

TEMPLATE ANALYSIS

for BUSINESS *and* MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES WHEN USING TEMPLATE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, we introduced you to Template Analysis as a generic style of thematic analysis widely used in qualitative business and management research. As we pointed out, Template Analysis is not wedded to any one methodological approach or underlying philosophy. However, while Template Analysis does not insist on any particular specific philosophical or theoretical commitments on the part of the researcher, this does not render these commitments unimportant or inconsequential. It means, rather, that the onus is on you as a researcher to reflect on and elucidate your own particular philosophical position. In this chapter, we will introduce you to some of the main aspects of the philosophy of research of which you need to be aware, then consider the ways in which this impacts on how Template Analysis should (or should not) be used in your business and management research project.

UNDERSTANDING THE PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION OF RESEARCH

Template Analysis is a qualitative research method. *Method* refers to the particular techniques used to collect and analyse data in research. As we saw in Chapter 1, there is a wide range of methods of data collection in qualitative research, including



interviews (one-to-one, focus groups, online), research diaries, participant observation and the use of pre-existing texts. Methods are informed by *methodology* - that is, the general approach taken to carrying out a piece of research. Different methodologies are shaped by different underlying philosophical and theoretical assumptions. Ideally, before undertaking any piece of qualitative research, you should first consider the philosophical position your work is coming from, as your philosophical stance has important implications for data collection and analysis.

In order to understand why it is necessary to think about your philosophical assumptions when undertaking qualitative research, there are some key terms with which you need to become familiar. *Epistemology* is the philosophical theory of knowledge, and refers to the assumptions we make about *what* it is possible for us to know and *how* we can obtain this knowledge. *Ontology* refers to philosophical assumptions about the nature of being, which determine what we can know to be real, and what we can know to exist. Understanding these terms may be difficult, and it might be tempting to dismiss them as florid, convoluted issues of no real-life or applied relevance for your own research. However, all research involves epistemological and ontological assumptions, whether or not these are explicitly addressed. These assumptions have very real and practical consequences for choices you make in terms of your research area, your research question, the data you collect, the analysis undertaken and the way in which you report your findings. This is of particular importance in qualitative research, as we shall explain now.

In qualitative research, the essential concern is with human beings as meaning-makers. Qualitative approaches, examining how the social world is experienced and understood, are generally founded upon *interpretivism*. Human experience is the central focus of research. Individuals' accounts of their experiences enable researchers to gain a better understanding of the social world they inhabit. This is rather different from other forms of traditional scientific research, which tends to be concerned with accurate measurement and prediction. The sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) distinguished between the natural sciences and the human sciences, arguing that the latter should be concerned with *verstehen* (understanding) rather than *erklären* (explanation). This commitment to *verstehen* is inherent in all interpretive research traditions, which prioritize the exploration of meaning over the establishment of causal relationships.

For those undertaking quantitative research in business and management, epistemology and ontology will often not be given any detailed or overt consideration. This is because such research often (tacitly) assumes that the phenomena under investigation exist independently, can be objectively observed from a neutral stance and can be accurately measured. Management and organizational research has often been characterized as being underpinned by *positivism* (Duberley et al., 2012). The positivist approach suggests the goal of research is to provide objective knowledge, and to develop general laws or principles to explain phenomena. However, although

mainstream quantitative research is still often described as positivist, it is probably more accurate nowadays to describe it as *post-positivist*. *Post-positivism*, a term associated with the philosophy of Karl Popper (1902-1994), is an approach that advocates the principles of *hypothetico-deductivism* (we should come up with formal theories about the world which we can test) and *falsification* (we should then seek to disprove or falsify these theories or hypotheses).

Positivist and post-positivist approaches can be said to be taking a *realist* position in both epistemological and ontological terms. A realist approach subscribes to the view that there is a real-world or objective reality 'out there' that exists independently of us, and that we can have some kind of access to further knowledge about this world using appropriate methods and techniques. As we discuss below, there is variation among realist approaches in how they view such access to independent reality. An alternative to realism is a *relativist* stance. From this position, knowledge and reality are always open to a range of interpretations, relative to our historical, cultural and social contexts. Notions of 'real' and 'true' are rather different from this perspective. For example, some researchers take the view that it is impossible to neutrally observe the social world because we are inevitably influencing what we see through the act of observation. Equally, our interpretations cannot be entirely detached from our own position in the world and our methodological choices. From this standpoint, the idea that there is objective knowledge about an independently existing world waiting to be uncovered through appropriate measurement is not supportable.

However, portraying the ontological perspectives available to researchers as either realist or relativist is a little crude - the options are really more nuanced than this simplistic distinction suggests. Similarly, qualitative and quantitative researchers need not be portrayed as necessarily diametrically opposed - what is important to point out is that they might need to take different approaches based on different understandings of what they can and what they might like to research. King and Horrocks (2010) use the example of different understandings of human behaviour to demonstrate how a topic can be explored in quite diverse ways from different perspectives. If a researcher believes that behaviour is mainly determined by genetic inheritance, their epistemological and ontological position (as well as their choice of an appropriate way to research or investigate behaviour) will be rather different from that of a researcher who assumes that people's behaviour is brought about by their interactions in social situations. *Critical realism* is an example of an alternative perspective that acknowledges the social construction of reality, but retains a core element of ontological realism, arguing that there are realities which exist independent of human activity. From this perspective, for example, while structures outside an individual's control (e.g. biological, social or economic) may not directly determine behaviour, they are nonetheless recognized as having important influences in understanding experience.

IDENTIFYING A PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION IN STUDIES USING TEMPLATE ANALYSIS

So, we have seen how the choice of a method of data analysis for a piece of qualitative research needs to be guided by its methodological position and the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. As we discussed in Chapter 1, there are some qualitative data analysis methods which are directly linked to particular methodologies (for example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which is, as the name suggests, linked to a phenomenological approach; Discourse Analysis methods with social constructionist approaches - these positions will be explained more fully shortly). Template Analysis, in contrast, is not a distinct methodology but rather a style of analysis, and can therefore be used in qualitative research from a range of philosophical positions. This ability to use Template Analysis flexibly within different philosophical approaches may be seen as an advantage of the method. However, with a generic method like Template Analysis, the onus is on those utilizing it to be explicit and upfront about the position they are adopting in their work. Writers on qualitative methods have suggested a variety of ways of distinguishing the different philosophical positions taken within the field. For example, Reicher (2000) divides qualitative methods into 'experiential' and 'discursive' approaches. Madill et al. (2000) classify methods as 'realist', 'contextual constructionist' and 'radical constructionist', while also recognizing there are important distinctions within these broad positions. The emphasis in these classifications is on epistemology - what claims different methods make as to what our data enable us to know about the world. This question does tend to be at the forefront of researcher's minds when thinking about how they plan to use Template Analysis, but we would argue that it is important not to neglect ontological considerations - what claims you want to make about the nature of reality. Sometimes, methodological approaches that on the face of it have rather similar epistemological positions differ with regard to ontology, with significant consequences for aspects of research practice. We will describe below four different philosophical positions within which Template Analysis may be used: *qualitative neo-positivist*, *limited realist*, *contextualist* and *radical constructionist*. We will highlight how the epistemological and ontological claims of these positions impact on good practice in the use of Template Analysis. Table 2.1 summarizes the distinctive features of each of these four positions, and their main implications for Template Analysis.

Qualitative neo-positivism

We borrow this term from Duberley et al. (2012), to refer to qualitative research which is undertaken from a realist position not unlike the conventional positivistic stance taken in mainstream quantitative research. Work in this tradition is sometimes referred to rather dismissively as 'naïve realist'; we prefer Duberley et al.'s term

Table 2.1 Different philosophical positions for research and their implications for the use of Template Analysis

<i>Philosophical position</i>	<i>Ontology</i>	<i>Epistemology</i>	<i>Implications for use of Template Analysis</i>
Neo-positivism	Realist	Realist	Emphasis on minimizing impact of researcher subjectivity Use of independent coders May use strong, theory-linked <i>a priori</i> themes
Limited realism	Realist	Constructivist/ Relativist	Often uses <i>a priori</i> themes informed by theory or evaluation criteria Quality checks to stimulate critical thinking, specific to needs of particular study Reflexivity in analysis important, to go beyond researcher subjectivity
Contextualism	Relativist (or indeterminate)	Constructivist/ Relativist	Loose, highly tentative use of <i>a priori</i> themes (if at all) Reflexivity: researcher subjectivity integral to whole process
Radical constructionism	Relativist	Strongly relativist	Scepticism about any quality criteria in analysis Focus on themes as aspects of discursive construction rather than of direct experience

because it allows that researchers may have a clear rationale for adopting such an approach, rather than simply exhibiting naïvety. We distinguish it from the more limited forms of realism that are variously labelled ‘critical realism’, ‘subtle realism’ and ‘perspectival realism’ among other terms. These are covered in the next section.

Research adopting a qualitative neo-positivist position takes the view that individuals are part of an observable and knowable world, and that there is a relatively unproblematic relationship between our view of the world, and the real, material world ‘out there’. It assumes that research participants’ accounts directly represent this reality, and that as researchers we can take steps to remove subjective bias from our investigations. This position is thus strongly realist in both its ontology (beliefs about the nature of reality) and epistemology (beliefs regarding what we can know about reality). Researchers may decide to take such a position where their research is strongly tied to existing theory, including in mixed methods studies where it offers the advantage of philosophical congruity between the quantitative and qualitative arms of a project (e.g. Hughes et al., 2010).

If using Template Analysis from a qualitative neo-positive position, you will need to show a concern for minimizing the impact of researcher subjectivity. Using independent coders would be recommended; these could be fellow student researchers or experts in

your methodology and/or topic area. (We discuss details of these kinds of quality check in Chapter 3.) This is the only one of our four philosophical positions in which the use of statistical inter-rater reliability calculations might be justifiable and useful – though not compulsory. In addition to these implications for quality checks, using Template Analysis from this perspective would necessitate a clear, consistent use of the steps in the analysis process, with less scope for adaptation and flexibility than other positions. This is because you would need to demonstrate consistency in procedures for the whole of your data to enhance claims for objectivity. Finally, you are likely to choose a neo-positive approach to Template Analysis if you want to work within a strong existing theoretical framework, so you would be likely to use well-defined, theoretically driven *a priori* themes in your analysis. Maznevski and Chudoba (2000), for instance, used *a priori* themes informed by Adaptive Structuration Theory in a mixed methods study of global virtual team dynamics.

Limited realist

We use the term 'limited realism' here to refer to a range of related philosophical positions that call themselves such things as 'critical realism' (Archer et al., 1998), 'subtle realism' (Hammersley, 1992) and 'natural realism' (Putnam, 1999), among others (see Maxwell (2012) for further discussion). What all these positions have in common is a commitment to a realist ontology combined with a constructivist epistemology. Put simply, they believe the world has a reality outside of human constructions of it, but that our understanding of it is always limited by our position within it. Intangible things such as mental phenomena, social forces and culture are just as 'real' as physical phenomena, and can influence our behaviour and experience. However, in contrast to the neo-positivist position described in the previous section, limited realists hold that we cannot ever remove our subjectivity from the analytical process.

Limited realist research is often concerned with producing causal explanations of social phenomena, and seeks some degree of generalizability – albeit a more cautious and nuanced form than in neo-positivist qualitative research. It also commonly draws on and seeks to develop theory (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, while limited realist qualitative research does not claim objectivity, it also rejects the position of more relativist and constructionist positions that no interpretation of data is 'better' than any other. When analysing data, the researcher needs to question his or her assumptions and seek to develop an interpretation that is as credible as possible; reflexivity is therefore an important part of the research process.

Given that the approaches we have covered under the heading 'limited realist' include quite a varied range of positions, there cannot be a single prescription for how such research should incorporate Template Analysis. However, there are some issues that you are likely to need to consider if you are taking such an approach. Firstly, limited realist work will often seek to draw on existing theory and/or develop theory in a

specific area; the use of theoretically informed *a priori* themes is therefore quite common. An example is Shaw and Wainwright's (2007) study of Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in a healthcare IT system, which utilizes *a priori* themes derived from the existing CSF literature. Similarly, evaluation studies using a limited realist approach may well employ *a priori* themes related to evaluation criteria and/or theory underpinning the evaluation. Secondly, because limited realist studies on the one hand recognize the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher but on the other hand seek to develop understandings that are not simply a product of that subjectivity, reflexivity in the analysis process is important. Thirdly, limited realist researchers would not tend to use the kind of quality criteria employed in neo-positivist research, nor the technical checks such as the calculation of inter-rater reliability scores. Independent rating might well be used but more as a way to encourage critical thinking and reflection on unrecognized assumptions than to establish a particular interpretation as 'correct' (e.g. Dries and Pepermans, 2008). Indeed, Maxwell (2012) argues that critical realist research (using this as a broad term equivalent to our 'limited realist') should not rely on standardized quality checks based just on particular elements of methods; rather researchers need to think about threats to quality of interpretation in their particular study and consider their overall strategy for addressing these.

Contextualist

Qualitative research undertaken from a contextual position assumes that context - in historical, cultural and social terms - is integral to understanding how people experience and understand their lives. For researchers taking this position, all knowledge that can be obtained through research is always conditional and context specific. There is no single reality 'out there' which can be measured and objectively investigated. Both researcher and research participant are seen as conscious beings who are always interpreting and acting on and in the world, and all accounts that can be obtained through qualitative inquiry are therefore subjective. Notions of knowledge as being universal and value free are not sustainable from this perspective and given this, it is neither meaningful nor appropriate to try to impose or measure objectivity or reliability. However, those taking a contextual approach do understand their data as being part of a broader existence - that is, they seek to achieve some kind of grounding in participants' experiences and their social context for their results. Contextualist research may therefore be seen as taking a constructivist stance towards both ontology and epistemology. However, the form of constructivist epistemology it proposes is less strongly relativist than the radical constructionist position we describe below. The constructivist form of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), phenomenology (Langdrige, 2007), some readings of Personal Construct Psychology (Butt and Burr, 2004) and some forms of narrative analysis (McAdams, 1993) would normally be seen as occupying a contextualist position.

The specific contextualist approach within which Template Analysis is most commonly used is phenomenology. Developing from foundations in the philosophy of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (Langdridge, 2007), phenomenological research is concerned with describing and making sense of people's first-hand experiences of particular aspects of their world. It takes the view that neither researcher nor participant has direct access to 'reality', but that we can nonetheless meaningfully analyse subjective experiences of the world. A researcher using Template Analysis from this perspective would assume that experience is real to the experiencer and that we can make sense of reported experience, while avoiding claims about what 'actually' happened. Note that phenomenological research is a broad church, and some phenomenologists argue for a position that is closer to limited realism (Finlay, 2009). This highlights the fact that the divisions between the philosophical positions we outline in this chapter are blurred - this needs to be borne in mind when you are thinking through the position of your particular study.

From a contextualist stance, then, there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomena, and these interpretations will depend upon both the specific social context of the research and the position of the researcher. Researchers using Template Analysis from a contextualist stance will be likely to take a 'bottom up' approach to data analysis, using *a priori* themes cautiously, if at all. However, given that researcher subjectivity is acknowledged as integral (the researcher is seen not as a potential source of bias but as playing an active role in data generation and data analysis), *a priori* themes can be a useful way for a researcher to be explicitly upfront with regards to his or her own perspective on the research. *A priori* themes should always be seen as tentative and subject to removal if they do not work well with the data obtained - this may be particularly important to keep in mind when using Template Analysis from a contextualist stance. Template Analysis studies undertaken from this philosophical position will need to use the technique in a flexible way, considering multiple interpretations of the data, rather than one 'correct' reading.

As we have discussed, researcher subjectivity is integral to this sort of research and this is accepted and welcomed rather than seen as a source of bias. While recognizing that it is inevitable that one's own perspective is brought to research, it is argued that common cultural understandings and the empathy engendered through the recognition of a shared humanity are both important and valuable. As the researcher is recognized as active in both data generation and data analysis, one would expect to see researchers using Template Analysis from this epistemological position making an effort to communicate their own perspective - both to assist the reader in fully understanding their findings, and also to help the researcher recognize and move beyond their everyday assumptions. When using Template Analysis from a contextualist stance, one would therefore expect to see significant attention paid to researcher reflexivity. Questions that might need addressing may include, 'What was the nature of my involvement as a researcher in the research process?' and 'How did my involvement shape the outcomes of the research?' You should think about how

your own assumptions about the research topic might, for instance, influence the way you formulate your research question, or the issues you highlight in your interview topic guide. Reflexivity needs to be both personal and methodological (Finlay, 2003). Personal reflexivity means thinking about the effect of your own position on the research process; for instance, do you have strong views or expectations with regard to the research topic? Methodological reflexivity means thinking about the impact of the methodological choices you have made; for instance, using focus groups rather than individual interviews.

Reflexivity should not be seen as something to be 'dealt with' only at certain points; attention should be paid to your own role in research throughout the research process. Nonetheless, it is possible to suggest a number of ways to attend to reflexivity in contextualist work using Template Analysis. Independent coding can be used as a way to highlight or challenge your assumptions, much as we suggested in relation to a limited realist approach. You can also use an audit trail as a means of making transparent the analytical choices you make in the course of data analysis. An audit trail consists of a documentary record of the steps undertaken and decisions made in moving from the raw data to a final interpretation of that data. Keeping an audit trail forces you to be explicit about the decisions you are making and to reflect upon how they led you on a course towards your findings and conclusions. Because of the focus on iterative development of the template, it is a good idea to keep successive versions of your template, ideally with some commentary to remind you at the end of the study of the thinking behind the way you developed it. These might be incorporated within a 'research journal', where you record your thoughts and feelings about doing the analysis.

Findings produced in a piece of research using Template Analysis from a contextualist stance may be very context specific as it is acknowledged that the knowledge that can be produced in such work does not claim to be universal. From a contextualist stance, it is acknowledged that there will be multiple possible interpretations to be made of any phenomena, and these will depend upon the position of the researcher, and the specific social context of the research. Such an approach will acknowledge and focus on the multiplicity of the potential perspectives available. From a contextualist position, it is important that the research participant's perspective is reflected on and explored, just as the researcher's role should be considered through the processes to promote researcher reflexivity previously suggested.

Radical constructionist

Radical constructionist approaches share a number of similarities with the contextualist position we have just covered, and many of the points we have made in relation to using Template Analysis from a contextualist approach would therefore also be applicable here. Constructionist approaches also take the view that avoiding 'bias'

is meaningless, that knowledge is co-produced between researcher and research participant. Knowledge is also seen as being historically and culturally located. However, while contextual approaches maintain that research findings can be 'grounded' in participants' accounts, constructionism presents a challenge to the notion that there are any absolute foundations for knowledge at all. According to constructionists, 'reality' is socially and culturally produced and is constructed through language, especially in social interaction.

Radical constructionist approaches have an unambiguously relativist epistemology with a very strong emphasis on the role of language. To the extent that they concern themselves with ontology at all, radical constructionists clearly take a relativist view of it too. However, as Maxwell (2012) argues, many constructionist scholars simply see ontology and epistemology as reflections of each other; if all knowledge is constructed through language in interaction, then it follows that we cannot consider a reality that exists outside our constructions of it. The aim of research from this position is to explore how people construct versions of their world, and what resources they draw on to do so. It is often also concerned with how society limits the ways in which people may construct their world through the power of dominant discourses. Language is not seen as *representing* reality, instead language is assumed to *create* reality. Language is seen as productive and actively doing something: rather than there being one reality 'out there' which we can observe and measure, different versions of reality can be produced with different discourses.

Like the contextualist position, radical constructionism recognizes the researcher's active engagement in the production of knowledge, and the central importance of the social world(s) they inhabit. However, while the notion of objective truth is problematic for contextualism, constructivism goes further still, arguing that concepts of key importance for contextualists such as subjectivity and even the notion of knowledge itself are discursive devices or constructions. Constructivism is interested in the ways in which claims of knowledge are legitimated and how they function.

The applicability of Template Analysis to research taking a radical constructionist approach is more questionable than its application in work coming from other phenomenological positions. The approach is not suitable to use with constructionist methodologies concerned with the fine detail of how language constructs social reality in interaction, such as various types of discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Potter, 2012; Gee, 2014), as these do not use thematic forms of analysis. However, there are examples of research which can be identified as working within a constructionist epistemology where text is looked at in a broader manner (e.g. Taylor and Ussher, 2001). This type of work, concerned with patterns of discourse use rather than close analysis of interactions, could certainly consider using Template Analysis although it would be crucial to be clear that themes elicited were defined in terms of aspects of discourse rather than personal experience.

The quality criteria applied to work undertaken from within a constructionist epistemology differ greatly from those that might be appropriate for work undertaken from

a realist stance - notions of objectivity, validity and reliability are clearly unsuitable. Even alternative quality criteria such as 'credibility' and 'transferability' developed specifically for qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) are seen as constructions that serve a rhetorical function. Researcher reflexivity, as described above in relation to contextualism, is again important and relevant, for its ability to enrich an account of how particular researchers produced knowledge in a particular setting. Other quality criteria might include audience appeal (do the findings contribute to understanding, do they facilitate productive action?) and ability of the findings to explain exceptions to the general rule as well as more typical examples (Madill et al., 2000). A further potential criterion is that of 'internal coherence'. The production of a logical, coherent and persuasive account is often proffered as a credible way by which to judge the success or otherwise of qualitative research generally. However, Madill and colleagues point out that as research of this type often focuses on questioning the extent to which any text is truly coherent or consistent, it is somewhat problematic to then apply criteria of coherence or consistency to the account of the research. They suggest the alternative criterion of 'no *abhorrent* contradictions' as a pragmatic alternative.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we have:

- explained why it is important to consider your philosophical position in qualitative research generally, and when using Template Analysis specifically
- considered four particular approaches - qualitative neo-positivist, limited realist, contextualist and radical constructionist - and described their ontological and epistemological positions
- discussed some of the main implications for the use of Template Analysis within each of these approaches
- emphasized that the boundaries between these approaches are fuzzy rather than clear-cut.