Clive Seale & Carol Rivas

Researching Society & Culture

5th Edition

Sage

1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks
California 91320

Unit No. 323–333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower
Nehru Place, New Delhi – 110 019

8 Marina View Suite 43-053
Asia Square Tower 1
Singapore 018960

Editor: Charlotte Bush
Assistant editor: Pippa Wills
Assistant editor, digital: Ben Hegarty
Production editor: Nicola Marshall
Copyeditor: Tom Bedford
Proofreader: Leigh Smithson
Indexer: Elske Janssen
Marketing manager: Rhoda Toweh
Cover design: Francis Kenney
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024943726

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5296-2899-9
ISBN 978-1-5296-2898-2 (pbk)

Contents

Extended contents

Author biographies

Suki Ali is Professor (Education) in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics. Her main interests focus on feminist postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, research methodologies, visual culture, and theories of identification and embodiment. Her work centres on the ways in which the interplay of gender, sexualities, 'race', and class shape and are shaped by education and family life. Her recent work has focused on knowledge politics in UK higher education: Ali, S. (2022). Managing racism? Race equality and decolonial educational futures. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *73*(5), 923–941.

Bridget Byrne is Professor in Sociology at the University of Manchester and Director of the ESRC research centre CoDE (Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity). She conducts qualitative research in the areas of race, citizenship, class, and gender. Her books include: *All in the Mix: Race, Class and School Choice* (with Carla De Tona, 2020); *Making Citizens: Public Rituals and Private Journeys to Citizenship* (2014); and *White Lives: The Interplay of Race, Class and Gender in Contemporary London* (2006); and the edited book *Ethnicity and Race in the UK: State of the Nation* (2020).

Niamh Hayes Niamh Hayes is an independent researcher and writer. She holds a PhD in Sociology. Her interests include visual culture, visual sociology, theories of race and racism, and cultural studies.

Natasha Howard is an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). She has a DrPH from LSHTM and previously worked with non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies as a public health consultant in Asia and Africa. Her research interests include critical global health, health policy and systems, infectious disease control policy and governance, and applying social science theory and methodology to public health research. Her current research focuses on zoonotic disease control in Southeast Asia and securitisation and health equity.

Moira Kelly is Honorary Senior Lecturer in Medical Sociology at Queen Mary, University of London. She has extensive experience in medical education and health research (specialising in qualitative methods). Her main interests are in the management of chronic illness and the relationship between ethnicity and health. Her publications cover a range of health research topics and methods, as well as medical education. She has recently acted as qualitative research advisor on a research trial of psychological therapy in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Tim Rapley is a Professor of Applied Health Care Research at the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University. He is a (medical) sociologist with an interest in social studies of medical work, research, and practice, as well as, more recently,

social care. He's also interested in social studies of qualitative research, so thinking, talking, and teaching about the practical, taken-for-granted ways that qualitative research gets done.

Carol Rivas is Professor of Health and Social Care at the Social Research Institute, University College London. She has previously worked at the University of Southampton, Queen Mary, University of London, and St Mary's Hospital, London. A methodologist, she specialises in research on under-represented and marginalised groups, with a particular focus on the intersections of race, ethnicity, citizenship, disability, and health. A recognised leader in the field, with several prizes for her work, she has written the Sage Methods course on culturally appropriate research methods. Carol's transformative work is notable for its careful incorporation of innovative social science approaches.

Clive Seale is a freelance person these days, which is another way of saying he has largely retired from academic life. When in employment he was a Professor of Sociology, specialising in health issues, in Goldsmiths and in Queen Mary (both University of London) and Brunel University. He edited, revised, and rewrote this book for the fifth edition because, with no other work distractions, he finally had the time to get it right. He has edited every chapter to make it friendlier, clearer, and more accessible to a wide range of students.

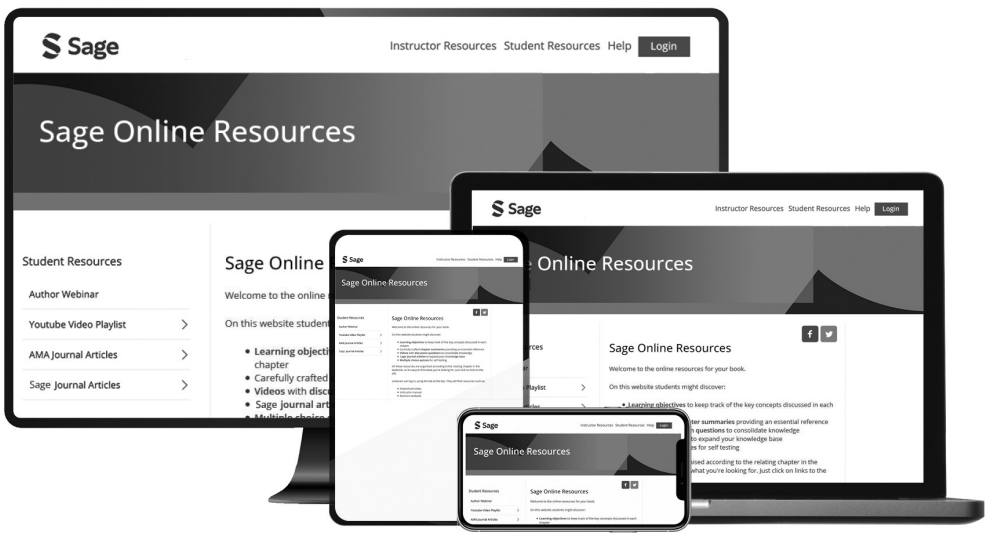
Neil Spicer is an Associate Professor in global health policy at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He has previously worked as a researcher at Goldsmiths College, London, and the University of Birmingham and has a PhD in Geography from the University of Glasgow. His interests include global health policy, HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, non-communicable diseases, health policy and services research, and qualitative and mixed methods research. His recent work has focused on community-based maternal and newborn health programmes in Nigeria, Ethiopia, and India, and global HIV/AIDS initiatives in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

Acknowledgements

The reprint of SPSS Statistics software screenshots (Figures 22.1 and Table 22.4) are courtesy of International Business Machines Corporation (IBM). SPSS Inc. was acquired by IBM in October, 2009. Mike Scott gave permission for reproduction of the image of Concordance software in Figure 24.2. Normand Peladeau gave permission for the images of Wordstat in Figures 24.3 and QDA Miner in Figure 25.8. Barbara Kinney/Hillary for America gave permission for the use of Figure 26.1. Taylor & Francis permitted the use of Figure 26.4, 26.5, and 26.6. Brill Publishing Company gave permission to reproduce Figure 26.7. Blackwell Publishing Ltd permitted the reproduction of Figure 26.8.

In addition, we would like to thank Charlotte Bush and Pippa Wills at Sage for their unfailing support, patience, and encouragement.

Online resources



Designed to take students through the theory and practice of social research, the fifth edition of *Researching Society and Culture* offers a range of online resources for lecturers. Find them at: https://study.sagepub.com/seale-rivas5e.

For lecturers

Access **PowerPoint slides** for each chapter, featuring key figures, concepts and content summaries to be customized for your own use in lectures and presentations.

Test your students' knowledge with a **Testbank**, featuring multiple choice and short answer questions which can be used in the classroom, as homework or exams.

Support your teaching with a detailed **Lecturer's guide**, featuring real case studies, videos, teaching suggestions, transcripts and additional further reading resources for each chapter.

1

Introduction and guide to using this book

Clive Seale

This fifth edition of *Researching Society and Culture* guides you in using the key social research methods for investigating society and culture. There's a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, with an equal balance between the two. There's also a chapter on how to mix methods, so you can use both kinds in your own research.

Carol Rivas has joined Clive Seale in editing the book this time. Clive has edited existing text to make it much more readable and we have added new material to bring it up to date with contemporary research practice. For example, Clive has written a completely new chapter on using online data (Chapter 18) and Carol has written one on participatory research (Chapter 5). There have been some pretty radical changes and additions to existing chapters too, with Chapters 3, 13, 16, 24, 27, and 30 being completely rewritten.

Some of the chapters have been updated by other contributors. Inevitably their writing style has varied and Clive has worked hard to bring these styles into line with the rest of the book, so that you experience it as if written by a single person. Thanks to our contributors for cooperating with this! Authors' names are given at the start of each chapter.

We use a lot of examples from published research studies to illustrate the methods we cover. Because earlier editions of the book have increasingly been used internationally, we've made a particular effort to include many examples of work done by international authors, exploring issues in many different countries.

Clive and Carol have also worked together to provide new materials for lecturers on the associated Sage website for the book. These are designed to help lecturers enhance the learning experience of their students when using the book. We'll describe these in more detail below.

This book therefore outlines in a concise way the methods you need to know about when you start research. Some of them are basic skills that everyone doing research needs to know about: writing a *research proposal*, research design, *sampling*, analysing tables, doing qualitative thematic analysis, writing a research report. Others are more advanced – multivariate statistical analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, for example. Whether you use these more advanced methods depends on what you need for your own project.

But it's also good to know about methods that you may never use yourself. If you are going to evaluate other people's studies, you need this knowledge. And unless you know what a particular method involves, you'll never know whether it might help you with your own *research questions*. Learning about research methods is good for anyone studying social or cultural disciplines, as methods lie at the heart of so many knowledge claims.

This book, in its various editions, has been used by students and lecturers in a wide range of disciplines. This is why the chapters are filled with examples of research studies from lots of different academic disciplines making use of the methods described. These include, for example, geography, cultural and media studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology, health sciences, educational research, sports science, and criminology. 'Social research', or sometimes 'social and cultural research', is the shorthand term we use in the book to refer to all this work, and it is reflected in the title of this book as well.

Organisation of the book

Under one cover, *Researching Society and Culture* will help you learn how to use the main methods social and cultural researchers use today. At the end of each chapter there is guidance on further reading, which will give you a deeper understanding of each topic. The supplementary

online resources include workshop and discussion exercises that will help you develop practical skills, as well as enhance your understanding of issues underlying the use of particular methods.

Key technical terms have been put in italics where a definition of the term is given in the text. Mostly this happens when the term is first used. There's a glossary at the end of the book where each one is defined. You can also look up technical terms in the index at the end of the book.

It has been helpful to group the chapters into four parts. Here's a description of what is in each part.

Part I: Starting out

This covers things you need to think about or do before collecting any data. This includes chapters on the philosophical foundations of science and social research, considerations of the role politics and values play in doing research, and the relationship between research and theory. Ethical issues in research are next discussed and there's a new chapter on participatory research, much of which draws on themes introduced in the chapters on politics and values and ethics.

Everyone who does research has to review other literature, so there's coverage of that before chapters on formulating research questions and research proposals. Associated with this is an important chapter on the overall design of different kinds of research investigation.

Part II: Generating data

This part of the book outlines the main methods for collecting (or 'generating') both quantitative and qualitative data. Sampling considerations run through all social research, whether quantitative or qualitative, so a chapter on this is first. There follow accounts of data collection using questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, ethnography or fieldwork, and archival and documentary research. It will be evident that a firm distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods is not always helpful, and a chapter on combining them is included in this section, which ends with an overview of how you can use online data, such as messages posted in social media.

It will become clear that, particularly for qualitative methods like ethnography and grounded theorising, the distinction between data collection and data analysis isn't a firm one. A lot of qualitative research involves going back and forth between fieldwork and analysis, with ideas emerging from early analysis guiding episodes of fieldwork. But we've put those methods in this part anyway. They had to go somewhere!

Part III: Doing analysis

This starts with chapters on statistical analysis, carefully taking you through this process from initial *data* preparation to multivariate analysis, with all of the stages in between. Earlier editions of this book used the statistical software SPSS to illustrate some of the procedures. We've switched to a program called PSPP now. It does most of the things SPSS does, but it is free for you to download, so we thought you would like that.

All the same, you might be in an institution that makes available other statistical software, so there are brief descriptions of the pros and cons of a variety of software and there are links in the online resources to video tutorials for some of them.

After a chapter on using existing data (secondary analysis) and official statistics, this part of the book then considers content and text analysis. The second half of this part then describes a variety of qualitative methods, including thematic analysis (sometimes also called qualitative thematic analysis), visual, discourse, narrative, and conversation analysis.

Part IV: Writing, presenting, reflecting

This part is brief, containing just three chapters, but they are important. Research reports are usually made by writing about them in a variety of formats, so there is extensive coverage of this. Oral presentations are increasingly important, and a chapter on this provides helpful advice. Finally, a chapter on how to ensure, and how to judge, the quality of research ends the book.

Part I
Starting out

Part I of this book provides guidance on ideas that lie behind the practice of social and cultural research and introduces you to important considerations before you begin to generate data on a research project. Chapter 2 concerns the philosophical foundations of science and social research as well as the role politics and values play in research. This merges into Chapter 3, which delineates different relationships between research and theory.

Ethical considerations in research are then discussed in Chapter 4. Political and ethical considerations have driven moves towards more participatory approaches to research in recent years, so there's a chapter on this, before Chapter 6 on how to proceed with a literature review. Developing research questions is covered in Chapter 7 before a final chapter on the design of research studies.

When you've read the chapters in this section, reviewed relevant literature, chosen your research design, and written your own research proposal, you'll be ready to start collecting data.

2

Philosophy, politics, and values

Clive Seale

Contents

Summary of chapter

In this chapter you'll learn about the philosophical foundations of social and cultural research. It emphasises the significance of understanding epistemology and ontology in shaping your approach to research. It discusses positivism and its alternatives, assessing their philosophical implications, criticisms, and practical implications for research practice.

The chapter critically examines the aim of mimicking natural science from various philosophical perspectives, highlighting the challenges and complexities involved in achieving scientific objectivity in social and cultural research.

It then explores the influence of personal characteristics, values, and politics in social research, discussing different approaches you can take in addressing these, and the role of participatory and action research in challenging traditional research paradigms. Overall, this chapter underscores the importance of philosophical awareness in conducting rigorous social and cultural research.

Learning objectives

When you have read this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Understand some fundamental principles of social research methodology and their philosophical underpinnings.
2. Recognise the significance of epistemology and ontology in guiding research approaches and methodologies.
3. Evaluate positivism and its alternatives, considering their implications for social research and methodological choices.
4. Critically analyse the validity of scientific inquiry from diverse philosophical perspectives, including positivism, post-positivism, phenomenology, interpretivism, social constructionism, and postmodernism.
5. Assess the influence of personal characteristics, values, and politics on social research, and explore strategies to address these when doing research.
6. Appreciate the role of participatory and action research in challenging traditional research paradigms and facilitating social change.

This is largely a book about the methods you can use to carry out a social research project. Of course, you must decide which methods you are going to use, and the book contains some guidance on how you might make such decisions (see, particularly, Chapters 7 and 8 for this). There is more to research than this. In deciding to do research, rather than, say, write about your own opinions, you are (I hope) wanting to discover something you don't yet know, or at least produce some knowledge that has a firmer foundation than personal opinion.

Studying society and culture is difficult, not least because social researchers study people rather than the inanimate objects studied by physicists, chemists, and other natural scientists. Unlike molecules, people possess motivation and agency and can change their behaviour; they can even read research reports about them and then decide to do things differently.

So, perhaps a science of society and culture is so difficult that it is no better than personal opinion. One way of raising this issue is to ask the classic school exam question, 'Is social research a science?'. This question suggests 'science' is a thing to aspire to, a guarantee of good quality knowledge. Natural sciences, together with engineering and other technological applications of science, have generated an enormous range of effective technologies, convincing most people that natural sciences say something truthful about the world, contrasting with religious explanations for natural phenomena, politically motivated views, or opinions based on personal experience. Can social and cultural research approach this level of success and truthfulness? Most people would say that it falls some way short, although it is often interesting and influential. Box 2.1 shows an example of an influential social research study, based on ethnographic research (an approach explained in Chapter 14).

Box 2.1 Goffman, 'total' institutions and the growth of community care

Erving Goffman used participant observation in an ethnographic study of mental hospitals in 1950s America (Goffman, 1961). His study described the all-encompassing level of control such institutions exercised over all aspects of inmates' lives, despite strategies they sometimes used to resist such control. From this work, he coined the term 'total institution' which became popularised as a way of understanding institutions as diverse as armies, prisons, and asylums. Eventually, recognition of the negative impact of total institutions on identity and in damaging inmates' mental health led to a widespread programme of closures of such institutions. Former patients were 'decanted' into the community, where it was hoped they would lead more autonomous lives.

But perhaps a better way of putting the question is to ask what sort of science social research might be, and to ask how this compares with natural sciences like physics or chemistry. To do this, it is necessary to understand what kind of enterprise is science. This is something that philosophers have investigated.

Consider the subject matter of social and cultural research a bit further. It comprises the collective behaviour of people, the artefacts they produce, the problems they encounter as they go about their lives, the social and political issues that trouble them. You are part of this world as a social researcher. In doing a social research project, you are likely to have your own opinions about the issue on which you are doing research. Being aware of your personal values and being ready to understand how they might influence the way you carry out your research project is therefore likely to be important when doing social research.

Finally, in doing research, you are likely to produce an artefact – a dissertation or a research report, for example. It may have a limited impact, or it may be very significant. If it concerns a controversial topic and delivers findings that contribute information that is highly original, it may challenge powerfully held views and have relevance for political or moral positions.

Social and cultural research needs to be carried out with some awareness of philosophical debates about research-based knowledge, of the researcher's personal values, and with sensitivity to values and politics. These broader considerations are likely to connect with the research design and methods you adopt. Let us start with philosophy.

Philosophy

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with how we know things. What is the truth? How can we justify our beliefs? What criteria can we use to decide whether we should believe a statement? These are all epistemological questions, central for understanding the contribution of social and cultural research.

Ontology concerns the nature of the world, what kinds of things exist and how to group or subdivide them. In relation to social and cultural research, ontological debates are about what social entities (such as social class, religion, culture) actually are. What are the things that we study when we do social research and how may we study them? While questions like this may appear abstract, how you answer them can influence the approach you take to your research project.

Epistemology

Researchers who work with numbers and call themselves 'social scientists' are sometimes derided as 'positivists'. People who commit themselves to seemingly more humanist approaches to research, such as qualitative, interpretive, or more literary methods, can feel this way. Those who work with numbers can sometimes feel that qualitative research is hopelessly subjective and biased. This kind of name-calling reflects a low level of debate and results in entrenched positions about method that stifle creativity. Understanding positivism and its alternatives, as well as questioning the *meaning* of words like 'bias' or 'objectivity' and uncovering the underlying values they appeal to, is essential for a more sophisticated social research practice. Debates about these things are epistemological debates.

It is important to work through the connections between abstract epistemological positions (such as positivism, interpretivism, realism, and so on) and more concrete and practical decisions about method (such as whether to use a structured questionnaire or a qualitative interview), and to recognise that such connections may sometimes be quite loose, and legitimately so. Researchers do not have to become philosophers to practise their craft, although it can help to be aware of the philosophical debates that lie behind knowledge creation.

Positivism

A central tenet of *positivism* is the view that the methods of the natural sciences are the best way to study the social world. This view is called *naturalism*, in which natural sciences are taken to be the ideal method for producing knowledge. (This use of the term 'naturalism' needs to be distinguished from other uses of the term, referring, for example, to the claim of ethnographers to be studying naturally occurring events; see Chapter 14.)

Committing to naturalism means you must know about the methods used by natural scientists. Positivists say that natural science involves the study of phenomena, using human senses (such as sight, touch, or hearing) or extensions of those senses (as in microscopes, telescopes, and scientific instruments of many kinds). *Empiricism* relies on sensory experience of the phenomena that make up the world to form knowledge.

Empiricism itself depends on a further idea: *realism*. A realist approach to knowledge involves the view that a reality exists independently of our own thoughts and beliefs about that reality. The purpose of science is to uncover and explain that reality.

Using facts gathered with our senses, we can make laws that govern the behaviour of phenomena. Isaac Newton, for example, made a series of observations that led to a law of universal gravitation, namely that particles in the universe (for example, planets) attract other particles with a force that is proportionate to their mass, but inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them.

This movement, from empirical observation (such as watching apples drop from trees) to generally applicable law, or theory, is known as *induction*. Induction can be contrasted with *deduction*, where you start with a law or theory and use this to infer what may go on in some aspect of the world.

However they are formulated, laws and theories can be tested by further observation. This is then known as a *hypothetico-deductive method*. Figure 2.1 shows the steps involved in this.

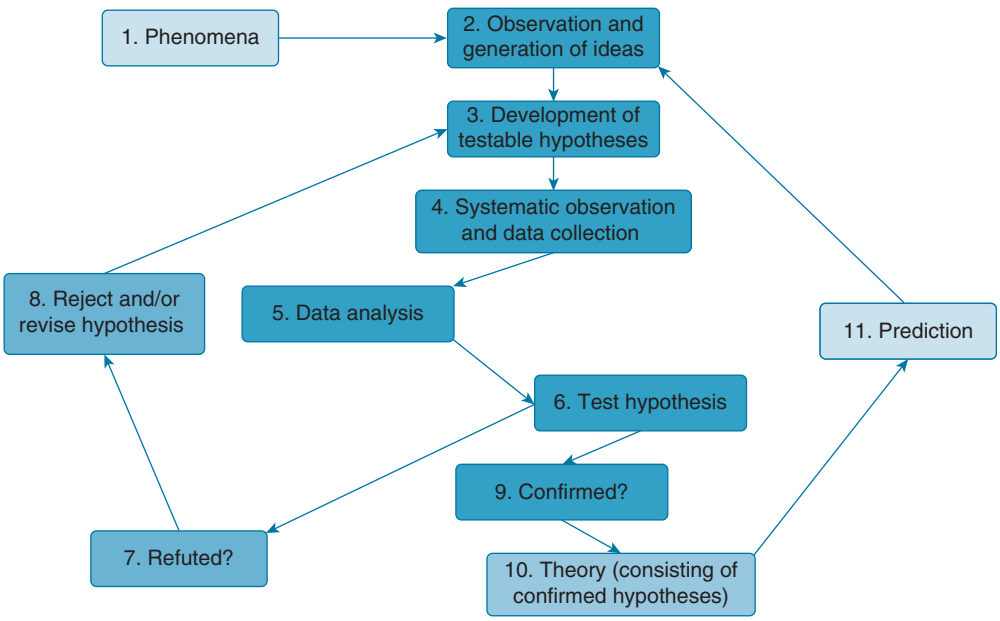


Figure 2.1 The hypothetico-deductive method

Box 2.2 Responses to COVID: An example of the hypothetico-deductive method

Observation and generation of ideas: Antonia Mariss and her colleagues (2022) were familiar with studies showing that people who believe in a just world (where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get) tend to behave fairly themselves. They try to restore justice if they see the need. The researchers also knew people varied in the extent to which they practised safe social distancing during the COVID pandemic.

Development of testable hypotheses: From these observations, they developed various hypotheses. One was that a belief in a just world was associated with greater social distancing.

(Continued)

Data collection and analysis: They used online methods to recruit 367 participants in Germany. They measured belief in a just world with a six-item measure, assessing each participant. They asked the people taking part to report on their social distancing practices by answering questions like 'Because of coronavirus COVID-19, I am massively curtailing social contact'.

Hypothesis confirmed: The researchers found a significant association between belief in a just world and greater social distancing.

The study described in Box 2.2 follows in the tradition of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who, in work on the causes of suicide (1897, later republished in 1970), pioneered the use of the hypothetico-deductive method in social research.

After studying suicide rates in different groups, he concluded that 'suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part' (Durkheim, 1970: 209). He found statistics that showed Catholics were less likely to commit suicide than Protestants, and he felt Catholics were more 'integrated' – they gave and received more social support from other Catholics – than Protestants, and this protected them from feeling suicidal.

Durkheim wanted social research to be a scientific discipline and his ontological position reflects that. He believed he was studying what he called social facts, just as natural scientists might study physical or natural facts. Many things came under his definition of social facts, for instance 'religious beliefs and practices, the rules of morality and the innumerable precepts of law' (1970: 73). Social facts were things constraining people to behave in certain ways. Social scientists had to take this into account if they wanted to understand people.

But this version of social science tends towards a deterministic view of human behaviour. *Determinism* means that people are portrayed as being like the physical objects that natural scientists want to explain. They are subject to laws propelling them inevitably into certain kinds of behaviour. This limits their capacity to generate actions themselves, their thoughts and their feelings being constrained. Indeed, thoughts and feelings, for some psychologists, are themselves determined by underlying forces (such as the unconscious, or by inherited neural pathways), so the very idea of an autonomous self may be called into question by a highly deterministic philosophy of science.

It is, of course, more difficult to observe and measure social facts, such as suicide rates, as they happen, than it is to observe physical facts, such as the speed at which objects accelerate. We can criticise Durkheim's reliance on officially complied suicide statistics: perhaps Catholics were more reluctant than Protestants to designate a death as a suicide (see also Box 2.4). In this sense, the positivist commitment to sensory observation of phenomena is hard to achieve in social science.

To understand social facts, Durkheim believed personal values had to be set aside. This reflects another commitment typical of a positivist epistemology: that the application of a method results in objective knowledge (*objectivity*) free from the contaminating bias of personal opinions or values. The result is a value-neutral, objective, and true account of the social (or natural) world.

Rejecting empiricism

Karl Popper (1902–1994) was a philosopher of science whose ideas varied in several respects from the positivist vision outlined above, so some call him a 'post-positivist'. Most importantly, he rejected the empiricist view that scientific laws and theories have validity because they are inductively derived from repeated sensory observations. He noted that a scientist (or social scientist) cannot observe every instance of a phenomenon since they cannot see past and future events. Just because all swans are white does not mean you will never discover a black swan. Therefore, induction could not be an absolute guarantee of truth. Nevertheless, Popper kept to the naturalist view that natural science methods are a suitable model for social scientists to follow.

For Popper, theories arise from the mind of the scientist as much as from the scientist's observations of the world. Theories are a series of conjectures, each of which might be refuted by observation. Thus, we should think of Popper as a *falsificationist* rather than a *verificationist*. For him, a good scientific theory is one that you can test and potentially falsify. It should be a *testable* explanation. He condemned the tendency of some scientists who tried only to prove that their theories were true. Even worse were some thinkers who proposed untestable theories that no new observation could refute.

Amongst those whom he condemned in this way were the psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, Karl Marx, and astrology (see Box 2.3). Popper felt they had all put forward theories that no kind of evidence could test, since any new observations were too easily accounted for.

Einstein, though, in his theory of relativity, had proposed a theory testable by observation, that was falsifiable, and was therefore scientific. The dividing line between science and non-science, then, lay in the testability of theories, not (as in positivism) on whether they were the product of empirical observations. Thus, Popper felt he had solved what he called the 'problem of *demarcation*' between science and rival forms of knowledge, while maintaining the view that the methods of the natural sciences should also be those of the social sciences.

Box 2.3 Popper's view of astrology as pseudoscience

> Astrology [does] not pass the test [of being scientific]. Astrologers were greatly impressed, and misled, by what they believed to be confirming evidence – so much so that they were quite unimpressed by any unfavourable evidence. Moreover, by making their interpretations and prophesies sufficiently vague they were able to explain away anything that might have been a refutation of the theory had the theory and the prophesies been more precise. In order to escape falsification, they destroyed the testability of their theory. It is a typical soothsayer's trick to predict things so vaguely that the predictions can hardly fail: that they become irrefutable. (Popper, 1962: 38)

Ontology

Physicists, chemists, astronomers, and other natural scientists rarely worry about the ontological status of the phenomena they study. Whether or not a scientist is watching molecules, they

exist. They act on each other and on the rest of the physical world. They are hard facts, and the scientist needs to understand how they work and influence each other.

Social and cultural researchers, though, appear to face a different reality. They might study religion, inequality, ethnicity, or bureaucratic and other kinds of organisations: schools, businesses, hospitals, parliaments. Are these things like planets? Do they exist 'out there' as irrefutable, hard facts acting on people? In other words, are such social facts 'things' in the same way planets or molecules are things?

For Durkheim, social facts such as religion and the other entities listed above were undoubtedly things, and his job (as in his study of suicide outlined earlier) was to explain their impact on people. In our everyday lives, we experience social facts as external objects that control, or at least influence, our lives. If my family is Muslim, some of my experiences, beliefs, and attitudes will differ from a person in a Christian or an atheist family. This is somewhat out of my control; religious orientation has been handed down to me, to live with or live against, hard to ignore.

Yet social facts – religion, ethnicity, institutions – are, in fact, created by people. In that sense, they are not facts at all, but are socially constructed. First, institutions, belief systems, and cultures have long histories, in which events occurred that made them what they are today. If history had been different, they might be different today. People made them.

And, in another sense, social facts have no existence separate from the active efforts of people to reassert them every day. A school would no longer exist if we all woke up tomorrow and stopped calling ourselves 'pupils' and 'teachers', and arranging ourselves in space in certain ways that create one person in a room as 'the teacher' and the others as 'the pupils'.

Daily, then, our human *agency* leads us to create and recreate the social world that we inhabit, and this is a vision of human behaviour that is op posed to the determinism of Durkheim. An ontological position that foregrounds the ongoing creation of social life results in a social science that differs greatly from either *positivism* or *post-positivism*.

It also leads to a view of personal identity that is fluid and changeable, rather than the product of fixed personality attributes. Box 2.2 described a study where 'belief in a just world' was a measured attribute of each person taking part in the study. This psychological attribute is just as unstable as a social fact. For example, some people might say they believe in a just world to researchers but say something else to their friends.

Essentialism expresses the view that aspects of human 'nature', such as 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or attitudinal dispositions like racism or homophobia, are fixed within people. An anti-essentialist view that sees these things as the product of human agency challenges this. For example, anti-essentialists would say gender can be 'performed' in a variety of ways; people can express different 'attitudes' in different contexts and are often contradictory.

Phenomenology and interpretivism

Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) was a philosopher, not a social scientist, but his ideas have been very influential in social research. He took the view that social scientists should embrace the difference between people and the inanimate or unreflective objects studied by natural scientists. People had ideas, feelings, subjectivities, what Schutz called 'constructs'. It was possible, he argued, to have an objective science of the subjective worlds of people. From the 'first order' constructs that people formulate as they go about their lives, the scientist can formulate 'second order' constructs that build on and explain behaviour. A famous quote from Schutz (1962) expresses this difference between natural science and a phenomenological social science:

> The world of nature as explored by the natural scientist does not 'mean' anything to molecules, atoms and electrons. But the observational field of the social scientists – social reality – has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the beings living, acting and thinking within it. By a series of common-sense constructs they have pre-selected and pre-interpreted this world which they experience as the reality of their daily lives. It is these thought objects of theirs which determine their behaviour by motivating it. The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of [people], living their daily life within the social world. (1962: 59)

The social scientist, therefore, enquires into the viewpoint of the people being studied, in order to discover what things mean to them, and how they make things meaningful. This is a fundamental commitment of *phenomenology*. On the one hand, you could investigate this by using qualitative or depth interviews (see Chapter 12). Alternatively you could see how people create meaning through observing their interactions with each other (see, for example, Chapter 28). Some quite fierce debates can go on between social researchers who prefer one or the other of these alternatives, but both sides of this debate are following the approach outlined by Schutz.

Phenomenology lies behind several approaches to understanding the social world. Schutz's interest in the 'thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking' of people can be extended to incorporate what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call the social construction of reality. *Constructionism*, or *social constructionism*, which emerges from this perspective, is a radical departure from Durkheim's view of the world.

Its starting point is to enquire into the way people, in actions, conversations, cultural products, and activities, create their world and the things in it, from what would otherwise be the undifferentiated matter of the world. This activity *naturalises* these objects, making them seem 'natural' with an unquestionable reality. Such things as gender, ethnic identity, the distinction between childhood and adulthood, and so on, are understood to be things people have decided to agree about. So, the social scientist must uncover this process of social construction so that the objects of the social world are denaturalised or, in other words, *deconstructed*.

Phenomenology is also related to the concept of *interpretivism*, also an approach concerned with discovering what things mean to people and how they then act, but perhaps less oriented towards understanding everyday life as an ongoing accomplishment. In fact, interpretivists can be seen as studying *intersubjectivity*, the shared meanings which people create and agree upon to guide them through social life, informing their social interactions.

Box 2.4 summarises a study of suicide by Jack Douglas (1967) which is helpful in illustrating the difference between Durkheim's positivist approach and an interpretivist one.

Box 2.4 Douglas on suicide

Douglas (1967) was critical of Durkheim's reliance on suicide statistics, which he felt were constructed by a bureaucratic process that itself deserved investigation. Douglas argued that suicide meant different things in different communities, being the product of negotiation between interested parties.

(Continued)

He examined this by studying diaries and notes written by people who had killed themselves. He also interviewed people who knew the person who had died and people who had survived suicide attempts. He categorised suicides into those which were designed for revenge (for example, making a former lover feel guilty), those which were a cry for help when all else had failed, an escape from an unbearable situation, a self-punishment, or repentance for some misdeed.

He also discovered that relatives in different communities felt differing degrees of shame about the suicide, and (sometimes with the help of coroners) tried to categorise the death as being accidental rather than the result of self-harm. This perspective, which emphasised local variations in the intersubjective construction of how to categorise a death, made suicide statistics highly unreliable.

Questioning the validity of science

Positivism, post-positivism, phenomenology, and interpretivism share a commitment to social science that says that it is, at least, possible to have such a science. For one camp, the methods of the natural sciences (albeit with the modifications suggested by Popper) are the way forward. The ontological position of the other camp requires a different view of the proper subject matter of social science. This requires an investigation of subjectivity to understand behaviour. Natural scientists don't need to do this.

Both camps, though, retain the view that it is possible to create an objective science, free from the personal prejudices of the researcher, whose status is superior to that of personal opinion because of the application of methodological procedures.

Yet this can itself be questioned, in particular from an idealist epistemological position. *Idealism* involves the view that what we perceive to be 'real' is, in fact, the product of our minds. Reality is shaped by our thoughts and ideas. These thoughts and ideas are the product of our biographies, emotions, and social positions.

There are various half-way positions between idealism and the opposite perspective of realism, one of which is *subtle realism* (Martyn Hammersley, 1992a, contrasts this with 'crude' or 'naïve' realism). This suggests the mind of a researcher only partially shapes the subject being studied. Reality strikes back, and some accounts are simply more plausible than others. In judging plausibility, it is good to know about a researcher's background and prejudices, as these will have shaped their account of reality.

Such compromised positions need to be understood as a response to a thoroughgoing questioning of the validity of science, which started with the ideas of the philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996), whose study of the history of natural sciences (Kuhn, 1970) has had a profound influence on social and cultural research, largely because it seemed to claim that science rests on a basis of shared beliefs, or *paradigms*, that change at revolutionary moments.

Scientific revolutions

Unlike Popper, Kuhn did not believe that rationally justifiable principles, such as the testing of falsifiable theories through empirical observation, were the basis for scientific progress. Instead,

mature sciences (and he did not regard the social sciences as 'mature') operated because scientists committed to a set of underlying beliefs, which together make up the *paradigm* within which they work. A scientific paradigm, for example, determines the techniques scientists use, as well as the questions they regard as legitimate. Puzzles that don't fit into the paradigm are either solved or ignored, keeping the paradigm intact for as long as possible. Scientists, therefore, tend to be conservative.

Ultimately, however, contradictions build up that cannot be explained away. This can lead to a *scientific revolution* in which fundamental beliefs supporting the old paradigm are revised and a new paradigm emerges. An example is the change from Ptolemy's view that planets revolve around the earth, to the view of Copernicus that they revolve around the sun. Scientists working in different paradigms lack a shared language for communication because their views are incommensurable, having no shared set of criteria to evaluate their ideas, and are almost like rival religious groupings, so fundamental are their differences.

It is important to recognise that Kuhn retained a vision of scientific progress. For him, science was a success story and paradigm shifts usually involve movement to a better system of beliefs. He was dismayed when some people used his work to conclude 'anything goes' in science, or even that scientific findings were no better than personal opinions.

One philosopher who adopted a more anarchical view of science than Thomas Kuhn, and who paved the way for postmodernist conceptions of social inquiry, was Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994). He took the view that there are no methodological rules that scientists always use. Scientific progress results from free thought, and this implies freedom from constraint. He stated:

> the world we want to explore is a largely unknown entity. We must, therefore, keep our options open … Epistemological prescriptions may look splendid when compared with other epistemological prescriptions … but who can guarantee that they are the best way to discover, not just a few isolated 'facts', but also some deep-lying secrets of nature? (1975: 20)

Feyerabend argued, too, that 'All methodologies have their limitations and the only "rule" that survives is "anything goes"' (1975: 296). This level of anarchism was essential for scientists, who ought to be permanent revolutionaries.

Unlike Popper, whose critical views of astrology we have seen, Feyerabend regarded the rejection of such alternative explanations of the world as a sign of scientific elitism. Although science had in some respects been a liberating force in the development of modern society, it had become too powerful and repressive. He complained that 'science still reigns supreme … its practitioners are unable to understand, and unwilling to condone, different ideologies, because they have the power to enforce their wishes' (1975: 298).

Postmodernism and post-truth

We can understand the ideas of Kuhn and Feyerabend as precursors of *postmodernism*. By appearing to knock away foundations, they open up a new world where the distinction between science and non-science is harder to sustain. A postmodernist view of social and cultural research would claim that there is nothing definitive about research findings, which are just stories about that world. There are no criteria for judging which story is true.

Empiricism, theory testing, experimental or other methods, the idea that there is a real world out there that can be known, are all 'metanarratives' that postmodernists reject as adequate reasons to accord privileged status to scientific or social scientific *texts*. Instead, social research is regarded as producing narratives, presenting the world in a particular light by using a variety of literary devices to appear persuasive.

This is a profoundly *relativist* philosophical position. Truth, or *trustworthiness*, or allegiance to a particular view of the world, then depends on the position and preferences of the observer rather than any external criteria.

At its extreme, this risks falling foul of populist politicians who gain power by questioning expertise and spreading false facts. Donald Trump's claim to have won the 2020 presidential election is an example. Conspiracy theories, such as those that circulated about COVID-19, or promulgated by followers of QAnon, can also influence people. In the political sphere, the equivalent to postmodernism is post-truth, where emotion and personal beliefs substitute for facts established by experts.

Yet the emphasis of postmodernists on storytelling has led to some positive methodological developments. It has encouraged a critical and analytical view of the literary techniques of persuasion and justification used in texts (such as research reports) and narratives of all kinds. This has been helpful in developing new methods, such as narrative analysis and discourse analysis (see Chapter 27).

Values and politics in social research

Anyone doing research will have personal characteristics that influence how they see things. Age, ethnicity, gender, social class, religious belief, or non-belief can all exercise such an influence, as well as the point in history at which the research project is carried out.

Individual personality differences can also be influential. An extrovert may want to study racism by doing *participant observation* amongst a right-wing pressure group. An introvert may decide to study it by reading documents produced by such groups. Someone who lives by conservative moral rules may ask very different questions about (say) abortion compared with someone with more liberal values. A researcher may not see how this has influenced them, although it may be obvious to someone else.

In these circumstances, how is objectivity possible, and is it even desirable? One view, taken, for example, by positivists, is that values can be eradicated by following methodological rules. Another is that we cannot eradicate them but can expose them to view so that they can be taken into account. Or perhaps values are inevitable, so we should just choose the right ones. Social researchers can then help liberate disadvantaged people by choosing research questions favouring the interests of particular groups. I shall consider each of these positions in turn.

Durkheim wanted, as a part of his commitment to treat social facts (like religion or suicide) as things, to encourage social scientists to 'systematically discard all preconceptions' (1982: 73), dispensing with any concepts formed outside science. Arguably, he failed to discard his preconceptions in his study of suicide, since he clearly believed that suicide statistics were reflections of the real rate of suicide, a belief that has subsequently been shown to be questionable (see Box 2.4). This shows you can't always know about your own preconceptions.

Another method Durkheim recommended for dealing with unwarranted preconceptions or values he thought could contaminate a study was the exposure of that study to critical review by members of the scientific community. This kind of exposure can be helpful in revealing a host of problems with any research study, including unwarranted assumptions or excessive imposition of particular value positions. But what about Kuhn's view of the conservative nature of the scientific community, based on his studies of how scientists have actually behaved? Is it not the case that, sometimes at least, critical review might only end up reinforcing the prejudices of a community of researchers attached to a particular paradigm?

Anyone who has submitted an essay for marking, or a research paper to a journal, will know the feeling of being criticised unfairly, and might believe that this arises from differing values between the essay marker/journal referee and the author. If that can happen, surely scientific communities will impose their values, even if the researcher has dispensed with them?

These are only partial solutions to the problem of values (if they are a problem). Max Weber (1864–1920) recognised this and tried to deal with the role of values in social research differently, by proposing the concept of *value relevance*. He accepted values are bound to influence how people do social research, determining, for example, what kind of thing we choose to study. But once a topic has been chosen, you can set aside your personal values while uncovering facts relevant to value-driven debates.

Weber (1949) wanted social scientists to adopt this perspective as part of an ethical commitment to science as a vocation. Social scientists could then use their findings to tell people (such as politicians) about the consequences of their actions and policies, without telling them what they must do.

Adopting *reflexivity* is another approach to the influence of values in social research. Here, the researcher attempts to provide as much information as possible about themselves and their background, values, and preconceptions. In theory, this would equip other people to see whether these influenced the claims a study makes. (It's also a way of ensuring ethical research practice, as Chapter 4 explains.) But a reflexive account is limited by how much the researcher knows, or can admit to, about their own biases.

Finally, there is the view that values are desirable, so researchers should embrace them rather than try to eradicate them. Social research, in this view, is inevitably political, so we might as well choose the right values to influence the questions we ask and the methods we choose to pursue them.

Standpoint epistemology, originally developed by feminist social theorists and researchers (Harding & Hintikka, 2004), rejects the (positivist) aspiration to an objective, bird's-eye view of the social world. Instead it embraces the idea that all knowledge arises from a particular standpoint, or view of the world, that is determined by the social position of the knowledge producer. Value freedom is replaced by taking on the perspective and values of people deemed to be oppressed, so that research contributes to their enlightenment or liberation.

With some modifications, this is the position sometimes adopted by researchers committed to anti-racist and feminist strategies, who design research to further the interests of participants. It is also popular in disability and mental health research (see Box 2.5) where users of services may become involved in *user-led research*. This can involve anything from formulating research questions to collecting and analysing data and disseminating and acting on findings.

Box 2.5 Service user research in mental health

The INFORM project reported by Sue Taylor and two colleagues (2012) involved survivors of mental health services evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the services provided. INFORM members undertook a six-week training programme, learning about research and interviewing. With some input from a researcher, they designed an open-ended questionnaire that served as a topic guide for interviews, which they carried out with 49 people who had experienced mental health services. A group of INFORM members analysed the interviews, and all members discussed and modified their report, with findings eventually being published and influencing future provision.

Clearly, this could alienate people who do not share the values of the politically committed researcher. But if such a value-driven approach uncovers uncomfortable facts by using methods that are hard to criticise, it is likely to be influential.

You can adopt any of these positions when carrying out your own research project, but you will need to be prepared to defend your choice. If you go for value neutrality achieved by strictly following methodological procedures, expect to be criticised for making assumptions of which you may not have been aware. Have you excluded important voices in the issue you are investigating?

Similarly, if you go for a political stance, expect to be accused of bias. A middle way could be to follow methodological rules and recognise there are other ways your research problem could have been investigated. You can also try to understand whether your values and life experience have shaped your conclusions.

It is worth pointing out, too, that practical considerations are sometimes the most pressing influences on how a research project develops. If you can't get enough interviewees, or don't have time to engage in months of participant observation, such things will influence your project massively. Reflexivity also involves acknowledging this kind of influence on a project.

Participatory and action research

User-led research is in fact a type of participatory research, by which is meant research in which participants, to a greater or lesser extent, shape the aims and nature of the project. Chapter 5 is all about this. It breaks down the distinction between 'objective' researcher and research 'subject' made by some researchers attached to a positivist position. Instead of being observed or questioned by the researcher, with no influence over how the researcher thinks, or on how the researcher collects information, *participatory research* involves a more active role for participants. Participation in setting aims, or in generating or in analysing data, can be educative and empowering.

Beyond this, *action research*, which is often (though not always) also participatory, is research designed to change the lives of participants. Chapter 5 also covers this in more depth. Here, an initial research inquiry produces results that are then acted upon in an intervention, followed by further research to evaluate the effects of the intervention. Further cycles of inquiry, intervention, and evaluation may then occur. Commonly, action research projects are driven

by the desire to overcome a perceived social injustice, alleviate oppression, or give voice to the disenfranchised. They have been done in the fields of health, disability, youth, and education, and in poorer or 'developing' countries. Box 2.6 shows an example.

While this type of research may be more likely to achieve beneficial changes in the world outside research, as a contribution to knowledge, it may be of limited value. Findings tend to be context specific and locally applicable, which restricts their relevance to other situations.

Box 2.6 Participatory action research with American Indian and Alaskan Native communities

Philip Fisher and Thomas Ball (2002) describe the Indian Family Wellness project, a family-centred prevention intervention for pre-school children, in which they developed and applied a 'Tribal Participatory Research Model' (TPRM). This involved:

- *Tribal oversight*: a tribal council overseeing the conduct of the research and intervention study.
- *Use of a facilitator*: to be an intermediary between project staff and members of tribal oversight committees and members of the community to ensure good communication and culturally appropriate behaviour.
- *Training and employing members of the community as project staff*: to carry out research tasks and participate in the design of interventions with families.
- *Using culturally specific interventions*: which include, for example, traditional practices and concepts, respecting the resourcefulness of the community. The interventions, for example, included the use of stories told by tribal elders, designed to reinforce and validate good parenting practices that would enhance the health and well-being of young children.

Conclusion

Philosophical debates about the nature of the social world and about the basis of our knowledge underpin the practice of social research. This chapter has introduced you to some of the key debates in epistemology and ontology, focusing on the divide between positivism and its rivals. We can question the view that the methods of the natural sciences can apply to the study of the social world. Yet these methods may help with reliability and objectivity if these are your priorities. Such an approach is often associated with quantitative, statistical work, though not always.

The chapter has also outlined social constructionist and interpretivist perspectives, which view the social world as an ongoing accomplishment of human actors. These perspectives are often associated with the use of a range of qualitative methods, although you should not automatically assume this. Postmodernist perspectives present a radical critique of the social research enterprise itself, positioning the researcher as a storyteller rather than a discoverer of truth.

The chapter then reviewed the place of values and political commitments in social research. Social researchers range from those who aim at a value-free version of knowledge to those who argue that this is not feasible. There are also those who embrace commitment to particular values and political perspectives as a core feature of their work. Participatory and action research explicitly take the viewpoint of marginalised or oppressed people, and seek to involve them in research to advance their interests.

As you read subsequent chapters of this book, you will see frequent reference to concepts in this chapter. Discussions of the validity and reliability, or the quality, of social research require a certain level of understanding of the issues raised in this chapter, and Chapter 31 covers these. The chapters on participatory research (Chapter 5) and research ethics (Chapter 4) also draw on these ideas. Together, these chapters should equip you to think deeply about the wider implications of your own methodological choices.

Further reading

Hollis (1994), Howell (2012), and Potter (2016) are good introductory texts. Zamora-Bonilla and Jarvie (2011) is a treasury of advanced articles in the philosophy of science. Seale (2004) contains key extracts from classic works on methodology relevant to this chapter, including extracts from the work of Émile Durkheim, Walter Wallace, Thomas Cook and Donald Campbell, Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, Renato Rosaldo, Zygmunt Bauman, Max Weber, and Sandra Harding.