomena is always perspectival and that so-called facts are always theory-laden.

## Ways of explanation and understanding

In explanatory models, it is usual to distinguish between *induction* and *deduction*.<sup>2</sup> An inductive approach proceeds from a number of single cases and assumes that a connection that has been observed in all these is also generally valid. This approach thus involves a risky leap from a collection of single facts to a general truth. Consider, for example, ‘there have never been any rocks on the bottom so far when I have dived into the water; therefore there are probably not any this time either’. The weakness is, it appears, that the underlying structure or situation is not included in the picture, but only a mechanical, external connection. The method, as it were, distils a general rule from a set of observations; what comes out then becomes merely a concentrate of what is already included in the observations themselves.

A deductive approach, on the contrary, proceeds from a general rule and asserts that this rule explains a single case. This approach is less risky – at the price of seeming to presuppose what is to be explained: that the general rule always holds true, hence also in the current case. Moreover, it does not really appear to *explain* anything, but rather avoids explanation through authoritarian statements, rather as a parent under stress might answer an inquisitive child: ‘Why do butterflies have wings?’ ‘Because all butterflies have wings, dear.’ Thus, in deduction, too, we see a lack of underlying patterns and tendencies, which makes the model flat, bordering on the empty.

These two models are usually regarded as exclusive alternatives, but it would be difficult to force all research into them, if they are not to serve as a Procrustean bed. There are in fact other possibilities, and we will now present one of them.

*Abduction* is probably the method used in real practice in many case-study-based research processes (Sköldbberg 1991). It has also been recommended more generally as an innovative approach to theory-driven empirical research (Meyer and Lunnay 2013). In abduction, an (often surprising) single case is interpreted from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which, if it were true, would explain the case in question. The interpretation should then be strengthened by new observations (new cases). The method has some characteristics of both

induction and deduction, but it is very important to keep in mind that abduction neither formally (see note 5) nor informally is any simple ‘mix’ of these, nor can it be reduced to these; it adds new, specific elements. During the process, the empirical area of application is successively developed, and the theory (the proposed overarching pattern) is also adjusted and refined. In its focus on underlying patterns, abduction also differs advantageously from the two other, shallower models of explanation. The difference is, in other words, that it includes *understanding* as well.

Abduction is the method used in medical diagnosis and in diagnosing errors in technical systems; the interpretation of poetry is another field. It has had increasing impact in many areas of linguistics and the social sciences. Abduction is close to hermeneutics (Eco, 1990; cf. Chapter 4 in this book).

Induction has its point of departure in empirical data and deduction in theory. Abduction starts from an empirical basis, just like induction, but does not reject theoretical preconceptions and is in that respect closer to deduction. The analysis of the empirical fact(s) may very well be combined with, or preceded by, studies of previous theory in the literature, not as a mechanical application on single cases, but as a source of inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding. The research process, therefore, alternates between (previous) theory and empirical facts (or clues) whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other. In comparison, induction and deduction appear more one-sided and unrealistic, if we take into consideration how research is actually carried out; in other words, those who follow them too strictly risk putting a straitjacket on their research. Theory is poetry over facts, it has been said (Erslev, 1961). Maybe, but then as much as poetry *in and through* facts. Even though ‘facts’ are the surface of friction necessary to generate theory, theory is not a simple summary or description of ‘empirical facts’ as in natural history. The theory must also transcend ‘facts’ in order to achieve scope. ‘Facts’ thus serve to *occasion* the theory, while continually playing the role of critical tuning instrument and fount of new ideas for the theory.

Glaser and Strauss’s induction from theory-free facts (Chapter 3 below) can be regarded as a counter-picture to Popper’s long-dominating and one-sided thesis of *deduction from fact-free theory* (e.g. Popper, 1963).<sup>3</sup> In the latter case, it is a question of a kind of scientific virginal birth which should be as rare or miraculous for the practical researcher as its obstetric counterpart. Since Popper’s influence has been so strong, Glaser and Strauss’s thesis can perhaps be viewed as a polemically understandable one-sidedness. We argue, though, that there is a way beyond this polarization between induction and deduction.

Here it is fitting to quote what Whitehead says about induction and, implicitly, about abduction:

This collapse of the method of rigid empiricism ... occurs whenever we seek the larger generalities. In natural science this rigid method is the Baconian method of induction, a method which, if consistently pursued, would have left science where it found it. What Bacon omitted was the play of a free imagination, controlled by the requirements of coherence and logic. The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation. ...

[T]his construction must have its origin in the generalization of particular factors discerned in particular topics of human interest. In this way the prime requisite, that anyhow there shall be some important application, is secured. The success of the imaginative experiment is always to be tested by the applicability of its results beyond the restricted locus from which it originated. In default of such extended application, a generalization ... remains merely an alternative expression of notions [already] applicable. (1929: 4ff.)

Also, a theoretician of science like Bunge never tires of pointing out that it is not possible to generate theory by just condensing empirical data (see, for instance, Bunge, 1967; cf. also Toulmin, 1953).

Let us for the sake of simplicity illustrate this with the traditional example of positivism – swans and their colours. Deduction would start by postulating that if a bird is a swan, it is white, and then draw the conclusion that if we meet an individual swan, it is white. Induction first meets one white swan, then another, then yet another ... and finally draws the conclusion that all swans are white. Abduction would at first observe a swan with a certain colour, and then show how, for example, the bird's genetic structure might generate a certain colouring. This underlying pattern then explains the individual case.

Neither induction nor abduction are logically necessary – that is, they allow mistakes – yet we could not do without them, any more than without deduction, which is logically necessary at the price of empirical emptiness (it does not say more than its premisses). Through induction, we draw, for instance, as children the conclusion that objects a, b, and so on fall to the ground if they are dropped, and therefore probably also all other objects. Abduction can, as was indicated above, be illustrated by diagnostics and also with the interpretation of poetry. In the former case, we observe a symptom and from this draw the conclusion of an underlying pattern – that is, a disease. In the interpretation of poetry, we see a certain pattern as an indication of a hidden but underlying pattern in the text. Since abduction is not logically necessary, it must be controlled against more cases. The physician must, for instance, compare with more symptoms (or patients); the interpreter of lyrics with more expressions,



verses (or poems). A research process may rather be compared with a *series* of flights, such as was described in the Whitehead quotation, rather than with a single one (or even better with one long air trip with several intermediate landings). In other words, what is needed is a repeated process of alternating between (empirically laden) theory and (theory-laden) empirical ‘facts’.<sup>4</sup> This means a hermeneutic process during which the researcher, as it were, eats into the empirical matter with the help of theoretical preconceptions, and also keeps developing and elaborating the theory.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of theory application in contrast to induction has also been used as a learning strategy in artificial intelligence: expert systems with causal models (‘deep models’), as a complement to previous heuristic rule-of-thumb models (‘surface models’), which cannot explain the hidden patterns and tendencies behind processes (Hart, 1986; Steels and Van de Velde, 1986). In general, abduction remains a useful, topical method for learning systems in artificial intelligence (van der Lubbe, 1993), especially in situations with uncertainty and complexity (e.g. Esposito et al., 2007).

\* \* \*

Abduction as an explanatory model also has connections to a perspectival approach. We are referring to Hanson’s familiar and very important (1958) conclusion that *facts are always theory-laden*, a thesis for which he argued so convincingly that, despite other differences, there has long been almost complete consensus about it in the later philosophy of science (Hesse, 1980; Newton-Smith, 1990). The post-Kuhnian philosophy of science has gone even further along these lines, problematizing the very distinction between facts and theory, and thereby the very term ‘theory-ladenness of facts’ (see, for instance, Suppe, 2000). This does not, however, change our point in this section, but rather strengthens it. It was also for this reason that we put the word ‘facts’ within quotation marks above.

Hanson arrived at his conclusion among other things by interesting himself in what is meant by ‘seeing’. There is evidence that we never see single sense data, but always *interpreted* data, data that are placed in a certain frame of reference. Hanson used puzzle pictures as examples – ambiguous pictures that can be interpreted in two different ways, although their data are identical. Exactly the same set of lines can, for instance, be interpreted both as a bird and as an antelope, but not both simultaneously. (The idea goes back to the later Wittgenstein, 1953.) Thus, we always lay a perspective into what we say, and not only that, but seeing is *inseparable* from the perspective, *is perspectival*.

In the same way, a physician does not just ‘see’ a collection of black and white dots on an X-ray picture, but, for example, a certain shadow on the lungs, indicating a certain illness syndrome. The layperson is literally ‘blind’ to

this. A chess player does not ‘see’ a number of pieces that are then put together as a picture of the game, but views the whole board as a complex field of forces. Data are thus always contextually inserted in a semantic frame, which gives them their sense to begin with. This reasoning can be extended to research processes. Hanson rejected both induction and deduction as models for such processes. Induction is unsatisfactory since new knowledge does not constitute simple summaries, or condensations, of data, but an *explanation* of data. Deduction also gives a faulty picture of the research process, since it presupposes that scientific discoveries happen through airy speculation, which remains to be tested through empirical analysis. Instead, Hanson holds that through the work with the empirical material, at a certain point a pattern emerges, and, as suggested by the title of his book, *Patterns of Discovery: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Science*, this very pattern-finding is at the heart of science. Hanson (1958) calls this process of pattern-finding ‘retroduction’, which corresponds to what we have called ‘abduction’; the latter term is the one most commonly used.

## Qualitative and quantitative methods

Having thus anchored our overall approach in this book to the overall principle of abduction and declared our scepticism towards induction as well as deduction, we proceed by indicating more specifically our view on methodology.

We deal in this book primarily with qualitative methods, but, as indicated, we do so in a somewhat unorthodox way. How ‘qualitative method’ should be defined is by no means self-evident. The consideration of open, equivocal empirical material, and the focus on such material, is a central criterion, although of course some qualitative methods do stress the importance of categorizations. The distinction between standardization and non-standardization as the dividing line between quantitative and qualitative methods thus becomes a little blurred, which does not prevent it from being useful. Another important distinguishing feature of qualitative methods is that they start from the perspective and actions of the subjects studied, while quantitative studies typically proceed from the researcher’s ideas about the dimensions and categories which should constitute the central focus (Bryman, 1989). Denzin and Lincoln strongly emphasize the researcher’s presence and interpretive work in qualitative research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level,

qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (2005: 3)

This characterization of qualitative studies is valid for the majority of such research. Some language- and practice-oriented qualitative researchers are not, however, interested in the meanings or viewpoints of subjects (Silverman, 2006). Qualitative research then ‘becomes not so much a question of deciding what a text or a textual extract might mean to a thinking subject as a matter of analysing the origins, nature and structure of the discursive themes by means of which the text has been produced’ (Prior, 1997: 66).

We do not explicitly argue in favour of qualitative methods or against quantitative ones, even though it will be obvious that we are highly sceptical about the universal adoption of the latter in the social sciences, at least in their most narrowly codified forms. There is no reason to make a particular point of justifying the existence of qualitative methods, which are now well established in most social science disciplines, and even predominant in some (cf. Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Silverman, 2006).

Consequently we will not engage in any further discussion of the advantages or disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative methods – a subject on which a good deal of often unproductive debate has already been held (Deetz, 1996). However, this debate does appear to be dying down, partly because the arguments have run dry and partly because polarization no longer seems to be as popular as it used to be in the discussions about method (see, for example, Bryman, 1989; Martin, 1990a). A common view is that the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods cannot be made in the abstract, but must be related to the particular research problem and research object. Sometimes – although in our view not nearly as often as seems to be the case today – a purely quantitative method may be appropriate, sometimes a purely qualitative one and sometimes a combination of the two (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).<sup>6</sup> Even in the case of mainly qualitative research it may sometimes be sensible to include certain simple quantifications. Although statistics on social phenomena often contain ambiguities, and conceal the social norms on which classifications are based (Prior, 1997), they may nonetheless sometimes have a certain value as background material in qualitative research.

In our view it is not methods but ontology and epistemology which are the determinants of good social science. These aspects are often handled better in qualitative research – which allows for ambiguity as regards interpretive possibilities, and lets the researcher’s construction of what is explored become more visible – but there are also examples of the use of the quantitative methods in which techniques and claims to objectivity are not allowed to gain the upper

hand, but are subordinated to a well-thought-out overall research view (among them Bourdieu, 1984; Silverman, 1985). If we can avoid the trap of regarding quantitative results as robust and unequivocal reflections of a reality ‘out there’, there is no reason to be rabidly ‘anti-quantitative’.

## Reflective/reflexive research

Rather than arguing in favour of qualitative methods, the intention of this book is to contribute to what we call ‘reflective or reflexive empirical research’. (For the time being we will use both these concepts synonymously. Researchers sometimes use them in a similar way. Later we will distinguish between them, viewing reflexive as a particular, specified version of reflective research, involving reflection on several levels or directed at several themes.) What does this mean? According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), there are different varieties of reflexivity. These include ethnomethodological ethnography as text, social science studies of the (natural) sciences, postmodern sociology, critical phenomenology and the writings of authors such as Gouldner and Giddens (double hermeneutics). Bourdieu’s own variety – where the researcher is seen as being inserted into a social field, with specific relationships of competition and power conditions generating a particular ‘habitus’, that is a pattern of action dispositions, among the participants – also belongs here. Other discussions of reflexivity concentrate on the sociology of knowledge (e.g. Ashmore, 1989; Lynch, 2000; Woolgar, 1988) or the politics of doing and publishing research (Alvesson et al., 2008). Again, others understand reflexivity ‘as a strategy of using subjectivity to examine social and psychosocial phenomena, assuming that social discourses are inscribed in and social practices are embodied by the researcher’ (Kuenher et al., 2016: 699–700). The somewhat jargon-filled language here is unfortunately not atypical for reflexivity authors. We do our best to avoid it in this book.

Thus in the literature there are different uses of reflexivity or reflection which typically draw attention to the complex relationship between processes of knowledge production and the various contexts of such processes, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer. This involves operating on at least two levels in research work and paying much attention to how one thinks about thinking (Maranhão, 1991).

Calás and Smircich (1992: 240) speak of ‘a reflexivity that constantly assesses the relationship between “knowledge” and “the ways of doing knowledge”’. Briefly, for us this concept – which we will explore below – means that serious attention is paid to the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development,

during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written. Empirical research in a reflective mode starts from a sceptical approach to what appear at a superficial glance as unproblematic replicas of the way reality functions, while at the same time maintaining the belief that the study of suitable (well-thought-out) excerpts from this reality can provide an important basis for a generation of knowledge that opens up rather than closes, and furnishes opportunities for understanding rather than establishes 'truths'.

Reflective research, as we define it, has two basic characteristics: careful interpretation and reflection.<sup>7</sup> The first implies that all references – trivial and non-trivial – to empirical data are the *results of interpretation*. Thus the idea that measurements, observations, the statements of interview subjects and the study of secondary data such as statistics or archival data have an *unequivocal* or unproblematic relationship to anything outside the empirical material is rejected on principle. Consideration of the fundamental importance of interpretation means that an assumption of a simple mirroring thesis of the relationship between 'reality' or 'empirical facts' and research results (text) has to be rejected. Interpretation comes to the forefront of the research work. This calls for the utmost awareness of the theoretical assumptions, the importance of language and preunderstanding, all of which constitute major determinants of the interpretation. The second element, reflection, turns attention 'inwards' towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as the problematic nature of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context. Systematic reflection on several different levels can endow the interpretation with a quality that makes empirical research of value. Reflection can, in the context of empirical research, be defined as the *interpretation of interpretation* and the launching of a critical self-exploration of one's own interpretations of empirical material (including its construction). Reflection can mean that we consistently consider various basic dimensions behind and in the work of interpretation, by means of which this can be qualified. In the course of this book we will indicate some reflective levels and principles, which we hold can be integrated in and stimulate empirical research.

Thus in reflective empirical research the centre of gravity is shifted from the handling of empirical material towards, as far as possible, a consideration of the perceptual, cognitive, theoretical, linguistic, (inter)textual, political and cultural circumstances that form the backdrop to – as well as impregnate – the interpretations. These circumstances make the interpretations possible, but to a varying degree they also mean that research becomes in part a naive and unconscious undertaking. For example, it is difficult, if not by definition impossible, for the researchers to clarify the taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots in their own social culture, research community and language. The main thrust of our

approach is thus to try to stimulate critical reflection and awareness, in the first instance as regards qualitative research.<sup>8</sup> Empirical material – interpretations referring to ‘reality’ – remains important, but we must proceed with care and reflection, pondering a good deal more upon what the empirical material means, and why we make just these particular interpretations, before forming any opinions of ‘reality’ as such. The research process constitutes a (re)construction of the social reality in which researchers both interact with the agents researched and, actively interpreting, continually create images for themselves and for others: images which selectively highlight certain claims as to how conditions and processes – experiences, situations, relations – can be understood, thus suppressing alternative interpretations. The aim of this book is to indicate some important themes in the data construction (interpretation) and text production (authorship) of research work, to conceptualize these in such a way as to stimulate awareness, and to provide ideas about care and reflection in planning, interpreting and writing during the research process.

This is, of course, an ambitious goal. Before the reader starts attributing fantasies of omnipotence to us, we should perhaps add that this book naturally does not start from scratch. In fundamental ways it is an inventory and critical review of the state of knowledge in the philosophy of (social) science, with particular relevance to social research and especially to the qualitative method. There is much for us to build on. However, we will try to go beyond a simple inventory and general discussion. We also wish to present critiques of various positions, seeking to achieve integrations and to develop applications, and above all to suggest new ways of doing social research, through the development of a sufficiently flexible and mobile frame of reference for handling reflective elements.

Much philosophically oriented discussion remains uncoupled from empirical work. Many researchers probably feel like Melia (1997: 29), who states that ‘[t]he link between what a researcher does and the philosophical position set out to justify the method is often problematic’. We agree that this all too frequently is the case, which of course is highly unsatisfactory. Referring to philosophical ideas without really using them is pointless, bewildering and means a waste of the time and energy both for the researcher and for his or her unfortunate readers. Interplay between philosophical ideas and empirical work marks high-quality social research. While philosophical sophistication is certainly not the principal task of social science, social research without philosophically informed reflection easily grows so unreflective that the label ‘research’ becomes questionable. To avoid methodology being perceived as peripheral to research practice as a result of being ‘intellectualized’ is certainly a challenge. Against a perception that ‘as the methods debates have become more philosophical, or at least epistemological, they have become less useful for the doing of research’ (Melia, 1997: 35), we hope to contribute to a productive debate. Usefulness would then lead to research that avoids some of the pitfalls as well as being more reflective

and creative due to a better interaction between philosophical–theoretical ideas and empirical–practical sources of inspiration.

## Four elements in reflective research

Chapters 3–6 address four currents of methodology and philosophy of science, which we regard as important sources of inspiration: empirically oriented currents (in particular, grounded theory); hermeneutics; critical theory; and postmodernism. These four orientations indicate the reflective areas in which the social science researcher should be engaged – regardless of the specific methods he or she prefers. At this point we will content ourselves with a brief description of the chief contributions that have emerged from the different orientations, and give some indication of what we will discuss below.

1. Systematics and techniques in research procedures. Qualitative research should follow some well-reasoned logic in interacting with the empirical material, and use rigorous techniques for processing the data. This is what most books on the qualitative method are about. We take up grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) as a typical example of this methodological view. We will also briefly present ethnomethodology and inductive ethnography.
2. Clarification of the primacy of interpretation. Research can be seen as a fundamentally interpretive activity, which in contrast to – or at least to a greater degree than – other activity is aware of this very fact. The recognition that all research work includes and is driven by an interpreter – who in the social sciences, moreover, often interacts with and contemplates other interpreters (the people studied) – here provides the key to a qualified methodological view. Thus method cannot be disengaged from theory and other elements of preunderstanding, since assumptions and notions in some sense determine interpretations and representations of the object of study. Hermeneutics is thus an important form of reflection.
3. Awareness of the political–ideological character of research. Social science is a social phenomenon embedded in a political and ethical context. What is explored, and how it is explored, can hardly avoid either supporting (reproducing) or challenging existing social conditions. Different social interests are favoured or disfavoured depending on the questions that are asked (and not asked), and on how reality is represented and interpreted. Thus the interpretations and the theoretical assumptions on which these are based are not neutral but are part of, and help to construct, political and ideological conditions. These dimensions are highlighted by critical theorists, among others.

4. Reflection in relation to the problem of representation and authority. It has been pointed out in recent hermeneutics that in many decisive ways the text is decoupled from the author. Postmodernism (poststructuralism) goes one step further and decouples the text from any external reality as well. The text lives its own life, as it were, and lacks any reference to anything outside itself. Texts only affect one another, and the consequence of this multiplicity of chaotic mutual influences is that the texts become fragmented or split. In this way both the author's (or in our case the researcher's) claim to authority and the texts' claim to reproduce (not to mention 'mirror') some extrinsic reality are equally undermined: the researching subject and the researched object are both called into question.

The reader may perhaps regard as incommensurable the different theoretical positions linked to the four themes introduced here. And so they are, at least in some cases.

However, it is possible to envisage research strategies which reinterpret important ideas from one or more of these positions, and to put them into new contexts. Admittedly there are considerable differences between our four orientations, but the point here is not to integrate typical research from, for example, grounded theory and postmodernism, but to try to abstract principles and ideas from the four intellectual orientations, with a view to endowing qualitative research with a more reflexive character, while also stressing the importance of empirical material. The latter is often under-emphasized in the other three orientations, but is central to grounded theory and ethnomethodology, where certain ideas of research procedures may be useful. We are thus interested in interpreting certain insights gleaned from the different positions, which can be of general value to social science research, rather than proceeding from orthodox stances as regards these schools of thought.

These four areas for reflection (where the element of reflection is under-emphasized in the first one, namely grounded theory) provide, in the order given here, a certain logic. The interest in (unstandardized) empirical material that represents the core in (several variants of) the qualitative method, such as grounded theory, constitutes a kind of bottom line for research work. However, this bottom line is considerably less stable than is generally assumed. The focus on 'data collecting and processing' in most qualitative methodological theories is unreflective and should be impugned. Instead, a fundamental hermeneutic element permeates the research process from beginning to end. Interpretation rather than the representation of reality on the basis of collected data then becomes the central element. Even more strongly, there is no such thing as unmediated data or facts; these are always the results of interpretation. Yet the interpretation does not take place in a neutral, apolitical, ideology-free space.



Nor is an autonomous, value-free researcher responsible for it. Various paradigms, perspectives and concepts, as well as research and other political interests, all bring out certain types of interpretation possibilities at the same time as they suppress others, often under the guise of what is neutral, rational, right and correct. Interpretation as a political–ideological expression then represents an important complement to the hermeneutic brand of interpretation. An element of suspicion has thereby been introduced. To this is added the insight that even ideologically and politically aware researchers risk being steered by their own text production, where influences from prevailing, free-floating discourses can gain the upper hand and play their own fragmented game with the intentionally referential, supposedly politically aware, text. Any ambition to determine ‘how things are’ or ‘how best to interpret a phenomenon’ in this situation may then be regarded as illusory and doomed to failure. This idea inspires a problematization of the researcher’s claim to authority.

On the basis of these preliminary considerations, and others which will be elaborated later on in the book, we thus claim that good qualitative research – and other research as well – should build upon a general awareness and a systematic, explicit treatment of the above-mentioned positions, and the problems, as well as the possibilities, which they indicate. How this can be tackled is the theme of the rest of the book. We will arrive, in Chapters 8–10, at a proposal for a reflexive methodology, built around a multi-layered, flexible structure of interpretation and reflection in which the systematic interplay of reflective areas is central.

## Layout of the book

After this introduction, we will give in Chapter 2 an overview of some important traditions that provide reference points for discussions in the philosophy of science and methodology: (neo-)positivism, social constructionism and neorealism. These offer good ground for acknowledging the variety and tension in social research. They illuminate that social studies exist in contested terrain, encouraging a high level of thoughtfulness. We view knowledge of these traditions as important, but do not consider these broad streams to be sufficiently distinct to aid specific research work. Chapters 3–6 address the four main levels in a reflexive methodology which we will be discussing. First we consider a typical qualitative method with a rather strict empirical orientation, namely grounded theory. We see certain positive elements in it, but suggest that it gives too rational a picture of the research process and expresses a naive view of empirical research. Chapters 4–6 deal with elements which, if they are taken seriously and applied to empirical research projects, can

overcome the weaknesses in the empirically oriented methods, making it possible to go beyond these towards more sophisticated research processes: interpretation, political–ideological aspects and the relative autonomy of the text.

In Chapter 7 we present some further important and topical influences that are highly relevant to a reoriented qualitative method, albeit in the nature of a complement to the above-mentioned levels in the work of reflection rather than constituting fundamental elements of it. To these belong discourse analysis (the close empirical study of linguistic actions and expressions), feminism (gender research) and genealogical power theory (Foucault). These lines of argument carry further some of the insights from Chapter 6 and even to a certain extent from Chapters 4 and 5, but also go beyond what is treated in these chapters.

The thrust of the concluding Chapters 8–10 is to confront the four main levels with one another – that is, the handling of empirical material, interpretation, politics/ideology and representation/authority – with a view to creating a new and broader, but also developable, scope for qualitative methods. We indicate different ways of structuring our thinking on methodological issues, and point out some types of reflexive research in which the areas of reflection are given different weights depending on the research question and the knowledge interest. We also offer some concrete proposals on possible ways of coping with the complexity of the research process, and we discuss suitable levels of ambition in connection with the reflexive element.

The text presupposes some general cognizance of academic social science and a certain familiarity with qualitative method and the theory of science. Apart from this, it should be possible to read the book without any specific previous knowledge.

We have not explained terms that can be regarded as belonging to general knowledge; for those who are stuck for any particular word, an ordinary encyclopaedia should be able to help. However, parts of the book may be rather demanding, due to its research orientation and depending on the reader's degree of previous acquaintance with the field. But it is simply a matter of persevering! Without hard work there is nothing, except possibly methodological junk food, satisfying in the moment but leading to malnutrition in the end.

## Notes

1. By 'empiricists' we mean those working in the field of science who place great faith in the capability of empirical research to reflect reality directly, and in the vital role of 'data' in science. Research is regarded primarily as a question of collecting, processing and analysing data, be it quantitative or qualitative. Theory and data are regarded as indisputably separate, and the value of the former is established by being tested against or emerging from the latter.

2. Within logic these are known as types of inference, within the philosophy of science also as types of explanation. This is true also of induction, which we take up below (see McMullin, 1982; Ruben, 1990).
3. In which one starts from a ‘conjecture’. Like Glasser and Strauss, Popper to a certain extent slides between a more radical and a more attenuated version of his thesis. The radical thesis, however, predominates in both cases.
4. See here also Yin (1984) about the replication of case studies.
5. We can also formally compare abduction, deduction and induction (Charniak and McDermott, 1985). This only fills the function of summary and schematic memory support; the formalization thus has no value in itself:

*Deduction* (modus ponens variant) (1) If a, then b. (2) a. (3) Hence b.

In the formalization of induction that follows,  $P(x)$  means ‘x has the property P’.

*Induction*: (1)  $P(a)$ .  $P(b)$ . ... (2) Hence: for all x,  $P(x)$ .

*Abduction*: (1) b. (2) If a, then b. (3) Hence a. In this last case, b is the (surprising) fact to be explained and a is the pattern that, if true, explains the fact.

At the end of this book we vary the abductive theme further, in our discussion of finding and solving mysteries, as an alternative to the more traditional ‘gap-spotting’ in research.

6. One view is that the problem should first be determined, and then the method. As a counterweight to technique-driven research – in which the questionnaire or the semi-structured interview, for example, is regarded as the solution to all problems – this is reasonable. But it is important to note that research problems cannot be determined independent of epistemological and theoretical starting points. What constitutes an interesting and manageable research problem depends on the researcher’s fundamental stance on methodological questions in the broad sense. More reasonable than the one-sided relationship of dominance between method (and theoretical considerations on methodological questions) on the one hand, and problems on the other, is a mutual relationship of influence between the two.
7. It could be argued that all research – indeed human life in general – is characterized by interpretation and reflection. In most books on method, including on qualitative method, these aspects are not salient. Interpretation is normally treated as a limited element, taking place after data have been gathered and categorized. Reflection is seldom mentioned and is normally constrained to technical matters and in relation to conclusions.

8. However, much if not all of what we have to say is also relevant to quantitative research. Actually a good deal of the criticism we make touches to an even greater extent on the quantitative methods, such as the adoption of a naive view of language. Nor are the borderlines between the two orientations always clear cut. However, in this book we do not address the question of what is specific to the quantitative method, but refer instead to the literature in the field of qualitative method and address themes of particular relevance to that field. In a way, a distinction that is more interesting than that between quantitative and qualitative research is one that distinguishes between reflective research and research in which the knowledge subject can avoid all critical examination, since it 'has been established as methodological reason' (Kittang, 1977: 33).