

# RESEARCH METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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For Janet Earnshaw (1957–2025), who left the world too soon.

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# ONLINE RESOURCES FOR INSTRUCTORS

*Research Methods in Psychology: Your Essential Guide* is accompanied by a wealth of online resources that have been specially designed to support those using the book in their teaching. Instructors can visit <https://study.sagepub.com/earnshaw-et-al> to access:

- A **Teaching Guide** providing support for seminars and tutorials
- **PowerPoints** for each chapter that can be downloaded and customised as needed
- **Testbanks** for each chapter that can be used for both formative and summative student assessment
- A **Resource Pack** containing all the instructor resources supporting this book, which can be quickly uploaded into your institution's learning management system (e.g. Moodle or Blackboard) and customised as needed

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# PREFACE

Welcome to *Research Methods in Psychology: Your Essential Guide!* We have written this book to support you on your research adventure in psychology as we know that research methods are often something that students can find the scariest and most challenging. We want to show you that learning about research methods, and of course doing your own research, needn't be scary, and hopefully something that you end up enjoying!

We have split the book up into four parts which reflect the different areas of the research process. The first part covers all of the foundations you need for designing your own research project including coming up with research ideas and research questions, understanding your theoretical position and how this relates to your research design, how you can carry out your research ethically and how you recruit participants to take part in your research. If you are new to the research process you may want to begin your adventure from Chapter 1 to get to grips with the basics of research. If you are already confident with these ideas and are starting to think about ways which you might collect data for your own project, you may wish to go straight to Part II of the book. In Part II, we talk you through collecting data using interviews and focus groups, questionnaires and experiments. We also have a chapter on analysing secondary sources of data and, if you want to do something exciting with qualitative research, we have a whole chapter which introduces you to interesting, novel methods of collecting qualitative data. In Part III of the book, we will introduce you to different methods for analysing data and begin with qualitative analyses such as Thematic Analysis, Phenomenology and Discourse Analysis, before three chapters on statistical analyses which are most commonly used in psychology. If you have already collected data and need to understand the best ways to analyse it, you may wish to go straight ahead to Part III. Then, in the final part of this book (Part IV), we guide you through the process of writing a full research report and then ask you to reflect on the research that you have done.

In each chapter you will find a series of learning features that are there to support your learning and understanding of each of the topics covered. These include our own top tips, questions for you to ask yourself about the topic and case studies of academic research which use or apply the methods we have been discussing in the chapter. Some of these academic case studies discuss our own research and we use these features to reflect on the methodological decisions we have made in our own research projects. We also include in each chapter a case study from one or more of our own students, which we hope will inspire you to think about your own research, and we also include extracts from their final undergraduate research reports so you can also understand how to write-up the different sections of your report.

We hope you enjoy coming on this research adventure with us and that you are inspired to carry out your own brilliant research!

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# 3

## YOUR THEORETICAL APPROACH

### Learning Objectives

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After reading this chapter, you will:

- Know what is meant by theoretical approach and research paradigm
- Understand how the theoretical approach you choose shapes your research
- Be familiar with phrases and language about theoretical approaches
- Know how to write about your theoretical approach

### Introduction

Theoretical approach – what could this mean? Within psychology, the word ‘theory’ is used a lot and can mean a variety of things. Some of you may be tempted to skip this chapter, but to be a successful researcher or psychologist – even as a student – you need to understand what we mean by theoretical approach. To do this, you need to know what knowledge is, what knowledge *you* want to find and understand, and what that knowledge *means*. This is because our perspectives as a person can shape anything and everything – including research. In this chapter, we will be discussing what a ‘theoretical approach’ is, what ontology is, what epistemology is, how to choose your approach, and how to identify it.

### What is a ‘Theoretical Approach’ or a ‘Research Paradigm’?

Ask anyone on the street the above question, and most likely they would just shrug. Ask a psychologist, and most would be able to answer: ‘**ontology** and **epistemology**’. Some might even give you their specific approaches or **paradigm** that they consistently use for

their research. But as the student, you should know what this is by the end of your degree journey, because it should be informing the approach you take to any research that you do. A theoretical approach or research paradigm is our understanding of how we are approaching and understanding knowledge. It provides us with parameters (structure or restrictions) to work in and with, to ensure we don't stray too far from what we're meant to be researching and finding out.

'But why is this important? Why can't I just do my research how I want?' some of you may be asking. Well, you can, but without a solid foundation for your research design (**Chapters 1, 2, and 4**), how you recruit your participants, how you collect your data, how you interpret and understand your findings and how you present them to others can be impacted. Without a solid foundation, your research will not be 'good', as you may not find the things you want or need to find. So, as you can see, a theoretical approach or research paradigm is important!

For us as researchers, the way that we were taught about these foundations of research was using the metaphor of an iceberg. If we think about an iceberg, much of what we see is above the surface of the water and, in a research sense, this will relate to the methods that we use, who our participants are and how we collect and analyse our data. However, most of an iceberg is not visible to us as it sits below the surface of the water, and even though we don't see it, those foundations are an essential part of that iceberg because without it the bit on the surface would just float or melt away. In research terms, our theoretical position is equivalent to that part of the iceberg that is under the water's surface, that solid foundation which is essential for a successful research project!

Before we explain what that means, something to note about ontology and epistemology is that these terms originate from philosophy and often textbooks and published articles will use these philosophical terms or jargon without clearer explanations of what they are. It can be quite frustrating (even from an academic perspective) when trying to understand just what they mean, so this section of the book aims to explain in plainer terms what they are. But please be advised that when doing your own independent reading, you may come across terms that require you to do some additional searching and reading to help further your understanding. If you are interested in hardline philosophy or even sociology, for instance, this chapter does not cover examples such as dualism, Dasein, physicalism and determinism etc. We acknowledge that it may be seen as a reductionist (simplistic) viewpoint for psychology to not cover these in-depth, but we will attempt to provide an understanding of the basics and ignite (potentially) some passion in our future psychologists – you! – so you can read additional material yourself.

Whilst ontology and epistemology are separated in this chapter to make it easier to explain what they are, they do in fact work together. It was Bhaskar (1975) who determined that for science and research to be understood, ontology and epistemology must be separated as distinct approaches to knowledge, but that we cannot understand or adopt one as our approach without considering the other. As academics and lecturers who teach this and then mark research reports as part of assessments, we often see the mistake of only including one, and routinely it is ontology which is forgotten about.

## Ontology

Ontology (On-toll-uh-jee) means the study of being, onto is from the Greek *ontos* ('being' or 'that is') and -logy is from the Greek *logia* ('logical discourse'). It relates here to the nature of reality, or what 'is'. Or, if you haven't read philosophy very much, ontology is simply the study of 'stuff'. Understanding ontology can be challenging at first, and knowing which ontological viewpoint to adopt can be even more challenging! To put it plainly: Ontology is the idea that there *is* reality, but we must determine whether there is one singular reality or multiple realities. It therefore requires us to ask questions such as, 'what is it possible to know about the world? And what exists in the human world that we can acquire knowledge about?'

We also need to consider whether this reality can be observed (seen) outright or whether it is something that we need to be invited into or acknowledge that our observation may not be the full picture. To use a similar example from Fryer and Navarrete (2022), imagine you're walking on the pavement, and your friend Natalie sends you something funny in a message or on social media. You're not looking where you're going, and you walk into a lamp post in front of a group of people. Ouch! You are now probably going to be thinking about your phone, the lamp post, the physical pain in your shoulder/head/neck and maybe the mental pain or embarrassment for doing it in front of others – these are all real things in the real world – reality. So, we can observe what you've done and then make assumptions about how you feel about it afterwards, maybe by observing your facial expression or if you rub or hold your head or shoulders. But, to have a clearer understanding of how you feel about what's just happened, not just based on our assumptions, we may go and speak to you and ask if you're okay and if anywhere hurts. Two separate understandings of the same event, but one is that we can make assumptions from observing and the other is that we engage as part of the observation.

So, we've now learned that knowledge can answer a question we may have about something specific, but we also need to consider how we can *see* that knowledge. We know there is knowledge, we know it exists, and we might even know where it exists, but how do we get to it and how do we access it? When we are designing our research (more in **Chapter 4**), we must decide on the way we are doing the research (establish specific conditions) to create and observe the results, which is applicable for quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research, which means we are determining the ontological element.

So, let's move away from the lamp post example and instead imagine you are sat on a hill and can hear what sounds like a gathering of people with music and laughter occurring, just a short walkable distance away. You walk that short distance to observe what is going on. There are a few things you can now do:

- 1 You can see the event from where you are, and believe that you can make assumptions about the event, without getting involved (e.g., reality/knowledge is independent of you)
- 2 You cannot see the event from where you are and must get closer and likely even get involved in the event, to make more informed assumptions of what is happening (e.g., reality/knowledge is created and shared, and not necessarily independent of you)

- 3 You can see the event from where you are, and can make *some* assumptions about the event without getting involved, but understand that there are additional aspects of this gathering (e.g., which we will frame as structures) that must be acknowledged (e.g., reality/knowledge is partly independent of you)

The first approach listed is what we call **Realism**. This is where we can observe knowledge (information, phenomena, experiences) and effectively make an evidenced and supported prediction or assumption about what we are seeing. This would fit in well with **quantitative research**, where we attempt to make objective (uninfluenced, unbiased, independent, or neutral) statements about that specific aspect we are researching. So, let's say that you do watch the event; you can assume that the people there are having a good time based on the level of noise (talking, singing along, laughter), or by what you can see (people hugging or smiling, smaller group gatherings, or dancing). They are doing these actions without your involvement, which means you are not influencing or leading the way they are reacting to or experiencing the event. But when it comes to research, we must understand that simply asking someone to be involved in research can influence the way they interact with you (see the **Hawthorne effect** or **observer effect**, and **social desirability** for further understanding). In this example, there is only *one* reality, meaning to some philosophers and researchers that our experiences do not matter, and assumes that events or reality are *only* observable and measurable. This means that what happens is what is known, regardless of thoughts, opinions and feelings towards or about it, and that what researchers may know about a specific event or reality does not necessarily matter. It is about the research and what they as researcher are exploring rather than themselves and their knowledge – effectively making them bystanders.

### Box 3.1 Activity

#### How Objective Can You be?

Who is to say that the person doing the observing or measuring is objective? Is it possible to be objective all the time, or does it depend on the situation? Review the following, and decide if you would consider yourself an 'objective' person in these situations:

- 1 Your sibling takes your favourite item of clothing or shoes from your wardrobe without your permission, and unfortunately ruins them
- 2 Your boss reaches out to you to discuss a possible promotion, but you also know that your best work friend is wanting to be promoted and if you take it, they won't get it
- 3 Your best friend and another friend in your group have fallen out, and your best friend asks you to not speak to the other friend and to block them on all social media platforms

A response to this activity can be found at the end of the chapter.

The second approach in our ontological list is **Relativism**. If we are adopting this approach, we know that we cannot make assumptions about what is happening from just observing it. We might be able to hear people laughing, but it does not mean that everyone there is having a good time, and so with a relativist stance, we often must become involved or need to be invited to be involved to understand what is happening. With relativism, we understand that there are multiple realities (not just one to observe like realism). Relativist research can be subjective (personal, influenced, or shaped), where the act of interacting with others can influence their perception or understanding. This is often considered a key part of **qualitative research**, where some think that making an objective bystander assumption (as per realism and mostly quantitative research) does not always provide the full or accurate picture. However, this can be problematic as it can be understood that with relativism, there is no other reality other than what we individually experience and can reflect on – perhaps suggesting that there isn't a singular reality that we share. Heavy stuff!

Often when discussing relativism with our own students, we liken it to their own world that we must be invited into – we can see that they are a person, but we are unsure what it is that makes them *themselves* without them letting us in and informing us of their likes, dislikes, ideas and thoughts. We could see a student drink a bottle of fizzy drink in multiple seminars (let's say Coca-Cola) and we could make the assumption that that is their favourite drink, because that is what we can observe – but then by discussing it with them, and realising that we are just observing a small snapshot of time with them, we could find out that actually they only get that one because it's part of a meal-deal, and their favourite one (let's say something a bit more obscure, like San Pellegrino Blood Orange) is not, and it makes more financial sense for them to purchase the Coca-Cola than their favourite one. We could only have found this out because they invited us into their reality/world and provided that knowledge. So, when applying this to our gathering event, we must get closer to and likely involved within it to understand what is happening and interact with others. If we were taking a realist perspective, we could see someone saying no to dancing with some individuals and assume that they don't like dancing or they don't know these individuals. With the same scenario, but taking a relativist perspective, we could interact *with* that individual and find out why they said no. Perhaps their shoes are new and have been hurting them, they don't like the song, they're tired, or they need a drink!

The third and final approach in our ontological list is what we would call **Critical Realism**. This is where some individuals say that a reality exists outside of our experiences, in that there is a 'real world' and an 'observable world'. The 'observable world' is made up of things we may think of as perspectives or perceptions and the 'real world' can be made up of *things*, such as events or structures that we don't necessarily see or witness, that can *cause* the observable world to happen. This means we must know or be aware of these causes in the real world to further understand the observable world. Sometimes however, what can cause something to happen in the observable world may still exist, even if the event in the real world does not happen. Confused? Us too! A really good example of what this means in plainer terms is amended from Martin (2020, p.158):

Gravity continuously exerts its force on a pen but placing it on a table will stop the pen falling to the floor. However, while the event (the pen falling to floor) is not present this does not mean that the cause is not present (i.e., gravity stops working).

To clarify: gravity is the cause and the pen falling to the floor is the event (observable world). Stopping the event does not mean that the cause does not exist. If we extended this to the example of the party, someone who takes a critical realist ontological viewpoint could say that the party exists (observable world), but we must take a closer look at it to understand it. It doesn't mean physically getting closer but looking at what makes the party exist and *be*. Some individuals who identify as Critical Realists discuss exploring what makes something exist as looking at *experiences*, *events* and *causal mechanisms* (sometimes referred to as causal structures). Experiences are what is perceived by an individual, for example, dancing at the party; events are occurrences that happen in the observable world, which may be perceived and become experiences; and lastly, causal mechanisms are the underlying processes or forces that bring events into existence or cause them to happen. By applying this to the party, it means that we are attempting to understand the partygoers' experiences of the party and look at what makes the experience what it is. In this instance, the causal mechanisms could be something easier to see and determine, like the weather, the group of individuals themselves, the music, the physical location of the party, or something smaller such as how everyone is interacting or dancing with each other in a specific space, or the beat and the bass of the music.

Hopefully this is all starting to make sense, below is a very brief overview of the three positions of ontology we presented earlier:

Realism: There is one reality that is observable, and assumptions can be made on this observable knowledge

Relativism: There are multiple realities that are not strictly observable, and assumptions cannot be made

Critical Realism: There is one reality that is observable, but also has hidden elements working in the background

All researchers should understand how they are approaching the knowledge they seek to find, but not all published research will identify the approach that has been taken. For quantitative research, this is often the norm, but Ryan and Golden (2006) have spoken about this for sociological research, if you are interested to read more. Qualitative research, for example, places a lot more emphasis on this identification, due to having to acknowledge and justify subjectivity (see Carter & Little, 2007 for examples about subjectivity in research, and **Chapter 19**). Once we know how we are approaching knowledge, we can then choose how this knowledge is being understood or created, which leads us to epistemology.

### Box 3.2 Ask Yourself

#### How do you Approach Knowledge?

Take some time to think about how you have approached knowledge before: have you just accepted that something could be observed and understood, or have you had to experience or interact with something to understand it more fully? Or have you considered that maybe something can be observed but that there are possible hidden features that need to be acknowledged? Your current stance may change as you go through your research journey and decide what you are interested in knowing more about.

## Epistemology

Epistemology (eh-pis-teh-moh-low-jee) is where we start to look at the knowledge itself: what is it made of? What do people know and how do they know what they know? You can now start to see how this fits with ontology and why it is important to consider both when we approach research.

In some literature, epistemology has been broken down into two sides; objectivist and subjectivist. Again, you may be thinking 'jargon!'. Objectivism would suggest that there are no real barriers to producing knowledge about the world – you can observe it and produce knowledge that is truth. Subjectivism, however, is pretty much the opposite; there is likely knowledge, but it cannot just be observed, and there are likely context or perspectives that must be considered too. Confusingly enough, there are some individuals who consider subjectivism an epistemological stance in its own right and can be considered alongside the others that we explain for you in this section. As we said earlier, it frustrates academics too when trying to read these and get our heads around them, so if you feel confused, you are well within your rights to feel that way! But keep reading, and it should all become a bit clearer.

So, let's go back to our party event example, but look at it solely from an epistemological perspective, and think about the different ways in which we could approach understanding and experiencing the event as a form of knowledge:

- 1 The way the event is being understood and experienced is factual knowledge that can be observed, be measured, is independent to you as the researcher, and likely can be averaged out across party attendees
- 2 The way the event is being understood and experienced is created (constructed, formed, built, influenced) between individuals (and maybe you as the researcher) in a social, historical, political, and maybe cultural context
- 3 The way the event is being understood and experienced is factual knowledge to you, and you alone

- 4 The way the event is being understood and experienced is unique to every individual and understanding can only be reached through immersive observation and interaction
- 5 The way the event is being understood and experienced can be understood as a total reality with additional things happening that may be viewable, but likely has hidden events occurring that underpin the whole event, that are independent to you as the researcher

The first approach is what we call **positivism**. This is where the world is assumed to consist of real things and that knowledge can be produced and understood objectively (e.g., independently without bias). This is often aligned with quantitative research and allows for descriptions to be produced about people and behaviour. This is the most common or dominant approach in psychology. However, there are two main issues to be aware of with positivism and research; 1) often what is being reported quantitatively (statistically) is suggesting a measurement or observation between very specific things, and 2) it is just telling us what *is* between these very specific things, not *how* or *why*. For some researchers, this is fine and what they're looking for but can be quite a reductionist (narrow) view to take of people and their behaviour. To explain the first point: let's say that some researchers have suggested that age can significantly predict positively coping with stress. This might be a useful statement to make based on research and findings, however, it does not consider anything else that might influence these findings. What about ... their gender or sex? How many children they might have (or if they want any)? What their job is (if they have one)? Is the stress related to something specific, for example, health conditions or their occupation? How often do they go on holiday? What other responsibilities do they have? The list literally could go on, but there are other stances to explain. For the second point, it is letting us know that this thing exists, but not why it exists or how it exists, meaning further exploration is then necessary to find out why or how. This isn't to say that quantitative (and positivist) research is not useful – it absolutely is. It can provide us with useful statements about particular people, specific behaviours or even instances in time that we can then use for future research or to compare findings, but the statements themselves should not be viewed as the be-all or end-all or definitive explanation of the knowledge you are seeking.

The second approach is what we call **constructionism** or **social constructionism**. This is the view that our beliefs, norms and values, which make up our social reality, are constructed between and amongst people. Aspects such as gender, social class, social hierarchy and even stereotypes are social constructs, which have changed throughout time, and are often very different across cultures, as they are based on a collective agreement and then shaped and maintained through interactions, practices and beliefs. Often this is considered as 'unseen', where empirical measurement cannot be placed to observe, like it would with positivism. It is still important and really useful though, particularly in certain aspects of qualitative research, as it allows us to see realities (and knowledge) as flexible. However, like positivism, there can be some issues with constructionism in that it does not always consider how biology can shape human behaviour (e.g., nature vs nurture, maybe one of the most consistent debates within psychology!), and has been criticised for not

acknowledging that there may be one objective (independent) reality as it favours a ‘multiple realities’ stance. Often you will see the term constructionism used interchangeably with *constructivism*, however there are subtle differences between the two, where constructivism can be applied more individualistically and psychologically, as you will see in the student project examples in **Box 3.3**.

### Box 3.3 Student Project

#### Sophie and Emma’s Theoretical Positions

Let’s introduce you to two more of our own students and consider how they approached the complex topic of ontology and epistemology in their own research.

Sophie explored how young adults perceive and understand Intimate Partner Violence perpetrated by both men and women in heterosexual relationships, using focus groups (see **Chapter 7**). Below is an excerpt from her undergraduate dissertation, where she explained what her theoretical approach was for her study:

Thematic Analysis (TA) also notably emphasises the social and cultural contexts influencing individual’s perceptions and understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and therefore fits with this study’s relativist and constructivist approach. This advocacy that reality is subjective, and that standards of truth, rationality and morality vary between cultures and people, therefore placed TA as best able to reveal participants’ beliefs surrounding IPV that are often considered socially constructed.

Emma investigated how factors influence British older men’s perception of accessing mental health services for themselves using one-to-one semi-structured interviews (see **Chapter 7**). Below is an excerpt from her undergraduate dissertation, where she explained what her theoretical approach was for her study:

The theoretical approach for this study is relativist and constructivist. Relativism fits the study as knowledge comes from an interpretation of reality that is locally and historically specific (Dieronitou, 2014) and therefore no suggestion or opinion provided by a participant is false or correct about mental health (MH). The thoughts and opinions of MH and accessing MH services is relativist as an individual may speak ‘facts’ that they have formed from a language system that is familiar to them historically or culturally in a sense (Paleček & Risjord, 2013). Constructivism is most appropriate as meaning and experience was interpreted to be socially produced, and the codes and themes are developed from meaningfulness in the data (Byrne, 2021). The individual and the topic of MH are inseparable, so the research gathered is dependent on values of individuals, that have developed from society and societal norms that have been projected on to them (Dieronitou, 2014).

(Continued)

Sophie and Emma both adopted a relativist (ontology) and constructivist (epistemology) approach to their research, even though their studies are on completely different topics and used different ways of generating their data. It is not often that researchers who are taking a realist (ontology) and positivist (epistemology) approach outline this, as often they expect others to understand that that is their approach based on their hypotheses. But as we can see with Sophie and Emma's explanations, explaining how the approaches fit with the specific study allows the reader to know how this knowledge is being approached!

The third in the epistemological list is what we call **subjectivism**. This is where people impose meaning onto their world/reality and understand it in a specific way which makes sense to them, but where their reality is seen as the *only* understanding of that experience. This is usually done based on prior experience or knowledge of the current context. For prior experience, using our earlier gathering example, it could be that an individual interprets a sudden very loud shout in the crowd as an emergency, as enjoyment, or an argument, depending on previous events they've been to. For knowledge of the current context, using our earlier gathering example, it could be that an individual may interpret an abrupt stop in the music depending on whether they were informed that the speakers were unreliable (technical fault), that a practice fire alarm had been mentioned during the running of the event (anticipated) or that different music had been listed to be played (expected).

Our fourth viewpoint on the list is known as **interpretivism** (or in some texts, **antipositivism**). This approach fully embraces how unique individuals are but that researchers cannot completely bracket themselves away from their participants; humans researching humans cannot be objective. Therefore, those who align with interpretivism look for meaning in the experiences of the individuals who are engaging *within* social interactions and often immerse themselves within the social context they are studying. As you have likely guessed here, this approach works for certain areas of research, but not all. It is unlikely that you would adopt this approach if you chose to study reaction time during a Stroop task, for example (see **Chapter 9**)!

Last on our list is what we call critical realism. Yes, it can be considered for both ontology and epistemology! This is because the way we approach knowledge with critical realism is to explore experiences, events and causal mechanisms, which means that we're already looking at the components of knowledge. It effectively combines a realist ontological stance (acknowledgement that there is something to explore and observe) but it is the causal mechanisms that make the events happen that are 'real', and these are understood in a variety of ways. Some individuals would consider that critical realism is essentially more ontology with a hint of epistemology. Below we provide a recap of the core epistemological positions:

**Positivism:** The world is assumed to contain real things, and knowledge is seen as objectively understandable, where it is independent of bias

**Constructionism or social constructionism:** Our social world is constructed of our beliefs, norms and values, and is constructed between and amongst people

**Subjectivism:** People interpret reality in ways that make sense to them, often viewing their perspective as the only valid understanding of an experience

**Interpretivism** (or **antipositivism**): Acknowledgement of human uniqueness and the impossibility of full researcher objectivity. Researchers seek meaning in participants' social experiences and often immerse themselves in the context studied

**Critical realism:** Knowledge is gained by examining experiences, events, and causal mechanisms, and blends a realist ontology with epistemological insight, where the 'real' lies in the underlying causes of observable phenomena

### How do we Know which One to Choose?

What an interesting question! The way we usually ask students to approach their research is to consider the same questions we ask in **Chapter 2**: what knowledge are you attempting to gather? Some areas of research are very easily identifiable for theoretical approaches, whereas others are a little more complicated. Most quantitative researchers will identify as **realist** and **positivist** as they are viewing knowledge as a snapshot of information that can be observed and can be generalised to others. Some mixed methods researchers may identify as more than one, depending on what their specific topic is; for example, their quantitative study could be realist and positivist, but their qualitative study could be critical realist, as they want to acknowledge those structures which may be influencing or shaping understanding. Qualitative researchers may identify as one approach consistently throughout their research time, whereas others may be flexible depending on what they are studying. For example, when discussing how identity can be understood, they may choose **relativist** and **constructivist**, but if exploring a specific experience (see **Chapter 13** for further information), then they may choose **interpretivism** as their epistemological approach instead. We recommend you read both tables where we have summarised the approaches so you can see which stances may work together. It does start to get a little complicated, as some researchers will state that some stances can't be harmonious, whereas others state they can be. If in doubt, have a read, make some notes, and have a chat with your psychology staff!

#### Box 3.4 Top Tip!

#### Read Published Articles to Understand the Theoretical Position Adopted by Similar Researchers on Your Topic

Figuring out your theoretical position can be quite a challenge, and we recognise that it is something which is complex and can be confusing for students. We always recommend reading published research articles to understand the theoretical position that other researchers have adopted. If you are reading research on a particular topic, you

*(Continued)*

are likely to find that this is approached in similar ways to how you wish to approach your own research.

As we have described in this chapter, psychology is primarily seen as an experimental discipline which follows the principles of realism (ontology) and positivism (epistemology), so many of the quantitative and experimental research articles you read may not fully explain this. However, you will certainly find this fully explained in most qualitative research articles, so if you are planning to do qualitative research, we recommend reading several examples of these to help determine your own theoretical position.

### When I've Identified it, How do I Explain it?

Again, great question! For most researchers who write about this, it will be simple: they identify the approach and explain why it is appropriate, usually in the methods section of their report. Head back to the student projects outlined earlier in this chapter (**Box 3.3**), of Sophie and Emma, to see how they wrote about it and applied it specifically to their chosen area of research. When reading published research, you may find that some researchers don't always identify their full approach to research – even some qualitative research – which others may view as problematic as then *we* don't have that understanding of how *they* are understanding their study or their findings.

#### Box 3.5 Case Study

##### Academic Research Examples

Here are some case study examples of acknowledgment of theoretical approaches in published research:

- Abbott et al. (2024) outlined that they utilised a 'critical and social constructionist framework' for their research as their focus was on how young adults at university explained their understanding of consent
- Samardzic et al. (2021, p.577) identified they approached their research 'from a feminist social constructionist viewpoint, which recognizes that science and knowledge production create rather than reflect reality, and that researchers, located in a specific time and context, are part of the knowledge construction process (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019)' as their research explored young Canadian women's experiences with polycystic ovary syndrome
- Clarke and Earley (2021, p.255) outlined that their theoretical approach was determined by their chosen analyses' methodology of IPA (see **Chapter 13**): 'It shares with descriptive phenomenology the aim to capture the texture and quality of individual experience, but, like interpretative phenomenology, it assumes it is impossible to gain direct access to participant's experiences' for their research exploring coming out experiences of white British divorced and separated gay fathers

Most quantitative researchers will not outline their specific theoretical approach to their research, as it is likely assumed to be realist and positivist based on their hypotheses. However, we suggest that researchers should consider stating their theoretical approaches for all research methods, to ensure clarity and consistency.

## Chapter Summary

Ontology and epistemology are important frameworks for how we approach and do our research in psychology, as they are our theoretical position. They guide us and help us understand what we're looking for, what we're doing and how we should approach and explain it. We need to know our positions for *both* as we cannot have one without the other.

Ontology recap:

- The nature of being. How we observe the world, how we observe human interaction and behaviour and how we observe knowledge.

Epistemology recap:

- The nature of knowledge. What it is, how it is made or understood, and how we can understand it in relation to other people and their understanding.

For ontology, we outlined **realism**, **critical realism** and **relativism**; what they mean and how we can understand them in the context of an event or situation to explore. For epistemology, we outlined **positivism**, **constructivism**, **subjectivism**, **interpretivism** and **critical realism**, and how this can further our understanding of the event or situation we are exploring. It should now be clearer to see how both fit and work together, and why we need to be aware of how we want to approach our research. You will now likely have an idea of what you prefer and how you are likely to approach knowledge in the future, for your own research. Knowing your theoretical position is key to the next stage of the research process, choosing a research design, which we move onto next in **Chapter 4**.

### Box 3.6 Response to Box 3.1 Activity

For this activity we asked you to consider three scenarios. For each of these scenarios, you probably decided no, you can't be objective to at least one of those situations. When something is happening to you, being objective can be quite difficult. The situations outlined are quite extreme in that they are specifically suggesting something happening to you but think about an area of psychology that you might be interested in, have experienced yourself or have a passion for – it can be hard to remove yourself from what is being said or suggested. When researchers make their career about investigating something specific, sometimes it can be hard to separate yourself from it, and it will influence how you approach it in the future. Our job as educators is to inform you of how to acknowledge this and work *with it* as part of your research – quantitatively or qualitatively!

## Going Further

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- If you want to know more about theoretical approaches (and get a head start on Chapter 19!), you can read this article: Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–34
- You can also read a Point of View piece by Yalda Natasha Tomlinson on the British Psychological Society's webpage about how important ontology and epistemology is to our research: <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/importance-engaging-ontology-and-epistemology-ecr>
- Alternatively, you can watch this short video that covers the basics of ontology and epistemology with visual aids: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH10ThG2kNU>
- We recommend reading Fryer (2022) and Fryer and Navarrete (2022) for further understanding on critical realism
- For more information on the Hawthorne or Observer Effect, Sage have a handy encyclopaedia where this is covered: <https://methods.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/encyc-of-research-design/chpt/hawthorne-effect>