

Realism and Qualitative Research

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Philosophic realism in general is "the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them."

Denis Phillips, *Philosophy, Science, and Social Inquiry* (1987, p. 205)

“Scientific realism is the view that theories refer to real features of the world. ‘Reality’ here refers to whatever it is in the universe (i.e., forces, structures, and so on) that causes the phenomena we perceive with our senses”

Thomas Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Research* (1997, p. 133).

“Although realism in some form or other is the tacit philosophy of many working scientists, and is endorsed by the majority of professional philosophers of science, it does not figure prominently in methodological discussions and research practice in the social sciences.”

Haig and Evers, *Realist Inquiry in Social Science* (2016, p. ix).

“Many, if not most, philosophical accounts of social science research are anti-realist in nature . . . One untoward consequence is that anti-realism has encouraged the idea that quantitative and qualitative research are fundamentally different modes of inquiry with different accompanying philosophies.”

Haig and Evers, *Realist Inquiry in Social Science* (2016, p. ix).

“On a daily basis, most of us probably behave as garden-variety empirical realists — that is, we act as if the objects in the world (things, events, structures, people, meanings, etc.) exist as independent in some way from our experience with them. We also regard society, institutions, feelings, intelligence, poverty, disability, and so on as being just as real as the toes on our feet and the sun in the sky.”

Thomas Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Research* (2007, p. 256) “

Ontology: the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of being—what actually exists.

Epistemology: the branch of philosophy that deals with what we can know—our understanding of what exists.

Ontological realism: There is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions.

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Epistemological constructivism: Our *understanding* of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoints.

Scientific realism . . . assumes that "the world is the way it is," while acknowledging that there can be more than one scientifically correct way of understanding reality in terms of conceptual schemes with different objects and categories of objects.

(George Lakoff, 1987, p. 265)

Paradigm

- Thomas Kuhn: a set of beliefs and practices that characterize a particular scientific community and guide its work, often embodied in “exemplary” research studies.

Incommensurability

- Paradigm incommensurability: impossibility of translating one into another; no “neutral language” to compare the two.

Key Features of Logical Positivism

- Verifiability theory of meaning: operational definitions of theoretical terms.
- Grounding of science in irrefutable sense data; no unobservable theoretical entities
- Regularity definition of causation
- Logically deductive system of laws
- “Unified science” with a single standardized language

"I suppose the main defect [of logical positivism] was that nearly all of it was false."

A.J. Ayer, 1978.

“Despite repeated attempts . . . to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire, the disciplines continue to experience a positivistic haunting.”

George Steinmetz, *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*, 2005.

“The naturalistic/constructivist paradigm effectively brought about the irrelevance of the distinction between ontology and epistemology.”

Yvonna Lincoln, *Emerging criteria for quality in qualitative and interpretive research*.
(*Qualitative Inquiry* 1, 2005)

“Maxwell is unable to show us how to get reality to do some serious work.”

Smith and Deemer, “The problem of criteria in the age of relativism” (p. 883)

"Realism in ontology and constructivism in epistemology turn out to be quite compatible."

Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*,
(1998)

Hume's account of causation: A regularity theory

- We can't directly perceive causal relationships, thus we can have no knowledge of causality beyond the observed regularities in associations of events.

A realist concept of causality

- Causation consists not of regularities, but of real (and in principle observable) causal mechanisms and processes, which may or may not produce regularities.--A. Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (2nd ed., 1992)

“Much that has been written on methods of explanation assumes that causation is a matter of regularities in relationships between events, and that without models of regularities we are left with allegedly inferior, ‘ad hoc’ narratives. But social science has been singularly unsuccessful in discovering law-like regularities. One of the main achievements of recent realist philosophy has been to show that this is an inevitable consequence of an erroneous view of causation.”

A. Sayer, *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach* (2nd ed., 1992).

Variance Theory

- the world is seen in terms of variables and the relationships among variables.
- causal explanation consists of showing a regular relationship between variables.

Variance Theory and Process Theory

- Variance theory
- the world is seen in terms of variables and the relationships among variables.
- explanation consists of showing a regular relationship between variables.
- Process theory
- the world is seen in terms of entities and events and the processes that connect these.
- explanation consists of showing a coherent process by which some entities and events influence others.

Implications of a Realist Concept of Causation for Social Research

- If causation can be directly observed or credibly inferred from observations, it can be observed or inferred in single cases, rather than requiring comparison of situations in which the presumed cause is present or absent.
- Context is intrinsically involved in causal processes, in a way that can't simply be reduced to a set of extraneous variables.
- Mental events and processes are real phenomena that can be causes of behavior.

“What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave. The natural and extrinsic effects of their actions, in turn, partly determine their thought patterns and affective reactions.”

Bandura, 1986, p. 25.

Advantages of Realism for Qualitative Research

- Meaning and mind are just as real as physical objects and processes.
- A realist theory of causation is quite compatible with qualitative research. Mental events and processes are real phenomena that can be causes of behavior, and causal *processes* can be identified and verified using qualitative methods.
- Diversity is a real phenomenon.
- Validity is not a property of methods, but of the inferences drawn from the research.

Validity is a property of inferences. It is *not* a property of designs or methods, for the same designs may contribute to more or less valid inferences under different circumstances. . . .
No method guarantees the validity of an inference.

Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference* (2002, p. 34; italics in original.)

- Validity is not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques . . . Rather, validity is like integrity, character, and quality, to be assessed relative to purposes and circumstances.—
- D. Brinberg & J. E. McGrath, *Validity and the Research Process* (1985)

Unfortunately . . .

- One implication of a realist stance toward validity is that there can be no generic criteria for definitively assessing validity, no checklist of characteristics or procedures that can be used to adequately evaluate a study in terms of the credibility or trustworthiness of its conclusions.

What makes a study's conclusions valid?

- The essential feature of science is its ability to test and rule out alternative explanations (validity threats) for the results of a study.

Validity threats

- All validity threats are basically alternative possible explanations for your results, and the ways of dealing with these are either ways of preventing them from operating (such as experimental controls) or discovering *if* they were operating and, if so, how serious they were.