Key Concepts in
The Philosophy of
Social Research

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For JJ who began it all

About the Author
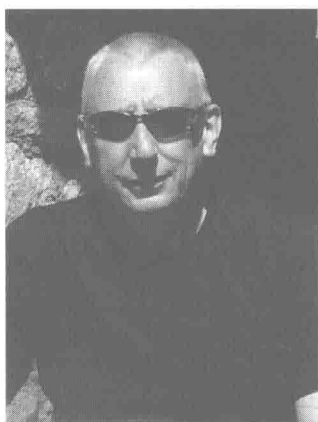
Malcolm Williams is Professor and Director of the Cardiff Q-Step Centre at Cardiff University. Prior to joining Cardiff in 2010, as Director of the School of Social Sciences, he was Professor of Social Research Methodology and Head of the School of Psychosocial Sciences at the University of Plymouth where he taught for 16 years.

Williams has designed and taught modules in the philosophy of social research for 18 years at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. In these he has introduced a number of innovative pedagogic techniques, such as 'Problem-Based Learning' and 'Concept Speed Dating', in which students take a key idea and move from table to table attempting to build conceptual links between ideas.

Additionally he has taught many modules/short courses in social theory, research design, questionnaire design, scaling, sampling, scientific method and history of science.

Williams has an extensive publishing record in philosophy of social research: with Tim May *Introduction to Philosophy of Social Research* (1996), also with Tim May edited *Knowing the Social World*, with essays by Rom Harré, William Outhwaite, David-Hillel Ruben, John Scott etc. *Science and Social Science* (2000) received wide critical acclaim. In 2006 he edited the Sage 4-volume set *Philosophical Foundations of Social Research* and more recently, jointly written with Gayle Letherby and John Scott, *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research* (Sage 2013).

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Introduction

This book is not a book for philosophers! Rather, it is a book for social researchers, or those thinking of doing social research, who would like to understand better the philosophical issues that lurk behind our surveys, our interviews, our observations and our data analyses. Every single entry here has been, or could be, a book in its own right and it may still only deal with the subject fairly superficially.

Yet if by beginning with a hand-waving understanding of a concept leads to deeper insights, then I will have done my job in taking the reader to the next level. Even if those deeper insights are not to be had, for reasons of taste or time, but instead some understanding of these key concepts alleviates anxiety, then the money you, or your library, paid for the book was well spent!

In this introduction I want to make the case for why any of this matters and to contextualise some of the debates in the practice of social research. I will conclude with a few clarifications, pointers to reading the book and one or two excuses.

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND PHILOSOPHY

I do not want to draw the boundaries too tightly on how we define social research, partly because its assumptions, ambition and methods are ever changing, but also to define is often to implicitly suggest what is good or authentic. Yet for most of us it is captured by methods of enquiry (e.g. surveys, secondary analysis, observations, experiments, interviews and more recently, online methods) and disciplines (e.g. social policy, politics, sociology, criminology and education). Some people will use the term 'social science research' in order to emphasise its scientific credentials, but what makes social research different is that it is not just influenced by science, but by art and the humanities. The term 'social research' then captures both scientific and humanistic approaches. Social science, as a description, on the face of it, would seem to suggest a scientific orientation, but what counts as science in this case is contested (more of this below). Also social science, unlike social research, is not wholly concerned with empirical

investigation and a great deal of it consists of theorisation that may only tangentially refer to social research. There is more about this in the section on theory.

Social science has its own branch of philosophy, called the 'Philosophy of the Social Sciences' (and is represented by a very good journal of the same name). There is an inevitable overlap between 'philosophy of the social sciences' and that of 'philosophy of social research'; the latter can be seen as a sub set of the former, but is especially concerned with the philosophical issues raised by social research (and vice versa, the philosophical issues that impact upon the practice of social research). The philosophy of the social sciences has broader concerns that transcend the empirical and may be more concerned with what we might call the metaphysics of social life. I'll say a bit more about metaphysics below. Also, philosophy of the social sciences often draws on (frequently idealised) economic exemplars to make arguments and illustrate. Though I have used a few simple examples from economics, the disciplines of economics and social research are somewhat separate activities. However, having said these things, it is also true to say that the line between the philosophies of social science and social research is rather blurred, and one which I have undoubtedly crossed several times in this book.

Often, when students are confronted with the need to learn some philosophy alongside research methods, they will ask 'why?'. Their concerns are often very specific and concerned with social problems, social practices or identities. It seems rather like asking a plumber to study hydrology! But let us take three examples of why some knowledge of the philosophical issues underlying social research are important:

- *Statistics*: Most students studying social research will have to get to grips with basic statistical concepts, such as measures of central tendency, descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, hypotheses and so on. These can appear bewildering and complex and for all of us, as social researchers, some knowledge of these concepts are a rite of passage and often a painful one at that. Yet, at the risk of over simplifying, it is true to say that at the heart of statistics lie some relatively simple principles of probability. Though mathematical in expression, these are philosophical issues, and an understanding of these makes us better critical consumers and users of statistics. For example, what is called the 'law of large numbers' sets the

limits and possibilities of probability sampling. And as we learn a little more about probability and statistics, despite these apparently natural mathematical limits, we find that many of our conventions are 'socially constructed', that is they were developed often as a result of historical practices, practical needs and the epistemological views of the statisticians.

- *Objectivity*: To read many social research text books one would think objectivity was either a state of grace to aim for, completely impossible or something that one tries to have more of, like loyalty points! That it is so contested actually suggests that it is a deeply philosophical issue, grounded in views about what humans are like, our long developed scientific practice and mostly whether social research is about the 'is' of describing and explaining, or the 'ought' of moral, or political action. If you do social research, whether you intend it or not, you must take a position on objectivity.

- *Quantity or Quality*: If you are already engaged in research you will be using methods that can be described as 'qualitative' or 'quantitative'. They may sometimes appear hybrid, but their component parts, with very few exceptions, can be so described. You may also be aware that the world contains researchers who favour one approach over the other (sometimes quite passionately) or are pluralists about method. They may present their choices as pragmatic, that some things are better known through observation or interview and some through surveys or experiments. Some will go further and say, for example, that social life cannot be known through the measurement instruments of surveys and experiments, because of the infinite variability of human interpretation, action and interaction. Their opposites may claim that unstructured observation and depth interviews are not rigorous or replicable and tell us more about the researcher, than the researched.

This antinomy, albeit put somewhat starkly here, is a reflection of a deep debate about what humans are like and whether we can use the nomothetic methods of science to describe and explain social life, or the idiographic methods of the arts to interpret human understandings and actions. It has led to the question of whether a science of the social is indeed possible and is therefore a deeply philosophical question about our humanity. It is fair to say that most researchers, in their day-to-day work, do not trouble themselves unduly with these deep issues and

matters of 'quantity' or 'quality' will be practical ones, but the decision to use one or the other and to subsequently make claims about the social world on the basis of the findings is ultimately to make claims that have a philosophical provenance.

These three examples are somewhat general, but hopefully illustrate that philosophical issues are ever present. The late Cathie Marsh, one of the greatest British survey researchers, often used to say that it was important that researchers were detectives, not lawyers. She was writing at a time in British social research when there were indeed too many of the latter and not enough of the former. I agree very much with her, we should be detectives, but good detectives should also know a little of the law, lest they find themselves in trouble with it!

PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

For those who are not philosophers, philosophy seems like a rather abstract activity, maybe even an indulgence. It can be both of these and it can certainly be obfuscating and difficult. Anyone who says it is not the latter is possibly very clever, but probably not – you decide. But like cookery and playing the piano, you can do it at different levels and still obtain satisfaction. The thing about philosophy is that there are only a very few big philosophical problems, but there are thousands and thousands of approaches and answers to these. Some of the problems are unanswerable, so we just have to shrug and move on.

Existence

How do you know you exist? And if you do, what is that exists? In the 18th century a cleric called George Berkeley believed that you could not show there was anything in the world beyond your own perceptions of it. The world was what you perceived. This view became known as 'solipsism' and ultimately it is irrefutable – you can deny, but you can't refute it! A modern version of this is depicted in the film *The Matrix*, in which reality as perceived by most people is in fact a simulation.[1]

The French philosopher René Descartes thought he had resolved the existence problem, and his solution is summed up in the motto 'I think, therefore I am' (you can refer to it airily as 'The Cogito'). His argument was that suppose an evil demon had tricked him into believing he

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[1] See: http://www.simulation-argument.com/simulation.html

existed, it was nevertheless undeniable that something existed to have such thoughts of existence and the fact that he was aware of existing through thinking these things, proved that he existed.

What has any of this got to do with social research? It is the case that through our investigations we claim to know other minds. This is especially true when we use methods of interpretation, where we aim to come to know how others understand the world. But there must be a logical limit to this knowledge. Some will say that 'to know one, you must be one', meaning, for example, to understand the perspective of a fundamentalist Christian or Muslim you must become, or perhaps nearly become one. This issue was explored in an excellent novel by Alison Lurie, called *Imaginary Friends*, which follows some investigators who infiltrate a UFO, millenniumist cult and who get drawn further and further into the beliefs of the cult.

Quite apart from the issue of 'going native' in such research, the issue remains that to know another mind (or minds) you must become that mind, and therefore a philosophical impossibility.

What can we know of the world?

The great philosopher Bertrand Russell reflected upon the habits of his cat. He sees his cat in the morning, when the cat is fed, and in the evening, when the cat is fed again. Often, he does not see him between those times. Does the cat exist, when not seen? This seems totally implausible and Russell (as would you and I, in the matter of cats, relatives and politicians between elections) assumes that the cat exists when not seen.

This is a trivial example, but actually is important philosophically and in social research, practically. How far can we reason beyond what our sense data tells us? In social research, this has historically been a major source of controversy. Positivist social researchers maintained that we could not reason beyond what was measured, so if two variables (say poor educational attainment and class) were associated, we could do no more than simply report the finding and report to what extent could such an association be simply chance, whatever other evidence might point to a possible causal connection. In practice, of course, even positivists would seek to test for relationships with third and subsequent variables, to attempt to establish whether a third, or subsequent variable made any difference to that relationship. Other researchers, broadly called 'realists', would say that just because we cannot observe something (rather like Bertrand Russell's cat) it does not mean it is not there.

They, instead, argue that there are real things and processes that exist beyond our ability to 'know' them with our senses. I will not adjudicate on this historical dispute, at this point at least, other than to pose the question of what do we mean by 'sense data' anyway? If you are caught driving your car too fast, it is likely to be as a result of activating a speed camera and the 'sense' data is that of the reading on the instrument. So it is in social research. We 'observe' through the proxy of data collection instruments, such as surveys and even in our one-to-one encounters, perhaps in participant observation, we must reason from verbal or visual clues to conclusions that are not manifest from our 'observations'.

Both of these problems are 'metaphysical' at root. Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy (perhaps the most important one) that goes beyond our existing knowledge and poses questions of existence and what can be known of it. It further divides into epistemology, which is concerned with how we know what we know and our justification for claiming to know it, and ontology, which is concerned with existence and the nature of the things that exist. On reflection, quite a good description of social research! One might even be brave enough to say social research is philosophy in action, but I'm not quite brave enough to say that. Epistemology and ontology can be found as entries below.

One further example that leads to epistemological and ontological questions, but is itself a separate branch of philosophy, is that of ethics.

I won't try to define ethics here, again there is an entry later. But consider this. Because all of us, except for Robinson Crusoe (and even he found his man Friday), are social beings, we must find ways of acting toward each other that produce social harmony. If not, as Thomas Hobbes said, life would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1960: 82–95). Now because we are social and mostly prefer not to be hit over the head with a club, or be nuked to death, we can be said to prefer social harmony – even the most cantankerous of us! That, of course, begs the question of what counts as social harmony, but no matter. We can approach this two ways: we can say that there are certain recipes for acting that will be the right thing to do, these may be religiously grounded in the Bible or the Quran, for example, or they may have a secular basis; or we may say that we should do those things, whatever they are, that promote social harmony, often translated as happiness. Both of these approaches inform our informal codes of conduct, our belief systems, our laws and our politics. And often they go horribly wrong and lead to the horrors of conflict, cruelty, division and de-friending

on Facebook. Ethics may be a branch of philosophy, but it underwrites social research in so many ways: the way we behave to those who we research, the kinds of research we will do, but most importantly it is about questions of commitment. Do social researchers commit to a set of values, beyond the communities they research, are they 'on the side' of one or other group, or is it only their duty to hold a mirror up to society? Again, I will not answer these questions here, but conclude this section with one observation: that both philosophically and as researchers, our ability to reflect upon and investigate the world and our species within it is an outcome of what we are as humans, and this leads us to reflect upon and investigate the world and our species within it.

THE SMALL PRINT: READING THIS BOOK, SOME CLARIFICATIONS AND EXCUSES

As I said at the beginning, this is not a book for philosophers. Think of it as minor triage for social researchers who need (and indeed ought) to learn a bit about the philosophical underpinnings, or as a philosophical *amuse bouche* for those social researchers who want to learn some philosophy. If you are a philosopher and have ended up with this book and really wanted to know about social research, then I can heartily recommend my own *Making Sense of Social Research*. OK, so now I have managed expectations, here's a bit more about this book and why it is like it is.

It is divided into short essays of between 1300 and 3000 words, because that is what the SAGE Key Concept books are like. But within this there are different kinds of entry. Some, like 'Epistemology', 'Ontology', 'Empiricism', might be found in any philosophy book, but they are angled toward social science and social research (and you won't necessarily need to look them up elsewhere). Other entries, though less obviously philosophical, are nevertheless a bit grandiose – for example 'Statistics'. But under this entry you will not find a comprehensive historical or technical discussion, nor will you learn how to do your statistics assignment, but you will find out a bit about the philosophical relationship of statistics to social research. Then there are the more obviously 'social research' type entries, such as 'Interpretation and meaning', where I try to relate research issues to their underlying philosophy. Some entries present an argument or arguments, but mostly it is impossible in such a few words to actually *make* an argument, so for the most part I simply summarise the arguments others have made.

There is a big overlap between concepts and I ended up with several that were really saying many of the same things as other entries, so some things are not there (e.g. naturalism, poststructuralism, agent-based modelling, reflexivity etc.), but mostly you can find them under other concepts and thus see how they fit within these other concepts. Some concepts could have had their own entry (e.g. hermeneutics, phenomenology), however, by describing them under their 'parent' philosophy, in this case idealism, it is possible to see how this philosophical position led to what we might term 'second order philosophies', which are also methodologies (or the basis of methodologies).

There were a few things that younger colleagues said ought to be in, for example posthumanism, but I either rather snootily thought these were just old wine in new bottles or some cases, such as posthumanism, I had no idea what the writers were talking about, and I suspect in some cases neither did they!

Within the concept entries themselves, there are a number of practical features. Often there are important linkages between concepts and these are indicated in the text itself and summarised at the end. Some concepts (e.g. Causality) have their own entry, but keep cropping up in other entries. Also at the end I list a few key readings, sometimes just one or two, other times several. These may amplify the concept more, or go into more depth about a particular feature of a concept. Some are debates about contentious issues, some are classics, others more obscure, but hopefully interesting. When I look through the references and key readings at the end of each concept, a few appear several times. These books might be worth broader attention. The first is Norman Blaikie's *Approaches to Social Enquiry* (2007), which is an excellent and accessible bridge between philosophical issues and the methodology of social research. A very clear introduction to philosophical issues in science is William Newton-Smith's *The Rationality of Science* (1981). My own *Science and Social Science* (2000) examines in a little more depth many of the concepts presented here and attempts to make the case for a moderate scientific social science. Finally, there are many very good introductions to philosophy more generally. Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* (1979) is clear and comprehensive.

Also at the end of each concept entry is a list of 'key thinkers'. I struggled with this one. Some concepts are clearly associated with famous philosophers (e.g. Empiricism with Hume, Falsification with Popper), but sometimes more contemporary and less well-known

figures are, at least in my view, 'key', so sometimes the list is a bit idiosyncratic, containing household names from philosophy and social science and a few Johnny-come-latelys. Also, just because someone is listed as a 'key thinker' does not mean they take the same view as others in the list on a matter, and indeed they might be quite opposed to each other. The penultimate entry in the book is 'Theory'. I have listed a few thinkers I think are key for this entry, but here the list could have gone on for pages!

In this book I have tried to be fair to positions that are often contentious, but this does not mean I have adopted a position of lofty disinterestedness. Like all social researchers, I have my views on technical issues and on good practice, and like all those who are concerned with methodological and philosophical matters, I have particular views on these too. Inevitably these views will become apparent, so it's better that I confess now. To begin with, I do not think there is any neutral or Archimedean position on knowledge; all knowledge, including that of the social world, is from a perspective. However, it does not follow from this that all knowledge has epistemological equivalence. It is a fact that I know more about the wines of Bordeaux than my postman, who refers to it as that 'French jollop', though I know a lot less that Robert Parker about the matter! Similarly, the scientific and social scientific knowledge of scientists and social scientists is greater than that of most lay people. It does not make scientists and social scientists always right, and certainly not superior in any moral sense. Scientists in particular can prove they know more, more readily, because they can do wizzy stuff that lay persons can't. So, I'm in favour of science (as Raymond Tallis (1995) argued, what is the alternative?), but a moderate and falsifiable science and this view equally applies to social science. Yet, whilst I reject the epistemological relativism, which often arises from more humanistic approaches to social science, I can also see the enormous importance of humanist approaches to knowing the social world. Additionally, I am a realist, which means I believe there is an actually existing world (physical or social) that transcends what we can know of it (and anyway, how would we know that we 'knew' it?). This puts me at odds with the positivists, because I believe in complex causality and mechanisms and not just associations, and also at odds with the more militant social constructionists, because I believe that whilst the social world is constructed, it is nevertheless 'real' in its consequences and it is grounded in a largely non-negotiable physical world.