EPISTEMOLOGY and METAPHYSICS for QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Preface

Human beings make sense of the external world through experience and cognition. 'Common sense' recognition would suggest that knowledge, then, is fundamentally the result of our physiological make-up and our cognitive processes. To make this concession is to enter an arena of philosophical problems which have occupied many an intellectual mind. While some have argued that by means of the scientific method it is possible to obtain accurate descriptions of reality, others have advocated that the only thing we can truly know is our ideas. Still others have accepted truth claims that solely pertain to the observable aspects of reality, while others still have rejected the possibility of knowledge altogether. In the quest to account for reality and gain knowledge of it, a number of distinct schools of thought have flourished. This book seeks to provide an accessible overview of the developments in the prevailing philosophical doctrines, and supply the reader with a deeper understanding of the key arguments.

There is an increasing demand on students to possess sound knowledge of various theoretical perspectives and to demonstrate the ability to apply these to research. However, attending to matters of metaphysics and epistemology is undoubtedly one of the most vexing tasks a researcher faces. In the pursuit of carefully articulating a philosophical stance, one has to make sense of legacies spanning the course of centuries in a very short period of time, grapple with intricate vocabularies, and digest complex ideas. Many arrive at this juncture without any philosophical background, unequipped to deal with this formidable task. The subtler ambition of this text, therefore, is to bring out the philosopher in the qualitative inquirer by examining a variety of topics that have been pivotal in the philosophy of science.

Several important tenets underpin this project. The first has to do with the notion that there is a 'better' or an 'accurate' way of doing qualitative research. To claim methodological superiority is in itself a manifestation of philosophical assumptions of a certain kind. The vantage point adopted in the pages that follow views qualitative inquiry as characterized by different research aims, philosophical assumptions, varying levels of usefulness, and a range of attitudinal factors – including claims to truth. It does not seek to advance any particular school of thought on qualitative research. This point ought to be raised upfront as some

readers may be enmeshed in the traditions of specific communities of qualitative practice. Secondly, this book is not a book about paradigms. Quite the contrary, it is argued that paradigms, as they have been construed in the literature, represent a rigid conceptual organization of ideas, and as such are limited in capturing philosophical diversity. The third tenet arises out of the first two as an appeal to building an environment that nurtures academic freedom, creativity, and the expression of a range of philosophical and methodological choices. Taken together, these three undercurrents crystalize in the final chapter in the form of an invitation to contemplate a post-paradigmatic approach to research.

The central thesis of this text is the claim that philosophy develops across multiple continua, whereby ideas may not only be of a similar (or similar enough) sort, but also diverge and occupy different planes. It is inadequate to speak of one realism, empiricism, rationalism, and idealism univocally; rather, there is a multiplicity of perspectives, and these have evolved and spilled over into other territories to give rise to modified outlooks. Consequently, it would be misleading to suggest that all constructionists, for example, are anti-realists through and through, that all researchers drawn to hermeneutics and phenomenology are anti-objectivists, and that all idealism goes hand in hand with subjectivism. Dichotomies of this breed no longer serve the qualitative researcher of today, who is called to navigate increasingly challenging and heterogeneous philosophical terrains.

The volume is divided into four parts and eight chapters. Parts I and IV are centered on qualitative research, enfolding Parts II and III, which attend to epistemological and ontological problems. Whereas the first chapter establishes the overall premise and erects a conceptual skeleton for thinking about metaphysical and epistemological issues, the final chapter reinforces the extent to which philosophy plays an integral role in the research process in its revisiting of some of the covered topics. Much of the content is built around the core philosophical considerations delineated in Figure 1.3 in Chapter 1. Indeed, this figure may serve as a guide for mapping the main epistemologies. Following that, the chapters in Part II examine the differences between the rationalist and empiricist approaches to knowledge, that is, positivism and postpositivism (Chapter 2); the epistemologies of scepticism, idea-ism, and idealism (Chapter 3); German idealism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Chapter 4); and realisms and anti-realisms (Chapter 5).

The third part of the book, titled Intangible Realities, addresses some of the neglected domains of qualitative research. Chapter 6 on social ontology examines how it is possible for social facts such as money and tourists to exist. This chapter should be particularly important for social science and humanities researchers, who study social facts as opposed to natural facts. Building on previous discussions, it also shows that academics can be stronger or weaker realists with regard to different entities. For instance, one can be an ontological realist about rocks and trees, but not about professors and tourists; one can be a realist about atoms and mathematics, but not about moral codes; and one can also be a realist or anti-realist about all of the above. Chapter 7 ventures into the territory of quantum

mechanics and outlines nine theories about quantum reality. It is argued that if we are to speak of reality with some degree of relevance in the twenty-first century, then attending to the philosophical problems entwined with the quantum world has an important place in the discourse.

Finally, the reader should be aware that this is not a complete philosophy of science, only a selection of the most pressing concerns for qualitative researchers. While the chapters are compiled to offer a general understanding of the key epistemological stances and metaphysical problems, the volume is not intended as an exhaustive resource. Instead, each chapter includes a list of recommended literature for furthering one's knowledge on the subject. It is also important to emphasize here that this is not a methodological text: its focus rests with metaphysical and epistemological questions, such as what there is and what can be known about it. Although the content is organized as a whole, each chapter can also be used independently as a focused resource. Regardless of their philosophical orientation and choice of methods, *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* should be a useful companion for social science researchers and students interested in qualitative inquiry.

Acknowledgements

Contents

PART I
Qualitative Inquiry and Philosophy

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window. What is the subject of the brick? The arm that throws it? The body connected to the arm? The brain encased in the body? The situation that brought brain and body to such a juncture? All and none of the above. What is its object? The window? The edifice? The laws the edifice shelters? The class and other power relations encrusted in the laws? All and none of the above.

(Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 2014)

One

Introduction: Situating Metaphysics and Epistemology in Qualitative Research

Epistemology and metaphysics are the fundamental philosophical pillars of any research. While most human beings make epistemological and metaphysical judgements on a daily basis, unless engaged in a scholarly activity, the average person does not contemplate complex philosophical questions, such as whether invisible subatomic particles can be said to exist or the possibility of social reality. Rather, we[1] trust our senses and take our perceptions for granted. This introductory chapter prepares the ground for our inquiry centred on the problem of knowledge and reality within the wider qualitative landscape. The chapter begins by signposting some of the key views and events that have contributed to the ways in which qualitative research unfolds today. A secondary, but no less important, aim is to provide a critical assessment of the increasingly challenging philosophical terrains students and academics must navigate. It will be argued that most conceptual schemata are limited in their capacity to capture the complexity and richness of the diverse streams of philosophical thought that have emerged and evolved over the past two millennia, and that those schemata responsible for the current paradigmatic dominance are too limiting to accomplish this task. As qualitative research becomes a more heterogeneous blend of various philosophical stances in an intricate web of interests, principles, ideals, and values, it is no longer sufficient to speak of only one way of embracing realism or absolutism, of only one type of objectivism, or to take a univocal approach to constructionism,[2] idealism, hermeneutics, or phenomenology. There are a multitude of philosophical and methodological horizons which require us to think in terms of flows and continua as opposed to rigid frameworks. Although there have been a number of useful conceptual structures devised to assist scholars in blending philosophical decisions with methodologies and methods, and although these models will continue

to play an important role in qualitative research, they come with limitations. In order to demonstrate the various ways in which philosophical assumptions can be organized to guide research, this chapter will concentrate on Crotty's (1998) structure of the research process, Lincoln and Guba's (2000) outline of alternative inquiry paradigms, and Lally's (1981) anatomy of metatheoretical and epistemological assumptions in social science. These frameworks have been selected for their popularity and to demonstrate their conceptual range. This chapter concludes with a delineation of the core concerns raised along the way, upon which subsequent chapters are built.

Multiple histories of qualitative research

Qualitative research, as defined for the purposes of this book, is a mode of inquiry capable of accommodating a wide array of philosophical perspectives and methods, stretching on an attitudinal continuum from *means* to *orientation*. This notion is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, nonetheless it is imperative to establish upfront that it would be too simplistic to conceive of qualitative research purely in terms of choosing a set of methods. Rather, there are a number of considerations which determine the shape and scope of one's project, including the research aims; the researcher's or one's own philosophical assumptions, values and moral sensitivities; the impact on local communities and co-researchers' lives; and, for some, also the critical engagement with issues of emancipation, empowerment and silencing – intertwined with the act of inquiry. Therefore, there is no single correct approach to qualitative research, and this text does not seek to offer a simple definition that would accurately capture the immense variety of qualitative works. Such a reductionist ideal would miss the point and be counterproductive for the task before us.

To articulate the different discourses and to show that qualitative research is a vibrant area benefiting from a multitude of voices, Brinkmann, Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2014), who refer to it as a 'field', have chosen to offer not just one historical account of it but a variety of histories. Their multi-faceted approach yields as many as six types of historical accounts of qualitative research: conceptual, qualitative, internal, marginalizing, repressed, social, and technological. In this section we briefly explore some of their differences.

With respect to the conceptual history of qualitative research, although the term itself is a relatively recent one, the notion of it originates in the ideas of our philosophical predecessors who put in place the early philosophical building blocks. Brinkmann et al. (2014) take note of the Enlightenment thinkers who distinguished between the qualities ('qualia') and the quantities ('quanta') of things. For instance, they call attention to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who argued as early as 1810 that there is a difference in the study of colours according to Newtonian optics and how colours are experienced through the human senses.

In Goethe's view, the latter, embodied experience was just as significant as the physics of colour perception, and his *Theory of Colours* is described by Brinkmann et al. as an early qualitative phenomenological study. Other philosophical giants, including Descartes, Locke, and Hume, saw the need to distinguish between primary qualities, those that are independent of observers, and secondary ones, which are observer-dependent. This early separation between 'appearances' and the 'intrinsic properties' of objects is, in contemporary terms, formulated as the problem of objectivism versus subjectivism, and will occupy us later in the book.

We can go beyond Brinkmann et al. and probe even deeper into our historical past. The ancient philosophers pondered many of the fundamental philosophical questions about knowledge with which we still grapple today. For example, the proponents of scepticism, such as the Greeks Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrho, contested the 'givens' of perception and radically undermined the views of the empirically oriented philosophers. Likewise, the philosophical ideas put forth by the proponents of relativism, including Protagoras, and later Wittgenstein, Feyerabend, and many others, played a major role in shaping the discourse between the doctrines of realism and anti-realism. And therefore, as commented by Laudan, 'struggles between realist and relativist perspectives span the entire history of epistemology' (1997: 139). When we adopt a longitudinal approach to qualitative research, we realize that it is in many ways a continuation of the older debates – albeit fuelled by contemporary concerns, novel theoretical perspectives, and innovative methods.

The second, internal history of qualitative research focuses our attention on the dedicated qualitative thinkers from inside the field. Here, Brinkmann et al. (2014: 20) outline what they call the 'three philosophical foundations of qualitative research': the German tradition of *Verstehen*, with figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002); the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938); and the North American traditions of pragmatism, Chicago sociology, Erving Goffman's (1922–1982) dramaturgical approach, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. These traditions, of course, come with an elaborate list of intellectuals – each making a contribution to what have become rather heterogeneous and at times radically different schools of thought. Later in this book we will see that there is not just one phenomenology but rather a variety of strands of phenomenological thought, that there is not just one symbolic interactionism but rather many approaches within this tradition (Herman and Reynolds (1994) noted that there were up to 15 varieties), and that there is no one univocal hermeneutics, idealism, or constructionism.

The third, marginalizing history of qualitative research is a reminder that qualitative researchers have been subjected to hostile attitudes by scientifically oriented, or what are frequently called positivistically inclined, academics for whom qualitative research does not meet the criteria of scientific inquiry. In this regard, what is refreshing in the work of Brinkmann et al. (2014) is their acknowledgement of positivism as being too quickly dismissed and typecast as the enemy of qualitative

inquiry. Pointing out that not all positivists are opposed to qualitative research, the authors comment that 'when qualitative researchers distance themselves from positivism, they most often construct a straw man [sic] and rarely, if ever, go back and read what early positivists such as Comte, Schlick, or Carnap in fact had to say about research and human experience' (2014: 31). This is a key point. We will follow this critical line of thought throughout this book, with Chapter 2 focusing in on the doctrine of positivism and other varieties of empiricism and addressing some of the misconceptions surrounding these.

In the fourth, repressed history of qualitative research, Brinkmann et al. provide an analysis of the discipline of psychology as a way of demonstrating that the qualitative tradition has been 'forgotten by the official journals and handbooks of psychology to an extent that makes it resemble repression' (2014: 32). The authors argue that the qualitative character of such research as Piaget's work with children, Gestalt psychologists' investigations into perception, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, and Bartlett's work on remembering is often omitted and 'almost always neglected and repressed' (2014: 32). This leads them to the realization that, in charting various disciplinary developments, qualitative research has not always been noted as having played a significant role, or even any role at all – a wholly unjustified view.

The fifth, social history of qualitative research underscores the necessity to take into account the social, cultural, economic, and historical contexts within which qualitative research takes place. This approach is an invitation to consider not only cultural and social movements, which undoubtedly created new opportunities for scholars to think and express themselves differently (particularly in the 1960s and 1970s), but also soft forms of power. Brinkmann et al. caution against the naïve conception of qualitative inquiry simply as 'progressive' or 'emancipatory', and explain that qualitative market research, for example, has become a powerful tool in the manipulation of consumers' desires and behaviour. This is a critical reminder that qualitative research is now firmly embedded in our social life and is applied for different purposes and agendas, including those that are economic and political.

The last type of history of qualitative research is the technological one. It makes allowance for the kinds of devices researchers utilize to gather, manage, and make sense of qualitative data. From digital voice recorders to the latest software programs, many contemporary researchers rely on a wide array of technological innovations (Brinkmann et al., 2014). It is increasingly common for scholars to work with electronic data, blogs, mind maps, transcription programs, and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo. Moreover, technology has been widely embraced and amalgamated into relatively novel approaches and methods, such as visual methodologies (e.g., Hughes, 2012; Rogers, 2013; Rose, 2012). Of course, as Brinkmann et al. point out, there are a number of issues related to the use of technology. Its critics are concerned that the use of software programs to manage and analyze qualitative data may lead to a

certain type of analysis being favoured over others. Nonetheless, the twenty-first century qualitative researcher can be not only a *bricoleur* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) but also a techno-savvy problem solver who understands that technology is useful and necessary in a digital era. And if we consider that we 'think through, with, and alongside media' (Hayles, 2012: 1), then much of the future research in humanities and qualitative social science is likely to rely on and incorporate the use of technology. However, there are philosophical implications researchers ought to consider when adopting numerical approaches to qualitative data, some of which are discussed in Chapter 8.

In addition to the types of histories noted above, an account of the developments in qualitative research can be also organized around a focus on specific geographical areas. Flick (2009), for example, explains that in Germany, advances on the front of qualitative research were marked by methodological consolidation and a focus on procedural questions, whereas across the Atlantic, qualitative researchers were more concerned about the issues of representation and the politics and practice of interpretation. He remarks that particularly towards the end of the 1970s, German qualitative researchers reduced their reliance on the translations of American works (what he calls the 'import of American developments') and began to develop original research focusing on the application and analysis of interviews. By the 1980s, Schütze's (1977) *narrative interview* and Oevermann et al.'s (1979) *objective hermeneutics* had become pivotal in the development of an original approach to qualitative research in Germany. The 'historical moments' delineated by Denzin and Lincon (1994) stand as rather unique and specific to the North American context.

The 'historical moments' of qualitative research in North America

Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) worked diligently to map several 'historical moments' in qualitative research. These have become a popular way of chronologically marking specific ideas and concerns over the past decades. As noted in the previous section, the *moments* correspond to developments within the qualitative communities in North America, and have been outlined as follows: 'the traditional (1900–1950); the modernist or golden age (1950–1970); blurred genres (1970–1986); the crisis of representation (1986–1990); the postmodern, a period of experimental and new ethnographies (1990–1995); postexperimental inquiry (1995–2000); the methodologically contested present (2000–2004); and the future (2005–), which is now' (Denzin, 2010b: 13). In the view of Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research has reached the *eighth* moment, which 'asks that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a). We shall not describe each moment here,