

The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Postpositivism

Contributors: Nick J. Fox

Editors: Lisa M. Given

Book Title: The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Postpositivism"

Pub. Date: 2008

Access Date: January 13, 2016

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412941631

Online ISBN: 9781412963909

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n332>

Print pages: 660-665

©2008 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n332>

Postpositivism describes an approach to knowledge, but it is also implicitly an assessment of the nature of reality. Thus, it is both an epistemological and an ontological position. It may be simplistically defined [p. 660 ↓] as those approaches that historically succeeded positivism (e.g., realism), but more rigorously, it may be understood as a critique of positivist epistemology and ontology in which positivist claims concerning both the objective nature of reality and the ability of science to discern that reality are rejected.

Positivism and Its Critics

Positivism is a position in the philosophy of science that emphasizes the importance of observation for the growth of knowledge and thus considers the measurement of phenomena as central to the development of understanding. In its more sophisticated characterizations, however, it recognizes the need for a theoretical framework within which to structure data. Karl Popper, the philosopher of science, argued that theories should be tested against data with the intention of their falsification and subsequent replacement with improved theoretical models. In this way, science would contribute a closer and closer approximation to the truth of how phenomena work and the causal relations between these phenomena. Positivism has been widely applied in the natural sciences, where empirical observation is used to generate theories and models that can be generalized. This approach rejects nonobservable (and hence untestable) sources of knowledge as unscientific.

Positivism can be criticized for ruling out various sources of understanding of the world including those deriving from human experiences, reasoning, or interpretation as inappropriate for scientific enquiry. In the social sciences, these sources of understanding (e.g., qualitative interview data) are of great importance as bases for the growth of knowledge, and many areas of social scientific enquiry would be impoverished without recourse to such sources because this interpretative work is itself the subject of interest. A second criticism is that positivism ignores context and attempts to establish generalities independent of setting. In social science, setting is often an integral component of activity and as such, cannot be discounted—indeed, claims to knowledge require full contextualization. A third criticism is that as social

order emerges from the sense making of human beings it will be largely contingent upon value-perspectives, and it is problematic to describe a single truth concerning the nature of the social world. Finally, positivism is committed to removing subjectivity from knowledge growth and thus denies any role for reflexivity among researchers.

For these reasons, positivism has been widely criticized since the inception of social science and has been largely replaced with postpositivist epistemologies (theories of knowledge) and ontologies (theories of the nature of reality), particularly in qualitative research. For postpositivists, while the pursuit of knowledge remains an aim of social scientific enquiry, the concept of an absolute truth may be seen as an aspiration rather than as something that can be discovered once and for all. Understanding rather than explanation is sometimes regarded as the objective of postpositivist enquiry, and this objective is often further constrained by acknowledgments of context and contingency. Furthermore, in postpositivism the role of the researcher as interpreter of data is fully acknowledged, as is the importance of reflexivity in research practice.

The Roots of Postpositivism

Postpositivism can be defined broadly to incorporate approaches to knowledge growth rejected by positivism as unscientific, such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, and astrology. However, this entry will restrict itself to examining the rival ontological and epistemological approaches to the theory and practice of social research that are both opposed to and critical of positivism.

An early manifestation of postpositivism in the social sciences can be found in the work of Max Weber, the late 19th- and early 20th-century sociologist. Weber developed the concept of *Verstehen*, or understanding, as a hermeneutic technique by which knowledge of the social world is to be gleaned. At the root of Weber's concept is the recognition that social realities need to be understood from the perspective of the subject rather than that of the observer and in totality rather than in isolation. However, to achieve this perspective, it is insufficient simply to try to imagine oneself in another's position or to interpret another's responses to a research instrument from the basis of the researcher's own assumptions about what these responses may mean. Rather, researchers need to recognize that actors are active subjects who are productive of

their social reality, not simply the objects of social forces. The process of *Verstehen* involves understanding the intention and context of these social realities for the subject herself or himself. For social researchers to gain knowledge about actors in a field will require that the meanings and interpretations [p. 661 ↓] of those subjects are fully acknowledged and understood. Understanding rather than causality is the key element to this approach.

This perspective offers the basis for both an interpretivist social science that recognizes the need to understand and interpret the meanings of subjects in order to make sense of the social order and a constructivist (or constructionist) approach in which social reality is seen not as objective and independent of actors, but as emergent from individual or collaborative constructions of concepts, values, beliefs, ethics, and norms of actors within a social field. The stability of social order derives not from social structures and independent forces, but from the customary habits of thought and shared meanings of actors that create a sense of continuity and order. Although these customs may be based in rationalizations, it is also possible to extend these constructions to encompass emotional or affective responses. Consequently, for the social researcher, *Verstehen* would require understanding not only rational thoughts and reflections, but also the affective components that contribute to the constructions of an actor's or groups of actor's social reality.

Methodologically, it will require a degree of empathy with the actors that a researcher is trying to understand and as a result, an element of reflexivity about the processes by which constructs are generated and deployed in the constitution of social reality. These elements have been highly influential in the development of social science research in the 20th century and have underpinned the development of movements including symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, feminist, and postmodern approaches in the social sciences. In all these approaches, the constructed and multiple character of the social world is acknowledged, and the need for reflexivity is seen as central to the enterprise of both research and social engagement.

Development of Postpositivist Ontologies

During the mid-20th century, Weber's postpositivist approach to the study of society was linked to phenomenology (the study of the structures of consciousness) to establish the basis for a sociology of knowledge that questioned many of the tenets of positivism and thus the objectivist approaches to social research that derive from the latter. Names associated with this development include Alfred Schutz, Thomas Luckmann, and Peter Berger, but this development can be discerned also in Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science, which recognized the social production of all scientific knowledge in both the natural and social sciences. This body of work underpins many elements of postpositivist research including the main strands of interpretivism, constructivism, and reflexive approaches, as well as many threads within the sociology of science and technology.

Drawing both on Weber's notion of *Verstehen* and upon phenomenological concerns with the collaborative nature of meaning, Schutz offered not only a perspective on the construction of reality but also an agenda for social research. He argued that knowledge and social reality are results of the sense-making work of human beings, but that these do not simply emerge out of individual rationalizations, but are constructed collaboratively between subjects and that, therefore, this intersubjective social production of knowledge (and the consequent social distribution of knowledge) should be the object of research.

He suggested that, unlike the objects of study in the natural sciences, those studied in social research are active, sense-making human beings, who are engaged in interpreting and ascribing meaning to their world in interaction with each other. Yet this description also applies to the social scientist, who is a further active interpreter of the same social world inhabited by those she or he would observe and understand. The social scientist is differentiated only by her or his aspiration to objectivity, in theory at least deriving from an interest that is purely intellectual.

Schutz pointed out a consequence for social science that is both methodological and epistemological. Researchers need to acknowledge their own interpretative work as they analyze the social worlds they are researching and to recognize that in

making sense of an actor's sense making, they impose a second level of interpretation that is subject to *Verstehen*. This issue is critical for social researchers, especially those using qualitative interpretivist approaches, as they must recognize that their human, rationalizing, constructivist activity is behind their analyses of actors' life-worlds. This limitation may lead to accusations that these analyses are no more than relativistic interpretations. Schutz was keen to find ways to ensure that social science interpretations were congruent with actors' own interpretations and imposed the requirement that the former's interpretations should be comprehensible by [p. 662 ↓] the latter and thus consistent with the understanding that an actor would impute to a social phenomenon.

Schutz's analysis has a further consequence. Because social science is part of the social world, the theories and models propounded by social scientists may contribute to the very social reality that is being researched. This possibility is the double hermeneutic of social science, according to sociologist Anthony Giddens.

This approach to the social scientific enterprise encompasses the main features of postpositivism. First, it acknowledges that the objects of study are engaged in an ongoing project of producing the social world, and therefore, their sense making must become part of the subject matter of a social science, ruling out a simplistic limitation of study to social facts and accepting the context-specificity of knowledge. Second, it recognizes that the tools of study in social science are human beings' own capacities as interpreters of the world. As such, these instruments work by means of exactly the same processes of intersubjective meaning-attribution that the social scientist seeks to study. Although there may be an aspiration to objectivity by the social scientist, this aspiration inheres only in her or his detachment from the practical commitments and interests of her or his subjects, not from some essential difference in her or his ability to interpret free from values, norms, and so forth. This problem leads to the third feature, the need for social scientists to be reflexive about their interpretative work, both to aspire to detachment but at the same time to accept its ultimate impossibility.

Realist Postpositivism

These elements of a full-blown postpositivist social science acknowledge both the ontological nature of social worlds as based in phenomenology and the epistemological constraints that result from the limitations that this ontology imposes on knowledge growth and the pursuit of truth in social science. The inevitable relativism that follows from fully adopting the postpositivist stance has been problematic in the social sciences, as its practitioners have been keen to retain some aspirations toward learning the truth about the social world. This problem has led to two contrary perspectives within postpositivism that can be broadly described as realist and constructivist. The former adheres to the notion that there is some objective reality to the social world, while acknowledging that the Schutzian analysis of social science as interpretative and therefore ultimately subjective sense making precludes the discovery of that reality once and for all. All that can be achieved is the aspiration to knowledge through rigor, multiple data and theory analyses, building and testing. Constructivists, by contrast, consider not only that objective knowledge is impossible because of these problems of interpretation, but also that given that the world is variously constructed by human beings with their context- and interest-specific views of the world anyway, that reality is itself multiple, contingent, and value laden. Constructivists would contend that realism cannot, therefore, be considered a postpositivist position.

The roots of the realist ontological compromise can be discerned in the work of Schutz's phenomenological contemporaries and sometime collaborators Berger and Luckmann, although it has been further developed to establish contemporary critical realism. Berger and Luckmann argued in *The Social Construction of Reality* and other works that the social world has a dual character. On one hand, it is the outcome of the constructive work done by human beings as they seek to make sense of the world. On the other, because this work is done intersubjectively with other people, it achieves a kind of independence and, over time, accretes a "commonsense" reality with layers of institutionalization, tradition, and socializations. Within these relatively stable meanings, people's sense making becomes progressively trammled, until the social world has the appearance of objective reality with a semblance of continuity that also limits the meanings that can be attributed to objects. This limitation renders the

social world available to enquiry independent of the human agency that constitutes it. Subsequent realist perspectives have built on this idea to argue that society is not created by individuals, though it is reproduced and transformed by them. Rather, the enduring social structures, processes, and institutions (e.g., class stratification and liberal democracy) are always the conditions of human agency and amount to an independent social reality to be studied objectively and potentially fully described.

This realist position, however, does not simply recapitulate positivism. Although realism considers there is an objective social reality that could be discerned were social researchers to possess sufficiently sophisticated tools, realism recognizes that when it comes to studying the social world, our tools (human understanding and interpretation) are inevitably value laden, [p. 663 ↓] theory laden and context dependent. All that can be hoped for is that by continual efforts toward methodological rigor, triangulation from various data sources, and meticulous analysis of data that an approximation to truth can be derived and generalized.

Constructivism and Poststructuralism

The tensions within realism between individual interpretations of the world and an independent social reality that is still reproduced and even transformed by agency do not exist for constructivist and poststructuralist approaches. Although drawing to an extent upon phenomenological approaches (but with a background within but also in opposition to anthropological structuralism), these perspectives reject any notion of an objective reality to the social world independent of human action and thought and conclude that we cannot seek to study society and social action in the same way that a natural scientist would study a chemical reaction. The basis for this conclusion, broadly speaking, inheres in the primacy of language as the mediator of the human experience of reality.

Poststructuralist thinking is highly skeptical about truth and antagonistic to any assertion that one or another interpretation of reality is the only way in which it may be understood. Power and authority, often vested in archives of ascribed knowledge, underpin attempts to persuade groups and cultures to one view or judgment, for example, to a particular perspective on sexuality, form of worship, models of health, and

so forth. Language comes to serve these authoritative bodies of knowledge so that they become more and more closed to challenge, and according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, may serve to effectively silence contrary voices. Furthermore, Michel Foucault argued that sources of power and systems of knowledge work together to create subjectivities in those whom they seek to persuade. However, poststructuralist approaches also recognize the unending potential that human subjects have for resisting these bodies of knowledge, and the entire history of human society can be understood as the struggle between power and resistance to control over what counts as knowledge and what it is to live ethically. The aim of poststructuralism has in general been to expose these power plays and claims to truth and thus to undermine them and offer alternative ways of thinking about the social world.

Constructivist and poststructuralist ontologies are consequently interested less in the continuities within the social order and more with the fluidity of meanings that are held by social actors. They emphasize the extreme context-specificity of knowledge, suggesting that truth depends entirely upon point of view and that multiple truths may be said to exist concurrently within groups or communities that operate doddering systems of thought or have different commitments. Epistemologically, this means that knowledge is entirely dependent on context and indeed that the role of the researcher (with all her or his baggage of culture, norms and values) in constructing knowledge about a research setting must also be fully accounted for.

These perspectives have been highly influential within qualitative research, and in their strongest forms (e.g., James Clifford and George Marcus's collection *Writing Culture*) have sought to expose the processes and rhetorical devices whereby qualitative fieldwork has been translated into (realist) social science knowledge. These include the techniques by which the researcher's view is privileged over that of the researched (who sometimes appears in realist texts as a "cultural dupe," unable to discern the reality of her or his own situation and doomed to false consciousness), and the politics of the academy, which considers social theory as superior to the practical knowledge held by participants in a field setting. Constructivism variously argues for research that is context sensitive, engaged with the practical needs of the subjects of research, and committed to supporting resistance to power and authority. It is critical of social science knowledge that does not reflect on its own production and its own values and assumptions.

Constructivism approaches to ontology and epistemology also underpin various other strands in social theory that are not explicitly poststructuralist in provenance. Some feminist researchers, for example, have adopted this stance to critique both the ontological status of social reality as constructed by patriarchy, and the epistemology of positivism and realism in which (male) knowledge about the social world is claimed as truth. These perspectives emphasize the importance of reflexivity for researchers, both in understanding data and in acknowledging their own identities and subjectivities. Broadly, these approaches embrace relativism in knowledge growth, emphasizing the value of a research practice that is sensitive to difference and does not seek to establish “grand narratives” of theory and social modeling. They further embrace reflexive knowledge in addition to empirical data as sources for exploring the social world and [p. 664 ↓] potentially transforming and improving the lives of those they research.

Summary

Postpositivism is a critique of both the ontological and epistemological foundations of theories of knowledge. It is a range of perspectives that have in common a rejection of the positivist claims to be able to discern a single social reality and to observation as the sole technique for its discernment. Realism and constructivism both recognize that our ability to know the world is constrained by the need for interpretation by researchers of data. Constructivists, however, also reject any sense that there is an independent reality that is there to be uncovered and consider instead that the social world is a consequence of authoritative claims to know the truth. The purpose of research, in the latter perspective, is exploratory and transformational.

Nick J.Fox

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n332>

See also

- [Constructivism](#)
- [Positivism](#)
- [Realism](#)
- [Relativism](#)

Further Readings

Alvesson, M., & Skoldberg, K. (2000). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Bauer, M., Gaskell, G., & Allum, N. C. (2000). Quality, quantity and knowledge interests: Avoiding confusions. In M. Bauer & ed. G. Gaskell (Eds., ed.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound* (chap. 1). London: Sage.

Clifford, J., & ed. Marcus, G. E. (Eds.), ed. (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fox, N. J. (1999). *Beyond health: Postmodernism and embodiment*. London: Free Association Books.

Fox, N. J. (2006). Postmodern fieldwork in health research. In D. Hobbs & ed. R. Wright (Eds., ed.), *The SAGE handbook of fieldwork*. London: Sage.

Ramazanoglu, C. On feminist methodology: Male reason versus female empowerment. *Sociology* (1992), vol. 26. pp. 207–212.

An introduction to qualitative research fourth edition sage. © Uwe Flick 2009. This fourth edition first published 2009 First edition published 1998 Second edition published 2002 Third edition published 2006 Reprinted 2010. terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers. SAGE Publications Ltd 1 Oliver's Yard 55 City Road London EC1Y 4SP. SAGE Publications Inc. 2455 Teller Road Thousand Oaks, California 91320. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd B 1/11 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area Mathura Road New Delhi 110 044. SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd 33 Pekin Street #02-01 Far East Square Singapore 048763. Library of Congress Control Number 2008933314. Qualitative research is designed to explore the human elements of a given topic, while specific qualitative methods examine how individuals see and experience the world. Qualitative approaches are typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and process. Such methods are central to research conducted in education, nursing, sociology, anthropology, information studies, and other disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and health sciences. The entries cover every major facet of qualitative methods, including access to research participants, data coding, research ethics, the role of theory in qualitative research, and much more—all without overwhelming the informed reader. Key Features. The SAGE Encyclopedia of has been added to your Basket. Add to Basket. Buy Now. Qualitative methods are central to research conducted in Education, Nursing, Sociology, Anthropology, and other disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and health sciences. The range of methods available to researchers is very broad (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observation) and projects are informed by various approaches (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory, discourse analysis). (Software) Data Storage xviâ€”â€”â€”The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods Debriefing Nonverbal Communication Subjectivity Statement Deception Observation Schedule Telephone Interview Dialogue Open-Ended Question Text Diaries and Journals Participant Observation Theoretical Sampling Documents Peer Debriefing Triangulation Dramaturgy Perception Unstructured Interview Email Interview Photographs in Qualitative Unstructured Observation Emotions in Qualitative Research Research Videorecording Empathy Pilot Study Vignettes Ethnopoetics Poetry in Qualitative Research.â€” Conference Literature in Qualitative Research Research Setting International Congress of Literature Review Research Team