

The Contextualist Approach to Social Science Methodology

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When delimiting a case, we start from a problem, then select a process towards an outcome and finally define a context in which it takes place. We explain by tracing the process within the context. These are the three basic operations of a contextualist methodology. This chapter provides a detailed comparison of this methodology with two other – the standard and the social–philosophical – methodologies. This comparison emphasizes how important it is that researchers in the qualitative tradition do not simply subordinate their reflection on the conduct of case studies to either of the other two methodologies. It also generates more general lessons on how we should think about methodologies, theory and accumulated knowledge in social science.

THE METHODOLOGIST'S DILEMMA

Methodologists are scholars who draw on the professional philosophy of science to

develop general methodological guidelines based on experience with certain kinds of research method. They direct students to selected professional philosophical literatures about what science is, and spell out how the main research methods produce results that confirm these principles. Methodologists mediate between the professional philosophy of science and specific technical routines of empirical analysis. Methodologists mostly come in disciplinary varieties. Their role is very authoritative and clear-cut, as they play a crucial role in the socialization of upcoming scholars.

Methodologists face a dilemma. In the following, we present this dilemma with specific reference to social science methodologists, who present methodologies in which their experience in using certain types of social science method is generalized with reference to selected philosophical principles. These methodologies have to appear highly consistent, as they reflect and influence views on what should pass as science in

various disciplines. But they can never be highly consistent because they are formulated by social scientists who are not professional philosophers but are specialized in specific research methods and related notions of theory.

The methodologist's mediating role between philosophy and empirical research is the key to this dilemma: Philosophical discussions draw towards fundamental, eternal questions, whether they are called questions of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology or just 'meta-theory'. However, any piece of empirical research must be carried out, reported and defended here and now. Methodologists cannot match the professional philosophers. Rather, their task is to produce *practical philosophies of social science* – methodologies that provide concrete guidelines in research practice and criteria to what knowledge shall count as science. Such practical demands require methodologies to appear as clear-cut and consistent as possible. However, if the link with philosophy were to be pursued systematically, all kinds of reservations, reflections and conceptual specifications would threaten any clarity whatsoever. In the end, most core methodological concepts become vague, with many proximate, even contradictory definitions.

We should not think about methodology as a question of one set of impeccable normative principles. Instead, we will take for granted that a community of social scientists exists, and that this community does not allow just any kind of knowledge to pass as science. Still, the fact that there are several schools of philosophy, and various research techniques in social science, makes it likely that there is more than one practical philosophy of social science. As any methodology is an uneasy balancing act, it is not easy to single-out sets of preconceptions that define families of methodologies in recent social science. Still, we make an empirically based attempt, claiming that these methodological standards are shared by broad groups of contemporary social science methodologists.

THREE PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHIES OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Methodological controversies are clues to different methodological frameworks. Scanning older and recent controversies, we find three broad clusters of methodologies (Mjøset 2006b). However, we also need to rely on sociology of science concepts. We have defined the concept of a methodologist, and others concern disciplinary communities, methods communities, local research frontiers, and the external and internal relations of science. Whereas our preferred technical term for what methodologists do is 'practical philosophies of social science', we also use other, shorter labels, such as 'methodological frameworks', 'views', 'positions', 'approaches', 'researcher attitudes' or – following Veblen (1919) – 'preconceptions'. We also use personalized terms, such as 'standard scholars', 'social philosophers' and 'contextualists'.

The three practical philosophies of social science are determined 'from above' by philosophical orientations, and 'from below' by the actual research methods their proponents employ. Looking 'upwards', methodologists can orient in three different directions: towards the professional philosophies of natural science, social science and the humanities, respectively. Looking 'downwards' to the everyday practices of social research, the methodologist will basically be familiar with either one of the clusters of empirical methods indicated in the lower part of Table 2.1. Our main claim, then, is that electoral affinities between the downwards and upwards orientations constitute the three practical philosophies of social science.

The practical philosophies are not 'fundamental' positions taken by professional philosophers, they are loose summaries of the views promoted by three types of methodologist. There may be both internal debates within each cluster, as well as typical debates between them. Our threefold distinction forms an empirical sociology of knowledge-based frameworks that might be useful as a meta-perspective on earlier and contemporary methodological debates in social science.

Table 2.1 The three practical philosophies of social science

The philosophy of the natural sciences: twentieth-century traditions emerging from logical positivism, Popper's critical rationalism, Lakatos' research programmes, Kuhn/Popper debate, analytical philosophy	The philosophy of the social sciences: US pragmatism, European critical theory, standpoint epistemologies	The philosophy of the humanities, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism
The standard attitude Mathematical modelling. Thought experiments/simulation. Statistical analysis of large data-sets. These methods indicate a methods community with the natural sciences	The contextualist attitude Qualitative methods implying direct or indirect involvement with the cases studied; ranging from long-term participant observation, more or less structured interviewing, comparative work on distinct case-histories. These are methods that are distinct to the social sciences	The social-philosophical attitude Interpretative analysis of texts: formal linguistic and narrative analysis, discourse analysis, history of concepts, content analysis, less formal methods of textual exegesis, use of classical texts in social theory to build broad "philosophy of history"-like interpretation of the present. These methods indicate a methods community with the humanities

Two of these three clusters have become visible from time to time in 'struggles on methodology' such as the critique of positivism in 1960s sociology, the science wars in 1990s science studies or the 'perestroika' debate in recent US political science. The third (contextualist) alternative has mostly appeared as a less obvious third position.

Methodological debates have been imminent since the birth of modern social science. Historically, these controversies display a pattern of recurrence: most of the topics debated today have appeared, disappeared and reappeared many times since the formation of modern social science more than hundred years ago. In some periods, one methodological approach has held a dominant position, gaining normative status. In other periods, some kind of dualism has prevailed, namely a dualism between generalizing ('nomothetic') natural sciences, and specifying ('ideographic') social/human sciences.¹ Our contextualist third position has been less frequently identified and discussed in its own right. One of the aims of this chapter is to argue that it is a most important one for social science.

The question here is not *just* the difference between methods used, neither is it solely about fundamental philosophical differences.

As the combination of philosophical positions and research methods defines each practical philosophy, the relation between any pair of these cannot be reduced to conventional dichotomies. For instance, the distinction between standard and contextualist attitudes is *not* identical to the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods, nor to the philosophical distinction between realism and nominalism (constructionism). Rather, such traditional dichotomies are interpreted in specific ways within each framework. More than consistency, each framework has a certain logic in terms of how various famous dichotomies (realism/constructionism, realism/empiricism, explanation/understanding, etc.) are discussed.

The philosophical inputs to a methodology, as well as the mere intellectual energy required to master specific social science methods, make it hard for one researcher simply to switch between practical philosophies. In everyday academic life, methodological clusters mostly remain self-contained, especially in disciplines largely dominated by just one framework. Even in multi-methodology social sciences (sociology, above all) the methodological camps mostly keep to themselves. Sometimes, this results in a situation in which scholars with different attitudes

grapple with very similar problems without ever discussing (at least not in a serious manner) the arguments of those who belong to other clusters.

We now turn to a more detailed overview, first sketching the standard and social philosophical methodologies. We then introduce the third, contextualist attitude, defining its specificity in comparison with the other two. We specify five aspects of each practical philosophy:² (1) their master example of explanatory logic; (2) their popularization of fundamental metaphysical questions; (3) their explanatory priorities given the autonomy of social science; (4) their implied sociology of knowledge; and (5) their assumptions about the relationship between the sciences. Furthermore, we define *two* notions of theory within each methodology, showing how each of these notions imply distinct strategies of specification and generalization, thus questioning any unspecified generalization/specification-dualism.

THE STANDARD PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

In earlier incarnations, the standard attitude was entirely dominant in the early postwar period; it still seems to be the dominant framework. It emerges when practical experiences from mathematical modeling and statistical analysis of large datasets are combined with selected items from the professional philosophy of the natural sciences.³ Its five characteristics are:

- (1) Master example of explanatory logic: There is one logic of explanation. The most direct version of this logic is found in natural science experiments. Natural scientists treat 'nature' as something that can be rearranged for experimental purposes. But in social science, the object ('nature') is a society of humans, into which experimental intervention is mostly undoable. Whereas social science knowledge does not – in any significant sense – grow as a result of actual experiments and modelling related to experiments, experimental logic is still held to be the best example of the kind of explanatory logic pursued. Thus, standard methodology regards statistical analyses of non-experimental data to be quasi-experiments, considers mathematical modelling as thought experiments, or – as a minimum – employs concepts originating from the conduct of experiments: dependent and independent variables. The experiment becomes the paradigm for reasoning both about past events that were never produced as experimental outcomes and about ongoing processes into which experimental intervention is impossible. It is nearly always implied that the experimental benchmark applies in indirect and modified ways. A sequence of internal methodological debates revolve around the modification of this ideal; these concern the epistemological status of thought experiments, and how statistical analysis of non-experimental data can emulate real experiments (e.g. Lieberman 1985).
- (2) Popularization of fundamental metaphysical questions: The standard attitude is based on a broad set of convictions that gained dominance in the early postwar period. It later went through several revisionist interpretations. One of its early roots was interwar logical positivism, which clearly pursued an anti-realist program (Hacking 1983), aimed at abolishing any metaphysics (any notion of unobservables, and of causality). But this purely syntactic definition of theory was philosophically hard to defend. As philosophers turned to semantic notions of theory, the question of representation could not be avoided. The main thrust since the late 1950s has been towards secularized approaches to the core metaphysical questions, mostly labelled *scientific realism*. Currently, there is something close to a consensus on this view. Scientific theories represent inherent structures, unobservables that lie below or beneath the flow of empirical events. The basic entities of this structure are referred to as the elementary particles or 'atoms' of social science. Internal disagreements relate to the nature of such a generative structure, e.g. whether it is based on individual beliefs and desires, or rather on systems of unintended consequences that cannot be derived from individual intentions.
- (3) Explanatory priorities given autonomy of the social science realm: Social science theory represents the inherent structures of the realm of action and interaction. Reductionism (whereby all of society would be made part of nature only)

is out of the question, at least in practical terms (Elster 1989, p. 74). The social sphere is, or must be treated as, marked by emergent properties *vis-à-vis* the realm of natural science. Neither concepts of utility (beliefs and desires) nor concepts of generative processes need to be further reduced to entities studied by neuroscience, biology or chemistry. The internal discussion concerns the kinds of explanatory reduction – to individual or non-individual entities – one can pursue within the sciences that cover the realm of the social.

- (4) Sociology of knowledge: Scientific beliefs are stabilized only from inside the scientific community, and this is enough to demarcate science from non-science. As a research community, social scientists are driven by the urge to illuminate ever more of the underlying structures behind social events and regularities. Influences from outside this community can certainly be found, but they are not relevant to the growth of social scientific knowledge. A sociology of (scientific) knowledge is irrelevant in this respect. 'The context of discovery' is no topic for the philosophy of science, and only logic matters in the 'context of justification'. Most statements of the standard programme emphasize that its ambitious theoretical ideals have not yet been realized in actual empirical research. Worries about this gap between theory and empirical research have haunted spokesmen of the standard framework since the early twentieth century.
- (5) Assumptions about the relation between the sciences: Compared with the natural sciences, social science is still young and immature, encountering several kinds of barrier in its efforts to mature. A sociology of scientific knowledge may be invoked to explain this. Disagreements revolve around how this is explained, whether it is simply due to younger age of the social sciences or due to the nature of their subject matter.

These five features do not go together in a consistent system. Still, they appear again and again in the writings of methodologists with a standard conviction. The preconditions can be specified historically. For instance, the nominalistic inclinations were obvious in early postwar operationalism, when Vienna school logical positivism was still broadly influential. Although one can distinguish different

varieties of the programme, the above specification is sufficient for our purpose.

Within the standard approach, we find at least two distinct types of theory (Mjøset 2005). The *idealizing notion* conceives theory as thought experiments using mathematical equation systems, investigating the implications (in terms of equilibrium or disequilibrium) of assumptions on actors and their interaction. The *law-oriented notion* emerges from attempts to find law-like regularities in datasets or from the use of qualitative data in ways that allow the researcher to investigate hypotheses about such regularities. One version of the law-oriented notion is a regression equation calculated from a large dataset, yielding the net effects of the relevant independent variables on the chosen dependent variable. Another version is what Merton (1968) called middle range theory.

Throughout the 1990s, many syntheses (e.g. Goldthorpe 2000) were suggested between the law-oriented and the idealizing notions of theory. But recently, more emphasis has been placed on problems in both of these components. These internal debates have led to what we shall call a *revisionist* standard position, such as, for example, Hedström's (2005) programme of analytical sociology and Pawson's (2000) programme on middle-range realism.

The notion of causal mechanisms is crucial to this revisionist position, which develops further the ambivalence towards high theory that was already built into Merton's notion of middle-range theory (Mjøset 2006b, p. 339f). Given the autonomy of the realm of social interaction, mechanisms define the inherent structure, and representation of this is counted as a satisfactory explanation. Mechanisms are elementary particles or driving forces. Elster (1989, cf. Elster 2007, p. 32, Hedström 2005, p. 25) conceived mechanisms as 'a continuous and contiguous chain of causal or intentional links' between initial conditions and an outcome. Hedström (2005, p. 23) states that we 'explain an observed phenomenon by referring to the social mechanism by which such phenomena are regularly brought about'.

As we will see, this standard concept of mechanisms addresses some of the same challenges as the contextualist notion of a process tracing.

THE SOCIAL-PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

Historically, the social-philosophical position was the first one to challenge the standard view in postwar debates. In Germany, second-generation Frankfurt school philosophers challenged Popper's attempt to transcend logical positivism. In Britain, philosophers concerned about Wittgenstein's 'linguistic turn' introduced the continental hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions into English-language methodological debates. Around Western Europe and the US, local varieties of this effort countered the dominant standard methodology, which was seen as an improper projection of natural science principles on to the sciences of man. The leading figures belonged mostly to the humanities (especially philosophy), but through the 1960s and 1970s, social science and the humanities were often close allies in pursuing these arguments.

Social philosophical methodology can be drawn from overview works presenting various personal contributions to *social theory*.⁴ To the extent explicit methodologies are produced, they are treatises on the methodology of discourse analysis, of conceptual history, etc (see Table 2.1). In the following, we present a stylized account, using the same five properties as in the standard case.

Master example of explanatory logic

Interpreting the standard view as a logic of mechanical, causal explanation, social philosophers emphasize that in human interaction the element of meaning cannot be ignored. Social actors are reflexive. Explanations in social science must therefore be based on a logic of understanding *meaning*.

Disagreements revolve around how common these intersubjective meanings are: do they relate to small communities or are they broad discourses that the researcher can tap into in her capacity of being a participant in (e.g. Western) society or culture at large?

Popularization of fundamental metaphysical questions

Whereas the standard position today in broad terms converges on scientific realism, the social philosophical position has a similar realism/nominalism debate, but with no full convergence around a constructionist/nominalist position. The social-philosophical approach specializes in fundamental questions. The leading question is how social science is possible. Transcendental notions of action, interaction, knowledge and structure are necessarily assumed by anyone who conducts empirical social research. The philosophical discussions about conditions of possibility are linked to empirical questions by means of broad concepts characterizing the state of the present social world: the most frequent core concept is *modernity* (cf. e.g. Habermas 1981, Giddens 1990), but other periodizing labels are also invoked. Modernity is mostly interpreted as a regime of knowledge. There is, however, also a materialist interpretation in which the core of present-day society is seen as an underlying structure of unintended consequences. These driving forces can be conceived in line with e.g. Marx's analysis of the cycles and trends of the capitalist mode of production. Still, there is a sense in which even the materialist interpretation requires an 'understanding' of capitalism in its totality.

Explanatory priority given the autonomy of the social science realm

The exploration of transcendental conditions of social science is social philosophy's demonstration that the study of the

social realm must be considered in its own terms. Contrary to the standard reduction to basic social entities, the social-philosophical attitude mostly implies a holistic position. What drives modernity is either a regime of knowledge (e.g., the rationalizing logic of modernization) or underlying driving forces (e.g., capitalist mode of production), which implies specific ideological patterns. Thus, a macro- to micro-connection is mostly emphasized. For instance, cases are studied as ‘expressions’ of a regime of knowledge (see Table 2.2, p. 000), just as the work of an artist synthesizes elements of the contemporary existential situation of mankind or some social group. The idea of individually rational action – whether it is defended or criticized – is a consequence of this regime, and thus not the elementary particle of explanations. Again, there is a more materialist version of this argument: the real forces of technological and economic rationality in a modern (e.g. capitalist) society produce ideologies that influence the growth of social science knowledge on this society. These forces must be the basis of any explanation. Internal debates revolve around the link between ‘real structures’ and ‘regimes of knowledge’.

Sociology of knowledge

In the social-philosophical view, the fundamental processes, *modernity* above all, supply a sociology of knowledge. Modernity is mostly interpreted as a knowledge regime. One can trace its impact in all social spheres, as well as in social science. In such a meta-perspective, the standard position expresses the fascination with natural science’s instrumental rationality in the modern world, specifically in Western academic culture. Alternatively, this rationality and the accompanying ideas of ‘enlightenment’ are linked – via ideologies or cognitive structures – to the underlying driving forces. In both versions of the argument, the sociology of knowledge is an external one: the preconditions implied by social research communities are seen as expressions of more encompassing regimes of knowledge and/or ideologies.

The relationship between the sciences

There is an inclination to consider science as a disguise. The varying maturity of the disciplines is not interesting. Rather, most disciplines play practical roles, they are part of a larger machinery of standardization that imposes discipline. Empirical research is often seen as purely instrumental (as is sectional divisions, the many ‘partial sociologies’ within sociology). Empiricist instrumentalism is overcome, either by existential accounts or by transcendental arguments about the conditions of social science. In the social-philosophical vision, social science shows its maturity and its superiority over natural science by being able to provide citizens with comprehensive understandings of their present predicament.

We can distinguish two social-philosophical notions of theory (Mjøset 2006b, pp. 347–349), with corresponding strategies of specification and generalization. *Transcendental or reconstructionist theory* is about the transcendental conditions of social science: basic notions of action, interaction, knowledge and structure (Habermas 1981, Giddens 1985). This notion is general at the outset, as it concerns pre-empirical general conditions. With such a starting point, considerations about modernity must be considered a *specification* (see Table 2.2, p. 000). The *deconstructionist notion of theory* is its opposite, aiming to show that no transcendental conditions can be established (Foucault 1969, 1975, Seidman 1991). This implies a far-reaching sociology of knowledge assessment, denying any accumulation of knowledge whatsoever in social science. That approach has a periodization of modernity as its *most general* (see Table 2.2, p. 000) feature (as it doubts any transcendental foundations) and it suggests an exceptionalist strategy of specification close to the one we find within the discipline of history.

Most historians tend to claim exceptional status for their single cases. Their disciplinary socialization does not require them to conduct the explicit comparisons along

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several properties that might tell them in which respects their case is specific. The predominant view that there are no 'cases of the same', leads historians to avoid the comparisons that would have allowed them to see their cases in different lights. Their perspective changes only when the 'spirit of the time' shifts. At that point, revisionist interpretations crop up, only to be challenged at a later point by post-revisionists. Each period's historians, so goes the old saying, writes the national history anew.

It is true that many of the – at least Western European and American – communities of historians have absorbed a lot of social science inspiration since the student revolt of the late 1960s. However, since the 1980s, many of these communities have been inspired by the methodology of denationalized humanities, developed by the French post-structuralists. Thus, many contemporary historians converge with the deconstructionist branch of social-philosophy. Both groups of scholars are socialized into a style of research typical of the humanities: their focus on archives and written sources leads to a non-comparative focus on the single case. Applied to history, the deconstructionist position would claim that the sequence of revisionisms and post-revisionisms shows that there can be no research frontiers.

THE CONTEXTUALIST PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The contextualist framework is a third methodological framework in social science.⁵ As outlined in Table 2.1, it differs from the two others in terms of philosophical references and through its reference to styles of social science craftwork that lacks methodological community with either natural science or the humanities.⁶ In the following, we define this attitude with reference to the same five aspects as the two attitudes discussed above.

The contextualist approach is closely connected to the conduct of case studies. Before we turn to the five properties of practical philosophies of social science, let us consider

some common sense understandings of a 'case'. If you are involved in a case in court, you are attentive to the specificities of the singular case, rather than any general features. You and your lawyer are interested in how your case fits a taxonomy of legal regulations. You are interested in how a specific institution (court) within a legal system will classify your case in the light of the specificities emerging from documents and testimonies presented in court. Certain types of court case require judges/juries to decide on personal responsibility or contextual determination (cf. the discussion in Barnes 2001). Ahead of some court cases lies police work on cases. Turning to other examples, the daily activities of therapists and social workers are work on *cases*. Whereas cases in court refer to conflicting parties, cases here refer to single persons, persons whose life history has led to problems that may be eased through a participatory relation.

The common feature is that we isolate sequences of events towards an outcome as a case because we have an interest in the outcome and thus also in the process. In everyday life, the importance of the case might be quite personal, we make cases out of particularly important chains of events in individual life histories. When social actors become involved with cases (e.g. in court cases, police investigations, therapy), they need to be sensitive to the process leading to the outcome, either because exact understanding of why the outcome came about is needed, or because the interest is in influencing the outcome.

Master example of explanatory logic

The contextualist framework is based on sensitivity to cases. (This is implied in the term '*qualitative* research'). In the highly simplified representation of Figure 2.1, a case is an outcome preceded by a process that unfolds in time. Delimiting cases in social science investigations, we imply a three-fold logic of empirical research. First, we relate to

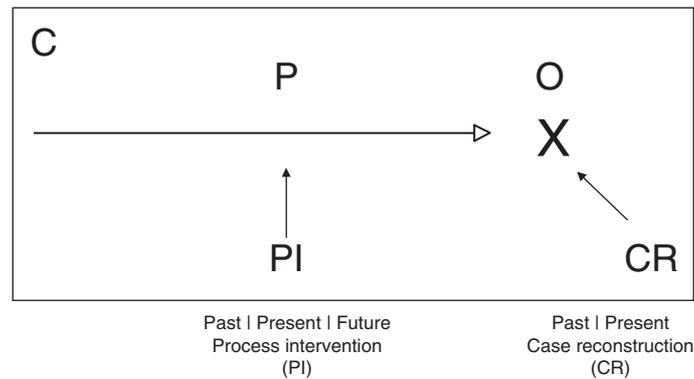


Figure 2.1 Two varieties of case study. C, context; O, outcome; P, process.

our research problems, selecting the process and/or outcome to be studied. Second, we define the context, the elements that we treat as the environment of the process singled out. Third, we trace the specific links in the process we have selected. Depending on the quality of our knowledge about the case, we arrive at an explanation of the case.

Sensitivity is necessary because investigators or therapists interact with their own kind. Standard preconceptions tempt scholars to approach experimental logic as closely as possible. The case study, in contrast, can be depicted as the opposite of the experiment. In an experiment, the production of a predicted outcome is just a means to arrive at general statements on the process. In case studies, outcome and process are significant in and of themselves. A case cannot be replicated at any time by any researcher anywhere. Some cases were the case in a particular context and will not necessarily ever happen the same way again. Other cases are produced again and again by an ongoing process, but we are then either interested in its specific cultural significance, or eager to evaluate it and possibly change it.

In an experiment, 'similar context' implies similar experimental set-ups. The fact that the processes studied are driven by humans largely precludes the exact engineering of experimental controls and shielding in social science. We cannot build context, so we cannot produce the isolated workings of particular mechanisms. Instead, we either

have to reconstruct both context and process *ex post*, or we intervene in an ongoing process in an existing context. Figure 2.1 represents these two varieties of case study; both are related to contemporary problems. In case reconstruction, the research problem determines the selection of an outcome. In process intervention, the research problem leads the observer/analyst into (actual or potential) participation in the production of an outcome.

In *case reconstructions*, the researcher reconstructs the process towards an outcome that has occurred in the past – once or several times. In social science, we often make cases out of historically individual and highly significant events in the development of a smaller or larger community. In an indirect sense, case reconstructions are also participatory.⁷ For instance, case reconstructions of significant macro-events can contribute to the self-understanding of a community (9/11 in the US). There are many examples of this, e.g. in the literature on the politics of ethnic identity. This is particularly the case if the outcome is not just significant but also remains controversial.

In *process interventions*, the researcher takes part in a process and the outcome is in the future. This might be a once-off outcome or, just as likely, a repeated outcome that has occurred many times before. Observation here requires participation (interview, fieldwork, participant observation). Participation differs from experimental manipulation. In many

cases, the observer wants to play a passive role, as the interest is in tracing the process as it would be without intervention. Anthropological and ethnographic case studies might not be interested in particular outcomes, but sensitivity relates to the historical and cultural specificity of daily life routines and cultural understandings. Participation, however, inevitably makes the researcher part of the creation of the case. This generates delicate problems of method. Still, these problems differ from problems of process intervention in cases that are inherently very controversial. These are more closely related to the ethics of research, and they might even lead the researcher to become part of mobilization to change the outcome, given the ethical judgement voiced by a social movement. Below, we define this as critical theory.

We can consider these two varieties *without* sensitivity to case particularities. *Process intervention* would then be an experiment, the production of an outcome predicted by a theory as general as possible. *Case reconstruction* would be the selection of a critical case that can test a high-level theory, even without manipulation by the researcher. Both varieties are well known from the natural sciences.

The interest in the specificity of cases goes together with a focus on learning and intervention. The philosophical background here is in pragmatist (mainly US) and standpoint (originally European) philosophies (Horkheimer 1937). Therefore, unlike the discipline of history, the contextualist position is committed to the explanation of single cases by means of comparison with other cases. The dual purpose is better specification of the original case *and* development of contextual generalizations. But these generalizations emerge through the analysis of specificities. They are important for learning. Learning establishes an important link between process intervention and case reconstruction: in many situations; case reconstructions explaining past outcomes by means of comparisons might be important for the intervention in present-day problems.

Popularization of fundamental metaphysical questions

Pragmatist philosophy is distinguished by its critique of the spectator theory of knowledge. Standpoint philosophies, such as early European critical theory (developing Marx's 'scientific socialism') and postwar feminist philosophy and social science (Smith 1999) particularly emphasize the epistemological consequences of social movements claiming equal rights in the development of society. In Hacking's (1983) terms, both treat science as intervention rather than as representation. Judgements about the real and the constructed are made with reference to local settings. The pragmatist tradition has been invoked by both realists (pointing to Peircian process realism) and by constructionists (there is even an old empirical tradition studying social problems construction, closely connected to the broader interactionist tradition that started with Chicago interwar sociology).

What unifies both realist and constructionist interpretations is the view that accumulation of knowledge is linked to participation, intervention and learning. Pragmatism differs from the far-reaching empiricism of both Hume and the early twentieth-century positivists who counterposed experience-based science to religion and philosophy. The pragmatists instead tried to bridge this gap, aiming both to redefine the area of science and to bring philosophy and religion into line with modern science. Acceptance of the Darwinian revolution was crucial to their efforts to reconcile scientific reasoning and religious belief (Skagestad 1978, pp. 21, 34f). Darwin transcended the Cartesian subject/object dualism because he saw man as an organism that is part of the world it develops knowledge about. Referring to this interaction between the organism and the environment, Dewey (1920/1950, p. 83) wrote that knowledge:

... is not something separate and self-sufficing, but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved. The senses lose their place as gateways of knowing to take their rightful place as stimuli to action.

The contextualist position implies scepticism towards generalizing statements on fundamental features, whether they are about cultural deep structures or material ‘driving forces’. Rather, it holds that statements on such properties must be linked by means of the sociology of knowledge to some participatory, interventionist and/or learning purpose. Like social philosophy, the contextualist position is committed to the analysis of a totality, but the totality of a case, thus not sharing the social philosophical focus on the totality of driving forces or cognitive deep structures.

Explanatory priorities given autonomy of the social science realm

As for reduction, the emphasis is on emergent properties and the practical context of scientific knowledge. In contrast to the largely theory-driven standard programme of explanatory reduction (cf. Hedström 2005, pp. 26–28, 36), contextualist research is problem driven. Explanations are related to the context relevant to the research question at hand.⁸ There is no programme of reduction, not even within social science. The idea of representing inherent structures between social science elementary particles is absent. There may be many layers between the very micro- and the very macro-levels, but these distinctions are drawn with reference to the research question, not to principal declarations about elementary particles. Explanation might require analysis at lower levels than the outcome, but there is no general micro-to-macro problem. With contextualization as an independent element in the explanatory strategy, the problem of micro-reduction does not emerge. Research may relate to various locations on a micro–macro continuum. A case may be singled out at *any* level of aggregation: therapists deal with single clients as cases, whereas macro-historians deal with nation states, macro-regions or even historical epochs. Statements about inherent structures are always contextualized and depend on the research question being

asked. Scholars committed to the standard framework sometimes discuss – and disagree on – what outcomes social scientists should be concerned to explain. Goldthorpe (2000, p. 203) insists on regularities, Hedström (2005, p. 67) on macro-level phenomena, and Elster (2007, p. 13) on events. In the contextualist framework, such disagreements seem odd. The problem at hand defines the outcome(s) to be explained, whether events or regularities. Explanatory ventures can be plotted into a space, depending on where they are located on the micro-/macro-continuum, whether the researcher prefers a passive or active position, and whether the process/outcome studied is controversial or non-controversial.⁹

Sociology of knowledge

The cluster of methods involving various kinds of participation define the contextualist framework ‘from below’ (see Table 2.1). Gaining knowledge by participation implies that, in principle (although not always in practice), we interact with what we study. Sensitivity to cases implies that we acknowledge the knowledge of actors who are ‘in’ the cases. Standard researchers tend to judge this just as a source of bias. But given seemingly insurmountable problems of getting sound data on beliefs (Elster 2007, p. 465), the ethnographic pride in ‘being there’ has its merits. Specific to research into society is that we can enter into the very sphere where the ‘mechanisms’ (even ‘elementary particles’) are supposed to be. The basic fact that we study something that we are (or could be) ourselves, implies that there must be some relationship between the way that we gather knowledge, and the ways in which people learn. Researchers may pursue knowledge more systematically, but not in a qualitatively different way.

According to the standard spectator theory of knowledge, the scientific community represents ‘nature’. In contrast, the contextualist view considers the scientific community as a society (the internal perspective), embedded in society at large (the external perspective).

As internal and external factors influence the way researchers represent their research topics, not only the context of justification but also the context of discovery (from biases in funding institutions, to the cultural problems addressed in the public sphere) is important to understand why we get the knowledge we get. This combined focus separates the contextualist sociology of knowledge from the predominantly external perspective of social philosophy. Research collectives with a high degree of (relative) autonomy can pursue strong programmes of basic research. Research collectives have their own internal processes, even fads and fashions. Still, even these collectives relate to current problems, often as defined by the agenda of funding institutions.

Assumptions about the relationship between the sciences

Although the social sciences are junior partners compared to the natural sciences, to contextualists they are not immature. Rather, the view is that both are related to pockets of relatively robust, problem-related knowledge (local research frontiers). Such knowledge does not converge in one high research frontier. There is no methods community with the natural sciences. Doing case studies, one need not feel bothered by 'immaturity' *vis à vis* the natural sciences, there is no commitment to some modified experimental master example. Social science is full of well-crafted and successful case studies, many of which also serve as a basis for learning.

The contextualist notions of theory are two ways in which knowledge is drawn from and related to our ability to be sensitive to cases.

Explanation-based theory is knowledge of contextual regularities accumulated from explanations of singular cases. These explanations are sharpened by means of comparisons and further cases are sampled with reference to the theory so far developed. Several programmes in social science (e.g. in network theory, Granovetter 1985) may be counted as explanation-based theory, but in this chapter, we limit our discussion to the program of

grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) as a specification of such a notion.

We define *critical theory* as a special case of explanation-based theory (Mjøset 2006a, p. 761). This definition is narrower than the broad definition implied by many social philosophers. The impulse towards critical theory emerges when social researchers participate closely with social groups that have legitimate claims to social change. Some of these groups are organized as social movements, others might be marginalized groups with few capacities to organize. In such cases, the position of the social researcher in a relatively autonomous research community may become problematic. In ethical terms (as argued, for example, in Habermas 1981) it might be untenable just to report research on contextual regularities; moral imperatives lead the researcher to become part of the relevant social movement to change these regularities.

The researcher then joins a movement whose collective action might fail or succeed. In the latter case, it feeds back on the single case. The researcher does not simply reconstruct an outcome but takes part in broader efforts to change an outcome. This is process intervention, but outside the confines of the research community. The kind of outcome differs depending on the kind of social movement. The most prominent examples are movements that have even given name to social science theories, such as 'scientific socialism' (Marxism) and feminism. The kind or permanent structures they point to and want to change differ: capitalist oppression of workers in classical Marxism, the position of women at work and at home in the feminist movement. Critical theory need not be linked to the macro-level: there are concepts of action research relating especially to firms and in psychology there is therapy relating to groups of persons. Not all such process interventions, however, are critical theory. The line of division between critical and explanation-based theory is a question of both ethical judgement and the social position of the researcher. Our discussion below, however, is mainly focused on explanation-based theory.

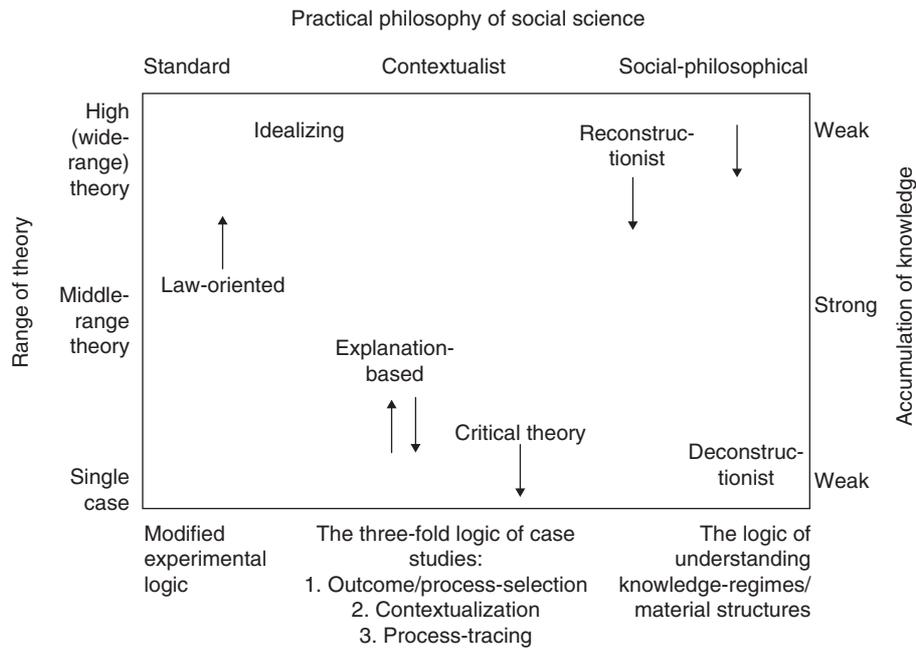


Figure 2.2 Practical philosophies of social science and notions of theory.

Figure 2.2 is the map we use for orientation in contemporary social science. It locates the three methodologies and the six notions of theory at different levels, and judges their potential for accumulation of knowledge. In the following, we use this map to discuss a number of principal questions of relevance to the conduct of case studies.

CASE STUDIES AND GENERALIZATION

How can the study of cases contribute to general knowledge? The question is a classical one in debates on qualitative methodology. In the following, we deal with it in the light of the map in Figure 2.2. Generalization takes on different meanings depending on what notion of theory we refer to; not all of these meanings can be equated with 'universal'. Table 2.2 relates one strategy to each of the six notions of theory. The social philosophical strategies of generalization were defined above, and are summarized in Table 2.2. As the discussions on case studies and generalization mainly concern standard and contextualist

methodologies, we do not relate to the social-philosophical framework in this section.

As for the standard notions of theory, the probability-based, statistical version of the law-oriented notion implies a *segmenting* strategy of generalization: the aim is to extract general relations within a specified field of research particularly relying on large datasets. These datasets are special purpose ones: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) makes datasets on growth available to the econometrician, research on innovation has its patent data and innovation surveys, sociology has its datasets on social mobility, political science has its electoral surveys, and so on. The strategy of generalization is to establish general knowledge related to the social segment from which the data on a large number of cases are gathered: the theory of economic growth, theories of innovative upgrading of mature economies, the theory of social mobility in industrial societies, the theory of voting behaviour and so on. The large number of cases contained in the datasets allows the use of statistical methods

Table 2.2 Notions of theory and strategies of generalization and specification

<i>Notion of theory</i>	<i>Strategy of generalization</i>	<i>Strategy of specification</i>
Law-oriented	Segmenting	Cases are analysed as the locus of selected dependent variables, which are explained by the net-effects of selected independent variables
Idealizing Explanation-based	Insulating Formal grounded theory (process-tracing, mechanisms). Substantive grounded theory (contextualization by means of typologies and periodization)	Cases as illustrations In combination, substantive and formal grounded theory secure sensitivity to specific cases (this is most properly described as a joint strategy of specification and generalization)
Critical theory	Efforts to promote their world view, challenging the 'model monopoly' of present 'regimes of knowledge'	Contributing to social change
Reconstructionist (transcendental)	Pre-empirical fundamentals	Periodization referring to modernity or some phase thereof. Cases as expressions of such 'logics of the present'
Deconstructionist	Periodization referring to modernity or some phase thereof	Exceptionalist strategy reminiscent of that found in the discipline of history

of generalization. However, the security of this method comes at the cost of segmentation, and findings based on patterns of correlation are not easy to translate back into a world that seldom is structured so that it gives rise to natural experiments. Given that the purpose of the law-oriented theories is the establishment of 'as general regularities as possible', there is little concern for cases, they are only the raw materials of large datasets. To the extent, however, that Merton-type middle-range theories are derived from other empirical sources than large datasets, another strategy of generalization may be involved. We return to this later.

The idealizing notion of theory implies an *insulating* strategy of generalization. Rational choice theory claims relevance for all social segments. It is based on a general theory of interaction, practised as thought experiments. Cases may here serve to illustrate patterns of interaction modelled in thought experiments. Strong interpretations of the idealizing notion would see game theory, etc. as the source of such patterns, whereas softer interpretations would analyze patterns with reference to a number of empirical sources, including folk wisdom, well-crafted case studies, etc.

However, the attitude is still the standard one, and thus a strategy of specification is not considered important: the focus is on the thought experiments as generalized, widely applicable knowledge, and often the 'parsimonious' nature of such knowledge is emphasized. In extreme cases, the aesthetic legitimation sometimes found in mathematics (the 'beauty of a proof') is simply taken over.

The contextualist strategy of generalization is to generalize only within specified contexts (Mjøset 2006a). In this view, specification and generalization are not opposites. Specification is only possible through more general knowledge. For instance, the exact features of Norway as a welfare state must be assessed with comparative reference to other cases of the same (in grounded theory, this is called theoretical sampling). As specifications are made in this way, the results also feed back into more general knowledge: denser and broader typologies, concepts and models of contextualized social interaction patterns. The use of comparison is the main alternative to subsumption under as general as possible concepts and theories in the standard conception, and also an alternative to the use of cases as 'expressions' of broad periodizing

notions (such as modernity) in the social-philosophical view.

It is not a contradiction to talk about general theory in the contextualist framework, but then it must be distinguished from universal range theory. Generalizations that retain grounding cannot be taken further than the middle range, but we can have more or less general theories within the middle range. Universal-range theory must necessarily be ungrounded. Theories can be established at a case level but should not be 'overgrounded', as in the case of the exceptionalist strategy of specification (see above).

Whereas the interwar Chicago School of Sociology mainly practised its ethnographic case studies, its second generation in the 1950s launched a criticism of variables as concepts (see, in particular, Blumer, 1969). Blumer's criticism favoured case sensitivity, but the sensitizing concepts he promoted as an alternative to 'definite concepts' alienated quantitative research altogether. A later generation of critics reflected the spread of statistical inference, regression analysis in particular. Ragin (1986, 2008 chapter 10) claimed that the estimation of net-effects across the whole population leads to notions of causal analysis that are at odds with the sense of causation we get from tracing processes that leads to outcomes in cases. In contrast to Blumer's social psychological orientation, the later generation was more concerned with macro-studies, especially historical sociology. Their criticism pointed in two directions: to concern with the methodology of macro-comparative social science (Ragin 1986, Mjøset 2000, referring particularly to Rokkan's work in the 1970s, cf. Rokkan 1999), or more generally to exploration of various kinds of process tracing and network models (Abbott 1999, 2001). These contributions generally agreed that Skocpol's (1984) attempts at methodological synthesis in historical sociology did not sufficiently cut the ties with standard preconceptions (Mjøset 2006b).

The other direction was towards alternative quantitative methods. One example is Ragin's (2000) qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), based on set-theory instead

of probability. Not relying on correlations, this technique can also analyse small populations. Abbott (2001) proposed models based on the logic of genetic sequencing. More broadly, Shalev (2007) urges scholars to rely on less high-tech statistical methods. The contextualist orientation is more than just a legitimization of qualitative methods, it has recently also led to development of types of quantitative studies that are designed to increase sensitivity to cases even among those who work with large datasets.

In the contextualist approach, the challenge of generalization is the investigation of smaller numbers of cases explained by concepts with high internal validity. The work on qualitative macro-studies, and also on non-probabilistic quantitative approaches, indicates that substantive generalization and comparative specification can go hand in hand. The next two sections present some conceptual and methodological specifications of such a strategy of generalization.

SUBSTANTIVE AND FORMAL GROUNDED THEORY

The distinction between substantive and formal grounded theory, as well as the emphasis on the operation of comparing, makes Glaser and Strauss's (1967) programme of grounded theory – rooted in interwar Chicago sociology – a particularly rich source for investigations of explanation-based notions of theory. In this section, we show how this programme provides further insight into the relation between types of theory and strategies of generalization. We can start from what might seem an inductionist credo:

Both substantive and formal theories must be grounded in data. Substantive theory faithful to the empirical situation cannot, we believe, be formulated merely by applying a few ideas from an established formal theory to the substantive area. To be sure one goes out and studies an area with a particular sociological perspective, and with a focus, a general question, or a problem in mind. But he can (and we believe should) also study an area without any preconceived theory that dictates,

prior to the research, 'relevancies' in concepts and hypotheses. Indeed it is presumptuous to assume that one begins to know the relevant categories and hypotheses until the 'first days in the field', at least, are over. A substantive theory generated from the data must first be formulated, in order to see which diverse formal theories are, perhaps, applicable for furthering additional substantive formulations. (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 33f)

This is a statement in favour of substantive *theory*, defined as theory developed 'for a substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry' (e.g. race relations, delinquency, research organizations). The opposite is formal theory, which is 'developed for a formal, or conceptual, area of sociological inquiry' (e.g. stigma, deviance, formal organization, social mobility). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 32f) emphasize that both types of theory are 'middle range' in Merton's sense. However, towards the end of this section, we shall specify differences (see Figure 2.2) between middle-range theory and explanation-based theory.

Strauss (1970) emphasized that the statement 'without preconceived theory' did not exclude reliance on earlier substantive theory, directly related to the field studied. Let us call this the *principle of substantive primacy*; 'discovering substantive theory relevant to a given substantive area (...), allowing substantive

concepts and hypotheses to emerge first, on their own' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p. 34).

We hold that this is a basic principle in any explanation-based theory. However, Glaser and Strauss never seem to discuss how it relates to the distinction (grounded/ungrounded) that appear in their book title. We make this connection in Table 2.3, considering grounded/ungrounded as an account of how theory is discovered and substantive/formal as a classification of theory that has been discovered (whether it is explanatory or not; its contribution to accumulation of knowledge).

Glaser and Strauss's programmatic formula – theory as grounded in data – refers to qualitative data emerging as researchers exercise sensitivity to cases. Such grounded theory is based on systematic work that codes data to establish core concepts and samples new cases to extend and develop earlier findings. Glaser and Strauss also use the term 'ungrounded theory', indicating theories that are not grounded in this way (see Table 2.3). Both notions can be differentiated in line with the substantive/formal distinction. In the following, we discuss some results of such a differentiation, relating to our typology of theories (see Figure 2.2).

We argue throughout this chapter against the frequent accusation that grounded theory

Table 2.3 Taxonomy of grounded and ungrounded theories

		<i>How knowledge was discovered</i>	
		<i>Grounded</i>	<i>Ungrounded</i>
Types of accumulated knowledge	Formal	Stylized interaction patterns recurring in explanations across various substantive research fields (internal analogies)	Explanatory patterns drawn not from social science but from other domains of science (external analogies, e.g. mechanical, organistic) Transcendental notions of theory. Methods-driven empirical analyses (e.g. net effects, axiomatization)
	Substantive	Case studies: case reconstruction/process intervention in various fields of society in specified periods. Bounded generalization developed through comparison of cases within an area of research, using typologies and periodization to specify context	'Journalistic' generalizations. Exceptionalist specifications. Examples selected from various fields put forward as illustrations of (formal) theoretical claims. Empirical cases as expressions of trends emphasized in broad interpretations of the present

is inductive or descriptive only. In Table 2.3, we can locate description as substantive ungrounded ‘theory’. A pure description of the flow of events is impossible, and thus ‘unconscious’ principles of selection must be involved in any description. Moral panics and other forms of ‘journalistic’ generalization of singular cases are good examples. This is not theory in any proper sense. The exceptionalist strategy of specification (see Table 2.2 and ‘The social-philosophical practical philosophy of social science’, above), which studies single cases independently of any comparison with other cases of the same, is also an example of substantive but ungrounded knowledge.

The relation between the two divisions of the ungrounded column in Table 2.3 illustrates the gap in the standard framework between theory and empirical research (see ‘The standard practical philosophy of social science’, above). We can distinguish four attempts to bridge this gap. Two of these *bridging attempts* try to close the gap going ‘downwards’ from formal ungrounded theory, thus producing substantive ungrounded theory. The other two attempt to find formal theory with some reference to empirical research, let us say they try to move ‘upwards’.

As for the relationship between high theories and empirical substance, there is a standard and a social-philosophical version (see Figure 2.2). The standard position implies the idealizing notion of theory, thought experiments in which the researcher establishes the context via definitions that suits an axiomatic system. The social-philosophical position implies reconstructive theory, which is formal in the philosophical sense of claiming transcendental status. The first downwards bridging attempt implies the quoting of illustrative examples to substantiate idealizing theory. For instance, the works of Jon Elster (e.g. Elster 2007) are avalanches of such examples, used as raw materials for speculations around his increasingly soft version of rational choice theory. The second downwards bridging attempt implies reconstructive theory approaching the study of modernity by linking transcendental notions

either to selected examples claimed to be expressions of the core concepts (modernity, globalization) in their interpretations of the present, *or* to selected quotes drawn from older or more recent classics who tried to grasp the spirit of their age (‘iron cage of rationality’, ‘anomie’).

As for the upwards bridging attempts, one is what we earlier discussed as the segmenting strategy of generalization, yielding explanations in terms of net effects. The contextualist criticism summarized above (in ‘Case studies and generalization’) would consider this methods-driven research, and in that sense *formal* (cf. Abbott’s criticism of ‘general linear reality’, and Ragin’s (2008 chapter 10) criticism of ‘net-effects thinking’, which yields ‘vague theory’).

The second upwards bridging attempt would be the Mertonian concept of middle-range theory. As noted (in ‘Three practical philosophies of social science’), the revisionist standard notion of mechanisms can be seen as a contemporary update of this programme. It has emerged from frustration with the two standard strategies of generalization (insulating and segmenting), as none of these have been able to close the theory/explanation gap. Their proposed bridging solution lies in explanation by mechanisms; however, before we consider it more closely, we need to discuss the purely formal, ungrounded theories in Table 2.3.

The history of social science has many examples of formal theories ‘ungrounded’ by ‘external analogies’. A theory-driven programme such as Parsons’ structural-functionalism of the 1950s and 1960s, relied on the analogy of an organic system to develop wide-ranging formal typologies. Despite a standard point of departure, Parsons’ theory of action actually ended up quite close to the transcendental position of reconstructive social-philosophy (see Figure 2.2). This kind of ‘grand theory’ was the main contrast against which Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory in the 1960s. There was no broad contextualist breakthrough, however, as Parsons’ theory was challenged simultaneously by economics-inspired rational choice and by

game theory. Here, 'external' formalism was not from another field of science but from mathematical notions of theory as an axiomatic system, 'interpreted' for action theory, thus requiring particularly strongly idealizing assumptions (cf. the economics notion of caricature models', Mjøset and Cappelen 2009). The rational-choice programme, which can also be considered to be methods driven, attracted a lot of intellectual energy for several decades, but recent standard revisionism rejects this attempt to close the gap (Hedström 2005, Elster 2007).

This critical stance points in the direction of a contextualist perspective. Ignorance of the principle of substantive primacy, wrote Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 34), is in most instances the result of:

... believing that formal theories can be applied directly to a substantive area, and will supply most or all of the necessary concepts and hypotheses. The consequence is often a forcing of data, as well as a neglect of relevant concepts and hypotheses that may emerge.

The rational choice criticism of functionalism was only about replacing one ungrounded formal theory with another. Both differ from the contextualist, interactionist tradition from Simmel, through Goffman and into contemporary interactionist thinking, which we can conceive as formal grounded theory. This tradition was always close to and partly overlapping with the empirical ethnographic orientation of the Chicago School, which we can count as substantive grounded theory. Can we relate the revisionist notion of mechanisms to these notions.

Let us turn to the grounded column of Table 2.3. The distinction between formal and substantive grounded theory decouples generality and explanatory power. Substantive grounded theory is the basis of the contextual generalization described above. Formal grounded theory leads to formal generalization that recognizes similarities between patterns of social interaction in many fields of study. Such generalization must be grounded. It respects the requirement of *internal* analogies (see Table 2.3), because

these must be derived from substantive studies in several fields of social research. It is not indexed to specific contexts, thus it is formal. It is general, but it explains nothing before it is inserted into a context. In terms of the three-fold contextualist logic of explanation (see 'The contextualist practical philosophy of social science'), a formal grounded theory is an appendix to the third step, as it isolates formal patterns visible in several process-tracings in different lines of study. These formal patterns can be useful as 'components' of explanations: they are explanatory 'modules', which results from researchers' efforts to spell out in some detail the formal properties of selected interaction patterns.

Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 34) note that the principle of substantive primacy:

... enables the analyst to ascertain which, if any, existing formal theory may help him generate his substantive theories. He can then be more faithful to his data, rather than forcing it to fit a theory. He can be more objective and less theoretically biased.

As an example, they note that it would be wrong to apply Parsonian or Mertonian categories at the start, it is crucial to 'wait to see whether they are linked to the emergent substantive theory concerning the issue in focus'. Formal generalization is not simply an alternative strategy of generalization. Context can be specified only by means of substantive grounded theory. Formal grounded theory does not relieve the scholar of doing the comparative craftwork: exploring categories, core categories, properties and subproperties, devising typologies and periodizations.

This line of argument allows us to conclude on the second upwards bridging attempt, the revisionist standard notion of mechanisms. This can be seen as an attempt to make formal theory substantive, without the problem-related choice of outcome/process and contextualization. This kind of formal theory *isolates one part* of the three-fold logic of contextualist analysis, namely the process-tracing logic. The revisionist notion of explanation by mechanisms requires tracing

of the chain of causal and intentional links (Elster 1989). Whether this formal theory is grounded or ungrounded, however, depends on the source of the mechanisms. We have argued that if they rely on external analogies they are ungrounded, but if they rely on internal analogies drawn from social science studies, they are grounded. In the latter case, they rely on earlier substantive grounded theory in the form of explanations of causal processes, as in Elster's 1989 understanding.

Interestingly, Elster in 1998 suggested a revised definition. The old definition he now calls 'causal chain', while according to the new definition, mechanisms 'are frequently occurring and easily recognizable causal patterns that are triggered under generally unknown conditions' (Elster 2007, pp. 32, 36). With his two successive definitions, it seems, Elster rediscovered Glaser and Strauss's distinction between substantive and formal grounded theory! If we trace a causal chain we need to include the context, and thus, we have substantive grounded theory, the earliest definition. If we recognize patterns in interaction across 'conditions' (contexts), we have formal grounded theory, the most recent definition, in which conditions are unknown, i.e. unspecified. Elster has, however, not noted the parallel, because he recognizes no other methodological frameworks than the standard one.

MECHANISMS AND PROCESS-TRACING IN THE CONTEXTUALIST FRAMEWORK

By considering the components of grounded theory, we can define a notion of mechanisms

within the contextualist framework. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 36) define categories and their properties as elements of a theory. A category 'stands by itself as a conceptual element' and a property is a 'conceptual aspect' of a category. The two notions are relative, thus an overall category might have many properties and each of these properties can be seen as categories that have further properties. This can be simplified into a three-level terminology of categories – properties – subproperties.

Let us start from a simple example of typology construction. Size, flavour, juiciness and type of product are properties of the category fruit. Adding a question, specifying the dimensions along which the properties vary, and aggregating the two vertical rows, we get a two-fold typology (Table 2.4). The typology is related to the core category that emerges when empirical data are scrutinized with the research question in mind (cf. the various types of coding and sampling in grounded theory; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Within this framework, a mechanism can be defined as *the pattern of social interaction involved as the properties of a category produce outcomes along a dimension*. We can further define *causal chain* or *causal process* with reference to conjunctions of mechanisms involved as social interaction on the dimensions of several (or ideally all) properties create overall outcomes. Thus, process tracing links mechanisms pertaining to the various properties of the core category we see our cases as cases of. The contextualist approach explains by means of many mechanisms linked in causal processes.¹⁰ Furthermore, once we consider causal processes that generate recurrent outcomes, we must also

Table 2.4 An example of typology construction

<i>Question</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Properties</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>
Why different prices?	Fruit, specifically oranges	Size	Large ↔ Small
		Flavour	Sweet ↔ Less sweet
		Juiciness	High ↔ Low
		Production	Ecologica ↔ Traditional
<i>Types of orange</i>			<i>High-price ↔ Low-price</i>

Tables 2.4 and 2.5 are synthesized from Senghaas (1985).

pay attention to the possibility that cumulative change occurs as the processes recur. These changes might originate in contradictory dynamics or in small contextual changes, and cumulative processes might lead to more significant changes in context, either through slow change or more sudden critical junctures (turning points). In the changed context, new processes might evolve.

In our simple example in Table 2.4, the mechanisms stems from biology and agro-science: specific species of oranges, fertilization, etc. But we can consider a more complex example from comparative political economy. Senghaas's (1985) large project on what developing countries can learn from European development experiences can be reconstructed as a discovery of explanation-based theory (Mjøset 2007). With reference to this research question, Senghaas established the core category of *auto-centred development*, which is understood as the combination of economic growth and improvement in living standards for broad masses of the population. Relying on a large selection of relevant literature on economic

development – theoretical, quantitative and monographic – Senghaas ended up with a table that specifies properties and subproperties of this core category. Table 2.5 is a simplified version.

Given the research problem, it is obviously necessary to close the explanatory chain (to establish context) way 'above' what would be Hedström's (2005) fundamental level (beliefs, desires, opportunities). The number of subproperties is, however, true to the middle-range realist view about stratified reality (Pawson 2000). Each subproperty can be dimensionalized, some in quantitative terms, others just in qualitative terms. This example also allows us to see how a change from dichotomization to more nuanced typologies will increase the detail of the processes traced. The more distinctions we allow into the dimensionalization, that is, in Ragin's (2000) terminology, we turn from crisp to fuzzy sets, the more historical context is allowed for. The same is the case if we increase the number of properties and sub-properties involved.

Systematic comparison led Senghaas to emphasize empirical indicators of the

Table 2.5 Properties, subproperties and dimensions of the core category auto-centred development

<i>Properties</i>	<i>Subproperties</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>
Agrarian property/ social structure	Distribution	Egalitarian ↔ Skewed
	Innovation-orientation	High ↔ Low
	Cooperative movement	Strong ↔ Weak
Distributional patterns	Income	Egalitarian ↔ Skewed
	Income distribution/savings	Promote ↔ block innovation
	Wages and salaries' share in net national product	High ↔ Low
Economic institutions	Firms (risk/innovation-orientation)	Strong ↔ Low
	Supportive banking system	Yes ↔ No
	Nature of national system of innovation	Strong ↔ Weak
	Education – training (literacy)	High ↔ Low
Social mobilization	Mobilization of farmers	Strong ↔ Weak
	Mobilization of workers (unions)	Strong ↔ Weak
Political mobilization	Democratization (replacement of old elites)	Strong ↔ Weak
	Nation building – sovereignty	Early ↔ Late
	Clientilism in political parties	Low ↔ High
State	Administrative reform	Yes ↔ No
	State provision of infrastructure	Considerable ↔ Low

Source: Mjøset (2007).

Tables 2.4 and 2.5 are synthesized from Senghaas (1985).

egalitarian distribution of farmland and agrarian incomes, postulating a mechanism whereby cash income in the agrarian sector accrued to a large share of the families in the that sector. The context is one in which the majority of the population is in the agrarian sector. With egalitarian agrarian distribution, staple export incomes are spread broadly. This creates broad-based domestic demand that stimulates small, but innovation-oriented manufacturing activities, the simple products of which are bought mainly by farmers.

Explanations of the development experience of particular cases, however, requires us to look at causal chains connecting several such mechanisms (or explanatory factors). The farmers joined in cooperatives that assisted both with sales and with investments in agricultural equipment. There are many mechanisms here, and one would never reach a conclusion if one were to trace them all the way 'up' from the level of beliefs, desires and opportunities. Instead, they are cut off by means of contextualization. The institutions or social structures that form the context are the results of processes not further traced: agrarian mobilization, church/state relations, colonial history, etc.

The factors that have been deemed important by earlier substantive research are listed in Table 2.5. For each of the subproperties, the dimensionalization creates a scale or a specified typology. These set the context for the mechanisms. But taken as such – at any level – mechanisms are patterns of social interaction, routine behaviour and so on. Mechanisms are formal grounded theories that cannot explain without context. The interesting feature is how various mechanisms connect in specific contexts defined by typologies related to properties/subproperties. This specifies how reality is layered (Pawson 2000): the various cases of more or less successful overall outcomes in terms of auto-centred development, are produced and reproduced thanks to *conjunctions* (Ragin 1986) of such mechanisms in specific contexts.

The analysis is often in terms of 'stylized facts', which in such an analysis can be

specified as typical processes. For instance, Senghaas refers to Hirschman's (1977) notion of linkage effects, which can be specified as various stylized constellations of early manufacturing development and social structure. As Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 32) emphasize, substantive and formal theory differ only 'in terms of degree'. The theory of linkage effects can be seen as substantive grounded theory, based on explanatory, monographic case studies of economic development. However, it can also be developed towards a more formal grounded theory in the form of network models. However, if the networks are modelled starting from checkerboard structures, as in Hedström (2005), we are in the realm of ungrounded formal theory and it is an open question as to whether a homogenous action rule derived from a regression equation with certain controls will actually ever lead us to such stylized processes.

To the extent that processes are cumulative, there will be change. This illustrates how typologies are not just specific to research questions, but also to historical periods. They must also be revised with reference to major contextual changes, conceived as turning points or more gradual change. However, the formal grounded theory of linkages can be used to trace the impact of manufacturing sector transformations through several periods, whereas the contextual specifications varies.

An important implication of this contextualist principle of substantive priority is that we cannot have accumulation of knowledge at the high level. In terms of accumulation of knowledge (cf. Figure 2.2), high-level formal theory in and of itself is as weak as ungrounded descriptions of the flow of events. Another implication, of equal relevance to the philosophy of the social sciences, is that we cannot have competing formal theories, only competing explanations. If explanations are to compete, substantive theories must be involved. Competition between theories – in other words – requires agreement on problems (outcome or process selection) and on context; it requires all three elements of the contextualist logic of research.

LOCAL RESEARCH FRONTIERS

The claim that contextualist approaches violate the principle that any observation is theory loaded is partly inspired by Popper's philosophy of natural science. As with any broad principle, scrutiny by new generations of professional philosophers (Hacking 1983, p. 171ff) leaves it in dire need of specification. Note that with reference to Figure 2.2, we face at least six different interpretations of what 'theory-loaded' might mean.

In the contextualist framework 'theory-loaded' means that discovery of new theory relates to earlier substantive grounded theory (Strauss 1970). We shall specify this relationship by means of the notion of *local research frontiers* (Mjøset 2006a). It specifies how explanation-based theory leads to accumulation of knowledge just because it remains in the middle range. Social science knowledge is developed with reference to the various areas of society. The main argument of the pragmatist philosophers was always that accumulation of knowledge takes place because it is important for the community. If many researchers ask the same research questions with reference to similar sets of data and other empirical investigations, we get a local research frontier. Such frontiers develop with reference to problems that are crucial to the community.¹¹ Rather than believing that we 'observe' in the light of some high theory, we must realize that a problem area requires the definition of a small number of core categories. These categories have many properties, and for each there might be subfrontiers of research, and thus, different types of explanation-based theories.

Local research frontiers synthesize existing analyses of relevant core categories and their properties. It also includes stylized facts, either quantitative (e.g. based on agreement on major indicators) or qualitative (e.g. as in certain commonly used typologies and periodizations). All these components are related to what the community of researchers accept as good explanations of relevant cases. The principle of substantive primacy applies, substantive grounded theory is the basis of

local research frontiers. Substantive theory without a local research frontier becomes ungrounded substantive theory, unless the topic/field is entirely unexplored, which is seldom the case. Only when substantive work is done can one check whether existing formal (grounded) theory might be useful in the consolidation of the research.

We have shown (see 'Case studies and generalization') that contextualist researchers have ways of accumulating knowledge that transcends the engrained generalization/specification dichotomy. Even a single case analysis can contribute to growth of knowledge when it is developed with reference to knowledge already accumulated in one or more local research frontiers (Mjøset 2006a). Such analyses can also rely on monographs. Their empirical material might be 'overgrounded' due to the influence of ideas of exceptionalist specification (see 'The social-philosophical practical philosophy of social science'), but they can be regeneralized with due attention to context. The specification of one or more new cases feeds back into the local research frontiers, adding to the generality of knowledge, even though its ties to the context are not cut.

In the standard framework, one imagines 'basic' theory – solving general problems in a high level research frontier – being 'applied' to local problems. The social-philosophical emphasis is on cultural problems that have an existential kind of generality. In the contextualist perspective, one sees all problems as specific and local, emphasizing how social science *theory* is cumulative only in local research frontiers. Local research frontiers should not be confused with exceptionalist specifications, which would narrow down a research frontier to what we know from earlier research on a particular case. Local research frontiers synthesize research on many cases.

Here is a contextualist notion of growth of knowledge: with richer dimensionalization of properties or subproperties, research frontiers become increasingly mature. This should not be conceived as ever more 'correct' representations of basic features of reality, but rather as a growing consensus within

a broad social science research collective concerning accumulated knowledge on social structures and processes in local, problem-related research frontiers. Even if some degree of maturity has been reached, it might not last forever, as underlying problems can change. The knowledge might grow further, be transformed in the light of new problems or wither away. Social science today possesses knowledge in several such local research frontiers, but this knowledge is *not* converging into higher level knowledge (see 'Mechanisms and process-tracing in the contextualist framework').

The accumulation of knowledge in local research frontiers has its own sociology of knowledge. If the study relates to uncontroversial cases, few researchers will return to it, the public will not address it and researchers will not judge this knowledge. However, real and persistent problems of social development lead to so much attention that local research frontiers develop and persist. A well-consolidated local research frontier requires funding enough to sustain a research collective over significant periods of time. Certain clusters of problems are better suited than others as a basis for durable collective and even interdisciplinary social science. In some cases, disciplinary idiosyncracies might lead different disciplines to study the same problems in relative independence of each other. In other cases, the nature of the problems is such that even economists can work fruitfully with non-economist social scientists.

Research into the welfare state is a good example. In the Western world, many interests converge to sustain a local research frontier on this topic. The collective of social researchers now has at its disposal a literature addressing the same cluster of questions by means of carefully maintained and updated databases, frequently used typologies, stylized facts, comparative case studies, models of explanation and converging discussions on historical backgrounds. Whatever a researcher might hold in terms of high theory, he or she will have to rely on this complex of middle-level knowledge, which is based on the best

explanations so far provided. This judgement is passed in the local research frontier, within which researchers judge knowledge by drawing on it in further research. This knowledge is not insulated from broader discussions in the public sphere on matters of policy and strategy.

Local research frontiers can cluster and might relate to each other in hierarchies. For instance, research into socioeconomic development patterns in Nordic countries (which might be relevant for policy learning by poor countries), the welfare state and the position of women in Nordic society are different research frontiers in terms of outcomes analysed. All can be related to policy learning in several respects. They require us to trace different processes but they might draw on overlapping contextual knowledge. We can imagine typological maps in a hierarchy, where the highest ones contain general substantive knowledge that might be relevant for several local research frontiers. This is the notion of substantive generalization. Such general knowledge is still specific to certain areas, even geographically. Let us consider this further with reference to Rokkan's political sociology.

Rokkan's contribution to political sociology was based on his contributions to subfrontiers such as nation-building, state-formation, electoral behaviour and the structure of party systems. In his last contributions (in the 1970s, collected in Rokkan 1999), however, he developed a framework that integrated several such research frontiers. It remains substantive, though, because it is valid only for Western Europe. The main outcome to be explained is the structure of the Western European party systems in the postwar period (1950s and 1960s).

Rokkan developed a basic sequential model as well as a multitude of typological maps. As grounded theory (Mjølset 2000), Rokkan's theory draws on historical monographs, studies comparing political institutions and on his continuous work on electoral statistics. His study of Western Europe yields no general formal theory to be applied directly (e.g. to Asia). But by doing a similar craftwork

of contextualization, relying on many of the same properties, one could establish new substantive theory in the form of typological maps of, say, the Asian region. This might yield new formal theory, but some of the formal theories developed from Western European developments would surely be useful, provided due attention is given to the different contexts. We see the principle of substantive primacy at work.

Given the clustering of research frontiers at different levels, the three elements in the case-study logic often interact. Within each period given in his sequential model, Rokkan traces economy – territory – culture ‘variables’. These broad *contextualizations* allow *choice of a number of more specified outcomes* to be explained, e.g. breakdowns of democratic regimes, the structuring of party systems, patterns of political mobilization. Specified typological maps then provide more specified contexts. The resulting explanations lead to successive refinements, both to the specified typological maps and the more basic sequence models.

Rokkan’s work also illustrates the combination of formal and substantive theory. Although his main strength was contextualization, process tracing was also involved. However, his formal theories were grounded. They were interaction patterns generalized across research on political and social history: patterns of mobilization, alliance formation, revolts in situations of scarcity, organization building, social movement formation. He also drew on the formal theories of others, e.g. Hirschman’s ‘exit, voice, loyalty’ triad and even Parsons’s AGIL-scheme, trying to make them serve him as formal grounded theory. He dealt with these formal theories only to the extent he could put them to work together with his substantive arsenal of typologies, periodizations and field-specific processes and mechanisms.

A comparison of (perhaps) the two most quoted Norwegians in international social science gives a striking result: Rokkan follows the principle of substantive primacy and hardly ever uses empirical material as mere examples; Elster, by contrast, pursues formal

theory only, and examples is all he has in terms of empirical content. As their implied practical philosophies of social science diverge in this way, it is not surprising that Elster hardly ever finds it interesting to refer to Rokkan’s work – so far.

Rokkan provided social science with accumulated knowledge, not just in the form of mechanisms, not as insulated relations between variables, but in the form of contextualizing maps that might be useful to several subfrontiers of research on European political developments. These were substantive generalizations: they allow later researchers to contextualize also with reference to other significant outcomes, *and* they can be improved and extended. His work has no trace of idealizing models and no interest in connecting his arguments back to elementary particles (beliefs, desires and opportunities). Compared with social-philosophy, Rokkan’s work is too disaggregated: it is ‘below’ the level of modernity.

Besides Weber’s wideranging typological work in *Economy and Society*, Rokkan’s model and maps are some of the most worked out examples we have in the social science of substantive generalization. Within the contextualist framework, we can understand Weber’s various ‘sociologies’ as typological discussions of the properties (law, domination, religion, economy) of ‘Western development’. These ‘sociologies’ are subfrontiers related to a broad local research frontier. The overall explanation, as among others suggested by Collins (1986), ties the various properties together in a complex cumulative process, one that is singular and relevant to many. The explanation traces processes that tie the various properties together. This interpretation challenges both standard and social-philosophical interpretations of Weber.¹² Social philosophers are very fond of Max Weber’s few paragraphs on the ‘iron cage’ nature of modernity. But contextualists are more interested in the main contents of Weber’s work, namely his enormous web of typologies contained in each of his sociologies. These various typologies, he wrote in *Economy and Society*, serve to

‘create conceptual points of orientation for particular purposes’. There was no intention of completeness, no intention of ‘forcing historical reality into schemes’ (Weber 1922, p. 154). Like the pragmatists, Weber clearly considered social science knowledge to be problem oriented.

Both from the vantage point of the standard near-consensus about scientific realism, and with reference to the social-philosophical preference for deep structures (real or cognitive), one might claim that processes are too often traced at the event level, ‘real science’ is to unveil more fundamental processes. Returning to the Senghaas project, for instance, one might claim that an analysis of several development experiences could be reduced to a common deep structural process: the development of capitalism. The typology of different kinds of development outcomes would disappear, being rejected as ‘empiricism’, and there would be *one* deep structural driving force. Alternatively, one might refer to the Nordic development pattern, claiming that it did not result from specified cumulative processes but that deep-down demography/family structure predetermined the role of women in the Nordic area (Todd 1985, 1987).

Both would bring us closer to or even into ‘philosophy of history’ kind of modernization approaches. The contextualist approach, however, is sceptical of such statements of deep structures, suggesting instead a sociology of knowledge reflection: different research communities converge on certain stylized processes that seem to be the best answers to their research questions. With a variety of research questions, we also have a variety of claims about ‘fundamental’ forces.

Typologies should not be turned into *essential* features of reality. Although they are empirically grounded, typologies are still constructions. The degree to which they ‘represent’ is up for discussion, at least if there is a well developed local research frontier. They most probably have to be changed, as Weber emphasized, if we turn to a new set of research questions.

A more conventional term for local research frontier is ‘the literature’. But given the quest for high theory in the standard framework, this concept plays no important role in that methodology: in particular there is no reflection on the fact that it is local, i.e. limited to substantive areas. As we have shown, within the standard framework, research frontiers are defined with reference to formal theory only. Elster’s notion of a ‘toolbox’ is adequate, but such a toolbox is irrelevant without the substantive elements contained in local research frontiers.¹³ In the contextualist framework, a research frontier consisting of formal theory only is not possible. This also ties in with the pragmatist emphasis on knowledge as problem driven.

Here we reach a conclusion for the practical social research: we need more emphasis on substantive types of accumulated knowledge. We have implied that a basic weakness of both standard and social-philosophical high-level notions of theory is the denial of contextualization as a research craftwork. Typology construction by means of comparison is a main way of specifying context. Typologies synthesize available knowledge in a form that allows further comparison with reference to a set of research questions. They are maintained, revised and improved by updating of cases and addition of new cases. A social scientist must command a repertoire of typologies (logic of contextualization) as much as they need a repertoire of formal theories (logic of process tracing).

The kind of research craftwork that yields substantive theory is underrated in the community of social scientists. The pursuit of typologies – or substantive theory more generally – is weakly institutionalized. Most typologies are sketchy and hard to find; and they give low status publication wise! Many scholars regard typologies as static. But they need not be. They become static if they are not maintained, upgraded, revised and indexed to periods. Whereas statistics and econometric models are well taken care of in economists’s research institutions and statistical offices, and large databases in similar institutions,

typologies are not cared for in the same way; they should be!

We can here specify our first implication for the philosophy of the social sciences (see the end of ‘Mechanisms and process-tracing in the contextualist framework’): social science today possesses knowledge in several local research frontiers, but this knowledge is *not* converging into high theoretical knowledge. Neither substantive nor formal grounded theory converge in one overarching research frontier; the former because it is tied to specific research fields, the latter because it is formal only. Substantive general theory in the contextualist sense is also *not* converging, at least so as long as we require that high theory be explanatory. The highest theory that is still explanatory might very well be typological maps such as Rokkan’s, which are applicable to several outcomes that can be chosen for explanation. But even this theory is clearly delimited to a context. There might, as we have seen, be several general theories. Researchers must learn to manoeuvre and know how various frontiers emerge as relevant depending on the research question asked.¹⁴

But even if there is no high-level convergence, there might be relations of aggregation and overlap between local research frontiers. Topics can rise to dominance and then fade, but certain clusters might emerge and there might be synergies. There is no way for substantive generalizations in a local research frontier to be replaced by formal theory. A logic of falsification is not of much help: rather, substantive generalizations fasten as parts of a local research frontier because they are used and improved in the research collective.

CONCLUSION

No drawing of distinctions is innocent! One might object that our linking of the methodological frameworks to natural science, the humanities and social science implies the conclusion that only the contextualist framework is adequate for social science. Admittedly,

our discussion has focused on strong features of the contextualist framework *vis à vis* the other two.

However, this chapter is also the work of a methodologist, and the starting point was, after all, that a methodology cannot be consistent! Although we are inclined to claim that contextualism has less of a gap between ideal and reality, theory and explanations, than the standard perspective, and that it avoids the personal, social-philosophical preoccupation with fundamental or existential problems that deflect attention from thorough empirical research, we do not claim that contextualism is without problems or that it can be taken as entirely consistent in philosophical terms.

If we want to make a plea for contextualism, then, it must be consistent with our introductory discussion of the methodologist’s dilemma! Our claim, therefore, is that if one wants to understand the social sciences, a three-fold division is better than any of the conventional dualisms. It is a major strength of the contextualist position that it falls between the two others: it is empirically oriented, as are many scholars within the standard approach. It can engage seriously with discussions on empirical methods, comparing the different logics of qualitative and quantitative empirical research: but it is also capable of reflecting in sociology of knowledge terms and of discussing various kinds of contextualization. It is thus it is on speaking terms with social-philosophers.

We have tried to map, as thoroughly as possible, the comparative specificity of the contextualist framework. This is important, as it is so often rejected or embraced as being part of either one or the other two. The third position must guard against polarization between natural science and humanities, which all too frequently degenerate into mutual parodies that serve only to bolster self-righteous identities. Intervening to undermine such methodological polarization, the contextualist position can temper each of the extremes. It has the potential to inspire more fruitful approaches to triangulation of methods and cooperative interdisciplinary work in an era when disciplinary divisions are challenged.

There is, then, first a contextualist lesson concerning the *relation between empirically oriented fellow social scientists*: Triangulation of methods should be performed with reference to real differences in the way researchers work and how they legitimate their research strategies. The message to social scientists who employ qualitative methods is that they should think twice before they buy into either a standard or a social-philosophical methodological style.

Second, there is a contextualist message to *professional philosophers of social science*. The contextualist methodological account, unlike the standard and the social-philosophical, gives professional philosophers of social science impressions of the variety of social science procedures.

Although this chapter was not written to prove that all social science methodology must converge on a contextualist framework, it presupposes a contextualist methodology. The framework we have used to discern three methodologies and six notions of theory has been a contextualist one. The three methodologies have been compared as cases of the same: mediation between methods and selected philosophical elements. By contrast, a standard methodology would be based on normative arguments in favour of one framework, while a social-philosophical methodology would be ripe with accounts of personalized theories. Neither normative, nor personalized, our account traces what researchers do when they conduct research and when they argue about what they do. By means of typologies, contextualized interaction patterns, and sociology of knowledge we contextualize the case of social science in the early twenty-first century.

The research behind this chapter is – at least implicitly – based on a coding of properties of academic social science research, reflecting the author's 'participant observation' in Norwegian, Nordic, European and US academic spheres over more than 25 years. The author maps the contemporary situation in social science, clearly accepting a role as participant in this research community. Social science concepts, we know, are 'interactive kinds'

(Hacking 1999); it does matter how we classify ourselves and our fellows. Hopefully, an increasing number of social scientists will find it useful to think of themselves as being guided by a contextualist methodology.

NOTES

1. The dualism was coined by German Neo-Kantian philosophers (cf. Collins 1998 chapter 13), but later appeared in other academic cultures (cf. e.g. Snow 1959).

2. Some of these can be traced back to Hacking (1999 chapter 3), but we rely more strongly on the sociology of knowledge.

3. This definition partially converges with the definition of the 'received view' in Hands (2001). Examples of standard methodology: Friedman (1953) in economics; King, Keohane and Verba (1994), Geddes (2003) in political science; Stinchcombe (1968), Goldthorpe (2000) in sociology; Peltó and Peltó (1978) in anthropology; Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002) in psychology.

4. Such as Lyotard (1979), Habermas (1981), Giddens (1985), Alexander (1983). One out of many overviews is Best/Kellner (1991).

5. Abbott (1999 pp. 196ff) uses the term 'contextualist paradigm' in his plea for a return to the programme of the interwar Chicago school of sociology. Even in the 1940s, Stephen Pepper (1942 pp. 232ff) distinguished contextualism as one out of four 'world hypotheses', referring mainly to US pragmatist philosophy. I earlier used the terms 'pragmatist' and/or 'participationist' (Mjøset 2005, 2006a, 2006b), but the term 'contextualist' is a more neutral label and avoids the identification with any particular philosophical school.

6. Examples of this position: Hands (2001), Hoover (2001), Mirowski (2002) in economics; Barnes (2001), Abbott (2001), Ragin (2000), Mjøset (2006a, 2006b) in sociology; Cicchetti and Rogosch (1996), Gottlieb and Halpern (2002), Biglan (2004) in psychology. In much recent political science, one often finds strong elements of contextualism within frameworks that try to retain standard features. Examples are Pierson (2004), Goertz (2006), George and Bennett (2005), and several contributions (e.g. McKeown 2004) in Brady and Collier (Eds) 2004. Unfortunately, a closer discussion of these various combinations is beyond the scope of this chapter.

7. This is a way to state the 'Thomas theorem'; cf. Merton (1968, chapter XIII).

8. In contrast to Hedström, Coleman (1990 p. 5) explicitly denies that 'for a given purpose an explanation must be taken all the way to the individual level to be satisfactory'. He instead invokes a 'pragmatic' criterion: 'The explanation is

satisfactory if it is useful for the particular kinds of intervention for which it is intended.' In that case, the whole debate on methodological individualism versus methodological collectivism must be judged a rather uninteresting polarization between the standard vision of elementary particles and the social philosophical totalizing orientation. Standard formulations are ripe with reservations accepting that the ideal of methodological individualism can seldom be realized. Contextualism simply accepts this.

9. We have no space to pursue this further here, but the controversial/non-controversial distinction is implied in our discussion of both critical theory and local research frontiers below.

10. This should fit Ragin's (1986) notion of multiple, conjunctural causation, as well as notions of equifinality and multifinality in the open-systems literature (Cicchetti and Rogosch 1996), but there is no space to expand on this hunch further here. Note that in standard accounts (Hedström 2005), the inclination is often to talk about mechanisms in singular.

11. Although we have no space to pursue it here, the discussion of various types of problem (problems of social engineering, conflict-related problems, existential problems, theoretical problems, etc.) would be a fruitful specification.

12. The standard interpretation is, for instance, Coleman's (1990, chapter 1) model of explanation in social science, and the social-philosophical interpretation is in terms of collective belief systems, civilizations, etc.

13. Elster (1989, 2006) suggests a toolbox of formal mechanisms. We suggest a tool-shed of grounded theories. In this shed there are many shelves for substantive theories: typologies, periodizations, stylized facts. There is also a place for Elster's toolbox, but these mechanisms can only provide explanations in contexts established by substantive theory. Elster tends to leave the tool-shed carrying the toolbox, forgetting to bring any of the substantive theories along. In this way, he retains the standard preoccupation with formal theory, although he often displays an unhappy consciousness that something important has been left behind.

14. Social philosophers are more interested in the conditions of knowledge than in the actual accumulation of knowledge in local research frontiers. Transcendental theory is personal, and so are the resulting interpretations of modernity. This is the position of the literary intellectual, the ability to express the deepest concerns of a generation (or some other unit – a nation, a people, etc.) in an individual synthesis (the work of art). It is interesting here to consider Flyvbjerg's (2001) programme of phronetic social science. This parallels contextualist social science in that both are problem driven. However, thanks to its notion of local research frontiers, the contextualist approach avoids a major dilemma in Flyvbjerg's account, namely that only

the high-theory ideal of the standard approach is considered to be *theory*. Flyvbjerg claims that because of 'context-dependence', 'cumulative' and 'stable' research is not possible in the social sciences. The contextualist framework outlined here does not imply that analysis of context precludes theory. One should not grant the standard position a monopoly on notions such as science and theory, but rather define these with reference to local research frontiers. This note is relevant given Laitin's (2003) use of Flyvbjerg as a proxy for the unknown 'Mr Perestroika' in recent controversies within US political science. The result was yet another polarization (Flyvbjerg 2003 was the response) between standard and social-philosophical positions, in which the real merits of a contextualist position gets lost.

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