



Edited by  
Margaretha Järvinen  
Nanna Mik-Meyer

# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Eight Approaches for  
the Social Sciences



# QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of editors and contributors</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<b>1 Analysing qualitative data in social science</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Margaretha Järvinen and Nanna Mik-Meyer</i>	
<b>2 Symbolic interactionism as analytical tradition</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Margaretha Järvinen</i>	
<b>3 Symbolic interactionism, stigma and othering</b>	<b>51</b>
<i>Nanna Mik-Meyer</i>	
<b>4 Phenomenology as qualitative methodology</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>Michael Gill</i>	
<b>5 Phenomenological analysis and the relationship between researcher and field</b>	<b>95</b>
<i>Anne Roelsgaard Obling</i>	
<b>6 Hermeneutics: theory and methodology</b>	<b>113</b>
<i>Nils Gilje</i>	
<b>7 Interpretation, prejudice and the hermeneutic circle</b>	<b>135</b>
<i>Søren Kristiansen</i>	
<b>8 Critical realism in theory and practice</b>	<b>155</b>
<i>Lee Martin</i>	
<b>9 Critical realism: philosophical and methodological considerations</b>	<b>173</b>
<i>Amber J. Fletcher</i>	

<b>10 Grounded theory: main characteristics</b>	<b>195</b>
<i>Kathy Charmaz</i>	
<b>11 Sampling and conceptualisation in grounded theory</b>	<b>223</b>
<i>Catherine Conlon</i>	
<b>12 Narrative analysis: an integrative approach</b>	<b>243</b>
<i>Michael Bamberg</i>	
<b>13 Narrative analysis: thematic, structural and performative</b>	<b>265</b>
<i>Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ditte Andersen</i>	
<b>14 Michel Foucault's discourse analysis</b>	<b>283</b>
<i>Kaspar Villadsen</i>	
<b>15 Critical discourse analysis</b>	<b>305</b>
<i>Teun A. van Dijk</i>	
<b>16 Actor-network theory as analytical approach</b>	<b>327</b>
<i>Lise Justesen</i>	
<b>17 Actor-network theory and qualitative interviews</b>	<b>345</b>
<i>Jakob Demant and Signe Ravn</i>	
<i>Appendix: Key concepts</i>	365
<i>Index</i>	375



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# PREFACE

Textbooks on qualitative research often contain detailed advice on how to collect data, through interviews, observations and/or documents, but less information about how to transform these data into research findings. In our own teaching, we have noticed that students are lacking a volume on how qualitative *analysis* is actually conducted. Very often, the way in which researchers carry through their analysis is the “black box” of the research process. Textbooks often discuss different analytical traditions, for instance phenomenology, hermeneutics or critical realism, but rarely show how exactly the chosen tradition affects the analysis.

This book aims to bridge the traditional gap between texts about the theory of science and texts about specific techniques of methods. It differs from other social science textbooks on qualitative research as it neither is purely theoretical nor just describes techniques of methods. It is a book about methodologies rather than methods, with all chapters combining a description of an analytic tradition with concrete examples of empirical research. Rather than describing how to conduct an analysis, the authors show the reader how an analysis can be carried through. The book is written for MA and PhD students but can also be used for specialised undergraduate courses.

Some of the chapters in the book are revised versions of contributions to a Danish book (*Kvalitativ analyse – syv traditioner*, ed. M. Järvinen and N. Mik-Meyer) published in 2017. We want to thank Hans Reitzels Forlag in Copenhagen for allowing us to use these chapters in a revised form, and editors Martin Laurberg and Marie Bruvik Heinskou for helping us with copyright and other administrative issues. Tam Mc Turk from Citadel Translations has translated Chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 13, 16 and 17 in collaboration with the authors and editors.

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# 1

## ANALYSING QUALITATIVE DATA IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Margaretha Järvinen and Nanna Mik-Meyer

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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What is qualitative research?	2
On the development of qualitative analyses	5
The process of qualitative analysis	7
Epistemological issues in qualitative research	8
Types of interviews, observations and document analysis	11
• Individual interviews	11
• Focus group interviews	12
• Go-along interviews	13
• Online interviews	14
• Participant observations	14
• Observation through recording	15
• Online observations	16
• Documents	17
The chapters	18
Key concepts	22
Further reading	23
References	23

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This book describes a range of analytical traditions in qualitative research. The aim is not to suggest that certain traditions are more useful or “correct” than others, but to show the diversity of approaches to analyses in qualitative studies. As such, we place ourselves firmly in the tradition of Erving Goffman’s (1967: 11) call for researchers to analyse social reality on the basis of different perspectives, rather than to apply a one-size-fits-all model: “Better, perhaps, different coats to clothe the children well than a single splendid tent in which they all shiver”, as Goffman so appealingly wrote.

The book presents chapters on symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical realism, grounded theory, narrative analysis, discourse analysis and actor-network theory. The list is not exhaustive, and other traditions could have been included. However, we have chosen these eight traditions because they are common in social science research today and because they constitute relatively coherent and recognisable units of qualitative work. The book describes *analytical* approaches in qualitative studies and focuses on methodology rather than method; that is, specific research techniques and tools. The choice of analytical approach is partly informed by how we understand the object of our study, how we look at the knowledge generated by our research, what we focus on in the analysis and how, in practical terms, we conduct analyses. The focus varies from chapter to chapter. For example, for some contributors the emphasis is on how we understand the object of our study, while others are more concerned with how qualitative data are analysed in practice. However, none of the chapters is purely theoretical or just describes techniques or methods. Rather, the idea is to bridge the traditional gap between texts about the theory of science and texts about specific research techniques.

This introductory chapter consists of six parts. The first describes the hallmarks of qualitative research, as viewed across analytical traditions. The second provides a brief historical insight into qualitative social science research, in particular how the literature on methods and methodologies has increasingly turned its attention to *how precisely* the analysis of qualitative data is conducted. The third part describes the various steps usually included in qualitative analyses, while the fourth part discusses epistemological issues. In the fifth part, we present different forms of interviews, observations and document analyses. Finally, we introduce the chapters of the book.

## What is qualitative research?

Qualitative research has been defined in many different ways (Silverman, 1993, 2013a; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, to mention a few classic contributions).

Definitions vary, but the following five characteristics are among those that most qualitative researchers seem to agree on.

Firstly, the purpose of qualitative research – and interviews in particular – is to analyse *meanings* and *interpretations*. Qualitative researchers often want to see reality “from the perspective of the person studied” and therefore try to understand the meaning of the phenomena studied for those involved. Thus, the reality into which we, as social scientists, seek insight has already been interpreted by the research participants. However, qualitative analysis is not a one-to-one description of the perspectives of the people we study, but analytical interpretations of their perspectives. Qualitative researchers study how meaning is generated, negotiated, maintained, or altered in specific social contexts.

Secondly, qualitative research works with *process* as much as content. Qualitative research is not just about showing that individuals or groups have specific features or act in certain ways, but also about analysing how these characteristics and actions are shaped and how they play a part in people’s lives. Qualitative research looks at processes, not necessarily as stages of development or as causal relationships over time, but as mutual interaction mechanisms between people and their (social and physical) surroundings. This means that qualitative studies are often based on *how* and *what* questions rather than *why* questions.

Thirdly, qualitative research focuses on the *context* of the phenomena studied. The purpose of qualitative studies is not to isolate a phenomenon from its background or to identify the context’s influence and then generalise across contexts (as is often the case in quantitative research). On the contrary, the purpose is to see the phenomenon studied as rooted in – and made possible by – a specific spatial, temporal and social context.

A fourth feature of qualitative research is that it has traditionally defined itself as inductive rather than deductive; that is, it develops understandings, concepts and potential theories based on empirical data, rather than collating data to test *a priori* hypotheses or models. However, qualitative traditions vary in terms of when in the process theory comes into the picture. In some classic variants of phenomenological research and in more traditional versions of grounded theory, the researcher ideally seeks to approach the field more or less without preconceptions. In these studies, theory is not incorporated into the research process until later. The researcher builds concepts and/or develops new theory based on the empirical data of the research. Other traditions incorporate theory at an earlier stage, for instance when formulating research questions and/or during data acquisition.

Many qualitative researchers work abductively. The concept of abduction stems from Charles S. Peirce who used it to describe the researcher’s quest for theories that might help explain surprising findings in empirical data. Today, the term is often used as a general description of an analytical approach that alternates

between data-driven interpretations, and the use and development of concepts that have their roots in theory. The analysis unfolds as a dialogue between theories and data, such that the data influence the researcher's choice of theory, while theory helps the researcher interpret and put the findings, deriving from data analysis, into perspective. The abductive approach is sometimes perceived as a buffer against purely descriptive analyses. Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson (1996: 155) put it this way: "Our important ideas are not 'in' the data, and however hard we work, we will not find those ideas simply by scrutinizing our data even more obsessively. We need to work at analysis and theorizing." Nevertheless, it is largely accepted in qualitative research that analyses should not be *too* guided by theories and concepts. Rather, social scientists must deploy their theoretical knowledge in a subtle and flexible manner: "Theoretical knowledge and pre-conceptions serve as heuristic tools for the construction of concepts which are elaborated and modified on the basis of empirical data" (Kelle, 1995: 34).

Finally, Herbert Blumer's (1970/1953) idea of "sensitizing concepts" has proven useful in qualitative research. The opposite of sensitising concepts is "definitive concepts" which "refer precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributed or fixed benchmarks" (Blumer, 1970/1953: 58; Blumer, 1986). Sensitising concepts are fruitful orientation tools and serve as a source of inspiration for researchers' analyses: "Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look" (Blumer, 1970/1953: 58). Blumer therefore recommends that researchers move away from abstract concepts and theories to the specific peculiarity of the phenomenon being explored, so as not to erroneously incorporate that which is being explored into a predetermined abstract framework. The goal is to avoid the concepts ending up as fixed templates or as instruments to tame empirical occurrences (Blumer, 1986/1969: 151). When researchers' analyses are too theory-driven, the understanding of the phenomenon studied becomes too solidified, meaning that a more sensitive and nuanced perception of the phenomena researched is difficult to obtain.

Goffman is one of the principal representatives of the development of sensitising concepts. He uses concepts in such a way that readers are able to recognise the phenomena described, even if they were previously unable to name them (see, for example, the concepts of "face-work", "impression management", or "spoiled identities"). As Howard Becker (2003: 663) writes about Goffman's concepts: "Most of us know immediately what he means and are grateful to finally put names to things." Goffman's concept-analysis approach is not an unnecessary abstraction – that is, applying complex, alien terms to things that already have functioning names – but utilises empirically grounded interpretation as a means of evolving theory.



## On the development of qualitative analyses

The history of qualitative research in sociology and related disciplines is a history of a steadily stronger systematisation both in regard to data-acquisition methods and – much later and still relatively undeveloped – to the actual analytical work conducted by the researcher. For many decades, qualitative research was conducted without textbooks and with little reflection on methods in published works. The classics of qualitative sociology appeared largely unconcerned with method. For example, Nels Anderson's book *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) is based on extensive fieldwork, but many years later (in 1975) Anderson revealed that he had known very little about qualitative methods when he conducted his research. The study is often cited as an example of participant observation, but Anderson (whose own father was a "hobo") wrote that he was not aware of this concept at the time, nor did he associate this method with his research: "I did not descend into the pit, assume a role there, and later ascend to brush off the dust. ... The role was familiar before the research began" (Anderson, 1975/1923: xiii). William Foote Whyte, author of *Street Corner Society* (1993/1943), who has been cited in classroom teaching about qualitative methods over the decades, was not particularly focused on method either. His book contains an appendix in which he reflects a little on participant observation and the use of informants, and adds a few sentences about whether it is more sensible to place empirical data in (physical) folders sorted by themes, or by groups of participants. Goffman is a third example of an influential, qualitative sociologist who never wrote about method. The primary description of method in Goffman's work is the recording of his conference presentation *On Fieldwork*, from 1974, which was published after his death (Goffman, 1989).

What these key figures in qualitative sociology have in common is that they have published few reflections on method, and virtually none on the work of analysis. To the extent that they write about method, they focus predominantly on data acquisition, as was the norm in qualitative research at the time and is still the norm in some of the more recent literature on qualitative methods.

However, the qualitative traditions presented in this book differ in terms of their focus on analysis. At one end of the spectrum is grounded theory, a tradition in which researchers have always described the analytical component of the research process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, grounded theory was developed as one of the first general methodologies for systematic data acquisition *and* analysis. The whole purpose of this systematisation was to make qualitative research more transparent and credible. At the other end of the spectrum, we find phenomenology and researchers who are outright opponents of too systematic an approach to the research process. Ernest Keen (1975: 41) writes, for example: "unlike other

methodologies, phenomenology cannot be reduced to a 'cookbook' set of instructions. It is more an approach, an attitude, an investigative posture with a certain set of goals."

The qualitative methods literature exploded in the 1970s and 1980s with a number of important publications, such as James P. Spradley's book about the ethnographic interview (1979) and Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson's classic account of ethnographic fieldwork (1995/1983). Unlike most other books of that time, these two textbooks deal with the acquisition of qualitative research materials – that is, detailed descriptions of fieldwork and the conducting of qualitative interviews – and suggest how data might be analysed. In most other books, such as Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan's well-known *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* (1984), the 'how to do analysis' part is marginal. Taylor and Bogdan characterise qualitative research as a craft and a practice that is more difficult to standardise than other (i.e. quantitative) approaches to research: "The methods serve the researcher; never is the researcher a slave to procedure and technique" (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984: 8).

During the 1990s, textbooks about methods began to show a stronger interest in how to conduct qualitative analyses. In this period researchers described qualitative research as consisting of several different approaches and, therefore, also of different analytical practices (see, for example, Silverman, 1993, 2013a; Seale et al., 2004).

Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (1994) pick up on the different approaches, or "moments", in the history of qualitative sociology and anthropology as follows: They refer to the years from the beginning of the 1900s to the 1940s as the "traditional" period, during which ethnographers presented "objectivist" descriptions of distant cultures and realities (e.g. Malinowsky, 1944). The second period (the 1950s and 1960s), which Denzin and Lincoln describe as "the modernist or golden age", is characterised by initial attempts to highlight and systematise the principles of qualitative research, primarily the principles for data acquisition and to a lesser degree for analytical work (with a few exceptions – see Becker, 1958; Becker et al., 1961; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Denzin and Lincoln describe the third period (the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s) as "blurred genres", and the fourth (from the mid-1980s onwards) as "the crisis of representation". The period of blurred genres is characterised by many different qualitative research traditions evolving in parallel (e.g. ethno-methodology, biographical research, narrative analysis, case studies and different variants of grounded theory), while the "crisis of representation" refers to the influence of post-structuralism and constructivism on qualitative research. In post-structuralism and constructivism, language and communication are defined as tools that create social reality, and not (only) as reflections of reality. Social reality is seen as shaped by interaction and characterised

by multiple truths dependent on the perspectives of the researcher and the participant. Max Weber's principle of *Verstehen* (understanding) – a keyword in qualitative studies – thus gains new meaning: “*Verstehen* is less like a process of getting inside the actor's head than it is a matter of grasping intersubjective meanings and symbolizing activities that are constitutive of social life” (Schwandt, 1994: 120; italics in original).

## The process of qualitative analysis

Qualitative analyses are conducted in many different ways. However, across different analytical traditions one will usually find the following elements: categorisation of data, narrowing down of data and presentation of data sequences in a research report (see Maxwell and Reybold, 2015).

Firstly, qualitative analysis involves a categorisation practice that is more or less rigid and systematic. To create order in empirical data stemming from interviews, observations or documents, the researcher has to categorise data into smaller units which are subsequently assigned names/labels/tags. This categorisation can take the form of a thematic reading of the empirical data, based on the researcher's presuppositions of the empirical field, or be based on the theoretical concepts chosen by the researcher (for the latter approach, see, for example, Jackson and Mazzei, 2012). Categorisation can also take the form of a coding process that specifically emerges from what the research participants say, or from an interpretation of the documents included in the research project (e.g. Charmaz, 1983). Furthermore, categorisation practice may involve identifying certain narratives, and their structure and relationship to specific contexts (e.g. narrative analyses). Data may also be processed and categorised according to specific empirical or historical themes, a specific political problem (e.g. discourse analyses), or in a network analysis of how certain actors relate to each other (e.g. analyses inspired by actor-network theory).

Secondly, the common denominator for all analytical approaches is that they involve data condensation or some other kind of analytical narrowing down of empirical materials. Most qualitative studies generate far more data than it would be possible to publish in a book, article or assignment, which makes reducing the amount of data an inevitable part of the research process. In the grounded theory tradition, data reduction – that is, moving from “initial codes” (applying to all parts of the empirical data) to “focused codes” (used to interpret the initial codes) is described as “zooming”. Zooming is about identifying and developing analytical categories and can be the first step towards the actual development of concepts and theory, which is an important aim in grounded theory.

A third element of qualitative analysis is to present empirical data; that is, to set forth “an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing” (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 429). Researchers must present significant sequences of interview quotes, observation notes or documents to enable the reader to see how they have arrived at their findings. In this process, it is important to reflect on how to select quotes and other empirical excerpts. Criteria mentioned in the literature on methods include that the selected interview quotes, observations, or excerpts from documents must provide a reliable picture of all the data (e.g. extremely rare statements and observations must not be presented as typical). The quotes should show variation and nuances, and be concise and saturated with meaning (Emerson et al., 1995). They should not be selected because they are particularly entertaining or dramatic, but because they illustrate key analytical findings that emerge once all of the research material (or relevant parts thereof) has been taken into account (Pratt, 2008). In other words, the passages selected should function as building blocks for the argumentation.

There is always a risk of focusing on interview quotes, observations or document passages that confirm your theoretical or empirical expectations, while ignoring those parts of the data that do not – also known as “deviant cases” (see Seale and Silverman, 1997). The purpose of including deviations in the analysis is to examine systematically whether the variation leads to new understandings of the provisional analysis and to any subtle differences. Of course, there are a number of quality criteria, other than the use of deviant cases, playing an important role in qualitative research, for example coherence, consistency, accuracy, transparency and reflection (Kirk and Miller, 1986; Kvale, 1989; Maxwell, 2002; Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012).

## Epistemological issues in qualitative research

As the chapters in this book will show, data are approached differently within different analytical traditions. There is a dividing line – partly between the traditions and partly cross-cutting them – between epistemological stances inspired by realism, and epistemological stances inspired by constructivism. The following sections discuss this dividing line, also showing how it has been addressed in the qualitative methods literature.

One of the first to classify qualitative approaches along these lines was David Silverman (1993) – for later revisions of these classifications see Silverman (2013a). Focusing on interviews, he put forward two questions, one concerning the relationship between interviewees’ accounts and the world they refer to, the other concerning the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. He then

described how researchers representing two different approaches – positivism and interactionism – respond to these questions (Silverman, 1993). Researchers working within a *positivist paradigm* regard interview data as representing facts about the world. In this paradigm data are supposed to be collected in a way that guarantees independence of the researcher and the research setting. Positivist researchers may distinguish between factual information (about individuals, organisations or communities) and interviewees' attitudes, motives and feelings. However, in both cases – facts and subjective accounts – the goal is to achieve as truthful a picture of reality as possible. In contrast, researchers working within an *interactionist paradigm* stress that interview data can only be interpreted by taking into account the context within which they are produced (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995/1983). Instead of treating interview data as (true or false) reports on reality, interactionists see them as displays of perspectives and as representing not only individual experiences but also social and cultural conventions (Silverman, 1993, 2013a).

Another example of how epistemological approaches to interviews, observations and documents can be classified comes from Lise Justesen and Nanna Mik-Meyer (2012). Justesen and Mik-Meyer differentiate between realist, phenomenological and constructionist stances in qualitative research. Seen from a *realist* perspective, reality exists “out there” independent of our knowledge of it, and the goal of the researcher is to describe the studied phenomena as accurately and neutrally as possible. In *phenomenology*, the researcher emphasises the subjective experiences and actions of individuals and the meaning these individuals attach to their own, and others', experiences/actions. In the version of phenomenology described by Justesen and Mik-Meyer (2012), empathy on the part of the researcher is key. Finally, a *constructivist* stance implies that researchers focus on the processual, complex and ambiguous nature of the phenomena they study. The aim of Justesen and Mik-Meyer's classification is to highlight that the choice of epistemological approach may affect all parts of a research process: from design, research questions and data, to data analysis.

A final example of how epistemological approaches to qualitative research data (here interviews) have been classified is Mats Alvesson's (2011) distinction between neo-positivism, romanticism and localism. Alvesson uses the term *neo-positivism* in order to signal that few researchers today follow the strict demands of traditional positivism. Neo-positivist guidelines for interviews suggest that interviewers should follow a standard schedule and avoid becoming involved in the interviewees' reports. Somewhat unusually, Alvesson presents interactionism as a form of revised neo-positivism – this in contrast to Silverman (1993) above who treated positivism and interactionism as contrasting approaches. Alvesson's argument is that interactionists strive for a deeper understanding of participants'

meanings, and for an active dialogue between interviewers and interviewees in order to achieve reflections of the interviewees' experiences that are as *accurate* as possible. Alvesson's second epistemological approach, *romanticism*, aims at an even closer relationship between the two parties in the interview. Personal engagement and identification are seen as central to revealing the interviewee's authentic inner world, and loosely structured interviews are recommended in order to facilitate rich and trustworthy accounts (Alvesson, 2011: 13 ff.). The third epistemological stance, *localism*, regards interviews as situated accomplishments drawing upon cultural resources, (often) with participants occupying asymmetrical positions in terms of power. In a localist perspective, interviews are social micro-orders, acted out through role-playing and impression management on the part of both interviewers and interviewees (Dingwall, 1997, Alvesson, 2011: 19).

As can be seen from these three examples, epistemological approaches to qualitative analysis can be categorised in many different ways. Common to most classifications – the ones we have presented here as well as others – is a spectrum with positivism or realism at one end and constructivism at the other. However, the similarity seems to end here. Interactionism is, as already mentioned, sometimes classified as a form of “neo-positivism” and sometimes as constructivism. Hermeneutics is described by some scholars as standing in opposition to constructivism, and by others as being closely related to it. Phenomenology in turn is difficult to place on this scale. In some cases, phenomenological research is presented as realist; in others phenomenology is seen as constituting a stance of its own (Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012) or as closely related to “romanticism” (Dingwall, 1997; Alvesson, 2011) or ‘emotionalism’/‘naturalism’ (Silverman, 2013a).

One reason for this variation is that few analytic traditions can be placed as either entirely realist or constructivist. As we will show in this book, many traditions contain elements of both epistemologies, and variations over time and over research themes in how much one or the other epistemology dominates. Chapter 2 on symbolic interactionism, for instance, traces a development from a pragmatist stance (Mead) to a constructivist stance within research on social “deviance” and social problems. In a similar vein, Chapter 10, introducing grounded theory, depicts a movement from realist/pragmatist beginnings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) towards grounded theory studies inspired by constructivism. Also Chapter 4 on phenomenology shows how this tradition contains many different strands, ranging from approaches (inspired by Husserl) where the researcher strives for neutrality by bracketing his/her presuppositions, to approaches (inspired by Heidegger and others) denying the possibility of a fully detached researcher.

## Types of interviews, observations and document analysis

### Individual interviews

Interviews come in many different forms, with individual face-to-face interviews being the most common. Qualitative interviews have been used in the social sciences since the early twentieth century but were only much later systematised into a research method (see Gubrium and Holstein, 2001, for a detailed description of different types of interviews). Interviews are typically divided into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured or open interviews. Structured interviews are based on standardised questions used in the same way and order with all participants, with the goal of comparing and often quantifying the answers. In unstructured interviews, the researcher enters the interview without an explicit interview guide, encouraging the interviewee to relate experiences and conceptions of the study's topic, and generating clarifying questions based on this narrative. Combining elements from these two approaches, semi-structured interviews are the most widespread form of qualitative interviewing. In semi-structured interviews the researcher uses a predetermined set of open questions (or at least research themes), but allows the interview to develop in directions inspired by the participants' accounts and varying from interview to interview. There is no clear dividing line between semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and as we have indicated above, the degree of structure and openness also depends on the epistemological stance taken by the researcher.

Some researchers distinguish between receptive and assertive interviews (Wengraf, 2001; Brinkmann, 2014). Receptive or empathetic interviewing has traditionally been the golden rule in qualitative research. For methodological as well as ethical reasons, interviewers have been preoccupied with supporting the interviewees in their narratives, signalling sympathy and understanding for what research participants have to say, and avoiding confrontational questions and remarks. In contrast to receptive interviewing stands assertive interviewing (Wengraf, 2001; Brinkmann, 2014). Instead of merely listening to and accepting the interviewees' accounts, assertive interviewers seek to develop the depth and quality of the interviews by engaging in an active dialogue. Assertive interviewers may point out contradictions in the interviewees' answers, they may probe into gaps in the interview accounts, and in other ways try to inspire self-reflexivity on the part of the interviewee. In this form of interviewing the aim is not just to map participants' understandings but also to discuss these understandings with the interviewees and look at the reasoning (and legitimations) they are embedded in (Wengraf, 2001; Brinkmann, 2014).

Furthermore, a distinction is sometimes made between interviews focusing on (and striving to produce) coherence in personal accounts and interviews looking



at ambivalence, contradictions and change. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) criticised traditional qualitative interviews, and especially life history interviews, for forcing the chaos of lived life into a straightforward, one-dimensional logic. In life history interviews, the events of an interviewee's life are organised into internally consistent, reciprocally meaningful units seen as functional parts of a greater whole (see Järvinen, 2000). In this tradition, interviews containing contradictions and inconsistencies are regarded as failed, either because the interviewee was not able or willing to tell his/her story correctly or because the interviewer was not professional enough to ask clarifying questions. In contrast to this, other researchers treat lack of coherence in interviews not as a problem, but as representing the conditions of human experience and storytelling in general (Järvinen, 2000). Thus, individual stories are seen as containing multiple perspectives, logics and codes (Frank, 2010, 2012). Interview accounts are always subjective as well as social/cultural, reflecting prevailing standards for storytelling, conceptions of right and wrong in a community, identity work during the interviews, and so on (Frank, 2010: 53 ff.). Because most interviews contain ambivalence and inconsistency, the goal of the researcher is to investigate this and not to overdo the tidying up and streamlining of data.

### Focus group interviews

Another much-used method in qualitative research is focus group interviews, first described and systematised by Robert K. Merton and Patricia L. Kendall (1946). Focus group interviews originated from group interviews where a large number of participants were gathered and answered questions individually (originally by pushing "yes" or "no" buttons). However, Merton and his co-workers saw the strength of focus group interviews as lying not necessarily in the contributions of individual participants but in the dynamics of group interaction. In this perspective, the role of the interviewer (or moderator, as s/he is called in focus groups) is to facilitate discussions *between* participants about topics chosen by the researcher, hence the term "focus". Focus group interviews have elements in common with both individual interviews and observations, given that the researcher receives data from what the group says, as well as from how participants relate to each other, in terms of group hierarchies, turns of speech, handling of disagreements, and so on (Demant and Järvinen, 2006; Halkier, 2010; Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012).

Discussions among focus group researchers concern several topics, epistemological as well as more technical (see Morgan, 1997; Barbour, 2007; Halkier, 2010). One of them is the question of which research themes it is appropriate and productive to investigate with this method. A classic standpoint is that "sensitive"

and “private” issues should not be discussed in focus groups, because this could cause embarrassment, confidentiality problems, and challenge the truthfulness of the individual accounts. An alternative standpoint is that there is no easy way to distinguish between sensitive and non-sensitive topics, that moral standards for the private–public distinction have changed, and that no areas of human life should (*a priori*) be banned from focus group discussions.

Another question concerns the relationship between individual opinions and collectively produced opinions. One consideration is that focus groups, like all forms of group interaction, are dominated by particular participants and that the voices of less assertive individuals are often ignored and silenced. Thus, the knowledge produced in focus group interviews is a reflection of a few members’ opinions rather than a genuine collective product. Another experience from focus groups is that the discussions may lead to a polarisation of opinions, meaning that subgroups of participants (or individuals), due to disagreements, sharpen their stance on the matters discussed to such a degree that opinions become oversimplified and superficial. If this happens, the knowledge produced during the interview may be more useful for analyses of disputes, power plays, face-work, and so on, than for analyses of the subject matter discussed.

### Go-along interviews

A third form of interviews that have become increasingly popular in the last 10–15 years are go-along interviews or mobile interviews, sometimes divided into walk-along interviews (on foot) and ride-along interviews (on wheels). Like focus groups, go-along interviews are a hybrid between interviewing and observation. In contrast to sit-down interviews, go-along interviews allow the researcher to relate participants’ verbal accounts to their practices in concrete contexts, chosen by the interviewee or the interviewer. Compared to observations, go-along interviews offer a continuous and systematic access to participants’ streams of experiences as they interact with their social and physical environments. As Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 463) puts it, go-along interviews are a “more outcome-oriented version of hanging out”, one that allows the researcher to observe the participants’ spatial practices *in situ* while continuously discussing their experiences with them. Go-along interviews have been described as creating a more equal relationship between researcher and participant than traditional interviews. This is so because go-along interviews are often conducted in the participants’ home territory and because the topics of conversation may be initiated by the interviewee as well as the interviewer (Kusenbach, 2003; Brown and Durrheim, 2009; Büscher and Urry, 2009).

## Online interviews

A relatively new and continuously developing group of qualitative methods is interviewing via Skype, email, or various forms of chat functions. One strength of online interviews is that researchers can reach participants, nationally as well as internationally, who may otherwise be inaccessible or very time- and cost-intensive to include. Online interviewing can be used with participants for whom anonymity and discretion are imperative (e.g. people involved in criminal or other morally condemned activities). Some researchers claim that the distance between interviewers and interviewees, as compared to face-to-face interviews, makes it easier for participants in general to talk about sensitive or embarrassing issues (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Other researchers argue that it is difficult to build rapport and produce rich data without the interviewers actually meeting the interviewees (for general discussions on this, see, for example, Bryman, 2008; Murthy, 2008; Salmons, 2015; Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2018). There is of course a difference between video-supported interviews, such as Skype, and text-based interviews via email or chatrooms. In Skype interviews, participants can see each other *in real time* – although the question of how the screen changes the participants' perception of each other is largely unanswered. Email interviews, on the other hand, are text-based only and asynchronous. This may cause challenges for researchers: the time lag between participants' messages, their questions and answers, disrupts the flow of conversation and makes it easier for interviewees to drop out (without the interviewer knowing the reason for this). On the other hand, email interviews may be seen as offering participants more room for reflection, including considerations of whether they want to answer questions or not – hence making the interviewees and interviewers more equal than they are in traditional interview situations (for discussions on this, see Salmons, 2015; Schiek and Ullrich, 2017; Sloan and Quan-Haase, 2018).

## Participant observations

Data collection through observations includes a number of different approaches, ranging from using an ethnographic method of “direct observation” (Gobo, 2011: 15) or participating while observing in a field, to turning on an audio or video recorder in the setting that the researcher wants to study, or observing people's actions online. The classic variant of observation is the ethnographic approach where the researcher conducts direct observations of people's actions. This approach has its roots in Western colonial history where researchers travelled to distant cultures and – with a more or less active role in the field (Adler and Adler, 1987) – observed the everyday life of people. A famous, early example is the

anthropological study by Bronisław Malinowski on social life in the Trobriand Islands, conducted from 1914 to 1918. However, sociologists soon included observations in their discipline as well. For instance, the sociologists William Thomas and Robert A. Park made their students conduct fieldwork among criminals, homeless people and other minority groups to get an insider view of life on the margins of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s (see Chapter 2 about Chicago School sociology).

In the research literature, one usually distinguishes between observations and participant observations; that is, between merely observing people and observing while participating in their social life (Adler and Adler, 1987). Taking on the observing outsider role can prove difficult, as the researchers' presence – contrary to their wish of passing unnoticed – may often be quite visible for the people observed. In most studies, researchers end up interacting with the participants, in order to get access to an insider view of their social life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995/1983).

Most often, the goal of observation studies is to produce a qualified perception of practice; that is, to study what people do. Observing people's practice allows the researcher to focus not just on the way participants talk about their social life in interviews, but also on their actual social interactions, and the way their social life is organised. Observations make it possible to analyse the positioning of the participants, their social identities and strategies, the standards and procedures affecting their social life, and so forth. It is the "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1966) of participants that is made accessible through observations. When observing practice, the researcher can spot things that are so taken for granted by participants that they may not reflect upon them in interviews. Hence, observation is a method that enables the researcher to analyse how complex institutional contexts – which may be unspoken in interviews – affect people's social life. Not all researchers can set time aside to conduct long-term fieldwork as in the classic anthropological and sociological studies. However, one or two weeks of observations will also add valuable knowledge to a research project if the goal is to examine what people do – and not just what they *say* they do. In those cases, most researchers will conduct their observations in a more focused and structured manner, following certain themes.

### Observation through recording

Observations also include audio and video recordings of social life. Video recording is a more and more commonly used data-acquisition tool, as it enables the researcher to investigate the micro-dynamics of human – verbal and non-verbal – interactions (Heath and Luff, 2012; Mik-Meyer, 2019). Hubert Knoblauch (2012: 253) proposes the term "videography" to make the point that video

recording people's actions is an interpretive method, often inspired by hermeneutics (see Chapters 6 and 7 in this volume). In videography, recordings are not seen as objective reflections of people's practices. It is the researcher who selects which parts of social life will be recorded, and it is the researcher who picks the sequences of action and interaction that will be analysed in detail. In addition, participants will be affected by the camera recording their actions, and hence demonstrate "recording-appropriate or -inappropriate conduct", as Spencer Hazel (2016: 446) puts it. Hazel uses the concept of "the observer's paradox" (Labov, 1984) to describe how people being observed – and knowing they are being observed – are influenced/changed by the research process. Furthermore, researchers are interpretive human beings. As in the previous discussion on interviews, audio and/or video recordings and notes taken by the observing researcher are data that have been affected by the study design and interests of the researcher. Even if recordings of naturally happening actions may seem neutral ("just observing and noting what people do") – observation data are the results of a particular research process, orchestrated by the researcher.

### Online observations

Over the last two decades, another approach has developed: namely, to observe the social world digitally, for example via social networking sites and blogs. Qualitative researchers conduct "online ethnography" (Hine, 2000; Leander and McKim, 2010; Tuncalp and Le, 2014), "virtual ethnography" (Steinmetz, 2012), "netnography" (Bowler, 2010), "social media ethnography" (Postill and Pink, 2012), "internet ethnography" (Sade-Beck, 2004) and "digital ethnography" (Varis, 2015). The names are many, but the joint argument in this branch of work is that social life has changed and that social scientists need to develop their methods accordingly (Sade-Beck, 2004). The virtual world is an integrated part of the "real world" (ibid.) as most people are engaged in online communities as well as offline interactions. Hence, the argument is that the physical world matters but no longer constitutes "self-evident boundaries of research sites" (Leander and McKim, 2010: 214). Online researchers are engaged in this new "messy" research environment (Postill and Pink, 2012) and should carefully address the challenges associated with digital observations, not least the many ethical considerations this new method produces (Gatson, 2013; Tuncalp and Le, 2014). Apart from crucial discussions of how a digital environment changes social identity work, and our perceptions of authenticity, time and space (Hine, 2000; Steinmetz, 2012), a highly debated issue is ethics. Key questions are when it is acceptable to "lurk" in people's lives, how and when to secure informed consent, and how to secure the anonymity of your research subjects (Steinmetz, 2012).

## Documents

Much qualitative research includes an analysis of empirical documents, such as political speeches, patient files, homepages of public and private organisations, and legislation from different fields – just as non-textual empirical data, such as photographs, diagrams and budgets, are commonly used in qualitative studies (Prior, 2011; Justesen and Mik-Meyer, 2012). In interview and observation studies, data are produced *with* the researcher, whose questions and focus of observations affect the data that will be analysed. However, empirical documents – whether textual, graphical or consisting of numbers – exist *prior* to the study of which they become part. They have been produced without the involvement of a researcher and his/her research interests. This gives empirical documents a particular status (Silverman, 2013a).

A first-hand impression may be that empirical documents are a data source that is more objective than, for instance, interview data. However, empirical documents – in whatever form they come – are not just data existing “out there”. They must be selected among many other documents. Consequently, the choice of *which* documents to include in an analysis is crucial as the selection is affected by the research agenda – similar to the method of interviewing where the questions posed are a result of the research project’s focus and framing. Another crucial question is the history of the chosen texts. Where, with what aim and by whom were they produced? Organisational documents are often the result of negotiation processes (and even processes of struggle and conflict); politicians’ speeches have been reworked by spin doctors before they are delivered to a selected audience; patients’ files have been written so that they reflect professional and organisational standards; budgets must be presented – and corrected – in a number of forums before they are presented to an executive board; and so on. Furthermore, texts often refer to other texts, for instance legal guidelines and professional standards in public organisations – in other words, they exist in networks of documents (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). In summary, researchers using empirical documents in their projects will have to reflect upon how they have selected and delineated texts; what the history of the document looks like; how the chosen text relate to other documents (if the project uses more than one type); and how the analysis of documents are affected by/or affect other data sources in the project.

We have briefly outlined the history and hallmarks of qualitative research, the different steps one takes when conducting qualitative analysis, the various epistemological perspectives, as well as different methods of data acquisition the researcher has to choose between. The purpose of this overview is to clarify the scope of questions the researcher has to take a position on when planning and carrying out a qualitative study.

In the last part of this introductory chapter, we briefly summarise the contents of the 16 chapters that all – in different ways – touch upon the issues discussed so far.

## The chapters

We began this introduction with a quote from Goffman (1967) in which he encourages social scientists to view reality from multiple perspectives. Goffman was open to different methods, but he was uninterested in, or even opposed to, describing them. He saw establishing procedures for qualitative research as a problematic endeavour. In discussions with his peer Becker, he argued that if you described guidelines for conducting qualitative studies, “people would misinterpret what you had written, do it (whatever *it* was) wrong, and then blame you for the resulting mess” (Becker, 2003: 660). Much has changed in the literature since then. It is now a basic requirement that researchers explain and reflect on their methods (Gergen and Gergen, 2000; Silverman, 2013b).

With this in mind, we invited 16 social scientists who work within different analytical traditions to write a chapter about their *analysis* of empirical data. The book contains two chapters examining each of the eight selected traditions. The first of the two chapters provides a more general introduction to the analytical approach, but also includes one or more specific empirically anchored analyses, showing how to work with data in the particular tradition. The second of the two chapters describes in greater detail than the introductory chapter exactly how, within the tradition chosen, an analysis can be conducted.

We begin with two chapters on symbolic interactionism, written by Margaretha Järvinen (Chapter 2) and Nanna Mik-Meyer (Chapter 3). Chapter 2 is a more general introduction to the distinctive features and history of symbolic interactionism. Järvinen outlines the essential aspects of Mead and Blumer’s work and discusses the perception of the self as a time-structured subject/object relationship. Focusing on “deviance research”, she describes Becker and Goffman’s contributions to the development of symbolic interactionism. The chapter then looks at constructivist interactionism, addressing the processes by which social problems and identities are shaped – including in interview situations. The main empirical case studies referred to in the chapter focus on transgender people (identity work in encounters with caseworkers) and drink-drivers (how they negotiate responsibility in interviews).

Nanna Mik-Meyer’s chapter (Chapter 3) is also about identity work. After a brief introduction to symbolic interactionism – in particular, Goffman’s work on stigma, social order, face-work, and so on – she presents this analytical approach as applied to a study of the situation faced by employees with disabilities. Readers



gain insight into Mik-Meyer's methodological considerations from reflections on the planning of the research project, data acquisition, categorising data and further processing to the final analysis. She shows how to conduct an empirical analysis of "othering" – the alienation often described in the research literature on disability – via a qualitative approach, based on both fieldwork and interviews with disabled employees, their colleagues and managers.

Chapters 4 and 5 are about phenomenology and are written by Michael Gill and Anne Roelsgaard Obling. The first chapter (Chapter 4) by Gill is an overall introduction to phenomenology as a qualitative methodology; that is, an approach that examines the structures of experiences. Gill presents descriptive and interpretive variations of phenomenological approaches. He develops a typology of five phenomenological methodologies and then presents guidelines on how to pick the type that best fits particular areas of research. The chapter shows that phenomenology can be used to investigate a broad variety of research questions, as long as they reflect subjective experiences and meanings.

In Chapter 5, Anne Roelsgaard Obling zooms in on the "lived experience" of professional officers in the Danish military when they move from one career stage to another. After discussing the key phenomenological themes of letting experience appear on its own terms and the "essence" of human experiences, Obling presents her interpretive phenomenological approach. She demonstrates how she conducted fieldwork and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with professional officers. Then she shows in detail how one can analyse data by focusing on particular themes – in her case, career progression and educational trajectories.

Chapters 6 and 7, by Nils Gilje and Søren Kristiansen, address hermeneutics. Gilje (Chapter 6) begins by anchoring hermeneutics in a historical perspective, and then introduces central hermeneutic concepts such as the part-whole relationship and pre-understandings. This is followed by an introduction to Gadamer's discussions about prejudice, interpretation horizons and the hermeneutical circle. Finally, Gilje looks at the difference between text-based and action-based hermeneutic approaches, as well as double and multiple hermeneutics, in which both researchers and subjects are involved in the complex processes of interpretation.

In Chapter 7, Kristiansen presents a detailed discussion of key hermeneutical principles related to the concept pairs of understanding/interpretation and preconception/prejudice. He also reflects on the concept of circular understanding (the hermeneutic circle). In the second half of the chapter, Kristiansen uses a study of a system-development project in a telecommunications company in order to show how the understanding of a phenomenon emerges via confrontations between horizons of meaning. Next, he draws on a study of group coaching among young school students with ethnic minority backgrounds to illustrate how

a hermeneutical approach stimulates an investigative focus on both the students' interpretations and the researcher's pre-understandings.

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with critical realism and are written by Lee Martin and Amber J. Fletcher. In Chapter 8, Martin introduces critical realism. His focus is on the philosophical background of critical realism and the way in which this perspective enables interrogation and critique of theory in a unique way. Critical realism inspires the researcher to ask questions that tackle not only what is happening within a research context, but also what is capable of happening. Martin pays particular attention to the concept of causality in critical realism, and shows how this perspective has been used in research on creativity.

Fletcher (Chapter 9) first briefly outlines the key tenets of the young philosophy of critical realism dating back to the 1970s. She moves on to display the way critical realism has informed her Canadian study of local food practices. Fletcher discusses the role of theory in research informed by critical realism, the coding of data and the different analytical approaches of abduction or retroduction as ways to identify 'demi-regularities'; that is, partial patterns in the data set. In her case, critical realism helped her move beyond rational-choice explanations, in order to identify political-economic structures of the food system she studied.

Chapters 10 and 11 are about grounded theory, written by Kathy Charmaz and Catherine Conlon. Charmaz (Chapter 10) introduces the reader to grounded theory, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and concentrates on the mix of positivist and interpretivist elements characterising the theory. She then discusses grounded theory in relation to different phases of a research process – from the development of research questions, theoretical sampling and data acquisition, to the coding and interpretations that are used to develop concepts. Charmaz includes data from her research on chronically ill persons as an empirical example of how individuals' narratives can be coded (line by line, focused, etc.) in order to define and develop analytical categories.

In Chapter 11, Catherine Conlon illustrates the use of grounded theory in a research project investigating intergenerational solidarity in Ireland. She applies the main principles of grounded theory to her data; that is, to remain open to emerging themes, to approach data again and again (the iterative process of this tradition), to use memos and to constantly compare your findings as a way to build theory. Conlon's chapter shows the importance of the researcher remaining open throughout the inquiry, which is why focused research questions are often suspended until sufficient data have been generated. The goal of grounded theory is to allow questions to emerge inductively from the data.

Chapters 12 and 13, by Michael Bamberg, Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ditte Andersen, introduce the narrative analysis approach. In Chapter 12, Bamberg briefly outlines how narrative analyses have developed over the last twenty years,

and then presents an integrative approach centring on narrative practices. The chapter shows how narrative analysis can be conducted by focusing on storytellers' positioning of different characters in their story, their positioning *vis-à-vis* their interlocutors, and their positioning in relation to master storylines and discourses. Furthermore, Bamberg discusses different identity dilemmas in storytelling. The final part of the chapter shows how positioning analysis can be used in a study of visual web data.

Chapter 13, by Bengtsson and Andersen, applies three different narrative approaches to a case study into the behaviour of young people living in public care facilities. One interviewee's narrative is systematically analysed, first on the basis of a thematic approach, focusing on what the story is about; then on the basis of a structural approach, focusing on how the story is organised; and finally, based on a performative approach addressing the context the interview brings into play. Bengtsson and Andersen demonstrate that the three forms of analysis are not mutually exclusive but may be combined to form a comprehensive analysis of a life story.

Chapters 14 and 15 are about discourse analysis. Kaspar Villadsen's chapter on Foucault (Chapter 14) presents an analytical approach that, in essence, is about showing that our habitual ways of thinking and acting are less of a matter of course – in other words, everything is explicable as the result of historical processes. In the first half of the chapter, Villadsen describes Foucault's discourse concept as "embedded in history". He discusses how to deal with texts as documents and monuments, and how Foucault portrayed the relationship between the discursive and non-discursive. Villadsen presents a case study of dialogue techniques in the encounters between health-care and social work professionals and patients/clients.

Teun van Dijk's chapter (Chapter 15) is about critical discourse analysis, a multidisciplinary approach that examines how social problems are created, and how power and inequality are exercised, reproduced, legitimised and counteracted in text and speech in both social and political contexts. According to van Dijk, this kind of discourse analysis is less a research orientation than a critical perspective – in his words, "discourse study with an attitude". After placing critical discourse analysis in its historical context, van Dijk demonstrates how the discourse concept is defined and applied within empirical studies on, for instance, media representation of immigrants, ethnocentrism and racism, as well as in gender studies.

The last two chapters, written by Lise Justesen, Jakob Demant and Signe Ravn, deal with the analytical tradition known as actor-network theory. In Chapter 16, Justesen introduces actor-network theory and the importance of materialities for analytical work. She emphasises the role of the concepts of human and non-human actors, networks, actor-networks and translation. She outlines how social

scientists, inspired by this approach, seek out actors who make a *visible* difference, assuming that no actors are privileged by definition in the analysis. Then she shows how to conduct an actor-network-theory-inspired analysis based on a research project in the construction industry, in which sharp-snouted frogs turned out to be very important “actors” for the completion of the building project.

Finally, Chapter 17, by Demant and Ravn, demonstrates how actor-network theory can be applied to interviews, even though interviews are not the most common empirical data in analyses inspired by actor-network theory. They briefly introduce the concept of enactment, which is central to their analysis of interviews with young substance users. They then discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of this analytical approach to interview data. The actual analysis focuses on how a non-human actor like cocaine affects young people and their situation-specific interactions, and how actor-network theory enables time and space to be included as actors of equal worth in the analysis of interaction, rather than as a backdrop for the actions of humans.

The overall purpose of this book is to introduce different analytical traditions in qualitative research. This diversity also applies in relation to the authors’ choice of empirical data, which deal with everything from sharp-snouted frogs and local food systems, to intergenerational relationships, staff encounters with co-workers with disabilities, young people in care, trans persons and elite soldiers. As mentioned above, some of the authors emphasise a description of the chosen tradition’s historical development and concentrate on how the tradition accentuates a particular methodological awareness of the researcher, whereas others specifically describe and show how to conduct an analysis. However, both types of chapters have a clear objective, namely to reveal what goes on inside the “black box” where empirical data are transformed into analytical findings.

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## Key concepts

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**Deduction, induction and abduction** Deductive reasoning starts with theories, models or laws and infers statements from certain premises, defined by these theories, models or laws. Inductive reasoning works the other way, moving from specific empirical data to broader analytical generalisations. The concept of abduction originally described the researcher’s quest for theories to explain surprising findings in the data. Today, the term is often used to describe a dialogue between theory and data, such that data influence the researcher’s choice of theory, while theory helps him/her to interpret findings and put them into perspective.

**Definitive concepts and sensitising concepts** Definitive concepts refer to what is common to groups of objects by the use of attributed and fixed benchmarks.

Sensitising concepts are more open orientation tools serving as inspiration in empirical analyses. As Blumer (1986/1969: 49) stated: “definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see; sensitizing concepts suggest directions along which to look”.

**Positivist and constructivist epistemologies** In qualitative research, a positivist/realist paradigm sees empirical data (interviews, observations, documents) as representing facts about the world. Reality exists “out there” independent of our knowledge about it, and the goal of the researcher is to describe this reality as neutrally as possible. In contrast, constructivists (or constructionists) argue that data are displays of perspectives – the researcher’s as well as the participants’ – and that the social world to be analysed is processual, complex and ambiguous.

**Qualitative research** Qualitative research can be defined in many different ways, but the following hallmarks constitute a common denominator: focusing on meanings and interpretations; working with process as much as content; seeing the studied phenomena as rooted in – and made possible by – specific spatial, temporal and social contexts; working inductively or abductively rather than deductively; and using sensitising concepts rather than definite concepts.

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# 2

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AS ANALYTICAL TRADITION

Margaretha Järvinen

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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What is symbolic interactionism?	31
The self as social but unpredictable	32
The weight of definitions	33
Stigma and moral careers	34
Constructivist interactionism	35
• Constructing social problems	36
• Social problems work in organisations	37
• Extended empirical example: transgender identities	39
• Interviews as symbolic interaction: who we are, who we were – and who we do not want to be	40
• Extended empirical example: drink-drivers	42
Conclusion	44
Key concepts	46
Further reading	46
References	47

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One of the most important breeding grounds for qualitative sociology was the classic Chicago School – represented by figures such as George Herbert Mead, Robert Park and W.I. Thomas. The following oft-cited quote is from a lecture given by Park in the 1920s, in which he encouraged his students to venture forth into the real world and collate qualitative data:

You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and liberal coating of grime. ... Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and the slum shakedown; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter burlesk. In short, gentlemen [sic], go get the seat of your pants dirty in **real** research. (Park, quoted in McKinney, 1966: 71).

The early Chicago sociologists followed this advice and went out into the city collecting data on ethnic minorities, criminality, homelessness and urban life in general, hence sparking off a distinct qualitative tradition in sociology (e.g. Anderson, 1975/1923; Park et al., 1925, Wirth, 1928). They used a variety of methods: observations, interviewing, document analysis (e.g. letters, diaries), a combination of approaches that would inspire generations of sociologists to seek “first-hand knowledge” of people and their social worlds.

This chapter introduces the symbolic interactionist tradition that emanated from the Chicago School (with inspiration from George Herbert Mead and other pragmatists). The first part of the chapter describes the foundations laid by Mead and Herbert Blumer, the sociologist who dubbed the tradition “symbolic interactionism”. I find it appropriate to combine them because Blumer was in many ways responsible for developing Mead’s philosophical ideas into an analytical tradition. I then discuss two key figures from the second generation of Chicago sociologists, Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, who serve as a bridge between traditional symbolic interactionism and the contemporary version, which often takes inspiration from constructivism. In the rest of the chapter, I discuss constructivist interactionism, which has been prevalent since the 1980s, and exemplify its use in qualitative analyses. It needs to be pointed out that symbolic interactionism as an analytical tradition can be described in many different ways. Symbolic interactionism has been important in several sub-fields of the social sciences, for instance the sociology of emotions, mass media research, education and nursing studies (see the journal *Symbolic Interaction* for an overview of empirical areas covered). This chapter describes *one* specific line of interactionist studies, those addressing “deviance” and “social problems” – which were also among the main fields of research in the classic Chicago School. I describe this field only, in order to make the chapter more focused, and also

because deviance and social problems are research themes where the influence of symbolic interactionism has been extraordinarily strong. I illustrate the symbolic interactionist approach to qualitative research with the help of empirical examples from different countries.

## What is symbolic interactionism?

Although symbolic interactionism has its roots in the early twentieth-century works of Mead, I begin with Blumer's manifesto for symbolic interactionism (1986/1969). Blumer set out three premises for symbolic interactionism. The first is that human beings act towards things (not only physical, but also psychological and social) on the basis of the meanings those things have for them. The second premise is that this meaning arises from and is constantly re-created through human interaction. In other words, meaning is not inherent in things; it is not a mechanical consequence of their objective composition. Nor is it attributed to things mentally, on the basis of individual motives, emotions, attitudes or needs. Rather, meaning is derived from human encounters – it is a product created through processes of social definition. The third premise is that, at the individual level, meaning is filtered through a process of interpretation. Humans are reflective by nature and do not automatically accept social definitions of reality. We choose, prefer, transform, organise and reject meanings in the light of the situation in which we find ourselves and the actions in which we are involved. Symbolic interactionism does not therefore regard meaning as attributed via a socially determined process, in which the individual is predestined to follow society's rules and understandings of the social world.

In his definition (and naming) of symbolic interactionism, Blumer (1986/1969) drew inspiration from Mead's distinction between symbolic and non-symbolic interaction. Non-symbolic interaction is a form of interaction via gestures, much like communication between two animals – a gesture by one animal elicits a gesture from the other animal in response, and this exchange requires neither self-consciousness nor "self-communication" (thinking). Symbolic interaction, on the other hand, implies that actors reflect on the meaning of their actions, and in doing so take into account the other party's (presumed) perception of those actions, and thereby anticipate likely outcomes. In other words, when we act, we step out of ourselves and try to see ourselves and our actions, including what we say and think, from the perspective of other people. We become a combined subject/object – actors who reflect not only on ourselves and others, but also on the background to and development of the interaction in which we are involved.

## The self as social but unpredictable

In many ways, Mead's thinking about the individual was at odds with the highly individualised view of the self that characterised psychology and philosophy at the time. If we insert Mead's "self" into Blumer's three-point programme for symbolic interactionism, we can define the self as a "thing" in line with other things to which the individual must relate. Or, in Blumer's (1986/1969: 12) words: "Like other objects, the self-object emerges from the process of social interaction in which other people are defining a person to himself." However, the self is not merely an object, but also a subject that acts and takes initiative. Mead's well-known *I-me* distinction reflects this dual understanding of the self – the *I* is the impulsive and unpredictable part, while the *me* is the social, socialised and controlled part. Mead's *me* is society's voice inside the individual. It is rooted in previous social experiences and reflects other people's attitudes and perceptions. The *I*, on the other hand, is the individual acting in the present. It is an expression of the self's creative potential, which can rise against and overcome the restrictive and controlled *me*.

Mead saw the self as socially created, and as a process rather than a substance. His concept of the self has sometimes been read from a deterministic perspective, in which the self is perceived as being ruled by social mechanisms. However, this is a simplistic interpretation. Rather, Mead regarded social reality as a "negotiated order" (Strauss, 1964: xv) that is constantly evolving, and which the individual can influence and change. This negotiated order can be described as a template or a suggestion for a perception of reality to which individuals are supposed to relate in one way or other, but do not automatically accept or internalise. The individual's response in the situation remains unknown and unpredictable until the *I*-dimension of the self has acted, and thereby contributed to the development of the *me*. Pragmatism – here with Mead as its representative – emphasises people's potential for agency. The individual is explicitly an actor, not a passive recipient of external stimuli or a puppet who subconsciously reproduces predetermined social roles. Action and actorship are therefore central to Mead's understanding of human beings.

The individual's choices must, however, continually be related to the social part of the self, characterised by the "generalised other", which consists of people's internalised representation of society's norms, expectations and values. If we as individuals are to be understood by others, and be integral parts of society and its varying social settings, we need to present ourselves in recognisable ways. This entails (by and large) adapting our actions and attitudes to the social roles in which we participate and in correspondence with the expectations associated with them. In this sense, the generalised other is characterised by a significant degree

of both social control and self-control (Mead, 1964; Strauss, 1964: x). The self (and society) are only possible because of human beings' ability to internalise the generalised other and the associated rules for actions, attitudes, responsibilities and duties (Mead, 1964: 33). Mead considered the "whole" (the social level) as having primacy in relation to its "parts" (the individual level), rather than being secondary, that is, the sum of its component parts (ibid.: 64). He described his analytical approach as "working from the outside to the inside instead of from the inside to the outside" (ibid.: 122).

### The weight of definitions

In 1928 the "Thomas theorem" was formulated by Chicago sociologists William and Dorothy Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 571). This basic sociological theorem was one of the starting-points from which Becker developed symbolic interactionism in the 1950s and 1960s. Together with Goffman, Becker was one of the central figures in the development of interactionist studies on deviance and social problems – the strand of symbolic interactionism which is the focus of this chapter.

Becker (1991/1963) wanted to make the question of how things are defined – including how actions and properties are defined as deviant, and the consequences of these definitions – into a central research area in interactionist studies. He criticised previous research for its excessive focus on the individuals who (for one reason or another) were defined as deviant. According to Becker, most deviance research so far had accepted the categorisations of people as, for example, "criminals", "prostitutes" or "addicts" as delineated by moral entrepreneurs and rule enforcers. This had led to social scientists studying individual-level causes of deviations, based on the question: "What kind of person would break such an important rule?" The answer to which was: "one who is different from the rest of us, who cannot or will not act as a moral human being" (Becker, 1991/1963: 34).

Becker's alternative to this traditional approach was to view deviance as a product of processes of social categorisations and reactions. In Becker's radical formulation, "The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label" (Becker, 1991/1963: 9). It is important to note that Becker did not, of course, see the sanctioning of deviance as the *reason* why people engage in acts for which they risk condemnation. Rather, his message was that definitions, categorisations and reactions influence the attitudes and actions of all parties involved – the ones doing the labelling, those witnessing and those being the objects of labelling. In Becker's interactionist alternative to traditional research on rule-breakers, deviance can only be understood if



we take into account the roles of anybody involved in the labelling process, and if we focus on the mechanisms by which definitions develop and gradually attain legitimacy and taken-for-grantedness (Becker, 1991/1963: 207).

## Stigma and moral careers

Goffman, to an even greater extent than Becker, analysed social deviance in a concrete, interactionist perspective. In doing so, he drew attention to the micro-sociological processes through which people are placed in – and try to cope with – marginal social positions. Goffman described how society establishes social categories and associates them with specific positive and negative human actions and characteristics. An individual breaking with normative expectations linked to a specific category and/or a specific situation risks being shamed and branded as deviant – in other words, s/he risks being stigmatised (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatisation can have severe consequences for the individual. Other people often attribute a range of negative characteristics to the individual beyond those that triggered the stigmatisation process. Goffman cites as an example that people often talk more loudly and clearly to blind people, despite their not having hearing difficulties. Another example is that people with reduced mobility are seen as dependent on others and as “not quite adult” (cf. Mik-Meyer’s analysis in Chapter 3), and as such are met with a condescending attitude and offered a level of attention and care that they do not necessarily want. In addition, the perception of stigmatised people is often associated with a stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), which explains the cause of the individual’s problems (e.g. criminal behaviour is attributed to weak character or genetic predisposition) and describes the future prospects for the labelled individual in a stereotypical and simplistic way (“once a criminal, always a criminal”).

Goffman stressed the relative nature of stigmatisation. Hence, a characteristic that discredits an individual in one specific context does not necessarily do so in a different context or for a different person. He also emphasised, in line with Mead and Blumer, the stigmatised individual’s own potential for action. Stigmatisation may well pave the way for a specific moral career, understood as a socialisation process in which the individual’s self-perception adapts to embrace other people’s negative expectations and the stigma is no longer just a consequence of but also a reason for (continued) deviant acts. However, there is significant variation in stigmatised individuals’ patterns of reaction; that is, in how they deal with information about their deviations, to what extent they identify with others in the same category, and whether they accept the stigma theory that explains the deviation and predicts its consequences. Some individuals reject the

lower status implied by the stigma, while for others their new moral status serves as an organising principle for their whole lives – the stigmatised person may, as Goffman (1963: 21) puts it, “develop to its fullest his sad tale accounting for the possession of the stigma”.

Mead’s influence is evident at many points in Goffman’s work, including his view of the self as a form of dual structure that encompasses both a subjective actor and a socially structured component. The self is not only an expression of its owner and his/her dispositions, needs and attitudes, but also a dramatic effect produced by the activities in all of the scenes in which the individual participates (Goffman, 1963: 219). Another point is Goffman’s emphasis on the idea that, when people interact, they incorporate others’ (presumed) perspectives on them. A successful interaction requires that participants adjust the way they express themselves – or, to use Goffman’s term, their *lines* – to each other; that they do not challenge each other’s self-presentations; and hence that they collaborate to maintain mutual respect. A third example of the overlap between Goffman and classic symbolic interactionism is the concept of the “definition of the situation” (ideas about the purpose of the interaction, role obligations, etc.) to which Blumer (1986/1969) also referred – see Chapter 3 for an elaboration on this concept. Obviously, different people may have divergent expectations and interpretations of a situation, but social interaction tends to create a shared understanding, at least temporarily, and puts considerable pressure on participants to adapt. In this sense, social situations rule over the participants. Interactionism’s object of study is not individuals and their psychology, but “the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another” (Goffman, 1967: 2). These interactions always occur within a specific temporal and spatial context, and this too must be taken into account in any analysis. This is reflected in how Goffman (1967: 3) describes what sociology studies: “Not, then, men and their moments. Rather moments and their men.”

As mentioned in the introduction, Becker (through his labelling theory, later defined as interactionist theory) and Goffman (with his focus on stigma, moral careers, definitions of situations, self-presentations, etc.) may be said to build a bridge from classical interactionism to the constructivist interactionism that has informed much research on social problems and deviance since the 1980s.

## Constructivist interactionism

The remainder of this chapter describes the emergence of constructivist interactionism and how this type of interactionism has been used in concrete research projects. I focus on three dimensions of this tradition: the construction of social

problems; social deviance and institutional identities; and qualitative interviews as a form of symbolic interaction.

### Constructing social problems

One important element in the emergence of a constructivist form of interactionism is the American “social problems” literature starting in the 1970s and 1980s (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Loseke, 1999; Holstein and Miller, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Loseke and Best, 2003). Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse took as their starting-point (cf. Becker’s labelling theory) that sociology cannot take “social problems”, for example crime, addiction or prostitution, for granted as categories. Researchers must take a step back and ask by whom, under what conditions and why these phenomena have been defined as social problems. The focus should be on the interaction processes through which specific phenomena are labelled as wrong, harmful or immoral in society, as well as the reactions that follow from this labelling (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977).

Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda’s *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (1994) further developed this perspective on social problems. They emphasised that there is no logical and predictable relationship between, on the one hand, a phenomenon’s factual occurrence and the severity of its effects and, on the other hand, the social definitions of and responses to the phenomenon. Whether or not a phenomenon is translated into a social problem depends on numerous factors, such as which social interests are at stake, what resources the labelled and the “labellers” have, and what justifications are available to both parties in the labelling process. Goode and Ben-Yehuda employed the concept of moral panic (originally coined in Cohen, 1972) to describe instances in which a society’s reactions seem disproportionate to the actual characteristics of a social phenomenon. One indicator of moral panic is a sudden indignant attention – in the media, politics and interest groups – to a phenomenon considered harmful and hostile, and against which action must be taken. For a reaction to qualify as moral panic, it has to be relatively strong and comprehensive in society as a whole or in specific, influential elements of society. It is usually not enough that a politically and socio-economically insignificant minority group designates something as a social problem. The constructed nature of social problems is evident in the fact that moral reactions come and go in waves, which do not (necessarily) follow fluctuations in the extent and seriousness of the problems.

There is a rich tradition of interactionist studies focusing on the social construction of social problems. Valerie Jenness (2003), for instance, analysed how HIV/AIDS became defined in the 1980s and 1990s as a consequence of *deviant sexualities* (in the USA and elsewhere), and how this medical problem from the early days

on was staged as a moral issue. In the beginning, homosexual men were the main target of this concern. Soon, however, HIV/AIDS became understood as a general threat to the heterosexual population, and in this process sex workers were singled out as a “deadly pool of contagion” for the HIV virus. Jenness (1993) analyses the discussions between different claims-makers in this process, including the interest organisations for sex workers who showed that the reports on infection rates among prostitutes were highly exaggerated, that it was primarily drug-injecting streetwalkers who tested positive for HIV, and that the suggested mandatory HIV tests for all sex workers were a violation of human rights. In essence, the interest organisations demonstrated how the designation of prostitutes as “reservoirs of infection” was indeed a mechanism for scapegoating a marginalised and already stigmatised group (Jenness, 2003).

Another example of interactionist research on social problems is Frank Furedi’s (2003) study of workplace bullying in Great Britain. According to Furedi, the British public first heard of workplace bullying in the early 1990s when reports suddenly identified this as a large-scale social problem – with some studies claiming that more than half of British employees had been bullied at work. Bullying now became known as the hidden and unacknowledged affliction that millions of adults suffered from in silence – and as a hitherto unrecognised reason for absenteeism and reduced productivity. In his analysis Furedi points to the relativity of the bullying concept in these discussions, also referring to the low quality of many of the surveys of workplace bullying, and to the adoption of this new social problem by the British trade union movement as part of the solution to the weakening support for union activism. Furedi then asks why bullying gained such a prominent social problem status in Great Britain as compared to other European countries with strong trade unions. His answer is that Britain to a higher degree than many other countries adopts social problems concerns (about, for example, child abuse, elder abuse, stalking and hate crimes) from the USA and often immediately assimilates them into a specific British moral agenda (Furedi, 2003).

### Social problems work in organisations

In their book *Reconsidering Social Constructionism* (1993), James A. Holstein and Gale Miller stated that interactionist studies of social problems so far had focused on large-scale constructions and public representations of problems, for example in mass media or in the political rhetoric. Holstein and Miller called for more research on the practices (e.g. in social work or health care) that connect public structures of interpretation with the everyday realities of the people involved in the concrete management of social problems. Referring to these practices as “social problems work”, they showed how the creation of social problems requires

not only that these categories exist in abstract form in claims-making activities and public “interpretation schemes” (Schutz, 1970) but also that they are used by human beings (e.g. professionals and clients) in concrete practice.

In a similar vein, Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001) analysed discursive environments, some of them represented by concrete organisations, as distinctive milieux for self-constructions among people living “troubled lives”. Inspired by Donileen Loseke (2001), Gubrium and Holstein used the term “identity work” to describe activities directed towards undesirable thoughts, emotions and actions in organisations and projects designed to reform and develop (and often also monitor and control) troubled individuals. Describing how the volume of identity work has exploded in late-modern society, Gubrium and Holstein (2001: 2) wrote: “Today, identity no longer emanates from within, but penetrates us from every angle. From self-change groups and 12-step programs, to welfare agencies and psychiatric clinics, to self-help books and television talk shows, who and what we are in practice has been dislodged from our inner spaces, to be relocated in the self-defining activities of varied institutions.” In this perspective, organisations working with troubled people perform identity work with the help of institutional identities, defined as locally salient images, models or templates for self-construction (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, 2001: 11).

In a Scandinavian context, I have, together with Nanna Mik-Meyer (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003), combined this perspective with organisational theory (Hasenfeld and English, 1974; Prottas, 1979) and developed it in real-life analyses of social service organisations. We showed how a standardisation of human troubles is a basic condition for institutions involved in social problems work. Organisations cannot relate to “whole persons” and to their highly individualised, complex and varying troubles (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003: 15; see also Järvinen, 1993; Mik-Meyer, 2004), without these troubles being adapted to a format that complies with the organisation’s problem categories, rules and routines. Our book (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003) builds directly on classic symbolic interactionism, in the sense that meaning – including the meaning attributed to the self and its many facets – is considered to be created through social interaction in concrete contexts. The book analyses, in an extension of Becker and Goffman, the processes through which actions and characteristics are defined as deviant, and the consequences of this for those involved. It sheds light on a range of stigma theories (e.g. about unemployed people, benefits claimants and addicts) that explain deviance and make prognoses about the clients’ futures (Goffman, 1963).

The subsection below presents an example of more recent interactionist research on identity work, showing how organisations provide institutional identities for their clients, but also how clients can use these identity templates for their own benefit.

## Extended empirical example: transgender identities

Viola Skovgaard and Ida Thing (2015) interviewed trans persons in treatment at the Sexological Clinic in Copenhagen – both trans women (those born male but who self-identify as female) and trans men (born female but self-identifying as males). They described how the institutional identity “transgender” was constructed at the clinic, and how the clients’ individual experiences of gender and sexuality had to harmonise with specific organisational criteria in order for the clients to be approved for gender reassignment treatment.

Important for the identity work performed at the Sexological Clinic was that the clinic fell under the auspices of Capital Region Psychiatry, meaning that the clients were defined as psychiatric patients. Skovgaard and Thing (2015: 36) described the work involving the clinic’s institutional identities as a “tightrope walk on psychiatric diagnoses”. On the one hand, those seeking treatment had to prove that they were in a “transgender state” – that is, that they experienced severe suffering, discomfort and feelings of inadequacy as a result of their anatomy. On the other hand, they must not have an actual mental disorder (e.g. depression or schizophrenia), as multiple concurrent diagnoses were regarded as interfering with the gender reassignment process. One of the trans men talked about how he was “afraid to seem too happy”, as he felt that the clinic would not help him if “he did not hate himself enough”. In his experience, he had to exaggerate the extent of his problems in order to fit into the clinic’s interpretation schemes. Conversely, another interviewee explained that you cannot be “too sick” if you want to be approved for treatment: “You shouldn’t have depression ... you cannot have schizophrenia, there must be nothing else wrong with you. This [gender] thing is the only thing that is wrong. You were born in the wrong body, period” (Skovgaard and Thing, 2015: 39).

The clinic not only placed emphasis on an appropriate degree of mental distress, but also adhered to institutional constructions of “transgender” based on specific ideas about masculinity and femininity. Skovgaard and Thing’s interviewees described the clinic as operating with a relatively traditional – and distinctly binary – perception of what it means to be male or female in relation to, for example, hobbies, tastes, preferences and style of dress. Some clients said they deliberately played the gender-binary game in order to qualify for treatment. One of the interviewees, a trans man (born female), explained:

When she asked, “What toys did you play with as a child?” I knew perfectly well that she expected me to say: “I always liked cars and planes and stuff like that” ... I knew what she was looking for. Then there was: “What’s your favourite colour?” “Blue!” If I had said pink, what would they have done? (Skovgaard and Thing, 2015: 30)

The institution's templates and models for the category "transgender" also included ideas about the clients' sexual orientations. One client, a trans woman (born male), said that the therapists warned her that there would be ramifications for her sexuality after the treatment. They told her that, as a trans woman, she would no longer be able to have female partners:

They said, "well you'll miss the thing you were equipped with ... I mean, that's how it is, isn't it?" In the therapist's eyes, it's like, "well, if you find a woman, then you'll definitely regret being operated on, because then you won't be able to ... well, have sex the way normal people do". (Skovgaard and Thing, 2015: 32)

Skovgaard and Thing's (2015) study is an example of how organisations work with institutional identities and how identity work is required in order to make the clients and their problems fit specific templates. It is, of course, necessary for the therapists to ensure that their clients know what they are getting into and actually want it, and that their suffering is commensurate with the problem for which they expect gender reassignment treatment to be a solution. By using the term "institutional identities", Skovgaard and Thing do not indicate that transgender identities are *invented* by treatment organisations but that they are *formed* by the processes the clients go through and by specific conceptions of, for example, gender characteristics and sexuality. The study also conveys the clients' actorship in identity work. The interviewees interpreted and related to the clinic's identity constructions in different ways. Sometimes they objected to them and continued to attribute alternative meanings to their situation; at other times, they used the constructions actively to achieve what they wanted. Institutional identities are not something organisations force on their clients, but neither are they inconsequential. In many cases, clients (here, trans persons) risk being turned away if their conceptions of their condition diverge too much from the organisation's problem categories, rules and routines (Skovgaard and Thing, 2015; Thing and Skovgaard, 2017).

### Interviews as symbolic interaction: who we are, who we were – and who we do not want to be

Having looked at the construction of social problems in a more general sense, and identity work and institutional identities in specific organisational contexts, I will now address a final point in interactionist studies: how social problems and deviant identities are negotiated in qualitative interviews.

The fact that social problems are shaped by processes of definition and categorisation also influences the actual meeting between the researcher and study participants in an interview situation. Interviews with people who in some way or other



represent social problems (e.g. drug addicts, homeless people, criminal offenders) are related to, and sometimes consciously framed within, certain conceptions of how these problems should be understood. This is true for the researcher, inspired by theory and other forms of pre-understandings, as well as for the research participants telling their stories. In his theory of time, Mead (1959, 1964) described the past as a phenomenon that is continually created and re-created in people's narratives. Life stories do not consist of a definitive truth that can be uncovered by a researcher, but rather of interpretations that change with time and are dependent on the narrator's present life situation and orientations – and of the interviewer's research agenda and further interpretations of the narrator's story (cf. Järvinen, 2000, 2001, 2004).

Interactionist analyses can focus, for example, on the extent to which the interviewees' stories are defeatist/despairing or action-oriented. Some interviewees describe their problems as more or less entirely determined by factors outside their control; others present life stories in which they are efficient actors who make choices (cf. Järvinen, 2000; Järvinen and Ravn, 2015). From an interactionist perspective, life stories are both retrospective and prospective, in that they identify "a locus of control, a plausible candidate to take responsibility for a problem [and] a point of leverage to fix a problem" (Stone, 1989: 289). Tales of the past can influence tales about the future. The more deterministic the manner in which the past is presented, the less the interviewees tend to stress their own actorship and impact on the problems, including their scope for action in the future (Järvinen and Ravn, 2015). Conversely, Mead's theory of time also states that people's current projects and view of the future affect their perception of the past. In other words, we reconstruct the past as our lives progress. Positive changes can lead to our taking a brighter view of our past, while negative changes may have the opposite effect. According to Mead's theory of time, our projects in the present affect our interpretations of the past, just as our interpretations of the past affect our view of the future (Mead, 1959, 1964).

Interactionist analyses of interviews with people labelled as deviants sometimes focus on the interviewees' use of legitimising explanations. Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) introduced the concept of *neutralisation* as an umbrella term for the strategies that people use to legitimise their actions. Their point was that "deviants" (in their example, juvenile delinquents) cannot help but feel society's condemnation of their actions. They also, to a great extent, agree with society's prevailing values and norms – but bend them at specific points. Neutralisation can both presage and follow in the wake of social deviation. Hence, people can, for various reasons (e.g. peer pressure) begin to define a breach of norms as less serious than they used to, which increases the likelihood that they will violate the norm at some point, and once they have done so, they often use neutralisation to



counteract condemnations of their actions (cf. Järvinen, 2001, 2003, 2004; Järvinen and Fynbo, 2011).

Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman (1968) further developed Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralisation theory. Employing the term *accounts*, they argued that such "legitimising explanations" are often found in interviews with people whose role, status or actions are deemed unacceptable and inappropriate, and people who for some reason or other feel they have to defend themselves, although they do not meet explicit external condemnation. *Accounting* is related to the distinctly human capacity to experience being blamed, accused or held responsible for roles and actions that are morally negotiable. According to Scott and Lyman (1968: 46), legitimising explanations serve to "shore up the timbers of fractured socialisation, to throw bridges between the promised and the performed, to repair the broken and restore the estranged".

Scott and Lyman's (1968) accounts and Sykes and Matza's (1957) neutralisation, taken together and with some minor adaptations, can be summarised in the following strategies. The summary only covers the strategies most often found in interactionist studies focusing on accounting:

- Rejection of responsibility – used by people to explain their problematic position/ actions with reference to factors outside their control.
- Reference to exception – indicates that the problem concerned is something extraordinary in the individual's life and/or that the narrator is less deviant than other people in the category into which the narrator has been placed.
- Denial of negative consequences – actions are neutralised by pointing out that they do not harm other people and are not associated with other serious risks.
- Condemnation of the condemners – actions are neutralised by the narrators describing the people who criticise/penalise them as biased, hypocritical, etc.

The next empirical example deals with legitimising explanations used by drink-drivers.

### Extended empirical example: drink-drivers

In a research project on drink-drivers, 25 people who had been convicted of drink-driving were interviewed (Fynbo and Järvinen, 2011; Järvinen and Fynbo, 2011; Fynbo, 2013). The participants were contacted at police alcohol and traffic safety courses that are compulsory for convicted drink-drivers in Denmark. Most of the interviewees alternated between expressing revulsion over their actions (drink-driving is illegal and can cause harm to others, and should therefore be avoided, they stated), and employing various neutralisation strategies to legitimise their transgressions. All of the above-mentioned strategies – rejection of responsibility,

reference to exception, denial of negative consequences and condemnation of the condemners – were used during the interviews. The following excerpt is from an interview with a woman who was asked to describe what happened the day she was arrested for drink-driving:

I'm divorced. I live in my own house and was doing up the kitchen. The tradesman turned up and painted the kitchen table with very strong paint. It was a Sunday. He arrived at 8 and I was going out for lunch at 12:30. We had a beer at 9 and a glass of red wine, but from a beer glass, and another one at 10. It wasn't a big beer glass ... I was late and a bit stressed, so I grabbed another quick glass of red just before I left at noon ... I could feel it in my head, I was a little bit "whew". It may well have been stress, and I've also wondered if it was the paint fumes ... I didn't feel drunk at all, and I didn't think about whether I'd had too much to drink. (Interview with woman convicted of drink-driving)

This excerpt, and large parts of the interview, can be read as an example of neutralisation through "rejection of responsibility". The red thread throughout the interview is that the narrator did not *choose* to drive while intoxicated. Rather, she was flustered due to stress and paint fumes, and "didn't think" that she was (excessively) under the influence of alcohol. She described her alcohol intake as modest ("not a big beer glass"), linking her drinking to a social situation in which it was (for her) natural to have a couple of drinks. Throughout the interview, she stressed that she is a responsible person – a single woman who looks after her home and a person who keeps her appointments (she did not want to disappoint those who had invited her to lunch). Her drink-driving was merely a convergence of unfortunate circumstances, and in no way something she chose – it was therefore less morally reprehensible than it might first appear.

The second neutralisation strategy, "reference to exception", also occurred in many of the project's interviews with drink-drivers. As previously mentioned, this strategy can relate to two slightly different aspects: narrators describing the condemned act as something extraordinary in their life or narrators presenting themselves as less criticisable than other people in a specific category. The following quote is from an interview with a woman employing "reference to exception" in both these ways:

I didn't get how the amount I had drunk led to such a high count. I was sure that someone had set up something or other ... And those who know me, and who I told about it, were shocked. They were shaken. But they were also dying of laughter. Because it is completely unthinkable for me to do something like that. "You were drunk, you will lose your licence? You, of all people? That's way out!" How the hell is it possible that people drive around over the limit three or four days a week and not lose their licence? And I just do it once and get bagged. (Interview with woman convicted of drink-driving)

A final example of neutralisation in the interviews with drink-drivers is an elderly man who combined the two strategies of “reference to exception” and “denial of negative consequences”:

A lot of people drive like madmen when they've been drinking, instead of driving very slowly and carefully ... They think they're such cool dudes. Young men, new drivers who've just passed their test, think they can just put the foot down, they don't know better ... And then the teacher [on the course] also said that women often become over-confident in traffic, but they drive better than men, he hastened to say. I certainly don't believe that. [About the time he was arrested:] I didn't feel any effects of the drink when they nabbed me. If I had even clipped another car, I would have understood it, but there was nothing like that. (Interview with man convicted of drink-driving)

This interviewee positioned himself as a safer driver than most others: women and young men, either drunk or sober (cf. Fynbo and Järvinen, 2011). He said he takes full responsibility for his drink-driving – “No excuses – they don't get anybody anywhere. I had four quick beers that day, usually I don't drink at all” – but he also stressed that he was not a danger to others by virtue of his experience and his exceptional driving skills.

Summing up this empirical example, it is important to point out that drink-driving in Denmark is regarded as a clear violation of central norms about risking other people's lives, at least by large parts of the population. The interviewees therefore had every reason to use legitimising explanations in an attempt to appear to be morally accountable, although they had been convicted of this offence. While most of them shared the condemnation of drink-driving (at least in principle and for drivers in general), they used neutralisation strategies to position themselves as more responsible and law-abiding than their status as convicted drink-drivers might indicate (Fynbo and Järvinen, 2011; Järvinen and Fynbo, 2011; Fynbo, 2013).

## Conclusion

This chapter has described (some of) the characteristics and history of symbolic interactionism. It started with a combined Mead/Blumer presentation, addressing interactionism's three basic precepts as formulated by Blumer and showing how these relate to Mead's concept of symbolic actions and his theories about the self as a time-structured subject/object relationship. Subsequently, Becker was presented as a key figure in the development of interactionism, in particular through his focus on the construction of social deviance. Becker called on sociologists to extend their research beyond the “deviant” individuals and their background and

motivations, in order to encompass the processes that define/label/sanction norm offenders. Goffman, working in parallel with Becker, developed interactionism through a series of micro-sociological studies of human interaction, including between stigmatised individuals and their surroundings. He showed how stigma has a degrading and discrediting effect, and how stigma theories define and contribute to shaping negative moral careers.

The chapter then addressed three different dimensions of constructivist interactionism. First, it presented the mainly American research tradition focusing on the construction of social problems in society – for example, by the mass media, special interest groups and official bodies that define certain social phenomena as wrong, harmful and/or immoral, and seek to establish specific policies to control them (see Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The empirical examples presented concerned HIV/AIDS constructed as a moral problem in the USA and the emergence of workplace bullying as a new large-scale problem in Britain in the 1990s.

The next dimension of symbolic interactionist research was represented by studies focusing on social problems work in specific institutional contexts, for instance treatment centres and other human service organisations (Holstein and Miller, 1993; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003; Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). A central message in this type of research is that definitions and categorisations of clients and their problems are a necessary part of the work in all human service organisations, but that the transformation of human troubles into standardised problems is consequential (Gubrium and Järvinen, 2014). The empirical example in this section was research on transgender people, showing that institutional identities may be restricting but that they can also be opposed and used by clients to their own advantage.

In the third part of the chapter focus shifted from macro-constructions of social problems and identity work in specific organisational contexts to identity constructions in qualitative interviews. Symbolic interactionist analyses of interviews can look at how participants present themselves and their problems in an interview situation, including how defeatism/despair and choice/agency play a role in their narratives, and how neutralisation strategies are often used. The empirical example in this section was research into drink-driving.

Collectively, the three empirical sections in the chapter showed how social problems are formed through a series of complicated processes of claims-making, definitions, categorisations, treatment and sanctions, and often through identity work or social problems work in specific human service organisations. It was stressed that the classified/treated/controlled individuals are not merely objects in these processes, but also active subjects who can either adapt to, reject or redefine the organisational templates offered to them. Most empirical examples in the

chapter came from research on social “deviants”, understood as individuals who are morally condemned, branded and/or “disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963: 9) in society.

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## Key concepts

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**Institutional identities** Institutional identities are templates for self-understanding, defining the character of specific problems, their background and possible solutions. Human service organisations work with such templates (although with variety in their openness or rigidity) in order to adapt the diffuse and various troubles of their clients into standardised definitions and categories, necessary for interventions.

**Labelling** Labelling theory states that people’s self-identity and behaviour are affected by the way they are defined and categorised by other people. Labelling theory asks researchers to focus on all parties involved in the process, and on the interaction between those alleged to be involved in wrongdoing and those making the allegations. Howard Becker, who introduced the theory, later renamed it an interactionist theory on deviance.

**Neutralisation** An umbrella term for the accounting strategies people use to legitimise their actions. Some of the most common forms of accounting are: rejection of responsibility, reference to exception, denial of negative consequences and condemnation of the “condemners”. Neutralisation is common in all human interaction but especially in situations where people feel accused of wrongdoing.

**Self in symbolic interaction** Mead saw the self as socially created, and as a process rather than a substance. Mead’s *I-me* distinction reflects his dual understanding of the self – the *I* is the impulsive and unpredictable part, while the *me* is the social, socialised and controlled part. Mead’s *me* is society’s voice inside the individual. The *I*, on the other hand, is the individual acting in the present.

**Symbolic interaction** Implies that actors reflect on the meaning of their actions, and in doing so take into account the other party’s (presumed) perception of those actions, and thereby anticipate likely outcomes. In other words, when we act, we step out of ourselves and try to see ourselves and our actions, including what we think and say, from the perspective of other people.

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# 3

## SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM, STIGMA AND OTHERING

Nanna Mik-Meyer

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Taking a symbolic interactionist approach	53
A very brief introduction to key themes in disability research	55
Introduction to the study and its methodology	56
• Data and analytical procedure	57
Analysis of othering in practice	58
• Othering by positioning a colleague with a disability as requiring care	58
• Othering by categorising disability along with other deviations	62
Conclusion	66
Key concepts	68
Further reading	69
References	69

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This chapter uses symbolic interactionism to investigate how employees' visible impairments affect their interaction with colleagues and managers. The focus of the chapter is on individuals' interpretative processes when negotiating what it means to have a disability. There is no doubt that a visible disability such as a "weird walk" attracts attention from the surrounding world, as this quote from a social worker with cerebral palsy illustrates:

I usually say that having a disability is like being famous, just without all the benefits. In the sense that I turn heads when I'm out and about. ... Some days I don't mind people turning around, you know, and staring at me, like, "Wow, what's making so much noise, and what's with the weird walk?" But other days, it bothers me. And that's why I compare it to being a celebrity. ... Because being famous – I assume, without being famous myself – means that you receive a high level of attention, whether you like it or not, and in every possible situation. And that's our reality, at least for those of us with a visible disability.

The quote supports a key point in disability research, namely that visible impairments lead to a form of "attention" markedly different from that afforded to most people without a disability. However, the quote does not reveal how the surrounding world makes sense of what it means to have a disability. For instance, does the frame of reference for disability imply that the person is weak and needs care? Does disability entail that the person differs profoundly from "normal" individuals? Therefore, when zooming in on the research field of disability and work, a symbolic interactionist approach will explore questions such as: what kind of social identity do colleagues and managers ascribe to the disabled person, and what expression does this ascription take in meetings with the person – and in the meeting between interviewees and the interviewer? What does the "interaction order" surrounding employees with a disability look like? What types of face-work can be identified when people interact with a colleague with a disability – or talk about her/him in an interview? The tradition of symbolic interactionism can help answer these types of questions that all centre on the *meaning* attached to having a visible impairment.

Within this tradition of symbolic interactionism, the aim of the researcher is to examine the different ways in which people make sense of the reality of their everyday life. Researchers investigate how people's interpretations of reality constitute a framework for their interactions and experiences, which, in turn, affects the way they see themselves and others (Blumer, 1998/1969). Therefore, the research attention is directed to the detailed, practical meaning-making of individuals in their everyday life.

The symbolic interactionist approach, when applied to the research field of disability, facilitates an analysis of what Campbell (2009: 196) refers to as studies of "ableism"; that is, research showing how a visible disability triggers a more

general perception of an individual with impairments. The concept of ableism has inspired studies prompting a reassessment of what constitutes “normal” bodies and “normal” ways of acting. This interest in what establishes “normalcy” is a classic area of focus in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (e.g. Goffman, 1990a/1965, 1991/1961; Becker, 1991/1963; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; see also Chapter 2 in this volume).

### Taking a symbolic interactionist approach

Symbolic interactionism places the interaction between people and their negotiation of meaning at the centre. Meaning are social products “that are formed in and through defining activities of people as they interact” (Blumer, 1998/1969: 5). The attention is on both verbal and non-verbal actions and on the context of these actions. In sociology, the Chicago School put the concept of interaction on the agenda. This school emerged from the American pragmatist tradition – the school of philosophy holding that knowledge is not an objective reflection of reality, but linked to practice. The emphasis is on practice, individuals’ practical considerations and actions, and the way practice affects the ideas, theories and methods of society that, in turn, affect individuals’ perceptions.

As shown in the previous chapter, Herbert Blumer (1998/1969) continued the early work of George Herbert Mead (2009/1934) on the relationship between the individual and society. In the interactionist tradition, the self is considered a product of social processes and is assumed to be created and re-created through social interactions. Within this tradition, the researcher looks at how different individuals negotiate certain perceptions of reality, based on an assumption that these perceptions have real consequences for people’s interactions and identity formations.

The work of Erving Goffman, a pivotal figure in symbolic interactionism, includes studies of how people use and interpret the situations in which they take part to create and maintain certain impressions of themselves (for a lengthier introduction to the work of Goffman, see Mik-Meyer and Villadsen, 2014: 29–47). Goffman’s work consists of several books that explore how identities are negotiated in different contexts. His book *Stigma* (1990a/1965) is particularly relevant for the analyses presented in this chapter. In *Stigma*, Goffman discusses the difference between an apparent and an actual social identity. His point is that people with a disability can experience a discrepancy between the two, namely between the category in which they are placed and their self-perception. For Goffman (1990a/1965: 68), “stigma management is an offshoot of something basic in society, the stereotyping or ‘profiling’ of our normative expectations regarding conduct and character”. The important point is that a visible disability cannot be

seen solely as a physical, observable phenomenon. When a visible disability leads to the stigmatisation of an individual, it becomes a relational phenomenon. This process may reflect a discrepancy between how other people – in this study, managers and colleagues at a workplace – perceive what it means to be “different”, and how persons branded as different see themselves.

Even though identity processes are central, a Goffman-inspired approach entails steering away from explaining how participants feel, the motivations behind their expressions, and how they are *actually* doing. Rather, the focus is on people’s sayings and doings seen in *relation* to the situation in which the sayings and doings take place. Goffman’s focus on everyday life means that the researcher must investigate the participants’ social selves (plural), the actions and interactions that constitute people’s particular lives, and the way in which this multi-faceted practice relates to specific contexts.

Goffman-inspired research often focuses on how individuals cope with a range of different positions or roles. This often involves mutually conflicting descriptions of the participants, derived from various ways of perceiving a specific situation (Goffman, 1990a/1965, 1990b/1959). By using the concept of “role” and the analogy of the theatre (scripts, props, characters, etc.) (Goffman, 1990b/1959), he wished to stress that human interaction is a ritualised practice that follows the script of a play, which defines the situation in which they are part. Particular roles, characters and props are suitable for particular situations. However, people react to the scripts of which they are part and redefine (or even challenges) the dominant perception of the drama played out. Therefore, the peculiarity of a situation is always emphasised in a symbolic interactionist-inspired analysis, as participants define and redefine particular situations every time they meet. The concepts of “interaction order” and “interaction ritual” (Goffman, 2008/1967) emphasise that human encounters are ritualised and are meaningful when taking into consideration the definition of the situation in which the interaction unfolds. Therefore, the focus is on the micro-actions of the participating individuals – both verbal and non-verbal.

As explained in Chapter 1, Goffman is famous for creating a number of “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1970/1953) that have become influential in micro-sociology. Sensitising concepts help the researcher to interpret the phenomena s/he studies, and they also help the reader to understand the researcher’s interpretations. The concepts of “interaction order” and “interaction ritual” indicate that human encounters and interactions are not random and unpredictable, but defined by certain conventions, expectations and role requirements (Goffman, 2008/1967). Another key concept is “face-work” (Goffman, 2008/1967). Again, and according to Goffman, “[face]-to-face interaction has its own regulations; it has its own processes and its own structure” (Goffman [1964] in Lemert and Branaman, 2001: 233).

This concept emphasises a dominant feature of human interaction, namely that individuals seek to avoid losing face or being in the “wrong face” – in other words, they seek to control the impressions they give of themselves; to be “in face” (see also his concept of ‘impression management’; Goffman, 1990b/1959).

The concept of “definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1990b/1959) underlines that people’s definition of a situation is embedded in the way they orientate to each other when they meet. The participants in any situation must agree about the type of situation in which they are interacting, and if they disagree about how to define a given situation (and its interaction order) they will negotiate the order – trying not to “lose face” as they go along. In other words, symbolic interactionist-inspired researchers do not take any preconceived definition of a situation for granted; they look at practice, the local encounter, and attend to what people say and do. This gives the particularity of actions (verbal and non-verbal) a crucial role in symbolic interactionist research.

In terms of methods, researchers inspired by this tradition usually observe the social world they examine and interview its participants. Since interaction is central to symbolic interactionism, it is decisive that researchers reflect on how they as researchers affect the research subjects as well. A crucial element is to reflect upon how the research design (e.g. the focus of observations and interview questions) influences what research participants say and do (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Järvinen, 2000; Mik-Meyer, 2019).

### A very brief introduction to key themes in disability research

The literature on disability and work has typically focused on exclusion mechanisms, for instance low pay and poorer career opportunities for employees with impairments. Since the 1960s, disability research has been predominantly based on what is termed the “social model” for understanding disability. This model replaced the earlier “medical model” (Oliver, 1983: 31). The social model analyses the “disability problem” with reference to structures of society or an organisation. Contrary to the social model, the “medical model” understood the “disability problem” with reference to the medical aspects of an individual’s impairments (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). However, both models have been criticised for being too essentialist in their theoretical approach (Söder, 1999, in Gustavsson, 2004: 59), as they do not explain how dominant perceptions of a disability affect concrete individuals and their situations.

For decades, disability research showed no special interest in how individuals – with and without an impairment – make sense of what it means to have a disability

(Albrecht, 2002). Research showed that people with a disability were seen as different, but did not focus on the everyday practice of how they were made different – a process now commonly referred to as “othering” (Oliver, 2004: 24–26). “Othering”, a concept also known from feminist work, is a term and an area of focus frequently mentioned in the literature on disability as being in need of further study (Oliver, 2004; Campbell, 2009; Foster and Wass, 2012; Williams and Mavin, 2012). To be “othered” is similar to a process of stigmatisation; that is, when people are diminished from being seen as “a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1990a/1965: 12). Within the field of disability research, othering refers to the process where a person with an impairment is made different from “normal people” – a difference that includes an interest in areas of their lives that have nothing to do with their disability (e.g. their personality and attitudes).

## Introduction to the study and its methodology

The chapter’s analyses will demonstrate how othering works in practice by investigating the way in which employees and managers ascribe meaning to disability, when they talk about their colleagues with an impairment. The analysis presented is based on a one-year research project in 2012–2013 that examined the work life of people with cerebral palsy in 13 Danish workplaces (for a detailed description of the study, including ethics, see Mik-Meyer, 2016b).<sup>1</sup> The study’s data set consisted of participant observations and interviews. Field observations allowed me to see things that may be more visible for an outsider than for the insiders: the seemingly unimportant aspects of everyday life (see the discussion of this aspect in Chapter 1 in this volume). Observations of real-life encounters ensured that I was confronted with the specificity and particularity of the phenomenon studied.

Often, as in my case, researchers inspired by symbolic interactionism supplement their observations with interviews. However, when using interviews it is important that the researcher does not steer the interview situation too much as it is the interpretive processes of the *interviewees* that should take centre stage (unless the goal is to investigate the methodological aspects of conducting an interview). Interviewees’ reflections and uninterrupted associations illuminate how they interpret what it means – in this case – to have a disability or to work with a colleague with a disability.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the chapter’s two empirical analyses have been published in Mik-Meyer (2016a, 2016b), and are reprinted with the permission of SAGE Publications Inc. The research project was supported by Elsass Foundation (grant number 4677).

## Data and analytical procedure

The empirical starting-point for the chapter's analysis is four weeks of participant observation at two workplaces and interviews with 13 employees with visible cerebral palsy and their colleagues (43) and managers (19). In the interviews, all three groups reflected on the influence of the disability on their everyday working life. All of the interviews were based on a guide consisting of a series of open questions adapted to suit the three groups of participants' different positions in the organisation. Questions included themes such as the appointment process, duties at work, everyday life in the workplace and career opportunities. Suiting a symbolic interactionist approach, the open questions meant that the interviewees were able to steer the conversation to areas of importance to their work life.

In order to get a systematic overview of how participants talked about particular themes, all interviews were coded. First, a smaller number of interviews were coded line by line to discover what the interviewees were talking about (setting aside the questions of the interviewer). Second, all interviews were coded using a focused approach, inspired by symbolic interactionist themes such as classifications, interaction orders, enactment of relationships, construction of identities ("normal" as well as "deviant") and self-presentations. To ensure that the interview guide did not steer the analysis too much, no specific hypotheses about the material were formulated in advance. Figure 3.1 depicts how I did the analysis.

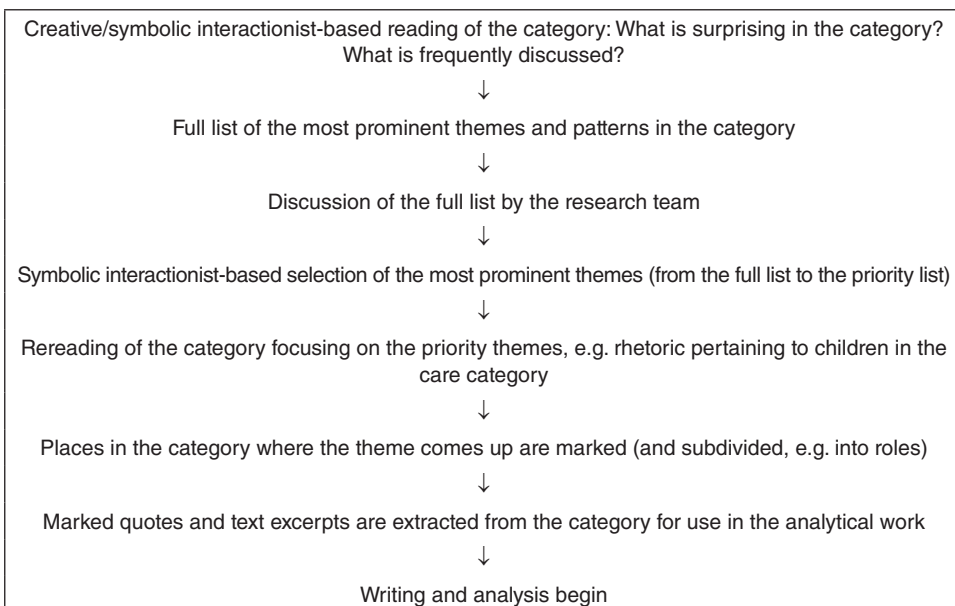


Figure 3.1 The initial process of analysing data



## Analysis of othering in practice

The two analyses presented in this chapter are based on my observation of “caring relations” and the interviewees talk about “care” (which filled 37 pages; analysis 1) and managers’ and employees’ (without a disability) talk about “other minority groups” (analysis 2). Two-thirds of the managers and employees brought up stories of care and/or minorities when talking about their colleague with a disability.

The first analysis focuses on care, because the four weeks of observations clearly showed that a “caring” relation between the employee with a disability and her/his colleagues and managers was a dominating kind of relation. As the analysis will show, engaging in such a caring relationship demonstrates a way in which managers and employees in practice “other” their colleague with a disability (albeit probably unintentionally).

The second analysis exhibits how employees with a disability are automatically categorised alongside other people with deviations. This second analysis takes as its starting-point the interviewees’ own associations and agendas when talking about their colleague with a disability. The analysis shows how their descriptions are linked to the interaction order of the disability field and (again probably unintentionally) lead to the othering of their colleague with a disability.

### Othering by positioning a colleague with a disability as requiring care

Care was a recurring phenomenon in the everyday work life in the two workplaces I observed. In everyday encounters, the special position occupied by the employee with cerebral palsy quickly became obvious. Participants would approach their colleague with a disability using a louder voice, with an extraordinary encouraging and smiling attitude, using their colleague’s first name repeatedly, and asking about his/her private life in ways they did not do with other colleagues. In the interviews, the managers and other employees repeatedly spoke about their colleague with a disability in terms of a “care relationship” (without being prompted to do so). The concept of care refers here to all situations and statements in which the participants displayed a form of caring contact, or used terms such as “pay special attention”, “taking care of”, “supporting”, “protecting”, “looking after”, as well as examples of using nicknames pointing to people in need of care (“bear cub”, “pet”). The special attention to the colleague with a disability necessitated a closer look at this phenomenon.

Many employees and managers whose talk I categorised as “care” mentioned the concrete help that they had offered their colleague with an impairment (fetching coffee, getting printed papers, etc.). However, a lot of them also spoke about their colleague in a very distinct way. These accounts – which constitute the

starting-point for the following analysis – refer to paying particular *emotional* attention to their colleague with a disability (cf. Shakespeare, 2000). For example, a manager and a colleague talked about the special attention the employee with a disability got at their workplace:

*Manager:* It wasn't something you would expect from an ordinary colleague. This constant attention, you know, almost like how you'd act towards a small child; that's how bad it was.

*Colleague:* I have also heard conversations where a person, when they talk to him ... it's like they're sitting across from a child, you know? ... It's something I've noticed and been a bit puzzled by. ... When they're sitting across from this particular colleague, who has a disability, they are not saying things they usually say or reacting the way they usually react, and you start to wonder: what's going on? It's as if they're on the phone with their own child. ... I encounter this almost on a daily basis.

Such “constant attention” and unusual reactions from co-workers without a disability – resembling the sort of attention normally reserved for “a small child” – seem to be related to a specific interaction order connected to disability (Goffman, 1990b/1959). It is an order that results in an asymmetric way of talking about the colleague with a disability (see also Williams, 2001; Watson et al., 2004; Kröger, 2009). The order stems from an interaction order that centres care, a Goffmanian “play of care-giving”, and the proper roles to take on in this kind of interaction will be as a caring parent (employees without a disability) and a child (employee with a disability), respectively. Of course, both parties can resist acting the characters of the play of care-giving. However, they also risk falling “out of face”, if they do not succeed in transforming the definition of the situation from a play of care-giving to, for instance, a play of work.

In another interview at the same workplace, an employee explained why several of her co-workers behaved very differently towards their colleague with a disability:

We have that maternal instinct, you know? He needs to be protected a bit. ... Because he's so small and cute. [*laughs*] I don't really know why we have that maternal instinct. It's just protection.

In other words, to follow the interaction order in this workplace would be to act on the basis of a “maternal instinct” towards your co-worker with a disability. In yet another interview, at a third workplace, one member of staff stated that the colleague was like a “pet”, who triggered their “care gene”:

Well, I guess that you could call him our little pet, right? Because we are all women [*laughs*], we all have children, and if this care gene isn't always sufficiently used at home, then it's used here. And I guess he has been subjected to a bit of that here.

In this workplace, several of the staff had special nicknames for their colleague. As well as being their “son”, “small and sweet” and their “pet”, other interviews revealed that he was also known as “little man” and “bear cub” who “might cry when insecure” and “mess up”. Such terms create an impression of a small and defenceless creature, and imply that their colleague with cerebral palsy needs to be looked after and protected.

However, the interviews also included examples of criticism of this interaction order – especially from the employees with a disability. The man who was described by colleagues as a “bear cub” and a “pet” explained, for example, that his colleagues sometimes “helped [him] too much – out of kindness”. His colleagues also talked about his criticism, that is his dissatisfaction with their care as well as their definition of the situation as one that primarily had to do with care. In the interviews, they explained how “he gets extremely sensitive when we start to fuss” and that he “can actually get angry if you keep doing it, if you fuss over him a bit too much”. A third colleague told how she had been “reprimanded” by him – “Don’t mother me. You’ve got your own kids.” She described his ability to reject being treated differently by his colleagues in positive terms. She continued:

I think that he handles his limitations extremely well by not wanting it [the care], because he’s very aware that he has to be able to manage by himself. So he shouldn’t have too many mothers at his heels doing everything for him. He doesn’t want that at all. ... You know, he’s a grown man and he can take care of himself. ... He creates a really good, a really good sense of equality by saying, “This is me and you’re not crossing this line. You’re someone else’s mum. But you’re not mine. So just stop it.” ... I really get why he feels the need to tell us off. And that creates a sense of equality.

According to her, there should be no “difference in the dialogue”, as he worked “on equal terms” with the others. All of the participants were, in other words, struggling to define the situation, and hence their mutual relationship, as an ordinary work relation (preferred by employees with a disability) or as a caring, and sometimes parental relation (acted out and described by co-workers without a disability).

This example about care exemplifies how participant observation can lead to the discovery of a phenomenon, which in this case was the special positioning of a colleagues and rhetoric about them being in need of specific attention. Hereafter the researcher can look for this phenomenon in the interviews (that have been conducted in a relatively open-ended way). Thereby it is possible to arrive at a more qualified understanding of the processes of interpretation attached to having a disability in Danish workplaces. The method of participant observation allows the researcher to study when and how this special positioning of the colleague arises, seen in the light of the situation that made it “natural” to establish

a relationship of this kind. Participant observation also identified a rhetoric about children, which was confirmed in the interviews.

It is worth adding (again) that no questions about this specific form of interaction were posed during the interviews. The interview guide contained open questions about, among other things, the significance of the disability for their work and participation in social events. However, at no point did the interviewers mention the theme of care, for example. Managers and colleagues in the two workplaces where participant observations were conducted spoke in greater depth about caring for their colleague with a disability than managers and colleagues in the other workplaces. This may have been because they were aware that the dominant interaction order was so apparent that they knew that I (the researcher) had noticed it. As such, more elaborated descriptions about care naturally arose during the interviews in these two workplaces.

Care is a central theme in the literature on disability and is often discussed in conjunction with stigmatising and infantilising practices (e.g. Shakespeare, 2000). Care is undoubtedly a moral phenomenon (Kittay, 2011: 53) and can be seen as “a positive, affective bond and investment in another’s well-being” (Kittay, 2011: 52). However, as shown in my analysis (and others’), care can also lead to stigmatising practices, not least in the form of dependent and asymmetric relationships between the giver and receiver of care. In my study, caring for your colleague with a disability created and deepened the dependency, which both parties explicitly said they wanted to overcome. Thus, a symbolic interactionist approach is a framework of analysis that can show the ambiguity of relationships between people and the way dominant assumptions about particular “types” of people (e.g. Goffman, 1990a/1965; Stone and Colella, 1996) may lead to processes of stigmatisation and stereotyping.

Ciaran Acton and Myra Hird (2004) argue, for example, that stammering is a social phenomenon, not least because it usually only manifests itself when the person with the stammer is in the company of others. Their study demonstrates how people who stammer try to “cover up or deny the reality of their speech pattern: what Goffman refers to as ‘passing’” (Acton and Hird, 2004: 505) in order to avoid the associated stigma. One of the key points in much of the research that utilises a symbolic interactionist perspective is that categorisation of problem identities has great significance for the individuals who find themselves labelled. Another study looks at how clients are “labelled” during appointments at a UK job centre. In this study, the researchers find that “clients are categorized quickly and largely on the basis of body language and demeanour in the initial interview with advisers” (Rosenthal and Peccei, 2006: 1652). Here, clients’ “job readiness” is evaluated by staff in relation to whether they showed gratitude or aggression when encountering staff. The symbolic interactionist data – the clients’ verbal and

non-verbal language and “self-presentation” (clothing, etc.) – was a significant indicator for these evaluations. Recently, I have conducted a study on the negotiation of homelessness in three Danish shelters that also centre the participants’ verbal and non-verbal actions. In this case, the data set consists of 23 video recordings of placement meetings with homeless individuals and service providers. The analyses show the important role of non-verbal actions (drawing your body up to full length, looking down, offering coffee to other participants, etc.) in determining agency and authority in these encounters (Mik-Meyer, 2019; Mik-Meyer and Haugaard, 2019; Mik-Meyer and Silverman, 2019).

Similar to the above-mentioned studies, the analysis just presented shows the way in which stigma is negotiated in everyday organisational life. The analysis of the chapter has so far demonstrated how managers and employees make their colleagues with a disability “different from others in the category of persons available for [them] to be, and of a less desirable kind” (Goffman, 1990a/1965: 12). Goffman goes on to explain that the stigmatising process occurs when people are diminished “in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1990a/1965: 12). Drawing on Goffman’s metaphors of the theatre (1990b/1959), stigma (1990a/1965) and the way in which the “interaction order” (2008/1967) of disability works makes it possible to analyse *how* “normal” colleague–colleague or manager–employee relations in the workplace are replaced by unusual working relationships, such as parent–child, helper–helpless, or protector–protected. The next analysis will provide possible reasons *why* employees with a disability are othered in Danish workplaces. This question needs an answer as the employees and managers jointly state that they want inclusive and tolerant workplaces; that is, they do not want to stigmatise their colleague with a disability. Yet, they often end up doing exactly that.

### Othering by categorising disability along with other deviations

This following analysis demonstrates another way in which employees with a disability are othered – in this case, by their disability being compared to other deviations. In the interviews, employees and managers without a disability frequently made reference to other groups and individuals with a disability, when they talked about their colleague with impairments. S/he reminded them of persons in wheelchairs or on crutches or, for instance, former colleagues who were (also) difficult to understand because of a speech impairment.

However, the following analysis emphasises examples of another kind. The interviews threw up a number of surprising associations with groups and individuals *without* impairments. References were made to people who were different because

of their sexual orientation, skin colour, hair colour, style of clothes, for example. Managers and employees talked about these groups of people: persons who were not ethnically Danes, homosexuals, drunks, children, transvestites, redheads, blondes, older women, pregnant women, people in mourning, women in male-dominated professions, drunk-drivers, Germans and Indians with poor English, marginalised people in general (without a disability) and people who were not very good at their jobs. The first analytical observation is that the interaction order in conversations about disability makes it relevant to talk about all kinds of “different” people.

Surprisingly, the interviews included descriptions of people that did not resemble the work situation of their colleague whose situation had led to these associations. Such highly varied associations were a recurring phenomenon in the interviews, despite the fact that the interviewers never asked about other groups that differ from the norm, nor did they otherwise steer the conversation in that direction. As a result, a systematic “incident-to-incident” search of the interviews was conducted (see Chapter 10 of this volume). The goal was to collect all the stories of “different” types of people in the 62 interviews with managers and employees without disabilities. The subsequent analytical work consisted of identifying why questions about their colleague with a disability automatically would lead to descriptions of all kinds of minority groups. The aim was to describe the frame of references related to disability in order to reveal the interpretive processes of disability of able-bodied managers and employees.

In the following excerpt, an employee reflects on a colleague’s disability. An ellipsis (...) indicates that he pauses a bit. The interviewer does not interrupt him.

*Interviewer:* You said that your impression of him changed within the first few weeks or over the initial period that you worked together?

*Colleague:* Yes. Yes. Well, in the beginning, you had to figure out what it was all about, what it meant. You might say that me meeting Ed, who has a disability ... In the beginning, I mostly focused on the fact that he had a disability, you know? And on my own efforts to distract from it, you know? I had to remind myself that I was talking to Ed – not a person with a disability. I find that to be the case a lot. You know, if I encounter something abnormal, I become preoccupied with persuading myself that ... how can I put this? To be frank, it’s none of my business, and I really don’t mind it, but I’m very much aware of making sure that the person who I perceive as abnormal can’t tell that I find him or her abnormal, you know? It’s like meeting a transvestite who you have to talk to. You just sit and remember that this is not the important thing, but that [something else] is, you know? Even if you really don’t mind that the person is a transvestite. You’re just having a conversation, you know? But I don’t know if this makes any sense?

The quote shows how, with no prompting or input from the interviewer, this employee goes from talking about meeting “Ed, who has a disability”, to talking

with Ed as “not a person with a disability”, to meeting “something abnormal”/“who I perceive as abnormal”, to saying “it’s like meeting a transvestite”. His chain of associations demonstrates a frame of reference for disability that indicates that it is preferable not to talk about a colleague’s impairments. The employee appears to be testing his perception of Ed as abnormal against the interviewer’s silence (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) – and, in all probability, against the inherent and contradictory “ableism” context (Campbell, 2009) in relation to which Ed appears different. He is also testing his perception of Ed as abnormal against his own tolerance and inclusivity, which makes it problematic to talk about a colleague’s disability (he risks being seen as intolerant and exclusionary, as per Goffman’s concept of impression management). These contradictory interpretations may be the reason that he tones down his classification of Ed from “something abnormal” to “what I perceive as abnormal”; that is, that other people do not necessarily classify Ed as different.

Without the explicit acceptance or acknowledgement of the interviewer, the employee goes on to introduce the parallel with a transvestite. Given that transvestites can (also) be viewed as a social group that deviates from the norm, this shift may indicate an attempt to cement Ed’s difference. Note how the employee’s choice of pronoun (“like meeting a transvestite who *you* have to talk to”) can be interpreted as meaning that everybody – including the interviewer – would categorise a transvestite as abnormal. Note also how important it seems to be for him to be considered tolerant (“this is not the important thing”, “I really don’t mind it”, etc.) – statements that all point at central norms of tolerance and inclusion.

This employee’s chain of associations not only reflects a particular frame of reference about disability, but also addresses the point made by the social worker with a disability in the quote at the beginning of the chapter: that cerebral palsy attracts a great deal of attention. The spontaneous association between Ed and a transvestite thus becomes meaningful when this connection is considered in relation to dominant norms about ableism and inclusion/tolerance. The employee’s closing rhetorical question (“I don’t know if this makes any sense?”) shows that he is uncertain what it is legitimate to say about disability. This indicates both that the meaning of a disability is determined in this particular interview context, and that disability is an ambiguous phenomenon – one that is visible to everyone, but is still something that it is preferable not to talk about (Albrecht, 2002). In this light, the employee’s answer makes good sense – even if, as his question indicates, he himself is not entirely convinced. This mini-analysis shows the strength of a symbolic interactionist analysis. By interpreting a very short interview excerpt with the sensitising concept of ‘labelling’, it is possible to conduct a thorough analysis of central problems in relations between people with and without visible



impairments. It should be noted, of course, that the work is based on a large volume of material that has already been systematically processed.

In the next example, a manager at another workplace actively endeavours to avoid perceiving an employee with cerebral palsy as different. When asked how she would introduce the member of staff concerned to her team, the manager makes an association with “dumb” people and blondes. Right away, before answering the interviewer’s question, she affirms the importance of there being “room for everyone” in the labour market. As in the previous example, nothing has been omitted from the following interview excerpt:

*Interviewer:* If you were to get a new apprentice tomorrow who was to become a part of your team, how would you introduce Rita?

*Manager:* Only by saying, “This is Rita, and she’s also one of our permanent employees”, you know? I wouldn’t say that Rita has a disability or something like that straight away, not at all. I wouldn’t, and I wouldn’t do it to any of my other employees either. Plus, they don’t actually discuss it [the disability]. They just take her as she is, like she’s just an ordinary colleague, you know? Just like all the others, and on equal terms. There’s no walking around with a huge sign [*laughs*] and being labelled, not at all. We don’t do that.

*Interviewer:* No, and I know that it may sound like a silly question, but I’ve never managed people in that way, so would you mind explaining to me why that would be a wrong thing to say?

*Manager:* Well, you know, it’s like, well ... It would be equally wrong for me to say, “Well, this one is dumb” or “She’s a blonde” or something like that, you know? Then she’s kind of labelled, you know? And we don’t label people. We don’t. You know, Rita is Rita, and my apprentice is Apprentice Peter, right? And I’m me, you know? I wouldn’t start saying, “Rita has a disability. That one over there, she can’t lift things, and this one, she can’t do this and that”. Then you’re kind of labelled, you know, and she’s not. That’s why I wouldn’t go over there and say, “She can’t do this and this and this”. Because she can. So to me, she’s not disabled.

Similar to the other colleagues cited, she does not wish to “label” her employee because of a disability. Based on the number of times she repeats this point, it is probable that she does not want to appear to be the type of person who labels others. Her presentation of self in the interview setting is that of a tolerant and inclusive type of person. The fact that she laughs after saying “There’s no walking around with a huge sign” suggests that this is of importance to her. One possible explanation for this insistence could be that this standpoint – not labelling people – adheres to the general norms of tolerance and inclusion in society and hence also to the (expected) norms of the interviewer who conducts research into disability. Her reaction – to stress that she is in favour of integrating people



with a disability in the labour market – demonstrates how the meaning of having a disability is co-created in the interaction with the interviewer.

The manager's statements cast Rita as an "ordinary colleague", but she then goes on to talk about blondes and "dumb" people. In doing so, she calls upon norms derived from ableism in relation to which Rita is automatically positioned as different. This is despite the manager's explicit statements that Rita is an "ordinary colleague ... just like all the others, and on equal terms". As in the example involving Ed above, Rita's disability can be understood as rooted in what Penny Dick (2013) calls a "politics of experience". In other words, situation-specific experiences have an embedded political and moral basis that positions the manager between two different views of disability: Rita's disability is simultaneously an objective phenomenon (it is visible) and a sensitive one (it must not be spoken about). The manager "solves" this problem (that it is socially illegitimate to talk about Rita's disability) by referring to other different people, who in this case are unintelligent or blonde. This "solution" makes it possible for her to talk indirectly about Rita's position as different and unfortunately (and surely unintentionally) leads to a further stigmatisation of Rita.

This second analysis provides an example of how managers and colleagues spontaneously "other" their colleague with a disability by comparing them to other groups that they also perceive as different (e.g. transvestites, "dumb" people and blondes). Despite their best efforts not to describe employees with a disability as different, they nonetheless manage to both make them different and reinforce the very stereotypes that they are endeavouring to tone down. This illustrates precisely how different the members of staff with cerebral palsy are in the eyes of managers and colleagues (and thus the strength of ableism; that is, dominant perceptions of what is normal). The only common denominator between the diverse array of groups they mention and the colleague with cerebral palsy is that they all look or are different from the norm. Since the managers and colleagues refrain from speaking about the difference of their colleague with a disability, ableism cannot be the only norm to define able-bodied co-workers' meaning-making of disability. The unwillingness to speak about their colleague's disability suggests strong norms of inclusion and tolerance that make it socially illegitimate to talk about visible disability, because you run the risk of appearing exclusionary or intolerant.

## Conclusion

The literature on disability contains many discussions of how "ableism" is difficult to study, as its ambiguous nature makes it difficult to define (e.g. Albrecht, 2002: 26; Campbell, 2009). It is impossible to arrive at an unequivocal definition of what

it means to be “able” and “normal”. However, this chapter’s analysis suggests that employees with a disability are not easily included in the category of “normal” people. Even though the category “employee with a visible disability” is an example of an identity to which multiple different meanings can be attributed, to be “normal” does not seem to be one of them.

The analysis of the chapter demonstrates how a symbolic interactionist perspective is relevant when studying disability, if the goal is to better understand what it means to have a visible disability and how and why people with a visible disability are “othered”. In the words of Goffman (1990b/1959), it is “the routine aspects of everyday life that at first glance seem unimportant” that end up explaining the content of what it means to have a disability. This chapter shows how a symbolic interactionist perspective, which examines a small amount of data, can qualify analyses of how a visible disability affects both employees with a disability and their colleagues and managers in Danish work organisations. The analysis shows that there exists a dominant caring approach to people with a disability in the workplace, which results in an unintentional othering, or a process of stigmatisation and marginalisation. The literature on disability has long called for research into precisely such practices of othering and marginalisation (Albrecht, 2002; Oliver, 2004; Campbell, 2009). However, more subtle processes of how marginalisation unfolds in everyday life are difficult to investigate via more traditional research approaches, for instance by looking into differences in pay, promotions and other quantifiable phenomena. Symbolic interactionism’s focus on identity constructions, labelling practices, definitions of situations and interaction orders makes this tradition an effective approach for looking beyond the discrimination statistics and understanding other aspects of the working life of employees with a disability.

The chapter’s first analysis showed how employees and managers position colleagues with a disability as being in need of care. This analysis focused on how participants (with and without a disability) often described their relationship as being equivalent to parent–child, helper–helpless and protector–protected relationships. As explained and discussed in interviews with both the employees with a disability and their colleagues and managers, this distribution of roles generated a form of social interaction that in many ways challenges the norms of equality and respect – norms that all of the participants in the research project described as important in the workplace, and which disability research has long sought to safeguard (Shakespeare, 2000). The tendency to exaggerated caring for employees with a disability therefore points to a stigmatising practice (Goffman, 1990a/1965). However, this kind of stigmatisation is not equivalent to classical studies of bullying, harassment and discrimination in the workplace (e.g. Robert and Harlan, 2006; Fevre et al., 2013).

The symbolic interactionist perspective made it possible to conduct analyses showing that caring is a highly ambivalent social practice linked to a particular interaction

order (Shakespeare, 2000: xi). Further, the analysis made it clear that care can lead to dependency, which much of the disability research has long shown (e.g. Morris, 1997; Fine and Glendinning, 2005; Kröger, 2009). The analysis of care also demonstrated a form of social interaction between the parties that unintentionally caused employees with a disability to become trapped in the role of a child or helpless person.

In addition, the chapter focused on another process of othering, namely when managers and colleagues talk about employees with a disability by comparing them with other people they consider different, such as transvestites, “dumb” people and blondes. Hence, despite their efforts not to describe their colleagues with a disability as different, they nonetheless succeed in othering them and reinforcing the norms attached to their perceptions of disability that make them different. This finding points towards strong norms of inclusiveness and tolerance, which makes it off-limits to talk about differences such as visible impairments because this may be construed as the interviewee being non-inclusive or intolerant. Along with the care analysis, this second analysis of othering exemplifies one of the major strengths of symbolic interactionist analyses – namely to explain why people actively reproduce practices (e.g. in interviews) from which they explicitly distance themselves: in this case, reinforcing the “difference” of a colleague with a disability despite explicitly wanting to do the exact opposite.

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## Key concepts

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**Face-work** As with most of Goffman’s concepts, face-work is an interactionist concept that highlights the moral aspect of human encounters. Individuals can act in either an improper (“wrong-face”) or proper (“in-face”) way. As individuals mainly strive to be “in-face”, they will do everything they can to save face and avoid acting improperly – an endeavour that their co-actors typically support them in. Face-work relates to the rules of practice as well as the social skills of the participants. The joint goal of the participants is to help each other to avoid crossing social boundaries that could threaten their faces.

**Interaction order** Interaction order emphasises that human encounters are meaningful when taking the situation in which they unfold into consideration. The concept underlines that individuals and social structures are not separate and competing entities, and that individuals continuously have to take other people’s expectations into consideration when they (inter)act. The interaction order displays the rules and procedures of the situation in which the encounter takes place.

**Presentation of self in everyday life** Presentation of self in everyday life is a concept that directs attention to the fact that social life is a drama, and that the unit of analysis is the interaction and mutual meaning-making of people in their

everyday life. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals put on a performance that resonates with the social situation in which they are acting. Goffman sees the social self as deriving from the reactions of others as well as from the set of rituals and procedures defining the situation in which people interact.

**Stigma** For Goffman, stigma refers to a state of “undesired differentness”. The tendency of “normal people” to consider the stigmatised person as different often leads to discrimination (e.g. against people with physical disabilities, mental disorders). However, as with other concepts developed by Goffman, stigma is a relational phenomenon. In other words, what constitutes stigma changes over time, and in accordance with the norms, rules and procedures of the situations in which people interact.

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# 4

## PHENOMENOLOGY AS QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

Michael Gill

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Phenomenological philosophy	74
• Husserl's descriptive phenomenology	74
• Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology	75
Differences between types of phenomenological methodologies	76
• Sanders's phenomenology for organisational research	77
• Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method	79
• Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology	80
• Benner's interpretive phenomenology	82
• Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis	83
Guidelines for selecting one type of phenomenology	84
Similarities across the family of phenomenological methodologies	86
Methodological developments and concluding discussion	87
Key concepts	89
Further reading	89
References	90

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Phenomenology is both a philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies. The term “phenomenology” refers to the study of phenomena, where a phenomenon is anything that appears to someone in their conscious experience (Moran, 2000). The objective of this chapter is to develop a typology to classify and contrast five phenomenological methodologies from diverse disciplines. This chapter illustrates how different types of phenomenological methodologies can be applied by focusing on an example of each in the field of organisational studies. The development of a typology is important because distinct phenomenological methodologies have proliferated across different social sciences, including nursing, pedagogy and psychology. By comparing the differing assumptions, aims and analytical steps of each methodology, the chapter seeks to illuminate the broad possibilities of phenomenology to address a range of research questions. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine each type of phenomenology in its entirety, it elaborates on a series of guidelines to support researchers in selecting one type that is apposite to their needs.

Four sections structure this chapter. First, it briefly introduces the philosophy of phenomenology to explicate the divide between its descriptive and interpretive forms. Second, drawing on this divide, the chapter develops a typology that classifies and contrasts five phenomenological methodologies and then generates guidelines to support researchers in selecting one type. Third, it posits that these distinct methodologies relate to one another through several inherent similarities that render them phenomenological. Fourth, it provides a concluding discussion.

## Phenomenological philosophy

While a variety of philosophers have advanced and developed phenomenology, most types of phenomenology draw principally from the work of Edmund Husserl or Martin Heidegger. Given the large amount of literature that discusses their ideas (e.g. Holt and Sandberg, 2011), the aim of this section is only to draw a clear distinction between Husserl’s descriptive and Heidegger’s interpretive approaches to phenomenology. This distinction is important because it illuminates many of the fundamental differences between the methodologies that this chapter will go on to examine.

### Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology

Edmund Husserl is the putative founder of phenomenological philosophy, and his work directly informs “descriptive” phenomenological methodologies, which seek to describe the essence of experiences. In his 1927 entry for *Encyclopedia*

*Britannica*, Husserl (translated by Palmer, 1971: 77) states that the term phenomenology designates two things: “a new kind of descriptive method, which made a breakthrough in philosophy at the turn of the century, and an *a priori* science derived from it”.

Husserl refers to his descriptive method as “reduction”, which underpins the analytical process of several phenomenological methodologies. In his other publications (Husserl, 1973, 2001, 2012), he discusses several kinds of reduction – the initial one being the phenomenological (or transcendental) reduction. This reduction requires the phenomenological *epoché* or *bracketing*, where a phenomenologist suspends their assumptions and presuppositions about a phenomenon. By disconnecting from, or transcending, the natural attitude of “everyday life”, Husserl believed his method of phenomenological reduction provided an outlook “upon ‘transcendentally’ purified phenomena” (2012: 3) where “purified” means “free from everyday assumptions”.

A further tenet of descriptive phenomenological methodologies is a search for essences. This calls for a further (different kind of) reduction known as *eidetic* reduction. Following reduction to the transcendent there is further reduction to the *eidos* or the essence. ‘Essence’ refers to the *a priori*, essential structures of subjective experiences or “that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e., without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such” (Husserl, 1973: 341). Husserl suggested that phenomenologists could see these essences through intuition or, more specifically, through the process of free variation. This process requires imagining different variations of the phenomenon under study to see what remains as its invariant or essential aspect without which it would be inconceivable. Phenomenology is “a science which aims exclusively at establishing ‘knowledge of essences’” (Husserl, 2012: 3). Phenomenology “must bring to pure expression, must *describe* in terms of their essential concepts, the essences which directly make themselves known in intuition” (Husserl, 2001: 86; emphasis in original). To Husserl, essences are the foundation for all other knowledge, and phenomenological methodologies that draw on his work share his goal to describe these essences.

### Heidegger’s interpretive phenomenology

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, developed his own type of phenomenology that differed in terms of both subject and method, inspiring “hermeneutic” or “interpretive” phenomenological methodologies. Heidegger began to outline his divergence from Husserl in his seminal treatise *Being and Time*, stating that with “regard to its subject matter, phenomenology is the science of the being of entities – ontology” (1996: 33). In contrast to Husserl’s epistemological focus, Heidegger

considers the question of being and, in particular, explores the human experience of being, which he terms *Dasein*. Heidegger's employment of such a neologism reflected his desire to develop a language unencumbered by the assumptions of the Cartesian subject–object divide. As Heidegger (1988: 297) explained: “Self and world belong together in the single entity, the *Dasein*.”

To explore the concept of *Dasein*, Heidegger emphasised the role of interpretation in any phenomenological endeavour. He states that the “methodological meaning of phenomenological description is *interpretation*” and that the “[p]henomenology of *Dasein* is *hermeneutics* in the original signification of that word, which designates the work of interpretation” (1996: 33; emphasis retained).

For any phenomenological methodology drawing on the work of Heidegger, interpretation is not a choice but an integral aspect of research. As Dreyfus (1991) notes in his reading of Heidegger's work, Heidegger introduced the hermeneutic method into modern philosophy by explicating the necessity of interpretation in the study of human beings. Heidegger (1988: 164) suggested that individuals are “always already in an enviroing world”, meaning that everyone exists in a culturally and historically conditioned environment from which they cannot step outside. Existence is always set against a background that contextualises experience. In this way, an individual's culture and traditions influence their understanding of an experience. As such, Heidegger challenges the notion that we can ever be free of assumptions, arguing that an “interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something to us” (1996: 141). Heidegger's interpretive approach to studying human existence denies the possibility of fully detached reflection and thereby disputes Husserl's idea of bracketing presuppositions to articulate an essence.

### Differences between types of phenomenological methodologies

Any type of phenomenological methodology rests upon an interpretation of phenomenological philosophy. Though many methodological chapters within organisation studies describe phenomenology as one standard methodology (e.g. Goulding, 2005; Suddaby, 2006), it is important for researchers to recognise that a variety of types exist due, primarily, to different underlying phenomenological philosophies. As Heidegger (1988: 328) insisted, “there is no such thing as *the one* phenomenology” (emphasis in original). These different philosophies inform the (often incommensurable) assumptions, objectives and analytical steps of different phenomenological methodologies.

Table 4.1 provides a classificatory typology of five phenomenological methodologies. These five methodologies were selected as they originate from diverse

disciplines, possess high citations in their respective disciplines and effectively demonstrate the scope of phenomenology. The methodologies in this typology relate to one another through a hierarchy, with an overarching concept of being phenomenological. As in other typologies, the column and row categories illuminate the attributes of each methodology (Collier et al., 2012). The columns utilise a descriptive–interpretive (Husserlian–Heideggerian) dichotomy to classify each methodology.

This typology's rows shed light on each type's attributes and draw out their underlying dimensions to clarify their differences for researchers. The first row considers the disciplinary origin of each type to illuminate their heritage and to indicate the subjects that they typically explore. The second row considers the aim of each methodology, clarifying that while some seek to explicate the essences of experiences, others attempt to articulate understandings or make sense of experiences. The third row considers the participant and sampling requirements of each type, so that researchers understand the practical implications of pursuing one methodology. The fourth row lists some of the key concepts associated with each type to help researchers appreciate their different notions of data collection and analysis.

The construction of a typology enables this chapter to contrast each of the five phenomenological methodologies to support researchers in discerning which type is apposite to their research needs. However, an inevitable consequence of classification and categorisation is some degree of simplification (McKinney, 1969). Each methodology possesses its own subtleties that a single chapter cannot capture. Indeed, this chapter does not seek to introduce all the key tenets of each methodology, as various chapters and textbooks already perform this task. Instead, this chapter stresses that its classifications and comparisons function as an introductory aid to, rather than a replacement for, becoming familiar with the nuances of a particular phenomenological approach. A final section entitled 'Guidelines for Selecting One Type of Phenomenology' reflects on these comparisons and offers some specific considerations for researchers contemplating phenomenological studies.

### Sanders's phenomenology for organisational research

Patricia Sanders's (1982) chapter is one of the few attempts to outline a phenomenological approach to the study of organisations and remains one of the most highly cited. Sanders describes her phenomenology as a research technique, which seeks to "make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experiences" (1982: 354) by exposing the universal pure essences that underlie human consciousness. This search for essences renders Sanders's approach a distinctly descriptive and Husserlian type of phenomenology.

Table 4.1 A typology of phenomenological methodologies

	<b>Phenomenology</b>			
	<b>Descriptive phenomenology (Husserlian)</b>		<b>Interpretive phenomenology (Heideggerian)</b>	
	<b>Sanders's phenomenology</b>	<b>Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method</b>	<b>Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology</b>	<b>Benner's interpretive phenomenology</b>
<i>Disciplinary origin</i>	Organization studies	Psychology	Pedagogy	Psychology
<i>Aims</i>	To make explicit the implicit structure (or essences) and meaning of human experiences	To establish the essence of a particular phenomenon	To transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence	To articulate practical, everyday understandings and knowledge
<i>Participants (sampling)</i>	3–6	At least 3	<i>Unspecified</i>	1 or more
<i>Key concepts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bracketing (epoché)</li> <li>• Eidetic reduction</li> <li>• Nomematic/noetic correlates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bracketing (epoché)</li> <li>• Eidetic reduction</li> <li>• Imaginative variation</li> <li>• Meaning units</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depthful writing</li> <li>• Orientation</li> <li>• Thoughtfulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Double hermeneutic</li> <li>• Idiographic</li> <li>• Inductive</li> </ul>
			Until new informants reveal no new findings	To explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world

Sanders argues that a phenomenologist should probe a limited number of individuals as sufficient information may be collected through the intensive interviewing of approximately three to six individuals. She goes on to suggest that while interviews are the centrepiece of phenomenological research, researchers can use document analyses and participant observation techniques conjunctively. By recording and transcribing interviews, researchers produce narratives to analyse.

Sanders notes that Husserl's bracketing is essential for any phenomenological inquiry and then sets out four levels of phenomenological analysis. First, a researcher describes the phenomena experienced by a participant, as revealed in interviews. Second, the researcher identifies the common themes (*invariants*) that emerge across the descriptions. Third, the researcher reflects on these themes and establishes the object as perceived or the "what" of participants' conscious experience (the *noema*) and the meaning this holds for the participant or "how" this is experienced (the *noesis*). It is their relationship, or the *nomematic/noetic correlates*, which represents "the individual's perception of the reality of the phenomena under investigation" (Sanders, 1982: 357). Fourth, the researcher utilises intuition and reflection, or *eidetic reduction*, to abstract the essences or "why" individuals experience a phenomenon in the way they do.

The strength of Sanders's paper stems from its provision of practical steps for organisational researchers who wish to pursue phenomenological research. However, few subsequent studies develop or elaborate her approach. In an indicative example, Kram and Isabella's (1985) pioneering research into mentoring within organisations cites Sanders's phenomenology as informing their data analysis but refer to her work only once. Consequently, several important aspects of conducting Sanders's phenomenology remain unclear, such as how to undertake the different stages of reduction or bracket presuppositions fully.

### Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method

Amedeo Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method is one of the most thoroughly developed and highly cited types of phenomenology (see Wertz, 2005). Unlike Sanders, Giorgi has been prolific in detailing his modifications to Husserl's phenomenological philosophy to create a psychological phenomenology and in providing rigorous guidelines to advance a phenomenological science (see Giorgi, 2006a). His phenomenology aims to establish and present the essence of a particular psychological phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985, 1997, 2009).

Sampling is similar across different types of descriptive phenomenological methodologies as Giorgi, like Sanders, calls for at least three participants as "a sufficient number of variations are needed in order to come up with a typical essence" (Giorgi, 2008: 37). A small number of participants is required, however,

as researchers must thoroughly assess all data, where “data” is the description of a situation by an experienter (Giorgi, 2006a), typically through interviews.

Though Giorgi’s method appears very similar to Sanders’s phenomenology, and also requires bracketing (Giorgi, 2009), he does employ different terminology and a subtly different analytical process with an emphasis on meaning units. Giorgi (1985) prescribes four analytical steps. First, a researcher must read the full description provided by a participant to get a sense of their whole experience. Second, the researcher must read the text to identify and isolate ‘meaning units’. Meaning units are the separate sections of an interview that present a change in meaning for the participant, in relation to a phenomenon. Third, the researcher probes these meaning units through Husserl’s method of imaginative variation. Spiegelberg (1982) describes imaginative variation as a process through which a researcher mentally experiments with aspects of an experience, adding or removing aspects until the resulting transformation no longer describes the experience underlying an experience. As Giorgi (2007: 64) states, if “the imaginative elimination of an aspect causes the phenomenon to collapse, then that aspect is essential”. Fourth, the researcher integrates and synthesises the meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of the phenomenon, which equates to its essence.

Giorgi (1985, 2006b) provides guidance to other social scientists seeking to use his method, suggesting that an appropriate disciplinary attitude should be adopted within the context of the phenomenological attitude. Giorgi’s attitude is psychological because it assumes a participant’s psyche as a fact and does not attempt to bracket it away. So, “if one is a nurse, then a nursing attitude should be adopted and if a psychologist, then a psychological attitude is required, and so forth” (Giorgi, 2006b: 354). However, only a small number of organisation scholars explicitly draw upon Giorgi’s method to develop new insights. In one example, McClure and Brown (2008) utilised Giorgi’s method to establish the complex constituents, or themes, that are essential to understanding the experience of belonging at work. The strongest of these was the discovery of self within a job, alongside being invited and learning to be part of a group. These researchers pointed out that this phenomenological approach enabled them to gain clarity about the underlying nature of a phenomenon and particular work experiences.

### Van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenology

Max van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology emerged within the discipline of pedagogy. In a clear point of departure from other types of phenomenology, van Manen straddles both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology:

hermeneutic phenomenology tries to be attentive to both terms of its methodology: it is descriptive (phenomenological) methodology because it wants to be attentive to how things appear, it wants to let things speak for themselves; it is an interpretive (hermeneutic) methodology because it claims that there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena. (1990: 180)

To van Manen (1990: 36), “the aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence”. Like Sanders and Giorgi, van Manen seeks the essence of a phenomenon, but in contrast to their conception of phenomenology as a technique or science, van Manen equates his phenomenology with an artistic endeavour. He describes his phenomenology as a “poetizing project” (van Manen, 1984) that seeks to speak to the world rather than of the world.

Unlike Sanders and Giorgi, van Manen does not provide specific sampling guidelines, though his followers also utilise small sample sizes (e.g. ten participants in Gibson, 2004). Van Manen suggests that a researcher initially become oriented – adopt a particular perspective – to the phenomenon of interest. Then the researcher should gather experiential descriptions from others through interviews, close observations, and by asking individuals to write their experiences down to generate original texts or “protocols”.

Van Manen (1984, 1989) describes four analytical activities and, in contrast to Sanders and Giorgi, rejects the idea of bracketing, suggesting that researchers should acknowledge their assumptions as presuppositions may “persistently creep back into our reflections” (van Manen, 1990: 47). First, a researcher conducts thematic analyses to determine the themes or experiential structures that make up an experience, separating incidental themes (which can change without affecting the phenomenon) and essential themes (which make the phenomenon what it is). Second, the researcher describes the phenomena through the art of writing, which requires multiple sessions of revision to become “depthful” (van Manen, 1989). Third, the researcher maintains a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon, which equates to reflexivity and practising “thoughtfulness”, whereby they consider how they act towards and understand their participants. Fourth, the researcher should balance the research context by considering the parts and whole, remembering to step back from specific details of “what something is” to construct a piece textual expression.

One study, which draws on van Manen’s work, is Gibson’s (2004) exploration of the essence of women faculty’s experience of being mentored. She established five essential themes: having someone who truly cares and acts in one’s best interest; a feeling of connection; being affirmed of one’s worth; not being alone; and politics as part of one’s experience – whereby the academic culture and environment enables or constrains the experience of mentoring. As Gibson argues, this phenomenological approach, which calls for researchers to bring their assumptions



into conscious experience, generates new insights into the essential nature and meaning of a particular experience.

### Benner's interpretive phenomenology

Patricia Benner developed her interpretive phenomenology (1985, 1994) to guide research into the experience of nursing and patients. In contrast to Husserlian and descriptive methodologies, Benner's (1985: 5) approach is "congruent with a particular theoretical stance (Heideggerian phenomenology) taken toward human beings and human experience". Benner's phenomenology places a significant emphasis on exploring practice, seeking to observe and articulate the commonalities across participants' practical, everyday understandings and knowledge (Benner, 1994: 103).

Unlike the small numbers of participants typically advocated in other phenomenological methodologies, Benner (1994) suggests that an adequate sample size is achieved when interpretations are visible and clear and when new informants reveal no new findings. As such, Benner and colleagues sometimes utilise interpretive teams (Crist and Tanner, 2003) or groups of researchers trained in interpretive phenomenology to interview over 100 participants (e.g. Tanner et al., 1993).

In recognition of Heidegger's notion of the taken-for-granted background meanings, interpretive phenomenology seeks to illuminate the kind of knowing that occurs within a particular social situation (Benner and Wrubel, 1989). This entails engaged reasoning and dwelling in the immediacy of the participants' worlds (Benner, 1994). Uncommon in other phenomenological approaches, Benner and colleagues sometimes utilise group interviews to create "a natural conversational setting for storytelling" (Tanner et al., 1993: 274) alongside observations and field notes of behaviour and interaction in natural settings (Benner, 1985).

In terms of analysis, Benner (1985) advocates a thematic analysis of texts whereby common themes are identified with sufficient supporting excerpts. Crist and Tanner (2003) provide a detailed overview of this process and note the importance of developing paradigm cases and exemplars. A paradigm case is a "marker" – a strong or vivid instance – of a particular pattern of meaning that is typified in one case and which helps researchers to recognise similarities in other cases. Exemplars are salient excerpts of stories or instances within a case, and are thus smaller than paradigm cases, which characterise specific common themes or meanings across informants (Crist and Tanner, 2003). Benner suggests that exemplars or paradigm cases embody the meaning of everyday practices (1985: 5) and that by establishing and presenting them, researchers can portray individuals' lived meanings.

Interpretive phenomenology's analytic guidelines are not specific to nursing, and researchers in other disciplines could apply them. For instance, sharing Benner's interest in examining caring practices, Yakhlef and Essén (2012) employed several data-generation techniques, including open-ended interviews and observations, across two Swedish community care organisations. Many of these observations focused on the care workers' bodily performances. By interpreting the data and text, the authors extracted several exemplars of similarities across the participants' experiences. These exemplars illustrated how care workers would often deviate from bureaucratic rules through their improvised performances to adjust to particular circumstances, "such as when the senior needs more time than prescribed" (Yakhlef and Essén, 2012: 17). By focusing on the body's skilful coping, the researchers demonstrated how physical practices could resist bureaucratic power and how innovative action arises. This study demonstrates the power of Benner's phenomenology to attend to the experiences of the body and to examine the meaning of practices.

### Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis

Jonathan Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a recent type of phenomenology, and since its emergence (Smith, 1996) it has become increasingly popular in psychology, producing hundreds of studies (Smith, 2010). IPA employs flexible guidelines, rendering it more of a craft than a technique or scientific method (as criticised by Giorgi, 2010). As its name suggests, IPA "concur[s] with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process" (Smith et al., 2009: 32). IPA aims to explore, in detail, how participants make sense of their personal and social world, and the meanings particular experiences or events hold for participants (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

IPA's idiographic nature separates it from most other phenomenological methodologies. In seeking to capture and convey the richness of a particular person's experience, Smith (2004) has argued for single case studies where a single participant is used to push the idiographic logic of IPA. While Smith's "interpretative" phenomenological analysis is similar to Benner's "interpretive" phenomenology, his idiographic emphasis is an important point of a distinction. In a further point of difference, while IPA can employ observations and focus groups, as they are helpful for researchers to understand particular contexts (Smith et al., 2009), data collection usually occurs through semi-structured interviews.

Smith and Osborne (2008) outline four key stages of inductive analysis for researchers, underlying which is the double hermeneutic, whereby a researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's sense-making activity. First, a researcher reads one transcript closely for familiarity and then looks for emerging

themes, annotating significant points. The researcher then develops their notes into concise themes that capture the “essential quality” of the respondent’s comments. Second, the researcher clusters together connected or related themes to create master (superordinate or overarching) themes. Third, the researcher uses the emergent themes from the first transcript to orient the analysis of subsequent transcripts, in an iterative fashion. Once each transcript has been analysed, a final table of superordinate themes is constructed. Fourth, the outcome of the analytical process is a narrative account, where “the researcher’s analytic interpretation is presented in detail with verbatim extracts from participants” (Smith et al., 2009: 4).

More so than other phenomenological methodologies, Smith et al. (2009) encourage the expansion of IPA from psychology into cognate disciplines, pointing out that researchers in other disciplines also seek to examine the experiential. A small, but growing, number of management scholars have utilised IPA to yield new insights (Cope, 2011; Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008; Gill, 2015; Murtagh et al., 2011; Rehman and Roomi, 2012; Schaefer, 2018; Wise and Millward, 2005). For instance, Murtagh et al.’s (2011) IPA study sought to understand the experience of voluntary career changes for women. Their study purposively recruited eight women with relevant experiences and utilised semi-structured interviews to interview the participants multiple times. Rich accounts of how each participant made sense of their decisions revealed how they initially took steps that they did not intend to use to change careers but that they later viewed as pivotal. The participants progressed with these steps when they experienced positive emotions, as opposed to a systematic approach to decision-making. Murtagh et al.’s (2011) study therefore highlighted the emotional drivers of career decisions and provided empirical evidence for the other-than-rational decision-making.

### Guidelines for selecting one type of phenomenology

By contrasting five different types of methodology that have emerged over the past thirty years, this chapter hopes to have demonstrated that there is no orthodox or standard phenomenological methodology. Indeed, the five methodologies contained in the typology are not exhaustive and numerous other phenomenological types exist, each with their own attributes (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Ricoeur, 1976; Salamon, 2018). Nonetheless, the typology helps researchers to consider the assumptions and implications of different types. With reference to the typology, this section offers some points to guide researchers in their selection of one particular type of phenomenological approach that is apposite to their research needs. These guidelines are necessarily abstract so that

they can provide guidance across the aforementioned variety of phenomenological methodologies.

*Descriptive or interpretive phenomenology.* A phenomenological researcher's epistemological and ontological assumptions should inform their selection of a particular methodology. Beyond a connection to a broad conception of phenomenology, the researcher should establish if their assumptions more closely align with Husserl, Heidegger, or a combination of different phenomenological philosophers. Selecting one type of phenomenological philosophy to underpin a study can preclude the application of certain types of phenomenological methodologies. As Osborne (1994: 174) points out, potential researchers should appreciate that hermeneutic phenomenology makes "an interpretive leap beyond Husserlian phenomenology". For example, the practice of bracketing that is essential to Sanders and Giorgi's methodologies would be inappropriate in Benner and Smith's approaches.

*Aims.* Closely linked to a researcher's philosophical assumptions, the nature of the research question and the intended research outcomes should also guide the selection of a methodology. This is a subtle but important distinction between phenomenological approaches (see Finlay, 2009). If the researcher is aiming to describe an experience in general (i.e. as one shared by many) then Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology would be appropriate. If the researcher is aiming to articulate the commonalities of individuals' experiences within a particular context, then Benner's interpretive phenomenology is a suitable option. Alternatively, if the researcher seeks to explicate individual experience, then Smith's IPA would be an apt choice. As outlined in Table 4.1, researchers should select a type of phenomenology with aims that align with their research objectives.

*Participants and sampling strategy.* It is important for a researcher to consider the practical elements of their phenomenological study, such as their research access, as different phenomenological methodologies necessitate different sampling approaches and numbers of participants. For example, using only one participant would be entirely appropriate in Smith's IPA, but would fail to meet the basic criteria of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method that requires at least three participants. Furthermore, though both Benner and Smith's approaches are interpretive and can explore commonalities across several participants, they differ in their sampling strategies. Benner's interpretive phenomenology would necessitate sampling until no new information emerges. In contrast, information saturation would be superfluous when utilising Smith's IPA.

*Key concepts of data collection and analysis.* The selection of a particular methodology informs the practical steps of conducting a phenomenological research study. While all approaches seek to capture the lived experiences of participants, they utilise different concepts and emphasise different methods of data collection. For example, all the methodologies considered in this chapter employ interviews

but, where appropriate, van Manen favours the use of protocols, while Benner advises researchers to conduct group interviews and observations. Furthermore, each methodology advances its own analytical steps and terminology. Thus, the selection of a specific phenomenological methodology is also a choice of particular philosophical assumptions and a certain course of action.

### Similarities across the family of phenomenological methodologies

While different types of phenomenology exist, their differences should not obscure their similarities and the characteristics that unite these approaches as phenomenological. Herbert Spiegelberg (1982) likened the various philosophies of phenomenology to a stream, which incorporates parallel currents, each with a common point of departure but not necessarily moving towards the same destination or at the same speed. In this way, Spiegelberg argued that while phenomenology is not easy to characterise, it is a movement, as its various forms possess common features. The simile of the stream appears equally apt for the varieties of phenomenological methodologies. This chapter posits that phenomenological methodologies are a family of approaches, related through five interrelated commonalities: a shared foundation of phenomenological philosophy; an explicit interest in the meaning of individuals' experiences; attempting to grasp the point of view of the 'experiencer'; homogeneous sampling; and thematic analyses that necessitate creativity and imagination.

Phenomenological philosophy and its challenge to the natural sciences' treatment of subjectivity underpins all forms of phenomenology. As Moran (2000: 15) argues, "the whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity." In this way, phenomenological investigations reject the Cartesian subject-object relationship that is central to the natural sciences and challenge natural sciences' ability to examine fully individuals' experiences. Indeed, Giorgi (2006a: 306) notes that "to use phenomenological philosophy as a basis for psychological (or other social science) research also implies that a phenomenological theory of science is presupposed even if it is not acknowledged". As a result, many phenomenological scholars have labelled their approach as a human science (e.g. Giorgi, 2005; Smith, 2007; van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological inquiry seeks to explore and examine experiences. Smith (2004: 41) suggests that different types of phenomenology, including his IPA, are "part of a stable of closely connected approaches which share a commitment to the exploration of personal lived experience, but which have different emphases or

suggested techniques to engage in this project". Van Manen (1990) expresses similar sentiments when he suggests that phenomenologists strive to understand the meanings of a person's experience rather than providing causal explanations of such experiences. Phenomenologists' ultimate aim is to understand an experience, as far as possible, as opposed to using this understanding to predict or explain behaviour.

As a related point, phenomenological approaches attempt to describe experiences from the point of view of the "experienter". Phenomenology assumes that human beings seek meaning from their experiences and that their accounts convey this meaning. Therefore, describing this meaning entails staying close (Smith et al., 2009) to research participants' language to provide a faithful account that clearly connects the researcher's interpretations to the participants' experiences.

Phenomenological studies utilise homogeneous and purposive samples. They recruit participants who can offer a meaningful perspective on the phenomenon of interest and who share a certain lived experience. Although phenomenological approaches typically employ small sample sizes, this is not always the case; for example, Benner and colleagues' (Tanner et al., 1993) use of interpretive teams facilitated the study of hundreds of participants. Nonetheless, generalisations are usually limited to the specific groups researchers are studying, and all forms of phenomenology emphasise rich qualitative accounts over the quantity of data (Sanders, 1982).

All the types of phenomenology considered in this chapter apply some form of thematic analysis to unravel the experiences under study. Giorgi (1997: 236), for example, "thematizes the phenomenon of consciousness", and Smith et al. (2009) call for researchers to analyse the structural or thematic aspects of experience. For phenomenologists, thematic analysis necessitates creativity and imagination. This could take the form of Giorgi's free imaginative variation or an "artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life" as articulated by Smith et al. (2009: 39).

While different types of phenomenology exist, often with differing assumptions or processes, their differences should not obscure their fundamental similarities. All phenomenological methodologies operate within a broad tradition of phenomenological thought and associated principles. These commonalities enable this chapter to distinguish phenomenological methodologies collectively from other, similar, qualitative methodologies.

## Methodological developments and concluding discussion

This chapter challenges the prevailing conception in many social scientific disciplines that phenomenology is one standard or orthodox methodology. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the wider discussion of qualitative research

in organisation studies in two ways. First, it provides guidance for researchers attempting to navigate through the increasing plurality of qualitative methodologies (Cunliffe, 2011). Second, it informs researchers' understanding of approaches to qualitative research within the interpretive traditions. The chapter stresses, however, that its classifications and guidelines function as an introductory aid to, rather than a replacement for, becoming familiar with the nuances of a particular phenomenological approach. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, researchers should seek to understand their selected methodology's complete interpretation of philosophical ideas into practical research principles. These interpretations have profound implications for what each type of phenomenology aims to achieve and how it proposes to examine experience.

It is important to note that there remain many opportunities for scholars to develop, extend, or even create new types of phenomenological methodologies beyond those discussed here. For example, there have been various turns of phenomenology such as the critical turn, which views phenomenology as an enactment of critique (Ferrari et al., 2018). In another direction, a small number of studies have begun to conceptualise mixed methods approaches to research that employ phenomenology (Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie, 2015) and to demonstrate their value empirically (e.g. Gill et al., 2018a), whereby quantitative analyses can be complemented with examinations of participants' lived experiences. A further opportunity is to reflect explicitly on how phenomenological approaches could attend to historical accounts or data. There have been calls for further considerations of how to apply established research methodologies to engage with historical evidence (see Gill et al., 2018b). While phenomenological research tends to focus on the examination of contemporary sources, both historians and phenomenological researchers produce their findings through the construction of narratives. The analysis of historical texts and biographies may also produce deep insights into the lived experience of historical figures. There are also opportunities to develop and employ sociological, as opposed to psychological, approaches to phenomenology. Although phenomenological sociology has passed through several waves (Bird, 2009) and continues to be employed by scholars (e.g. Ferguson, 2006), its use remains limited. This may reflect the fact that the body of phenomenological sociology literature provides little guidance for organisational scholars seeking to undertake research (but see Jehenson, 1973; Psathas, 1973). Revisiting social phenomenology may inspire scholars to develop innovative research approaches to unlock new insights into lived experiences.

Phenomenology, as a family of methodologies, can address a variety of topical research questions that consider subjective experiences and meanings. Max van Manen (2007) wrote that phenomenology should stir the reader by directing their gaze to where meaning originates. This chapter hopes to have illuminated the



meaning of several phenomenological methodologies to stimulate the research decisions of organisational scholars.

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## Key concepts

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**Dasein** The experience of being for human beings. Also described as the entity in which the self and world belong together. To Heidegger, this was a central concept to encapsulate the idea that people are thrown into, or always engaged with, the world and cannot step outside of it.

**Descriptive phenomenology** The original phenomenological methodology, developed by Edmund Husserl, as a science to describe the essences of phenomena that appear in our consciousness.

**Essences** The essential structures of subjective experiences.

**Intentionality** Consciousness is always consciousness of something. For example, every act of loving is a loving of something. Structures of experience involve intentionality, or what Husserl called directedness of experience towards things in the world. Note that this is distinct from contemporary definitions.

**Interpretive phenomenology** An approach to phenomenology, pioneered by Martin Heidegger, that emphasised how interpretation is an integral aspect of any understanding of experience. To Heidegger, we exist or are always in the world, such that our context informs the meanings we use to interpret the world. Heidegger's interpretive work was a departure from Husserl's earlier descriptive approach.

**Phenomenology** A philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies that examine the structures of experience or consciousness. The suffix *-ology* means 'study', while *phenomenon* describes what appears to us in our consciousness. Thus, phenomenology is the study of the objects that appear in our consciousness, or the ways we experience these objects.

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# 5

## PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND FIELD

Anne Roelsgaard Obling

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Phenomenological research: some overarching concerns and common themes	97
Field research: using phenomenology to study the lived experiences of professional career officers	98
Use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews	100
Data analysis	102
Some rules of thumb	103
• Example 1: Becoming an elite soldier	104
• Example 2: 'You are just a bunch of amateurs'	107
Conclusion	109
Key concepts	110
Further reading	111
References	111

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To *do* phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspects of the life-world, and yet to remain aware that life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (van Manen, 1990: 18)

We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer. (Wittgenstein, 1969/1918: 149)

The aim of phenomenological research is to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds. The meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for participants are in focus (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Examples of research questions in phenomenological studies are “What is the experience of motherhood for female career workers who have children aged 1–3 years?”, “What is it like to live with chronic pain?”, “How can we better understand people’s experiences of addiction and what addiction is like?” and “What role does battle fatigue play for soldiers deployed in Helmand?”. Such questions offer the researcher an opportunity to engage with research participants and to learn from their valuable insights, as these participants are experts in the topics explored.

Phenomenological inquiries try to capture “the richness, poignancy, resonance and ambiguity of lived experience, allowing readers to see the worlds of others in new and deeper ways” (Finlay, 2009: 474). Such inquiries are preoccupied with taking the fine grain of people’s everyday lives seriously as an integral starting-point of inquiry. This implies paying close attention to the specificities of everyday life and the complex meanings that adhere to the most mundane or trivial of people’s activities. Typically, in phenomenological research, a detailed account of human existence is presented “where the subject is understood as an embodied and socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world” (Zahavi, 2008: 662).

Phenomenology has made significant contributions to a wide range of empirical disciplines, including psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, literary studies, architecture, ethnology and psychology. Methodologically, it is as well suited to providing meaningful and unexpected analysis of (bio-)psychosocial issues as it is to exploring how, for instance, organisational members’ shared meanings create their social world in the workplace.

In this chapter I explain some overarching concerns and common themes in phenomenological research, and I show how the theoretical underpinnings of this research tradition dictate how I undertake a phenomenologically inspired analysis of the experiences of professional career officers in the Danish army as they progress through a higher military education. The focus here is on exploring the lived experience of officers, with a particular interest in the education’s impact on the

formative dimensions of “becoming an elite soldier”. While there is a substantial literature on elites and career workers in institutions of higher education (e.g. Khurana, 2007; Snook and Khurana, 2016), there is very little about professional officers’ experiences of being embedded in and passing through educational procedures and staff training that is meant to cultivate and change them, making them into deep specialists in their area of expertise.

### Phenomenological research: some overarching concerns and common themes

Phenomenology describes both a philosophical movement and a range of different research methods. In contemporary philosophy, there exists no consistent school or fixed system that can be called the “phenomenological position”, characterised by a systematically defined body of wisdom. Rather, it is a movement whose proponents have moved in various directions, with the effect that today phenomenology means different things to different people (Audi, 2005; Spiegelberg, 1994). Even though phenomenologists share a core concern with letting experience appear on its own terms, there are many different answers for how this comes about. Thus, as described in the previous chapter, there exist many phenomenologies.

Despite the variations in phenomenological philosophy, there are some overarching concerns and common themes and interests that unite phenomenological researchers. In phenomenological studies, the researcher tries to understand the “lived experience” of the participants relating to an idea, or a “phenomenon”, and attempts to identify the “essence” of human experiences of the phenomenon, as described by the participants.

Following Husserl (1998/1913), it must be stressed that grasping essences is by no means something mysterious or metaphysical:

The truth is that everyone sees ‘ideas’, ‘essences,’ and sees them, so to speak, continuously; they operate with them in their thinking and they also make judgments about them. It is only that, from their theoretical ‘standpoint,’ people interpret them away. (Ibid.: 41)

Seeing essences thus belongs to the everyday experiencing of the world. Furthermore, essences are not something we as researchers “add” to the world but something already there in the intentional relationship between the phenomena (objects) and the researcher (subject). This can also be understood as an attempt to get at the content of lived experience by describing it in terms of its particular and essential features.



The phenomenological researcher takes as her point of departure the phenomena and the way in which these represent themselves to consciousness (Spiegelberg, 1994). Thus, the researcher will attend to how participants present and perceive objects, actions and events, rather than describing phenomena according to an abstract thought model or predetermined categories. Husserl's dictum "to the things themselves" should be interpreted as a criticism of scientism, and as a call for the disclosure of a more original relationship with the world than the one manifested in scientific rationality (Zahavi, 2008: 664). This process requires the researcher to take on a distinct and special "attitude". What is meant by "allowing things to speak" is that the researcher needs to bracket her presuppositions and prejudices about the phenomena under study. This is easier said than done. As a rule of thumb, bracketing – or the phenomenological *epoché* – can be considered as a way to refrain from presuppositions and prejudices that are sensed by the researcher to be contaminating for understanding people's experiences, and that may taint the research process. However, bracketing in practice, and what exactly will be bracketed, will depend on the person conducting the research. As Schutz (1944) puts it, every phenomenological researcher will, as a consequence of her personal life story, have different ideas and assumptions which will be used in perception and experience. This also means that even though researchers try to get an insider's view of the studied phenomenon, they cannot do this completely or correctly. Access to another person's life-world depends on the researcher's own "habitual system of relevance" (Schutz, 1944: 499), and this system is required for making sense of that other life-world.

In contrast to seeking to explain the world through scientific conceptualisation and articulation, phenomenology is rooted in the world of experiences: the perceptual world that is prior to any scientific knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1995/1945). Phenomenological research thus takes its point of departure in the (life-)world we inhabit and are familiar with, and reflects on and describes how phenomena appear through intentional experiences. In empirical studies, this implies describing social phenomena in relation to how these are experienced and understood by participants, and acknowledging that the world is the world as it presents itself, whether this happens in our perception, in our everyday use of things, or in our scientific analysis (Zahavi, 2019).

### Field research: using phenomenology to study the lived experiences of professional career officers

The empirical data used as illustrations in this chapter were collected as part of a field study that investigated training for higher command and general staff work in the Danish armed forces.

My entrance to the field study was a higher military education. Originally, I had wanted to study the recently reformed basic officer education. However, when I contacted the war college, which hosts a broad spectrum of educations, they invited me to follow the “jewel of military education”: the higher command and general staff officers’ programme. The purpose of this programme is to provide officers with an education with particular emphasis on being able to hold important staff positions in international and national headquarters. Furthermore, the education aims to put the officers in a position to contribute to the implementation of the analysis and evaluation of complex tactical and operational issues in a military strategic context. It is the place for mid-career officers selected for advancement in the armed forces. Also, as one of the directing staff at the war college puts it, it is the breeding ground for future generals. This becomes evident when visiting the college. In the meeting room hang pictures of previous classes from 1930 to the present. In the pictures, it is possible to point out every general and chief of defence who over the course of years has been promoted in Denmark. One of the education’s mottos declares that “it comes with a responsibility to be selected and it obliges us all to do our best”. It is believed to be the finest educational achievement for the officers who are brought there to get to know the art and science of organising and deploying armed forces and all the technical terms associated with it.

The education lasted 10 months and mainly took place at the war college, but also other destinations in Denmark and in Germany were visited as part of the programme (such as an airbase, an international headquarters and some of the areas east of Berlin, where the historical battle between the Red Army and the German forces was fought at the end of World War II). My field study involved participant observation of operational exercises, classroom teaching, debriefings, week-long training tours, visits to ancient monuments and participation in official rituals, formal ceremonies and more informal social gatherings over the course of the programme.

On the basis of the above-mentioned analytical underpinnings of phenomenology, I worked in the study with a primary research question, which was open: “How do military officers experience and make sense of higher education?” Note the focus on personal meaning and sense-making. More pointed questions (e.g. how officers are cultivated for the role of professional staff officer, what dispositions belong to the role, and how these dispositions are made explicit) were secondary. The research question focused on the lived experiences of professional officers (“particular people”), who are attending the Danish army’s prestige, elite education (“a particular context”) to become staff officers and perhaps in time become higher commanders.

## Use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews

At the conclusion of the fieldwork, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 12 participants (officers) and nine semi-structured interviews with directing staff at the war college.

A key element in phenomenological research is that the research participants are experts on their own experience, and are recruited to the study for their expertise in the phenomenon being studied. For the interviews, I selected the participants “purposively” (Smith and Osborn, 2008), and as part of the purposive sampling strategy I opted for a homogeneous participant sample. As the emphasis is on having sufficiently rich data (as opposed to, for instance, a representative sample), a well-defined group for whom the research problem is relevant and important is worth aiming for.

Most argue that the sample size should be small enough to produce as rich descriptions of people’s experiences as possible within the sample, and that within the sample it should be possible to examine similarities and variations in relation to the chosen phenomenon. There is no general rule for how many participants should be included, and studies have been published with samples ranging from 3–5 participants to 42 participants involved in semi-structured interviews. Sometimes there will be a natural boundary to the sample, if the cases are very rare and only a few representatives are available. In situations where the research topic is more common, a sample boundary can be created by including participants with similar profiles. An example of this is Gill’s (2015) study of the emotional consequences of identity regulation in the workplace, in which eight management consultants in a British office of a global consultancy firm make up the sample.

It is essential for phenomenological research to elicit rich, detailed accounts of the reality of participants’ experience, and, as previously stated, semi-structured interviews are a key means for exploring this. The person-to-person in-depth interview provides an opportunity for the researcher and the participant to engage with each other and to discuss the phenomena under investigation. It takes some skills to conduct an interview suitable for a phenomenological study and to obtain sufficiently rich data for analysis. The challenge is that a phenomenological analysis is only as good as the data it is derived from (Smith et al., 2009). It is therefore vital that the interviewer establishes the interview situation as one in which interesting and personally lived accounts of a chosen phenomenon can be expressed. In my case, it was crucial that I had been talking to the participants for several months prior to the interviews; that I understood some of the terminology they used; and that I had a sense of the staff techniques and standardised procedures they were trained to accomplish. By socialising and

doing activities together with the officers, I also found that their experiences were beginning to colour my own ways of perceiving their world, and this also influenced the interview situation.

We can understand “experiencing the experiences of others” as a form of empathy, and in phenomenological research we must be able not only to consider others like ourselves, but also to acquire a genuine understanding of people’s experiences behind their obvious expressions. Empathy allows us to experience and understand the feelings, desires and beliefs of others in a more or less direct way (Zahavi, 2001: 153). In the interviewer role, empathy can be understood as a form of bracketing, whereby we bracket our own presuppositions and what we take for granted about the world and ourselves. I personally found it important not to overdo this *epoché* by, for instance, also bracketing the distinction in the field study between my experiences and the participants’ experiences. This is in line with Zahavi (2001), who argues that empathy, which is necessary for developing any social dimension of selfhood, entails the preservation of self–other differentiation. Rather than aligning differences between self and others, asymmetry and the maintenance of differences are crucial for empathy and the empathic relationship.

Furthermore, in the field study, I had to work hard to bracket my own assumptions about “being a professional career officer” in order to understand what it meant for particular participants in the particular study context. I had many theoretically guided presuppositions about the “character” of a higher commander, or what characteristics a higher commander, as a senior public servant, should develop. The consequence of this scheme of orientation and interpretation was that it took some time before I began to actually listen to the participants and how they made sense of the customs, attitudes and behaviours of “being an officer”. One example was how I was very focused on some of the duties and obligations that come with holding an military office, and I was determined to “see” these inscribed in various training practices. As part of the role-played war scenario “Stabilisation operations”, which is part of the education, the officers are sent on reconnaissance in the physical terrain to assess whether the deployment of an army division in a chosen land area is possible, and to incorporate “not-yet-recognised” factors in the planning process, such as elevation points, waterways or woodland in the terrain. Initially, I expected embodied experiences like reconnaissance, where the officers walk through mud and share the same experiences of cold, fatigue and hardship, to be connected to the formation of attributes of a staff officer, such as patience, sense of perspective and humility. However, some of the participants continually experienced the reconnaissance activities as “boring” and a “total waste of time”, and thus I had to modify my scheme of orientation and interpretation, and readjust to the officer group to be able to describe their individual experiences of the training exercises.

Given a focus on investigating the individual and understanding people's experiences with the world and themselves, some data are more suitable than others. Besides in-depth one-to-one interviews and participant observations, diaries, self-reports, blogs, autobiographies, personal letters and chat-room conversations can provide rich data in a phenomenological study. Relatively few studies have used group interviews or focus group discussions (see, for instance, Palmer et al., 2010).

## Data analysis

Holloway (1997) states that researchers who use phenomenology are reluctant to prescribe techniques. This is not quite true, since in current research practice there exist at least three broad methodological approaches that are widely used and that especially emphasise the technical part of conducting phenomenological analysis: first-person phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), descriptive phenomenology (Giorgio, 2008) and interpretative phenomenology (Smith and Osborn, 2008; Eatough and Smith, 2011). All three approaches are inspired by theoretical ideas from phenomenologists; however, they also have a particular take on these ideas, especially in their attempt to operationalise them in qualitative inquiries (Finlay, 2009; see also Chapter 4 in this volume for a classificatory typology of five phenomenological methodologies).

For some, phenomenological research is a creative, fluid approach with a distinctly emotive, poetic sensibility; for others, it is a more systematic, scientific method. In the following analysis, I have been inspired by the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which belongs in the latter category. The nature of my research question (how do military officers experience and make sense of higher education?) and the intended research outcome (to explain the individual experiences as much as the common experiences of professional staff officers) guided the selection of methodology.

Furthermore, the advantage of using this methodological approach is that it comes with a toolbox of procedures and guidelines that can be used to analyse and organise empirical data. The suggested methods should be seen as rules of thumb, rather than as fixed rules for analysing participants' lived experiences and the meaning that particular events hold for them in particular contexts.

One characteristic feature stands out as significant for IPA: idiography. Here the researcher chooses as her analytical point of departure a detailed examination of one case, before moving on to a detailed examination of the next case, and so on, through the sample of cases (Smith, 2004). The idea here is to explore every case individually before moving on to produce any general statements. Only on the basis of detailed case explorations can the researcher move on to conduct

a cross-case analysis. The idiographic approach allows a researcher to explore a phenomenon and individual differences in relation to this, and to develop an understanding across research participants or cases.

Another feature of IPA is the interpretative element, which has emerged from the work of hermeneutically oriented phenomenological philosophers, including Heidegger, who argued for our embeddedness in the world of language and social relationships, and the inescapable historicity of all understanding. Interpretation is not a procedure additional to the analytical process but instead an inevitable and basic structure of the phenomenological research method. Access to another person's life-world depends on the researcher's own "habitual system of relevance" (Schutz, 1944: 499), and this system is required for making sense of that other life-world through a two-stage interpretative process. In this process both the researcher and the participant are trying to interpret meaning: "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith and Osborn, 2008: 53). Instead of bracketing and setting aside the active or interpretative role of the researcher, and the conceptions or "system of relevance" through which she makes sense of herself and participants, the researcher's role and conceptions are explicated and integrated into the data analysis and the research findings.

### Some rules of thumb

The first step in the analytical process is to choose a transcript and to begin reading and re-reading it. It is important here to stick to one transcript and to read this in detail before moving on to the next. For researchers familiar with coding technique in grounded theory (see Chapters 10 and 11), the close analysis of the text material used in phenomenological research may seem similar. However, it is essential to remember that the purpose here is to focus on the subjective experiences of individual actors' life-worlds. This means that researchers are less interested in how subjective experiences can be abstracted into theoretical statements about causal relations between categories (converting data into theory), and more interested in coding for the details and nuances of the stories that individual participants elaborate, and the specific words they choose (Suddaby, 2006).

IPA researchers have instructively shown how data can be analysed through using a systematic step-by-step approach – from reading the first transcript to writing up a narrative account (see Smith and Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; Larkin and Thompson, 2011). In order to illustrate some of these steps, I use empirical material taken from the military field study. The analytical focus is on the particular ways in which military officers experience and make sense of higher education.

### Example 1: Becoming an elite soldier

The following extract is from a transcription with Fabian, who was one of the 13 officers participating in the education. The interview was conducted three days after the final course exam. Before beginning the analysis, I carefully listened to the tape and read the transcript a couple of times to immerse myself in the data. The extract chosen for the example here is typical of the transcript.

*Interviewer:* How has it been for you to finish the education?

*Respondent (Fabian):* When I decided to participate in the programme, I decided that it really shouldn't involve my family. Also, because I was so much in doubt about whether I should do it. So it was very important to me that my wife and kids came out of this in the best possible way, and that it should be balanced all the way through, one can say and, and this I had to couple to my own self-respect in terms of performing, receiving grades and all sorts of things, and I could feel that I needed to think about it. In a way, I got it completely as I wanted it; in another way, I also gave up on some things, which I thought I had put behind me, but I might not have done that anyway. Yet I had this self-respect going, something within myself, which I had to handle in relation to performance, I think. So, I have actually spent the last couple of days thinking this balance, it annoys me to think about it, but what I think it has to do with is, why am I a soldier, why am I at all here, why have I chosen this *métier* and not others? And some of the things that lie there are probably some of the answers to why this is so. So the bottom line was that I think I accomplished it the way I wanted to, but I might not have quite related to what it means, this balancing act between concerns.

What is in focus in this phase of the analysis is the content of the data; that is, each participant's understandings, concerns and experimental claims (Larkin and Thompson, 2011). The aim here is to develop a set of descriptive comments on the transcript. This can be done by using the comment function within Microsoft Word, or by using a table where one column is used for the transcript extract, one for the initial comments, and one for emerging themes. If the table technique is used, Table 5.1 shows what an initial note on Fabian's responses would look like.

In the table's initial comments section, I use italics to indicate which of the comments focus on describing the content of what the participant said (repeating the participant's own words), and roman type to indicate when I have commented on the transcript, trying to understand the meaning behind the participant's words. In the comments, I noted preliminary themes regarding the participant's overarching experience and understanding of becoming a general staff officer and/or higher commander. It is these conceptual comments and the development of insights that make it possible to enter the next stage of analysis.



Table 5.1 Transcript extract from interview with Fabian

Transcript extract	My initial comments	Emergent themes
<p>When I decided to join MEE, I decided <u>that it really shouldn't involve my family</u>. Also, <u>because I was so much in doubt about whether I should do it</u>. So it was very important to me that my wife came out of this with my children in the best possible way, and that <u>this should be balanced all the way through</u>, one can say and, <u>and this I had to couple to my own self-respect in terms of performing, receiving grades</u> and all sorts of things, and I could feel, that I needed to think about it. In a way, I got it completely, as I wanted it; in another way, I <u>also gave up on some things</u>, which I thought I had put behind me, but I might not have had that anyway, <u>yet I had this self-respect going, something within myself, which I had to relate to in relation to performance</u>, I think. So, I have actually spent the last couple of days thinking this <u>balance</u>, it annoys me to think about it, but what I think it has to do with is, for example, <u>why am I a soldier, why am I at all here, why have I chosen this métier and not others?</u> And some of the things that lie there are probably some of the answers to why this is so. So the <u>bottom line</u> was that I think I accomplished it as I wanted to, but I <u>might not have quite related to what it means, this balancing act between concerns</u>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>In doubt</i> about participation</li> <li>• Family shouldn't be involved/affected</li> <li>• <i>This should be balanced all the way through</i></li> <li>• Performing expectations</li> <li>• Ambitions (<i>self-respect</i>)</li> <li>• Ambiguous feelings (shame, surprise, anger)</li> </ul> <p>Bottom line:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Got it completely as I wanted it</i></li> <li>• However, going ... <i>something within myself</i></li> <li>• <i>Gave up on things</i> along the way – made compromises</li> </ul> <p><u>Something is bothering (it annoys me):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinking the balance</li> <li>• Something went on "inside"</li> <li>• . . . <i>why am I a soldier?</i></li> <li>• . . . <i>why am I at all here?</i></li> <li>• . . . <i>why have I chosen this métier?</i></li> <li>• <i>Balancing act between concerns – why???</i></li> </ul>	<p>Confusion, <i>I was so much in doubt</i>, struggling to make sense of the chosen path</p> <p>Balancing different concerns – family life/work life; keeping things "normal"/career;</p> <p>The education does something to the <i>self-respect</i> of the participant, which is difficult to weigh against the concern for the family</p> <p>Ambiguous feelings (shame, surprise, anger) related to the self</p> <p>The participation or the processes the participant has been through, bring up some fundamental questions about belonging and professional identity; being a soldier (<i>why am I a soldier, why am I at all here, why have I chosen this métier and not others</i>).</p> <p>Having trouble with defining a clear purpose or a clear path (<i>but I might not have quite related to what it means, this balancing act between concerns</i>).</p>

Whereas the first stages of analysis included getting closer to the data, the next stage involved identifying emerging themes (see the third column in Table 5.1). As this happens, the data analysis becomes more interpretative and more focused. The step from initial comments to writing up emergent themes involves mapping patterns, connections and interrelationships between the initial comments.



In the example in Table 5.1, the transformation of initial notes to emergent themes is conducted on only a small part of the interview transcript. However, at this stage of the analytical process, the whole transcript should be treated similarly. Through this process, some themes will be repeated and new ones will occur. It is worth remembering here, as Smith and Osborn (2008) note, that there is no requirement to find themes in every section of the transcript. Some parts of a transcript will be “richer” in relation to the occurrence of themes than other parts.

In Table 5.2 the themes are clustered, and each cluster represents a superordinate theme. Again, this has been done on only a small extract of the transcript and therefore does not show the whole table of themes from Fabian’s case. However, when going through the whole transcript, many instances of the same theme could be found, while other themes were dropped and new ones developed.

Table 5.2 Lists of themes

<b>Initial list of themes</b>	<b>Refined list of themes (superordinate themes)</b>
Confusion and doubt	Elite ambitions
Self-respect	(Unclear) career path
A questioning self – struggle to make sense of the chosen path	Identity concerns
Career versus family	The education brings forward a set of questions which centre around a basic question of belonging; of professional identity; of “why” soldiering
Balancing act between inner and outer expectations	
Why am I here?	

Finally, what was done for the Fabian transcript should now be done with the other research participants one by one. In doing this work, I found it helpful to use the themes from the first analysis to help orient the analysis of the second transcript. Other researchers prefer to analyse the second transcript from scratch. In reviewing all the transcriptions, a final list of themes will appear. The final task for the researcher is to translate the themes into a composite account of the essence of the experience for all interviewees. This account should both pay attention to the commonalities across participants’ accounts, and be sensitive to the variations within the accounts. The details and nuances of the stories that participants elaborate, and the specific words they use, will often compose the primary unit of analysis. Since the ambition in phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences of individuals, data units are often presented in their raw form without contaminating the data, for example, by lifting them to a conceptually higher level. The extract selected for the final presentation is typically the one that best captures the essence of the emerging themes.

The next example further illustrates my phenomenologically inspired analysis. The example pays attention to the role of the researcher and I use my field observations to show how I, even from a phenomenologically inspired approach, overdid my empathic attitude and the impact this had on experiencing what the participants experienced.

### Example 2: 'You are just a bunch of amateurs'

For researchers doing fieldwork it is typical to be in a situation in which one positions oneself as a 'stranger' to the group being studied (Schutz, 1944). As long as I positioned myself as a stranger to the officer group, I could easily fit what I perceived into my habitual frame of relevance and unquestioned assumptions. However, this familiar framework did not provide access to the new social surroundings and how the studied group regarded aspects of their culture. Throughout the education, different prominent visitors were invited to follow the participants as they, for example, role-played war-planning exercises, such as how to plan for conducting a stabilisation operation with coalition forces in a fictional Middle Eastern country. One former commander met the participants with the following words:

There wasn't any plan for what we did in Helmand. You have all built up and subscribed to some operational habits and routines, which are stupid and do not fit with what we are confronted with today on the battlefield. So, don't think you know about things.

My first response to this was that I felt deeply insulted on behalf of the participants. Most had been deployed more than once to the Helmand province in Afghanistan and had made personal sacrifices on the tours. My field observations highlighted that the comments, which I thought were inappropriate, emerged repeatedly over the course of the training. Not only the former commander in the above field note, but also others frequently spoke about the participants' former war experiences as "amateurish" and "inferior", whereas the education's ways of seeing, feeling and acting were described as "professional" and "superior". In particular, experiences with counterinsurgency practices in Afghanistan (defined as military – and civilian – efforts made to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances) were termed irrelevant, and as one guest visitor sourly proclaimed, "You think you're so clever and think you know everything there is to know about modern warfare".

However, when I spoke with the participants about how they experienced this insulting behaviour, they interpreted it in different ways – also differently from how I experienced it. One participant compared the situation with another situation he had encountered:

So, I remember I was in a job interview and a general all of a sudden told me that he had also been on some patrols himself, and he was very busy telling me about it, and

it was an interview and he spent half an hour telling me what he had experienced himself and some of the patrols he had been on. And I came in as a company chief and I had been sent to Afghanistan and been in war every third day and throwing air bombs and having helicopters flying all over the place, had dead soldiers and all sorts of other things. And then he sat there telling me what it would be like to be in a war. I had it like, it was just ... biggest compensation, it is such a thing ... It is like motorcycles and small cocks. (John)

The participant here was not even troubled about how the commander approached him. In a way, it even seemed to stabilise something in himself: that he was something unique because of his experiences, especially compared with older generations where some professional officers have passed their whole career without ever confronting a battle in reality. Here, another participant highlights a concrete situation in the classroom where the attitude of another individual is described:

If you have noticed it, he has referred to his own experiences a minimum of 50 times, but at the same time he knows that he stands in front of a group who – and this is I, Julia, Jonathan and Howard – have been in the shit up to our knees to such an extent that we do not care that he does not want to listen to our experiences. Because our experiences are for us the very real thing. Hey come on, he's been in Djurs Sommerland [Scandinavia's biggest amusement park] in the spring; he wasn't even near to being in danger, and he knows that well and therefore he doesn't bother listening to us. (Greg)

“Being a soldier” means different things for different people across generations in the Danish armed forces. Because of Denmark's intervention-based foreign policy over the last twenty years, which has seen Danish soldiers participating in international coalition forces, there exists a natural knowledge and experience gap between soldiers who have been actively involved in operational actions on the ground and soldiers who have not. This is what John hints at, when he talks about a form of “compensation”, meaning compensation for not knowing – and perhaps not wanting to know – how others experienced “the noise and smell of battle” (Strachan, 2006: 227).

I began this example with a description of the humiliation and injustice I felt on behalf of the participants: feelings that I attached to the participants but which the participants, when I spoke to them, did not recognise. This is an example of how my empathy was perhaps more radical than is usual within phenomenology; an example of how I overdid it. Because of my feelings, I ignored the distinction between researcher and participants, and thus bracketed the important and necessary distance between my own experiences and those of the others.

This brings me back to the starting-point about our habitual frames of relevance. What was actually happening in the above examples was that I came to realise that sticking to my frames was not enough to understand the experiences of the officer group. This did not imply, however, that everything I knew about the military

and its people and culture had to be bracketed, but it brought me back to the phenomenological call to attend to every phenomenon, including the known ones, as if it was presenting itself to consciousness for the first time. In this way, I could again become aware of the richness and fullness of these phenomena and observe, describe and classify them as clearly as possible. And this is precisely the strength of the phenomenological approach (Maso, 2001).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how to conduct a phenomenologically inspired analysis of how military officers experience and make sense of higher education, focusing on meaning-making and sense-making.

The analysis described how the process of moving from one status to another (from officer to career officer) involves messy activities and interruptions, including continuous self-scrutinising on behalf of the participants. The accounts of the participants reveal how the officers try to make sense of stepping from one phase of their professional lives into another, and thus how this transition is far from straightforward and neat. Overall, the education trajectory signifies a fragile and important moment in the participants' careers, in which taken-for-granted assumptions about occupational status and relations with oneself and others have to be rethought and reframed.

The analysis demonstrated how topics such as career progression and educational trajectories are suitable to research using a phenomenological approach. When people undergo changes in their life and they are engaged with an experience of something major, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening. Phenomenological research aims to engage with these reflections (Smith et al., 2009). During the course of the education, the participants went through different stages and activities – for example, got specially selected, gained success, took important decisions and committed to a new role. All these experiences had importance for the participants, and, in more or less self-conscious and systematic ways, they tried to make sense of these experiences and tell others about them.

When we do phenomenologically inspired research, we apply a distinct attitude which implies that we try to look at others' experiences in an unprejudiced and open manner. This does not imply, however, that everything we know of a given field and its people and culture has to be bracketed and suspended. A possible misunderstanding in some phenomenological research is that the researcher must aim to purify her experiences of any assumptions, or that she must bracket the knowledge and values that constitute her ordinary experience of the world. Reducing phenomenological research to mere collecting of detailed descriptions of participants' experiences is a mistake, and not sufficient for conducting

thorough, systematic, phenomenologically inspired analyses. To be able to describe the experiences we have as researchers, we need to include beliefs and knowledge about the world, because these are vital parts of our experiences. Furthermore, by integrating an awareness of our own schemes of orientation and interpretation into our studies, we are reminded of individual differences and that we have different ways of looking at the world and different understandings of reality.

Technically, this chapter showed that there is no standard phenomenological research method, but rather a plurality of practical research principles that can be combined and mixed in various ways. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is just one among many forms of phenomenological analysis methods. One of IPA's major strengths is that it is a flexible and inductive approach which can be used to research unexplored territory without an external framework or abstract theoretical pretext (Reid et al., 2005). It also, as demonstrated in my study, helps one not only to pay attention to general meaning structures but also to search for individual meanings and how particular activities and events may be experienced by individuals.

Applied phenomenology has been criticised for being insufficiently phenomenological (Paley, 2017). There is nothing out of the ordinary about this, since phenomenologists from Husserl onwards have been fighting about classical phenomenological questions – and about their interpretation. Interpretative phenomenological research approaches have been criticised for drawing on different phenomenological theories and therefore for lacking rigour (Giorgio, 2008). In my view, phenomenological research must be judged on the results it delivers: on whether the researcher manages to capture some of the complexity and richness of lived experience and whether, by doing so, she allows the reader to see some aspects of the worlds of others in new ways.

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### Key concepts

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**Empathy** Experiencing the experiences of others is called “empathy”. Empathy describes the relationship between self and others, and constitutes the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity.

**Idiographic approach** IPA relies on idiography, which means that researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal. The idiographic approach implies a complete, in-depth understanding of single cases in their unique context. Researchers analyse data to identify what is distinct to one case (e.g. the account of one participant), while balancing this with what is shared in all the cases studied. The idiographic approach is contrasted with nomothetic research, which is about attempting to establish general laws and generalisations.

**Lived experience** Phenomenological researchers use the term “lived experience” to capture “the embodied, socio-culturally and historically situated person who

inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world" (Eatough and Smith, 2011: 5). When researchers want to uncover this experience, they attend to (without participating in) everything from individuals' emotions, motivations, networks of plans, belief systems, to how these emerge and are conducted in social action.

**Phenomenological attitude** The phenomenologically inspired researcher has an attitude characterised by openness. Openness towards self, others and the world makes it possible to focus on the description of "things in their appearing" and of experiences as "lived experience" described by actors. It also implies refraining from, at least in the initial phases, determining frameworks and prejudiced interpretations.

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# 6

## HERMENEUTICS: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Nils Gilje

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Glimpses into the history of hermeneutics	115
Philosophical hermeneutics	119
Hermeneutics of action and intentional explanations	124
Double hermeneutics and multiple hermeneutics	128
Conclusion	130
Key concepts	131
Further reading	131
References	132

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Hermeneutics is the study of how to interpret cultural expressions and social phenomena, including texts, works of art, rituals and actions. For centuries, hermeneutics was synonymous with the rules for interpreting texts correctly in the fields of law, philology and theology. This art of interpretation was considered a form of academic craftsmanship. Indeed, Plato called it *hermeneutike techne* – the art or technique of interpretation. This remained the common thread throughout the history of hermeneutics, until the second half of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm Dilthey was the first to turn hermeneutics into a systematic methodology for both the historical “human sciences” and the new social sciences. Today, the broad consensus is that hermeneutical problems play a key role in all research in the humanities and social sciences. Projects in these areas encounter hermeneutical questions at every phase of the research process. The humanities and social sciences also use hermeneutical methodology and approaches to explore their objects of study. This chapter explores why and how hermeneutical problems became important in the social sciences.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first presents key concepts and “turning points” in the history of hermeneutics. The second consists of an introduction to modern philosophical hermeneutics, based on the work of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, both of whom thought “understanding” precedes all questions of methodology. Philosophical hermeneutics considers understanding as a basic structure of human existence. Gadamer emphasised the importance of the fact that anyone meeting with a fellow human being always brings with them their understandings, opinions and prejudices. These are of great significance to how social scientists interpret social actions, interviews, policy documents and other written materials.

Traditional hermeneutics was mainly the *hermeneutics of text*. However, for Friedrich Schleiermacher and Dilthey, speech acts and “life-expressions” were also objects for interpretation, which made the actors’ intentions and actions key factors. The third section examines the shift from the *hermeneutics of text* to the *hermeneutics of action*. It includes examples of how social scientists can link the hermeneutics of action with explanations of purpose or *intentional explanations*.

In recent decades, much debate has surrounded the relationship between concepts of actors and concepts of researchers, as well as the complex hermeneutical relationships between the interpretations of the informants and the researchers. This is the theme addressed in the fourth section. Social scientists do not just interpret informants’ experiences and interpretations – the informants (and the social world in general) also interpret and appropriate the researchers’ interpretations and explanations. The form of communication between researchers and informants in sociology is, therefore, quite distinctive. It has a mutual nature unknown in the natural sciences. The sociologist Anthony Giddens calls these processes

*double hermeneutics*, but they probably range even wider. Important communicative and hermeneutic processes are observed not only between informants (e.g. in a focus group interview) but also in society in general. Similar processes also take place among the researchers involved in projects. As such, a more suitable term for these complex hermeneutical relationships might be *multiple hermeneutics*.

## Glimpses into the history of hermeneutics

Modern hermeneutics has its roots in ancient Greek culture and philosophy. Plato's dialogue *Ion* uses the term *hermeneus* (hermeneuticist) for the poet, whose role was to interpret the words of the gods. The same term also applied to those who recited poems in public (also known as rhapsodists, see Platon, 2013: 534c). Thus, hermeneutics was an art of interpretation (Jaeger, 1974; Seebohm, 2004). The Greek dialogue *Epinomis*, which scholars long attributed to Plato, also called hermeneuticists *exegetai* (interpreters). Exegesis is another word for interpretation (cf. biblical exegesis). The Latin translation of this Greek term was *explicatio* (explication). Exegesis and explication both mean to account for the implicit meaning of a text. For medieval Christians, this entailed using or applying a text in a specific situation. Judges were not only expected to interpret the law correctly, but also to apply the interpretation in specific situations (e.g. to address specific violations of the law). The Church co-opted this principle. Priests did not just interpret scripture. Above all else, they applied the word of God to the situations faced by their flocks. More recently, Gadamer tried to rehabilitate the relationship between *explicatio* and *applicatio* (explication and application).

In the early nineteenth century, it became increasingly clear that interpretation cannot be limited to just texts. Cultural researchers and philosophers, such as Herder and Hegel, applied hermeneutical principles to the interpretation not only of texts, but also of foreign cultures and the cultures of the past. They understood everything, from tools to religious rituals, as expressions of a greater, meaningful whole, usually a distinctive national culture, or the "spirit" of the nation. The basic idea was that the meaning of every form of cultural expression – a poem, a philosophical text, a monument or a system of kinship – stemmed from a wider culture. They understood the parts in the light of the whole, and, conversely, they understood the whole as the sum of the constituent parts.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the philosopher and theologian Schleiermacher made a breakthrough that would prove important for the establishment of a general hermeneutical methodology (see Bowie, 2005; Crouter, 2008). For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics was about interpreting texts in a way that united both a historical-philological and a "psychological" interpretation

of them. A good interpretation must always take into account both the author's intentions and the linguistic context. If the author intended to write an allegory, researchers must interpret the text in that light and not take it literally. Similarly, they should not interpret a literal text allegorically. Schleiermacher's concept of interpretation remains relevant today, *inter alia* because Quentin Skinner and the historians and political scientists of the Chicago School (see, for example, Skinner, 2009) rehabilitated and revitalised it.

Schleiermacher is often unfairly portrayed as an advocate of a slightly old-fashioned type of hermeneutics of text. The original part of his contribution to the history of hermeneutics was that language and texts are actions as well; in other words, important conversations are important actions (Schleiermacher, 1999/1835). In fact, he was an early representative of a new hermeneutics of action that was relevant to anyone exploring actions and their intended and unintended consequences.

Like Schleiermacher, Dilthey focused on the idea that all human "manifestations of life" can be objects of interpretation. This was his contribution to an action-based theoretical justification for hermeneutics (Jung, 2008). One of his many projects was to account methodologically for the distinction between natural and social science. He formulated this as the distinction between *erklären* (explaining) and *verstehen* (understanding) (Beiser, 2011). The natural sciences develop causal explanations and try to explain the natural world through natural laws. The "human sciences" (covering both the humanities and subjects like sociology) develop understanding-based approaches to cultural and social phenomena. Dilthey (1964/1894: 144) summed up this distinction in a famous quote: "We explain nature, but understand the life of the soul."

There is nothing mysterious about the German verb *verstehen* – it means "understand". Everybody knows what it means in day-to-day life. Normally, people understand what other people say or do. If they do not, they ask what the other person meant. Sociology uses the same methods. The main difference is that sociology seeks to develop a more systematic and methodologically sound understanding of social phenomena than is the norm in everyday life.

Dilthey knew that many sociologists seek out causal explanation mechanisms and statistical "laws" – so why exactly is the distinction between *explaining* and *understanding* relevant? He saw a crucial difference between natural and social phenomena. The solar system, for example, has no self-perception. It does not interpret itself. It does not react, either positively or negatively, to human insights into Newton's laws, or other relevant scientific knowledge. Nor does the solar system participate in a learning process. Strictly speaking, humans do not communicate with celestial bodies or elementary particles. Social reality, on the other hand, has a different ontological structure – social actors interpret both their own lives and

sociology's interpretations. It makes sense to say that the informants in a research project are, in fact, conversation partners with the sociologists. After a successful interview, the interviewer has a better understanding of why informants act the way they do. Often, interviewees also learn something about themselves. It may be the first time that they "put things into words", and this forces a change in how they understand themselves. An earthquake, on the other hand, does not initiate a dialogue with us or take our knowledge and predictions into account. There is a fundamental ontological difference between nature and society. According to Dilthey, this difference has important methodological implications for the social sciences.

A simple example will suffice to illustrate Dilthey's point. Even though the statistical link between smoking and lung cancer is now well documented, not everybody has stopped smoking, and many young people continue to take up the habit. Health professionals often seem to think that these groups are unaware of the link between smoking and cancer, and make this an implicit premise in many anti-smoking campaigns. However, from a sociological point of view, smoking is more complicated. Many sociologists would contend that it is part of extensive and complex patterns of behaviour, for instance trying to convey an impression of toughness, to fit in with a social group or to cultivate a certain lifestyle. Lifestyles are ultimately about ideals and identity: Who do I want to be? How do I want to live my life? To understand smokers' choices, it is important to look at their subjective values, ideals and emotions. For many, a particular lifestyle is probably more important than the risk of disease and adverse health effects (Grimen and Ingstad, 2008).

For Dilthey, it was important that the hermeneuticist tried to empathise with the other person's situation. Qualitative interviews and participant observation allowed the researcher to map the actors' life-plans and linguistic, cultural and material resources. His programme is largely identical with sociology's requirement that researchers should see the world from the actor's position. People base their actions on the situation in which they find themselves. This means that sometimes they listen to health campaigns, and sometimes they do not (cf. the example above).

There is a certain amount of truth to the assertion that Dilthey's final works (e.g. Dilthey, 1968) partially anticipate the later "compassion principle" (Davidson, 1984). The principle sets out clear guidelines for drawing up a general hermeneutical interpretation strategy. In simple terms, it is possible to distinguish between two different principles for compassionate interpretation and two accompanying research strategies:

- One way of formulating the first interpretation principle is as follows. In order to understand what actors mean by what they say, write or do, *start with* the idea that most of what they say, write or do has the intended effect. This paves the way

for the following hermeneutical research strategy. When interpreting what informants say, interpret most of the statements as appearing to be *true*. Similarly, when interpreting what informants do, interpret most of the actions as appearing to be *intentional*. Only if this proves impossible should the researchers look for different interpretation strategies.

- One way of formulating the second principle of interpretation is as follows. In order to understand what actors mean by what they say, write or do, it is necessary to *start with* the presumption that they are *rational*. This principle paves the way for the following research strategy. When interpreting what actors say or do, the researchers should consider the informants as rational as possible. Only if this proves impossible should the researchers look for different interpretation strategies.

In other words, researchers need to be compassionate when interpreting what informants say and do, and give the “accused” the benefit of the doubt. Like it or not, in most cases, researchers must interpret whatever the informants believe as true and correct, and whatever they do as rational (Davidson, 1984). The point of the compassion principle is to ensure *respect* for other people’s perceptions. Only if it proves impossible to deploy this principle in the specific situation are other strategies deployed (for a more detailed discussion of the principle’s limitations, see Grimen, 2004: 163–175. The social scientists of previous eras often clearly breached the compassion principle. Many social anthropologists used to interpret statements, thoughts and actions in “primitive” societies as expressions of a “backward” and “pre-logic” mentality (see, for example, Lévy-Bruhl, 1923).

Many researchers have seen the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as a radical alternative to the compassion principle (Ricoeur, 1970), and considered Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the most prominent representatives of this approach because all three deployed interpretation strategies that sought to reveal something. Marx wanted to show how capitalism creates a “false consciousness”, Nietzsche wanted to show how the way we think reflects the “will to power”, and Freud wanted to show that what people dream and say reflects repressed sexual urges. The hermeneutics of suspicion is not always incompatible with the compassion principle, but problems arise if it is the only means social scientists employ to relate to what others say and do. As an interpretation strategy, suspicion does not try to maximise truth and rationality.

In summary form, the basic methodological principles of the hermeneutic tradition are as follows:

- 1 An understanding of the whole requires an understanding of the parts, and vice versa.
- 2 Researchers must not read meaning *into* the text; they must read it *out of* the text.
- 3 Researchers should understand a text in the light of the author’s intention and context.

- 4 Researchers should understand an action in the light of the actor's intention and context.
- 5 Researchers must take into account their own conditions and context.
- 6 Researchers must use (apply) the interpretation in a specific situation (legal hermeneutics and theological hermeneutics).
- 7 Researchers should seek compassionate interpretations. In some cases, the hermeneutics of suspicion serves as an alternative to the compassion principle.

However, these seven principles alone do not constitute a consistent methodological programme. Principles 1, 5 and 6 have always played a key role in biblical and legal hermeneutics, whereas the social sciences and humanities have emphasised 1–5 and 7.

Theoreticians often assert that the hermeneutic circle is a “vicious circle”, consisting only of circular, dead-end reasoning (Seeböhm, 2004: 169–218; Mantzavinos, 2008). The hermeneutic circle is a vicious one in this example:

*Person A:* How do we achieve a real understanding of the whole?

*Person B:* By building up a real understanding of the parts.

*Person A:* But how do we build up a real understanding of the parts?

*Person B:* By building up a real understanding of the whole.

Some unfortunate formulations of the hermeneutical circle use the same structure as Person B's argumentation in this example. However, when properly understood, the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious one. Instead, it is a process that extends and deepens knowledge and understanding. It would be more apt to speak of a spiral than a circle. A simple example will illustrate this point. Imagine that a reader starts a crime novel. The first three sentences are: “The dark suit fitted perfectly. Harry glanced in the mirror. He saw a well-dressed and successful businessman.” Readers do not need to have read the whole book to understand these sentences, but it is not yet clear how they fit into the plot – is Harry a hero, villain or victim? Only by reading on does further information come to light about Harry's characteristics and his role in the novel. This reading process is not a vicious circle.

## Philosophical hermeneutics

Somewhat surprisingly, Gadamer's seminal work, *Truth and Method* (written in 1960), barely touches on questions of methodology. It is a more general study of the possibilities for human understanding. In it, Gadamer stresses that the concept of understanding runs deeper and precedes all scientific questions of methodology

(Krogh, 2014: 47). In the introduction to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes that he seeks to shed light on the hermeneutical phenomenon more generally, and that it is indeed not his intention to draw up a methodological doctrine for hermeneutics:

The hermeneutics developed here is not, therefore, a methodology of the human sciences, but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world. (Gadamer, 2013/1975: xxii)

As a student of Heidegger, Gadamer concentrated mainly on understanding as a fundamental feature of “being-in-the-world”; that is, the concrete way in which humans are physically present in the world. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1985) has argued something similar, namely that *Homo sapiens* is a “self-interpreting animal”. The way humans understand and interpret is inextricably linked to the way they are. However, the finality and historicity of human existence do not constitute an unshakeable foundation for understanding. It is impossible to cast aside all historical, social and cultural factors – there is no such thing as a blank slate. Any understanding is always subject to prior understanding. According to Gadamer, *pre-understanding* is the most important of all hermeneutical conditions. It is important to emphasise the prefix *pre*. Any attempt to eliminate all preconditions will invariably involve a certain amount of pre-understanding. All research requires that the researcher is building on a certain pre-understanding, determined by ontological assumptions (perceptions of how the world actually is), methodological programmes, theories, tacit knowledge, practical skills, and so on. It is this pre-understanding that provides the researcher with access to a field of research.

Gadamer also placed great emphasis on the idea that the process of generating meaning invariably involves pre-existing opinions; a number of judgements precedes any evaluation. He called these often barely conscious judgements *prejudices*. Without prejudices, there is no understanding. They are always present in the way that human beings describe and interpret reality. Pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices are the lenses through which people view the world – and these lenses are always there, because they lie behind the human eye. It is possible to change their strength and colour, but not to get rid of them. Indeed, they make it possible to understand something *as* something (e.g. as ethnicity, sexuality or racism).

A central aim of Gadamer’s hermeneutics project was to affect a reversal of what he considered to be the Enlightenment’s prejudice against prejudice. He wanted to show that “the overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice, and removing it opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only



our humanity but also our historical consciousness" (2013/1975: 288). Unlike Enlightenment philosophers, such as Voltaire and Kant, Gadamer's concept of prejudice is not negative by definition. In this, he breaks with a widespread belief both in everyday life and in research that prejudices are something individuals need to drop because they lead people astray and make it impossible to understand an issue objectively and impartially. It is the idea that this should be possible that Gadamer sees as a prejudice.

Gadamer is right that it is impossible to stray into the hermeneutic circle without pre-understandings and prejudices, but should the researcher distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices? In a critique of Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas (1971) asserts that Gadamer has turned insight in understanding's pre-structures into a more general rehabilitation of prejudice *per se*. This criticism was a sore point with Gadamer: the question was how to avoid prejudices acting as a strait-jacket. As Gadamer himself points out, the problem is that the opinions and prejudices that determine one's perceptions may be completely unnoticed (Gardemer, 2004). If this is the case, it is difficult to understand how people can divest themselves of the negative prejudices that obstruct understanding.

According to Gadamer, our pre-understandings and prejudices make up a whole that he calls a horizon, which nobody can ever fully grasp. It is possible to establish a conscious relationship with parts of the whole, but never with the whole as such. Focusing on one element must never entail taking others for granted. It is not possible to step out of the whole and analyse its parts. In addition, an inherent characteristic of horizons is that they change. As Gadamer points out, a horizon does not have "a rigid boundary, but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further" (2013/1975: 247).

Social scientists always understand an issue from a certain horizon, while their informants often understand the same issue from a different one. Gadamer calls the ability to also understand the world from the informants' viewpoint as a "fusion of horizons". However, this does not imply that the two are identical. Some aspects will always remain alien, but research opens up the possibility of a gradual fusion with the informants' horizons.

The following example illustrates some of the points covered so far. The Norwegian sociologist Lise-Merete Alpers conducted a hermeneutical interpretation of Asian and African immigrants' encounters with the Norwegian health service (Alpers, 2016). One important finding from the interviews is that these immigrants bring different kinds of pre-understandings and prejudices (both positive and negative) to their meetings with Norwegian doctors and health professionals. Several informants related negative assumptions about and experience of the health service. One Asian woman claimed that none of the immigrants



she knew was satisfied with their doctors: "They feel that they are not understood ... So they feel that they need to go on holiday back to their home country and get treatment there. And the treatment they've struggled to get here in Norway for months or years, they get within two to three weeks in their home country" (Alpers, 2016: 17). Several of the immigrants felt that the treatment provided was worse in Norwegian hospitals than in their home countries and that Norwegian doctors were not nearly as friendly as the ones back home. When assessing the quality of Norwegian doctors, they often stressed the lack of authority, lengthy examinations and unclear diagnoses. The informants also felt that they often encountered various kinds of prejudices (including varieties of racism). The evidence suggests that they approached the Norwegian health service with an expectation horizon informed by their experiences elsewhere. They did not really understand that patients were supposed to consider different treatment options. Values such as patient autonomy, voluntary consent and free choice of hospital did not appear to be central to their horizon of understanding. Conversely, workers in the health service bring their own preconceptions, opinions and prejudices to their encounters with immigrants. In her study, Alpers shows what happens when two different horizons meet and gradually approach each other.

Interestingly, some of the patients who had lived in Norway for longer had a better understanding of the Norwegian health service and its values than relative newcomers. This may indicate that there has been a certain convergence between the horizons of the medical community and of the patients. Health workers may also have acquired greater cultural competencies and sensitivity in relation to Asian and African patients. This example illustrates a simple hermeneutical point: all actors in this field meet each other with certain pre-understandings and certain prejudices. In many cases, good conversations can lead to pre-understandings and a rethink of prejudices, and perhaps eventually to a fusion of horizons. It is also important to stress that Alpers's informants are involved in numerous interpretation processes, embracing fellow patients, relatives, neighbours, doctors and health service employees. In other words, the translation processes are multifaceted and complex (Alpers, 2016).

Gadamer did not just want to rehabilitate prejudices. He also wanted to restore faith in authority and tradition. This is perhaps the most problematic aspect of his philosophical hermeneutics. Enlightenment thinkers argued that tradition and authority had to justify themselves in relation to reason. Gadamer rejected this argument. He considered it entirely appropriate to talk about legitimate authority and tradition, as long as it is accompanied by a recognition that some people possess greater insight and are better at evaluating than others. Recognising this capacity in others is not the same as naïve faith in authority. Gadamer thought

that this was a compelling argument against the Enlightenment's revolutionary critique of prejudices, authorities and traditions:

Thus, acknowledging authority is always connected with the idea that what the authority says is not irrational and arbitrary but can, in principle, be discovered to be true. This is the essence of the authority claimed by the teacher, the superior, the expert ... Thus the essence of authority belongs in the context of a theory of prejudices free from the extremism of the Enlightenment. (2013/1975: 292)

Although Gadamer maintained that authority could be based on rational arguments, this part of his philosophical hermeneutics seems to express a somewhat conservative basic attitude. It is also hard to deny that Gadamer's argumentation is somewhat circular. If legitimate authority and tradition should build on rational arguments, rationality and criticism would seem to take precedence over authority and tradition: nothing can claim authority unless it has been vindicated by the court of reason, which is, of course, precisely the Enlightenment argument.

Gadamer is right to say that individuals always interpret an issue on the basis of a particular historical horizon and that this horizon changes. He is also right to say that, "[n]ot just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author" (2013/1975: 307). However, if it is accepted that a text, by virtue of its reception history, always has an additional meaning on top of the author's original intended meaning, then it is also necessary to reconstruct the author's meaning in order to clarify the nature of this additional meaning. Gadamer did not account for how this would be possible without a recourse to Schleiermacher and Dilthey's hermeneutics.

Other writers have often pointed out that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics was based on his teacher Heidegger's analysis of understanding in *Being and Time*. However, the two philosophers' positions are not identical. For Heidegger, understanding is not a cognitive phenomenon linked to pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices. He argues that understanding something is more akin to doing something, coping with something or being able to do something. For Heidegger, understanding is linked to "know-how" and practical knowledge. That a joiner knows how to use a hammer does not mean that he possesses knowledge of the hammer's physical/chemical properties, or from which species of wood the shaft is made. To understand a hammer is to know *how* to hammer. Understanding is the same as *understanding about something*. Heidegger's point is that our original relationship with the world is practical, not theoretical. As long as the hammer works as intended, it is not an object of knowledge (Heidegger, 1996).

In summary, some of the basic principles of philosophical hermeneutics are as follows:

- 1 All actors think and act on the basis of certain pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices. These conditions form the actors' horizons.
- 2 All actors enter into the hermeneutic circle with pre-understandings and prejudices.
- 3 For Gadamer, understanding is about two horizons approaching each other. Ideally, understanding is the same as a fusion of horizons.
- 4 Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics paves the way for a rehabilitation of authority and traditions.

At the start of this section, it was noted that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics precedes all questions of methodology. However, his analysis of pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices has great relevance for anyone about to embark on a research project. Individuals always bring with them certain prejudices and pre-understandings when they enter the hermeneutic circle.

It was also pointed out that Gadamer lacks good criteria for making a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices and legitimate and illegitimate authority. Nevertheless, he is right to assert that individuals always understand the world on the basis of their own (changing) horizons. He also offers good insights into the reception history of texts.

## Hermeneutics of action and intentional explanations

Hermeneutics in the Dilthey tradition revolves around the following areas of interest:

- 1 Human activities
- 2 The intended and unintended consequences of these activities
- 3 The conditions and contexts for these activities.

Dilthey considered human activities to be actions with meaning: building a house, writing an article, entering into a romantic relationship or taking part in a political demonstration. These activities have effects or consequences that the actors usually intend (cf. the compassion principle), but they also have many unintended consequences, such as neighbours submitting complaints about planning permission, the article triggering a heated debate, the relationship breaking up or the demonstration descending into a riot. It is when actions and their consequences are not readily understandable that the need for interpretations and explanations arises. The conditions and context for the activities will often coincide with the actors' horizons, social contexts, and so on.

The hermeneutics of action presented in this section attaches great importance to the social actors' intent and context. A central tenet of the hermeneutics of action is that what actors do must be "situated" or contextualised. This

is the first step towards understanding the actor's point or the intention behind the action. In order to understand the significance of the action for the actor, the researcher must reconstruct its context. The following example shows how the context helps to understand the actor's intention and the meaning behind an action. The example describes four different actions in the same "objective" or behavioural terms – that is, as people raising their right arm as an act of communication. The description says nothing about the nature of the action. The social context reveals its nature. This approach is a simple variant of the hermeneutic circle: actions make sense in the context (whole) of which they are part. For example, if this action takes place at a meeting of the local branch of the Young National Socialists, it most likely means "Heil Hitler!". In this situation, the action is identified as a Nazi salute. In another context, the same gesture can have a completely different meaning, for instance at an auction where people bid by lifting their arms. Here, the action is identified as a bid. In a third context, the gesture might mean voting, for instance at a Liberal Party conference. For football fans, it could simply be their way of greeting the team. The hermeneutical point is simple: If observers understand the context correctly, they will also understand the point of an action or the actor's intention.

Traditional hermeneutics often considers human actions as a phenomenon analogous with text. Philosophers like Taylor and Paul Ricoeur have therefore argued that social science hermeneutics must derive its interpretation principles from the hermeneutics of text (Taylor, 1985; Ricoeur, 1973: 137–175). This establishes the subject of hermeneutic interpretation of texts or phenomena that the researchers can "read" as texts.

There are several reasons why this strategy is not very satisfying for social scientists (Grimen, 1990). Indeed, from a sociological point of view, there is good reason to reverse the analogy. Firstly, it must be assumed that people have been interpreting intentions and actions since long before the advent of writing and texts. In that sense, the hermeneutics of action is an older and more original phenomenon than the hermeneutics of text. The hermeneutics of action is relevant when an actor's intentions, actions, or the results of their actions appear unclear or incomprehensible. In situations like this, two main hermeneutical strategies are available. One is to try to deduce the actor's intention through conversation, research interviews, or similar. Another strategy is to conduct a more detailed analysis of the context of the action (cf. the example of the arm movement above).

Secondly, writing a text is an action. Texts require the agency of a writer – they do not write themselves. Therefore, researchers can see the text as a deliberate or intended product of an action. Hermeneutic interpretation makes it possible to reconstruct the author's underlying point. It also facilitates the study of the text's reception history and its unintended and unacknowledged consequences.

In principle, this allows sociologists to interpret and analyse texts in the same way they would approach other forms of human action.

The hermeneutics of action is therefore primarily interested in the actor's communicative intentions. The sociologist Giddens asserted that, based on a theory of communicative intention, it is possible to interpret a text in the same way as an action, stressing that the intent of communication through text is analogous to the communicative intent of an action, and therefore should be analysed the same way (Giddens, 1989). In order to understand what actors want to communicate via a particular action, researchers must try to reconstruct the intention behind it.

The hermeneutics of action attaches great importance to the actor's intentions. These intentions are often attributed great prominence in "intentional explanations" or "explanations of purpose". Intentional explanations have the following logical structure:

- 1 Person P *intends* (goal) to obtain Y
- 2 Person P *thinks* that action X is the *best means* to obtain Y
- 3 Person P resorts to *action X*.

In an intentional explanation, parts 1 and 2 are premises or *explanans* sentences (that which explains), while part 3 is the conclusion or *explanandum* (that which the sentence explains), i.e. the actor's action. An intentional explanation always includes a premise that says something about the actor's intention or goal. It also includes a premise about how the actor thinks, and what they think are the best means to achieve their goal. The premises show how the actor *reasons*, the conclusion shows what s/he *does*. The aim of an intentional explanation is therefore to understand an action based on the actor's reasoning. Implicit in this reasoning are the actor's hermeneutical pre-understanding and prejudices. The job of the hermeneuticist is (using qualitative interviews, participant observation, document analysis, etc.) to reconstruct the premises and the horizon for the actor's action. These kinds of explanations are a necessity when the point of an actor's action is in some way obscured.

A study by the Polish sociologist and historian Witold Kula exemplifies the importance of hermeneutical interpretation in intentional explanations. Kula (2001) conducted a fascinating analysis of the "incomprehensible" economic pattern of behaviour among aristocratic Polish landowners in the 1600s and 1700s. The landowners' corn production was determined by their desire to achieve a stable and carefully planned income. When corn prices were good, production fell. Conversely, when prices fell, production rose. This appears to be irrational economic behaviour. The estate owners did not exploit good times in a rational manner. They ceased production once they had achieved the income they desired. Why did they not exploit the positive market to make higher profits? To understand

their behaviour, Kula reconstructed their intentions, pre-understandings and prejudices (i.e. the horizon for their actions). He convincingly demonstrated that the overall purpose of the landowners' project was to reproduce a stable, aristocratic way of life. Seen in this context, their actions become understandable and rational. They wanted to maintain a way of life that was incompatible with the maximisation of profit.

This example challenges pre-understandings and perceptions of what constitutes rational economic behaviour. Kula's study also shows that the laws of classical economics do not apply in all circumstances. It also shows, above all else, how important it is to focus on the landowners' own interpretation of themselves and their subjective understanding of what constitutes "a good life". Taylor's distinction between strong and weak evaluations is helpful in this context (Taylor, 1985: 15ff.). Everyday preferences are an example of weak evaluations, for instance a preference for cauliflower soup over tomato soup. Strong evaluations, however, stem from visions of what people consider a good life – they say something about who individuals are and who they want to be, thus they express identity. Although Kula's analysis is controversial, his comprehensive hermeneutic interpretation generates interesting insights into the landowners' strong evaluations.

This section has looked more closely at some aspects of the hermeneutics of action in social science. This hermeneutical tradition builds on the following assumptions:

- 1 The meaning of an action is largely determined by its social context.
- 2 As a rule, observers can understand the actor's intention in the light of the context of the action.
- 3 The hermeneutics of action has historical and logical primacy over the hermeneutics of text.
- 4 The hermeneutical interpretation of texts can build on the same principles as the hermeneutical interpretation of actions.
- 5 There is a close relationship between the hermeneutics of action and intentional explanations (explanations of purpose).
- 6 The actors' subjective interpretations of themselves and "strong evaluations" play key roles in the hermeneutics of action.

Social actors' self-perceptions and their understanding of society help to determine how they act and how society is organised. If this understanding changes, so too do the actors' actions and their society. Therefore, knowledge generated by the social sciences can influence society by creating new frameworks for interpretation, new ways of seeing things and new horizons of understanding. Everyday language assimilates social science concepts, and social science explanations often form part of the actors' own explanations. In a modern knowledge society, "first-person knowledge" also reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, knowledge that has

emerged from sociology, social anthropology, political science, psychology, and other disciplines.

## Double hermeneutics and multiple hermeneutics

Social science research invariably entails complex communicative and hermeneutical relationships between informants and researchers. This section looks more closely at the relationship between concepts of informants and of researchers, and between the knowledge that informants possess and the knowledge that social scientists develop. In line with the phenomenological and sociological tradition of Alfred Schütz and Giddens, researchers often describe informants' concepts as "first-order constructs" (Schütz, 1973, 1986) or "first-order concepts" (Giddens, 1989). Since they are the informants' own interpretations, another appropriate designation is "first-order interpretations" (for an introduction, see Gilje, 2006). One of the examples above showed how Asian and African patients developed their own first-order interpretations of the Norwegian health service, based on a certain horizon of understanding that encompassed various pre-understandings and prejudices. Similarly, the Polish landowners developed first-order interpretations based on their notion of what constituted a good, stable, aristocratic life. Such first-order interpretations are "common-sense" constructions, which the actors use to imbue their lives with meaning, acquire clarity about their goals, and develop an understanding of the best way to achieve these goals.

A central tenet to interpretative social science is that researchers must always relate to social phenomena *already* interpreted by social actors. The actors have their own perceptions, descriptions and interpretations of who they are, how their society is and should be, and why they act as they do. Researchers can only gain access to these actors' worlds by acquiring knowledge about what the actors already know and express via "native" and empirical concepts and first-order interpretations (Giddens, 1989: 284). In the social sciences, the object of study is the world that the social actors have already interpreted. It is therefore important to know how to relate to the informants' interpretations and explanations.

As Dilthey pointed out, this problem does not exist in the natural sciences. The natural scientist's objects of study have no self-perception, do not interpret anything, and do not generate descriptions that may be at odds with the researcher's descriptions and explanations. The natural scientist does not study a world that the natural phenomena have interpreted and explained. They do interpret observations and data, of course, but this is "single hermeneutics" – elementary particles and chemical processes do not interpret themselves.

In somewhat simplified terms, there are two basic views of how social scientists should relate to actors' own first-order interpretations. One important position is that the social actors' concepts and interpretations are often wrong and unscientific and that researchers should, therefore, ignore them. The main advocate of this position was Emile Durkheim. He argued that first-order interpretations are just a veil between people and the basic structures and laws of social reality, a veil that obscures things. Therefore, it is the task of the social scientist to break free from this "dominance of commonly held notions" (Durkheim, 1982/1895: 74). According to Durkheim – and sociological currents such as functionalism and structuralism – there is a knowledge gap between first-order interpretations on the one hand, and strictly scientific explanations on the other (Grimen, 2006). However, this position is not unchallenged. Max Weber believed that it was sociology's job to build on the social actors' interpretations of themselves and the world (Weber, 1978/1968: 3–31). In adopting this position, he defended a thesis (subsequently refined by Schütz, Giddens and others) about the continuity between first-order interpretations and scientific interpretations and explanations. According to this sociological tradition, the actor's first-order interpretations are the starting-point for the researcher's second-order interpretations. This approach also takes account of the fact that the social actors, in various ways, appropriate the researcher's second-order interpretations. This is the basis for double hermeneutics (Giddens, 1982: 78–79; 1989: 284).

Another manifestation of double hermeneutics is when social actors appropriate researchers' second-order interpretations and let them inform their own first-order interpretations. In a modern knowledge society, it is not only social scientists who use terms such as "primary group", "social class", "socialisation" and "social structure". These concepts have, in different ways, become a part of everyday life. Similarly, people often use psychological concepts such as "subconscious", "phobia" and "trauma". In this way, social actors and social scientists establish a hermeneutical spiral of communicative relationships between them.

However, even double hermeneutics cannot fully grasp the complex relationship between informants and researchers. Informants are not isolated individuals. They communicate with other actors and try to understand their perceptions and actions. Focus group interviews often branch off into surprising and creative dialogues that lead to the participants revising their views. Similarly, researchers discuss second-order interpretations with their colleagues, informants and other interested parties. The researcher's interpretations and explanations are challenged both before and after the publication of a scientific study, book reviews and other forms of feedback. Multiple hermeneutics is probably a better term for these complex processes of interpretation.



Also in the natural sciences, there are hermeneutic and communicative relations at the research level (i.e. within the research community). At this level, natural science research is virtually indistinguishable from social science research. The natural scientists must interpret data, but in natural science there is no communicative relationship between researchers and data (“simple hermeneutics”). The phenomena that natural scientists study do not establish hermeneutic or communicative relationships. However, hermeneutic and communicative processes permeate the social sciences.

This section has looked at the distinction between informants’ first-order interpretations and researchers’ second-order interpretations. Based on the work of Giddens, the emphasis was on the hermeneutic circle (or spiral) between second-order and first-order interpretations. Giddens refers to this as double hermeneutics. The section also hinted that these processes are extremely complex. Perhaps multiple hermeneutics is a better term, embracing the many actors on multiple levels. Both double and multiple hermeneutics build on the following principles:

- 1 Actors always develop “first-order interpretations” based on empirical concepts, subjective experiences and strong evaluations.
- 2 Social scientists interpret the social actors’ first-order interpretations, resulting in “second-order interpretations”. This is consistent with the “continuity thesis”.
- 3 Social actors often appropriate the researchers’ scientific concepts and parts of their second-order interpretations. Social scientists often refer to this as “double hermeneutics”.
- 4 Hermeneutic and communicative processes also take place among informants and among researchers. Social scientists often refer to the interaction between these groups and society in general as “multiple hermeneutics”.

Even though there are good arguments for the continuity thesis – that is, that the researchers’ second-order interpretations are based on actors’ first-order interpretations – it is not without its problems. As mentioned previously in this chapter, actors’ actions often have unintended and unacknowledged consequences. A great deal happens in a society that the actors do not want and of which they know nothing. If social science only uses concepts that build on the actors’ concepts, much may go unnoticed (Grimen, 2004). Therefore, often, social science explanations must extend beyond the actors’ self-interpretations.

## Conclusion

This chapter looked at the hermeneutical problems that permeate social science research. It stressed how this circle is actualised in different ways in a research context. The chapter paid particular attention to the fact that researchers bring their own pre-understandings to their meeting with the object of study. The research

process may have various methods of revising and correcting the pre-understandings built into the research, as there is no such thing as research without pre-understandings. Similarly, the researchers' informants also base their thoughts and actions on certain pre-understandings. The chapter stressed the need for both the hermeneutics of text and the hermeneutics of action in social science research. The principles that underpin the hermeneutics of text are particularly important when interpreting transcribed interviews. Finally, the chapter underlined the importance of the hermeneutic dialogue between researcher and informant ("double hermeneutics"). However, since both informants and researchers are part of complex interpretation and learning processes, the chapter went on to suggest "multiple hermeneutics" as a better term within social science research.

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### Key concepts

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**Hermeneutics of action** The hermeneutics of action presupposes that the meaning of what people say, write or do is defined by social context. The hermeneutics of action focuses on intentional explanations (explanations of purpose). Hence, observers interpret the actor's intentions in the light of the context of the action. Interpretations of texts often build on the same principles as interpretations of actions, because language and conversations *are* actions.

**Multiple hermeneutics** Actors always develop "first-order interpretations" based on their experiences and evaluations. Social scientists interpret these interpretations, thus creating "second-order interpretations". Actors often incorporate scientific concepts in their own interpretations, a phenomenon called "double hermeneutics". However, communications also take place among actors and among researchers. The concept of "multiple hermeneutics" is used to cover all these processes of meaning-making.

**Philosophical hermeneutics** The central principles of philosophical hermeneutics are: that human beings think and act on the basis of pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices; that these conditions form the actors' horizons of meaning; and that understanding is about people's horizons approaching each other.

**Principle of compassion** In order to understand what actors mean by what they say, write or do, hermeneuticists start with the idea that most actions are intentional and in a certain sense true. Furthermore, when analysing people's actions, hermeneuticists consider social actors as rational. Only if this proves impossible do researchers look for different interpretation strategies.

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# 7

## INTERPRETATION, PREJUDICE AND THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

Søren Kristiansen

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Hermeneutics in brief	136
• Interpretation as situated activity	138
• Understanding rather than explaining	138
• Pre-understandings and prejudices	139
• A circular understanding	140
Example 1: A hermeneutic perspective on the development of information systems	142
Example 2: Experience of coaching young people from ethnic minority backgrounds	145
Conclusion	149
Key concepts	150
Further reading	151
References	151

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A quarter of a century ago, Linda Pollock noticed that qualitative research reports tended to contain comprehensive descriptions of the procedures used for data acquisition but often lacked rigour when describing analytical processes. She observed that there was a “definite need for researchers to make explicit the methods they use to facilitate the management of large amounts of qualitative data” (Pollock, 1991: 295). Despite changes in the last 25 years – qualitative researchers do now include fuller descriptions of their analytical approach – this aspect of scientific work still needs improvement. It is essential for the future of qualitative research that practitioners provide explicit accounts of how they analyse and process their data. Those inspired by hermeneutics often include descriptions of the tradition as a perspective, and of the principles behind hermeneutic interpretation, but they rarely go into much detail about how they have used the perspective themselves. One reason for this could be that data analysis in qualitative studies is a research stage that is difficult to explain in terms of processes and procedures. There are also relatively few introductions to hermeneutics focusing on more operational aspects.

This chapter attempts to fill the gap by presenting ideas on how to conduct hermeneutic analyses of qualitative data and how to describe this process. The examples cited should be seen as just that – examples – rather than as authoritative formulas for practice. Following a brief review of classical hermeneutics’ key analytical ideas and principles, I will show how these can be deployed in practice. In this way, the chapter is intended to provide inspiration for applying hermeneutic principles in real-life analyses. From the outset, it is important to stress that none of the examples should be viewed as the “right” way to conduct a hermeneutic study. Any study, including a hermeneutic one, must be individually designed to reflect the research objective and question. Researchers draw on the philosophical basis for hermeneutics in different ways and design their study, establish their empirical case and analyse their data accordingly.

## Hermeneutics in brief

Hermeneutics is often described as a science of interpretation. It is a scientific approach that seeks to interpret – and in doing so understand – how people experience and attribute meaning to things, events and phenomena. Other scientific traditions (such as positivism) consider reality as an objective entity that exists independently of human experience – an entity with inherent qualities that neutral researchers can uncover by using the right methods. Hermeneutics has a different starting-point. It approaches reality as consisting of many different worlds (social, cultural, historical). Rather than explaining these worlds’ objective properties,

or the causal relationships between them, it seeks to understand the meaning of phenomena in their context (see Dilthey's distinction between social and natural phenomena in Chapter 6).

The focus on interpretation means that hermeneutics has certain similarities with phenomenology (see Chapters 4 and 5). However, while phenomenology is mainly preoccupied with manifestations of phenomena, and how people experience them, hermeneutics is interested in interpreting situated meanings. Hermeneutics is sometimes called the *art* of interpretation, although this may blur the fact that, as a scientific tradition, it tries to establish rules and principles for the interpretation of phenomena. Historians usually describe hermeneutics as a method of studying the *reception history* of a given phenomenon. In other words, in order to understand a phenomenon, you must recognise that over time a range of meanings has been attributed to it. These have had both practical and conceptual effects, and colour our current perception of the phenomenon. A hermeneutic analysis of a phenomenon must take into account that the history of the phenomenon is a co-creator of its horizons (see pp. 139–140), and interpret the phenomenon in this light.

The historian Poul Duedahl's research project on the effects of a series of specific UNESCO programmes provides a concrete example of a historical analysis of a phenomenon's reception history. The project uses a series of case studies of real-life scientific, educational and cultural programmes in different countries to trace the effects of UNESCO initiatives on attitudes (see, for example, Duedahl, 2016). One of the concrete analyses in this project covers how a shift in mentality in Swedish state schools (as observed in textbooks and students' exam papers) can be traced back to ideas and programmes introduced by UNESCO (Nygren, 2016). By analysing various documents, the project shows how UNESCO as an institution has in various ways affected both attitudes and practice.

Basically, we can distinguish between hermeneutics as *methodology* (determining principles for interpreting phenomena) and as *ontology* (a particular way of understanding human reality). In the methodological sense, which is the main theme of this chapter, hermeneutics use unique principles and procedures to interpret and understand social phenomena. In the ontological sense, it provides principles claimed to be fundamental to human existence in the world. In brief, in a hermeneutic ontology, humans approach the world with pre-understandings that provide the basis for their understanding – and therefore their actions. Such pre-understandings are a condition of human life and facilitate our existence (see Schwandt, 2007: 133–135). In simple terms, the main principles of hermeneutics are: interpretation as situated activity; understanding rather than explaining; the significance of pre-understandings and prejudices; and circular understanding. This chapter looks more closely at



these principles and describes what they mean in practical hermeneutic analyses (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed elaboration of the core elements of hermeneutics, as well as its historical and philosophical foundations). In terms of the history of ideas, hermeneutics draws on a lineage dating back to seventeenth-century theological efforts to deduce the inherent meaning of biblical texts via a practice of interpretation based on circular movements between words, sentences and texts as a whole (see Hope and LeCoure, 2010). The texts had to be understood through individual words, which, however, had to be understood in the light of the whole sentence, which in turn had to be assessed in the light of the text as a whole. Later on, hermeneutics expanded from an exercise in finding the hidden or innate meanings of a text to one that also seeks to interpret the author's intentions and opinions.

### Interpretation as situated activity

Hermeneutics stresses the "finite and situated character of all understanding" (Schwandt, 2007: 133). Its central domain is human beings ascribing meaning to phenomena in a specific time and a particular social and spatial context. One of the key starting-points is, therefore, that people experience the world in a certain context, which colours and influences the way they perceive and understand it. In this sense, hermeneutics resembles interactionism and phenomenology (see Chapters 2–5), in emphasising that it is important to include people's experiences and knowledge when analysing human behaviour. This is neatly encapsulated in what is known as the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572). This starting-point differentiates hermeneutics, like the other perspectives in this book, from the positivist ideal of science, which is not interested in people's attributions of meaning so much as in generating "objective" knowledge of relationships and how social phenomena influence each other.

### Understanding rather than explaining

The founders of modern hermeneutics (such as the philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer) stressed that society and human creations are fundamentally different from natural phenomena, and as such should be studied differently. In hermeneutics, human beings are interacting subjects who are aware of, experience and ascribe meaning to their world. Hermeneuticists, therefore, assert that a science of humankind must be based on interpretations of people's experiences of the world and its phenomena. In other words, human actions cannot be

explained solely by means of objective causal forces that determine certain actions (Bauman, 1978; Bernstein, 2002; Egholm, 2014).

Gadamer had a particular interest in the principles of human interpretation (hermeneutics as ontology). In his major work, *Truth and Method* (1975a), he points out that researchers, too, must be seen as members of society, even if they use scientific procedures and try to see the world from an external perspective (see Chapter 6). Researchers are embedded in history and this unavoidably influences their perceptions of the phenomena they study. According to Gadamer, a science of the human world and the ways in which people understand it cannot be completely neutral. According to hermeneutics, “true” knowledge (knowledge that is independent of values and interests) is not possible because it is always produced by people who are not only researchers but also members of society (Gadamer, 1975b: 310). Following from this, “[t]he goal of a hermeneutic approach is to seek understanding, rather than to offer explanation” (Kinsella, 2006: 7).

### Pre-understandings and prejudices

Researchers inspired by hermeneutics exploit this fact. Their primary analytical procedure, as members of society, is to use their pre-existing conceptions as a starting-point. Hermeneuticists must acknowledge and actively deploy their pre-understandings (Gadamer uses the term “prejudices” for such pre-understandings), and always be prepared to expand on, qualify and reflect on them. It is through this process that new knowledge becomes possible. Our understandings are based on the fact that we already *have* a relationship with the phenomena we study – and that, by relating reflexively to already existing conceptions, we will better understand the phenomena (Berg-Sørensen, 2012; Fehér, 2016).

In an interview in 1985, Gadamer asserted that the truth is not accessible from any one person’s perspective, but lies in the dialogue between people (Boyne, 1988: 28). All people, including researchers, have a *horizon* on the basis of which they interpret the world, and which must be actively deployed when generating new knowledge. In our daily lives, our horizons are continually shifting and developing as a result of our continuously testing our prejudices. When Gadamer applies this mechanism of interpretation to science, the result is an important hermeneutic concept: the *fusion of horizons*. It is through the fusion of horizons that understanding arises (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of Gadamer’s view on prejudice, understanding and fusion of horizons). Hermeneutic science is therefore not about abandoning one horizon in favour of a different one (that of an interview subject or another historical epoch, for example), but finding a

new common ground where horizons merge, as it were, and new knowledge and understanding emerge (Chaiklin, 1993).

The primary task of hermeneutic researchers is consciously to explicate and use their prejudices about the phenomenon being studied (see Fernandez, 2016). According to hermeneutics, researchers are “interpretive beings” who meet and comprehend phenomena through a pre-understanding or a horizon of meaning (Schwandt, 2007: 135). By gathering and interpreting data, they expand and process their pre-understandings in order to arrive at a new fusion of the phenomenon’s horizons and their own. Later in this chapter, we will see how researchers explicitly take as their starting-point, and reflect upon and expand their pre-understandings. As they acquire data, their understanding gradually changes, and these gradually changing conceptions of the phenomenon form the basis for new, more qualified, questions and more data acquisition. It is a dynamic and confrontational process – ideally, the meaning of a phenomenon only stops changing when the information-gathering no longer serves to qualify the understanding. At this point, a fusion of horizons will have occurred, resulting in new knowledge. However, it should be mentioned that this process is theoretically infinite, as any more informed understanding can always be juxtaposed with other horizons of meaning.

Defining and making explicit the researcher’s understanding is, therefore, a significant step in a hermeneutic analysis (and in many other analyses). Within social science research, when making this explication, we can refer to two ends of a continuum. At one end, we find research that establishes hypotheses based on one or more theories, and tests them empirically by means of operationalised concepts. At the other end is the phenomenological tradition, which recommends that researchers approach the study of phenomena as they appear in people’s consciousness. Hermeneutics occupies an intermediate position, where there is a pre-existing structure of understanding that builds on the researchers’ experiences and on previous work, and is open to the uniqueness of the phenomenon being studied (Patterson and Williams, 2002: 39).

### A circular understanding

A hermeneutic analysis usually takes the form of a relatively thorough description of aspects and dimensions that help shape an overall understanding of the phenomenon. Similarly, hermeneutics emphasises that the different aspects of the phenomenon can be understood only with reference to the whole (Hope and LeCoure, 2010: 436). The idea is that understanding is based on a circular process, in which the individual sub-elements of the phenomenon become meaningful in

the light of their importance in the overall context, while an understanding of the phenomenon as a whole is reached by combining and comparing the individual parts (Bontekoe, 1996: 3-4) – as illustrated in Figure 7.1 (see Chapter 6 for a more exhaustive analysis of the hermeneutic circle).

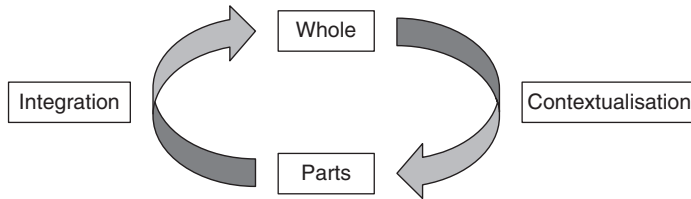


Figure 7.1 The hermeneutic circle (adapted from Bontekoe, 1996: 4).

The example of a football match serves as an illustration. Understanding this phenomenon from a hermeneutic perspective means that, instead of looking in isolation at the individual elements (players, ball, pitch, goals, corner flags, etc.) detached from their overall context, we see it as a unity in which the various players' actions are only understandable when viewed in the specific context, and vice versa. In other words, the parts and the whole are mutually dependent and act as prerequisites for each other. In hermeneutic analyses, this leads to a constantly shifting focus between part and whole, word and sentence, sentence and text, text and context (Berg-Sørensen, 2012: 221; Grondin, 2016). One important goal for a hermeneutic analysis is to arrive at a holistic understanding free from internal contradictions.

It is important to stress that there are many different ways of conducting a hermeneutic analysis and that the tradition merely provides general guidelines for interpretation. Often, however, analyses will be specifically designed to look at both how an overall holistic understanding affects and gives meaning to its smaller individual parts, and how the individual parts point towards a more general understanding (Egholm, 2014; Grondin, 2016). For example, as part of a hermeneutic analysis of job-creation initiatives during a given historical period, researchers may examine elements of the overall political understandings and how they affect the way in which local authority caseworkers do their job – but also conduct in-depth studies of caseworkers' practices and identify how they contribute to general understandings (e.g. of job-seekers, unemployment and activation).

The subject of hermeneutic research is usually human experiences of certain phenomena, and, as such, researchers must collect data that provide access to these experiences. Generally speaking, these data take a linguistic form that makes

underlying understandings and meanings accessible to the researchers. For example, data may consist of documents or interview transcripts in which respondents talk about the phenomenon being studied. For hermeneuticists, the interview is a means to collect and explore a person's understandings regarding a phenomenon or event. However, the interview is not only a means of acquiring material for interpretation but also a tool for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon or event, based on the researcher's pre-understandings (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007: 619).

### Example 1: A hermeneutic perspective on the development of information systems

My first example of a hermeneutic analysis is drawn from an Irish study (Butler, 1998) of the processes involved when organisations develop and roll out various types of information systems. I use this classic study as an example because it offers a clear description of how hermeneutic concepts and principles (e.g. circular understanding through movements between whole and parts) can be married with conventional qualitative research methods. Specifically, it illustrates how the understanding of a phenomenon emerges from the confrontation between two different horizons of meaning, and how the principle of circular movement between the whole and the parts can be applied in practice. As such, the example should be read as an attempt to show how a set of hermeneutic principles can be utilised in practice in a study of systems development processes. The example does not, then, illustrate specific hermeneutic techniques, rather it illustrates how hermeneutic concepts can inform an interpretive analysis through various stages. The researcher started by making the hermeneutic point that it would only be possible to understand the phenomenon of "system development process" if the horizons of meaning of the people involved were identified and compared to those of the researcher. The researcher also noted that an organisation's system-development processes often involve several different constellations of actors. As such, an understanding of the phenomenon must be based on studies of multiple system-development projects, as well as knowledge of the horizons of meaning represented by the actors in the parts of the company involved in the process.

From this starting-point, a research design was devised comprising an initial, exploratory case study (ten semi-structured qualitative interviews), followed by studies of four different system-development projects (two support-system projects; a data-warehouse project; and a marketing and sales project). The study also focused on the critical factors (development-related prerequisites, actions, or roles

performed or related to certain internal or external factors that inform or impact the development process and its products) that are the most important in this type of project. The actual data acquisition from the four development projects involved a total of 38 semi-structured qualitative interviews with senior staff, project managers, developers and users, as well as literature reviews and participant observation. In the processing and structuring of the data, Butler was inspired by the principle of constant comparison (cf. grounded theory; see Chapters 8 and 9).

The hermeneutic movement between the whole and the different parts was used throughout the study. The process started with an initial identification of the phenomenon's horizon, based on literature on the subject. From there, the researcher's horizon was expanded. A pilot study was conducted, leading to a further expansion. This led to the main empirical study, based on qualitative interviews with various people involved, observations and analyses of documentary material. The hermeneutic circle enabled the individual elements of the different horizons to be assessed in light of a holistic understanding that in turn endowed the individual parts with meaning. In this way, the different phases gradually enriched and qualified the researcher's understanding.

The hermeneutic approach is clearly illustrated in the project's overall conclusion. The researcher shows how a variety of critical factors (understood as sub-elements of the whole) affected each other, were influenced by their surroundings and collectively constituted the system-development projects as a whole. For example, the analysis showed that management and resource issues affected one such critical factor – the involvement of employees and end users in all phases of the project. Management and resource issues were in turn affected by both technical factors and the prevailing conditions in the organisation. In other words, a holistic understanding of the system-development process emerged from an analysis of the various sub-elements, each of which, via their mutual connections, contributed to the meaning to the whole.

Figure 7.2 provides a graphical representation of the various circular processes of understanding in the study, which led to various fusions of horizons. The figure shows the researcher's horizon on the left, with the phenomenon and its horizon on the right, comprising a whole with a number of individual parts. Butler analysed the phenomenon by moving between the parts and the whole and relating what he found to his own horizon of understanding. This process took place in the various stages of the study, which involved progressive (downward movement in the diagram) qualification of the researcher's knowledge of the phenomenon. Each row (A–E) in the diagram should be read as a separate hermeneutic circle that leads to the next hermeneutic circle on the level below.

This analysis also shows that hermeneutic analyses do not grant privileged status to the perspectives of the people involved. On the one hand, the study was


Circle	Researcher's horizon	Whole	Parts	Phenomenon's horizon
A.	Pre-understanding of systems development process modulated by the researcher's effective historical consciousness/prejudices etc.	Systems development process as represented in research literature.	Theories, concepts, themes, findings etc. in major streams of the literature on systems development.	
B.	Fusion of horizons of understanding from the transition through A.	Pilot study of IS functions in Telecom Eireann and its systems development-related activities.	'World views' of 10 senior IS function managers and IT professionals. These were expressed in their views on IT strategy, current and future development projects, development projects, development approaches, use/non-use of methodologies, quality issues etc.	
C.	The researcher's horizon is constituted by a fusion of theoretical/conceptual/empirical perspectives in the literature and the horizon offered by the phenomenon in the pilot study.	Empirical study of the systems-development process and its related development, organisational and external environments.	'World views' and explicit and tacit role-related CSFs of 38 social actors including 7 members of the IS function's senior management team, business and IS project managers, developers and user representatives in four development projects. These were expressed in the tape-recorded interview narratives. Additional insights came from documentary evidence and informal sources.	
D.	The researcher's horizon now consists of cumulated perspectives resulting in 'fusion of horizons' produced in C.	Accumulated research artefacts on the phenomenon and its environment that describe and give definition to the systems development process.	Interview transcriptions and notes; write-up of informal conversations etc. At a more fundamental level, the reductionist/analytical dialectic, as employed by the content and comparative data analysis, revealed the underlying activities/perspectives of the social actors involved in the development process – thus, the parts emerged from the analysis.	
E.	The researcher's horizon encompasses the cumulative fusion of horizons as represented by his understanding of the systems development process resulting from D.	The explanation provided by the research text.	The themes, descriptions, arguments, graphical mechanisms, tables, descriptive matrices, contained in the various chapters/sections etc. of the text. The complexity of the development process was addressed taking the salient development related activities (the CSFs or, in Heideggerian terms, those development-related phenomena that were most likely to experience breakdown and thus be 'present at hand') and describing them in extended narratives. Discussions and conclusions that coalesce to describe and explain the phenomenon etc.	
	The 'fusion of horizons' presented in the research artefact itself becomes a phenomenon with its own 'horizon' that requires interpretation by its audience. And so the movement through the circle continues.			

Figure 7.2 The circle of understanding as applied in the Butler case.

Source: Adapted and reprinted with permission from Springer Nature, *Journal of Information Technology*. Towards a hermeneutic method for interpretive research in information systems. Tom Butler © 1998.

based on the premise that the meaning of system-development processes cannot be seen as existing independently of the people who perceive and describe it. On the other hand, this meaning was not established through an analysis of participants' perceptions alone, but by carefully investigating the interplay between them, and a much broader complexity of elements, including the researcher's pre-understandings.

The example illustrates another key feature of hermeneutic studies, namely that the analytical process starts as soon as the first data have been acquired. The initial analyses help to qualify the researcher's conceptions and may give rise to new questions that have not previously been considered. Analysing the data as they are acquired helps to ensure that the understanding of the phenomenon gradually improves. This would not be possible if the researcher, for example, had asked the same questions throughout the study and waited until all of the interviews had been conducted before analysing any of the material.

### Example 2: Experience of coaching young people from ethnic minority backgrounds

The second example is from Mie Maar Andersen's (2014) Danish study of boys from ethnic minority backgrounds and their experiences of group coaching. The study was part of a broader research project aimed at strengthening the preconditions for resilience and integration among ethnic minority youths in the Danish school system. It was based on qualitative interviews with seventh-grade boys at a school in the Nørrebro area of Copenhagen, video observations of coaching sessions and direct observation of peer supervision sessions among the coaches. The study had a combined phenomenological/hermeneutic starting-point, and is a good example of how the researcher's pre-understandings can be made explicit, and how the hermeneutic circle can be deployed and accounted for.

The hermeneutic approach served as a framework for interpreting the boys' spontaneous statements and actions. It was also used to describe the relationship between the researcher's previous and more recent experiences, as well as her methodological choices and subsequent expanded understanding. In line with the principle that the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon (here, the boys and their experiences) is based on an active awareness and use of her own horizon of meaning, Andersen gives an explicit account of her own initial horizon when approaching the field:

My meeting with the boys at the school and in interview situations may well be coloured by the fact that I have lived in Nørrebro, just a few hundred metres from



[their school], for the last five years. The target group has been on the periphery of my everyday life. When I have walked or cycled by, they have been part of the streetscape, for good or ill. I have witnessed good-natured teasing, ball games, close community, yelled obscenities, violent fights, petty criminal pranks, aimless wandering of the streets and gathering at corners a little too late at night. These impressions have given me an understanding that it is a hard and very inwardly focused environment, in which ... the street, the group and alpha males' rules dictate behaviour and the agenda. I therefore have the perception that the group is very important, as it can be seen as a form of family that plays a supportive and instructional role in the boys' upbringing. ...

In addition to my everyday impressions, my work and my education have also affected the starting-point for my impressions of the boys. My job as a badminton instructor and camp leader at sports camps for children and young people aged 11–15 has given me a sense of what goes on among boys at this age. However, it is typically prosperous ethnic Danish boys and girls who attend such camps, so the priorities, interests and values of the boys in the study may well be very different (Andersen, 2014: 26).

Andersen also mentions that her university training has equipped her with various theories, concepts and empirical knowledge related to specific coaching tools, as well as how the boys are likely to experience them. She also stresses that, in connection with the broader project, she has participated in various presentations at which other people's experiences with the target group were described. In addition, she has read several other studies that she believes may have "heightened my awareness of the challenges the target group faces in general, which again can colour my view of the boys and my way of talking and posing questions" (2014: 27). On an overarching level, the study can be understood as a meeting between Andersen's and the boys' horizons of meaning. The researcher's use of hermeneutic principles facilitates a new, expanded understanding of the target group and their experiences of coaching. When examined more closely, it can be seen that this new horizon consists of multiple interconnections, forming a spiralling path that continually arrives at new sub-understandings. Figure 7.3 illustrates this process.

Like other researchers inspired by hermeneutics, Andersen stresses the importance of pre-understandings, citing concrete examples of how her expectations of the target group influenced the way she organised the study. One example of this is in the planning and implementation of the qualitative interviews. Andersen (2014: 49) says her assumption was "that the boys are often curt, reticent and unreflective in their responses" and that such a pre-understanding "is based on my own experiences with the boys, as well as on the experiences that the coaches have talked about at various supervision sessions". Her focus on the active use of follow-up questions was also rooted in her pre-understanding:

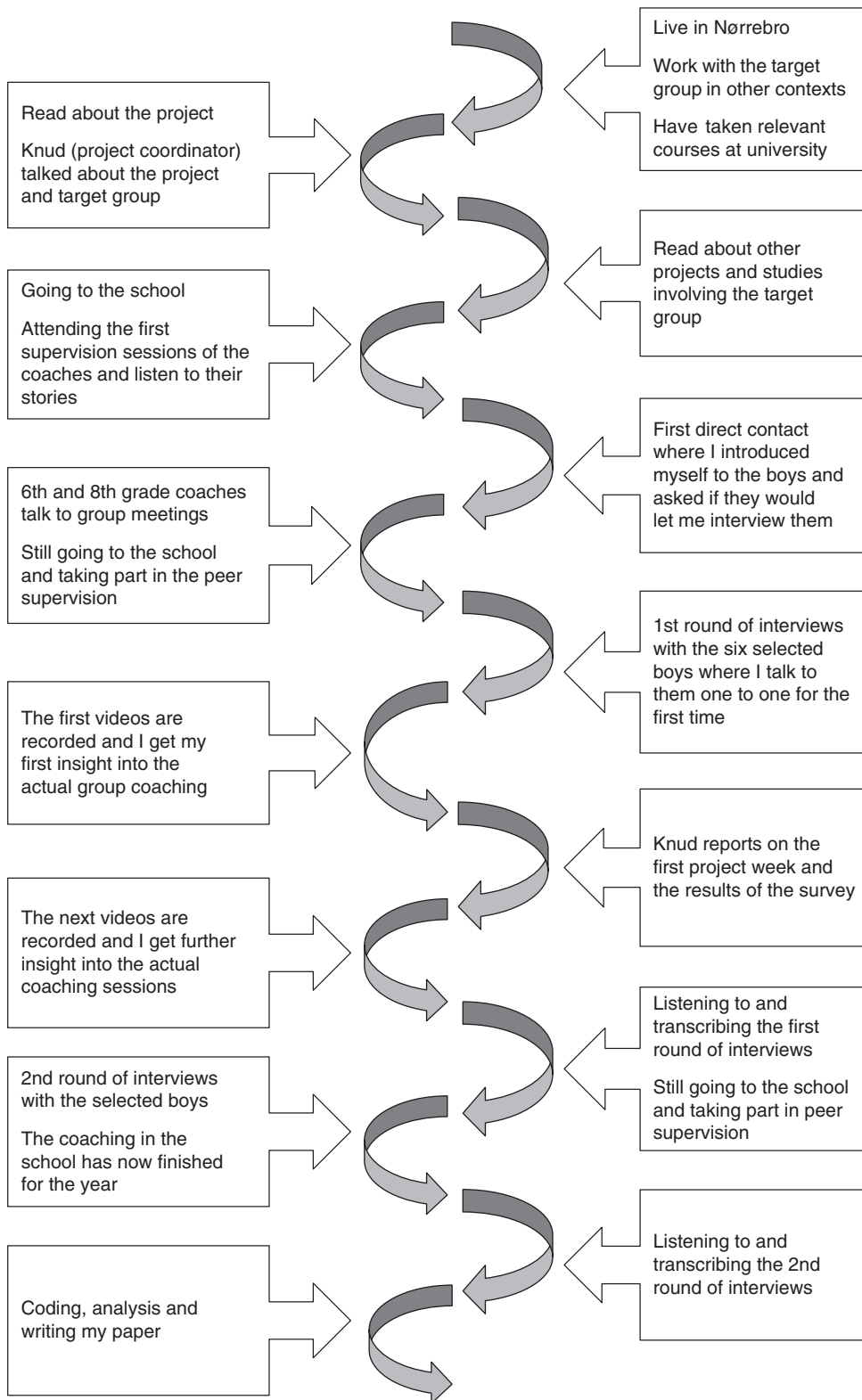


Figure 7.3 The hermeneutic spiral in the study of ethnic minority youths' experiences of coaching (adapted from Andersen, 2014: 28).

The pursuit of the boys' responses was also designed to focus on another pre-understanding, namely the previously mentioned tendency to come up with the answer they think I want to hear. The pursuit of their responses is thus also a way to ask critical questions designed to test their response. (2014: 50)

Although Andersen's study also had a phenomenological element (e.g. in its orientation towards Merleau-Ponty's concept of "the lived body"), it serves to illustrate a special feature of hermeneutic interviews: they are usually open and flexible. This creates the best possible space for the interviewees to express themselves freely about those aspects of the phenomenon that are important to them. The conversation is typically shaped by an interview guide that outlines a number of themes to pursue, based on the researcher's initial understanding and research question. The interview, therefore, constitutes a text produced by an interviewee, who describes his/her experiences and a researcher who leads him/her towards certain themes (Patterson and Williams, 2002: 45). Andersen developed and memorised an interview guide, which she used as a tool for structuring her conversations with the boys. She only looked at it at the end of each interview, to make sure she had covered everything.

As mentioned previously, it is impossible to prescribe specific ways of analysing data in a hermeneutic study. Researchers develop different systems (manually or with software) for organising and keeping track of the units of meaning identified in the analysis. However, they typically begin by identifying segments of data (e.g. text sequences – typically several sentences) that have their own specific meaning. These provide headings that are either taken from the interviewees themselves, or derived from the understanding that the researcher has developed. As in any other code-based analysis, the entire body of material is then encoded. During this process, the researcher tries to register and describe the relationships between units of meaning identified through the analytical process. This can be done in writing, or by means of visualisations. Andersen used concept-driven hermeneutic coding and subsequent categorisation that provided an overall description of the boys' experiences of the coaching sessions. She divided these experiences into two subgroups. One described experiences with the elements of the coaching (the interlocutor, the group, movement, conversation) while the other described the consequences of the coaching (reflexivity, mood, behaviour). The categories were arrived at via the coding work and through confrontation with her initial pre-understanding, which was partly based on theories about resilience in different areas (e.g. academic, social and physical skills). The analysis then confronted the various components of this pre-understanding and, in doing so, arrived at a new, expanded understanding that recognised how the boys' resilience might be influenced, stimulated, or inhibited by the group coaching.

## Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the methodological principles that guide hermeneutic studies and reviewed real-life examples of how to conduct them. The examples used came from organisation studies and research on coaching, but could have been picked from other research fields as well. Just to mention a few examples, there are interesting hermeneutic studies of advertising campaigns (Philips and Brown, 1993), relatives of critically ill patients (Walters, 1995), corporate communications to shareholders (Prasad and Mir, 2002), nursing practice (Bright, 2015), the importance of fathers' presence during childbirth (Kainz et al., 2010) and professional practice among occupational therapists (Paterson and Higgs, 2005).

The chapter discussed and illustrated a number of recurrent principles for hermeneutic analysis: situated interpretation, understanding rather than explanation, the importance of pre-understanding and prejudice, and circular understanding. An archetypical analytical process was identified, which starts with the researcher defining and describing his/her pre-understandings. These may be more or less informed by theory and relevant studies in the field – the most important consideration is that the pre-understandings must be acknowledged and that the researcher's horizon should be sufficiently open to the influence of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher must also decide on the method and principles for the selection, collection and analysis of the data. Due to hermeneutics' focus on qualitative phenomena (e.g. text, language, meaning and communication), data are often acquired via in-depth qualitative interviews. Similarly, its constructivist ontology means that the aim of the interview is not to uncover hidden knowledge or force a reaction from the interviewee, but to generate shared meaning about the phenomenon, by means of the interviewer and the interviewee together reaching a fusion of horizons.

Finally, we must dwell briefly on how to evaluate the quality of hermeneutic studies. First, however, we must emphasise that *all* scientific studies should be judged based on the scientific ideal and tradition of which they are a part. As mentioned, hermeneutics does not approach reality as a single entity, possessing inherent qualities that can be observed objectively by a researcher equipped with the right tools for measuring them. On the contrary, hermeneutics sees reality as consisting of many different worlds. Both the people studied and the researchers themselves form integral parts of this reality, and have a particular understanding of it. Hermeneutic studies should therefore not be judged on their ability to deliver context-independent knowledge about a phenomenon's objective properties or the causal relationships between phenomena. The scientific contribution of hermeneutic studies consists of their

ability to provide insight into phenomena – in other words, their potential to enhance the understanding of a phenomenon's meaning. Polkinghorne (1983: 238) expresses this very precisely:

The 'seeing' of the pattern which gives meaning to the text requires insight; the seeing is not a result of precise procedures as is, for instance, a mathematical result. In mathematics, the design and choice of procedures can require considerable creative work, but the analysis of the data follows directly from the application of the procedures. In the hermeneutic sciences, this is not so. Seeing the meaning is an insightful event supported by evidence, but the evidence is ambivalent and takes on its own meaning from its place in the interpretation proposed. The seeing is ultimately unformalizable, and thus its demonstration is not absolute.

A hermeneutic study based on qualitative interviews does therefore not merely consist of quoting interviewees and retelling how they express themselves in connection with the phenomenon being studied. It is not a matter of simply collating descriptions of a phenomenon from a number of sources and summarising their main points. As well as being anchored in, and empirically characterised by, a systematic and transparent approach, hermeneutic science must improve the reader's understanding of the specific phenomenon being studied. This requires a starting-point in a clearly stated and meaningful pre-understanding, which is then expanded and qualified by progressive circular part-whole interpretations. The final design of the analysis should include empirical evidence that is explicit enough to enable readers to make independent assessments of the interpretation presented. The researcher's final interpretation should therefore offer insights that are on a different (higher) level than was possible at the start of the study (Patterson and Williams, 2002: 36). An important prerequisite for reaching such an understanding is that the researchers are aware of hermeneutics' theoretical basis, assumptions and ambitions, and that they are capable of applying due academic rigour to ambiguous data.

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### Key concepts

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**Fusion of horizons** This is an expression of the process of understanding that occurs when two horizons merge and form a new meaning. In a research context, this refers to the confrontation between the phenomenon that the researchers want to explore and understand, and their own pre-understandings. Via this process, the phenomenon is brought into the researcher's horizon, and the researcher enters the phenomenon's horizon.

**Hermeneutic circle** The hermeneutic circle describes a process of moving back and forth between the sub-elements of a phenomenon and the context of which they are a part. In this way, sub-elements become meaningful in the light of their importance in the overall context, while an overall understanding of a phenomenon is reached by combining and comparing the sub-elements.

**Horizon** Everyone has a horizon of meaning that they use to interpret the world. According to Gadamer, this is a basic human condition, and a principle that can be put to systematic use in research. The fact that people understand the world from a horizon underlines the fact that researchers are not neutral observers, who simply expose the objective properties of a given phenomenon, but individuals who question them from their own horizons.

**Pre-understanding** Everybody, including researchers, has pre-understandings of phenomena, which are shaped by personal experience and form the basis of our interpretation of the world. In other words, our life experiences give rise to “prejudices” or “pre-judgements” that are necessary for our understanding of the phenomena we encounter – in research as well as in life in general.

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# 8

## CRITICAL REALISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Lee Martin

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Some principles for critical realist research	156
• Commitment to ontology	156
• Causal powers	158
• Stratification, emergence and open systems	159
• Agency–structure relations	159
• Causal explanation	160
Conducting critical realist qualitative interviews	161
• Preparing empirical work	162
• Data collection	164
• Data analysis	165
Conclusion	168
Key concepts	169
Further reading	169
References	170

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While there is an abundance of abstract instructions for designing critical realist empirical work, practical advice on the decision-making processes needed to conduct such work is somewhat harder to find. In this chapter, after defining some of the terms relevant to critical realist qualitative research, I will outline some practical processes and techniques that might be useful for those applying critical realism within their empirical work. The chapter focuses on designing and conducting critical realist semi-structured interviews within a case study, or similar research context. To achieve this, some principles of critical realism will be described and an explanation of why they matter to the design of empirical work will be offered, but only to the extent needed to think about the purpose, function and practice of critical realist interviews. The application of these principles will be discussed within three stages of qualitative research: before designing the research project; during data collection; and during the analysis of data. Examples from previous research projects will be drawn upon to demonstrate these principles within research practice. The chapter concludes with some comments on the future of critical realist empirical research.

## Some principles for critical realist research

### Commitment to ontology

Critical realism developed as an alternative to both traditional realist projects and hermeneutical philosophies. Since the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, attempting to explain the ontology of the social world has been subject to conceptual difficulty. For Kant, the world we perceive and our explanations of it are an inevitable reduction of its actual state. He argued that there is no essential or necessary ontological feature of the natural and social worlds that we can use as a touchstone for our knowledge claims. In effect, the world "out there" is transcendental to consciousness and so certainty can never be a feature of explanation or theory. Following the publication of Kant's work, *realist philosophy* has tended to focus on developing methods and methodologies that can improve the validity and reliability of theoretical explanation, while accepting this Kantian uncertainty surrounding knowledge claims. These methods and methodologies have developed into what we understand as the scientific method today, with observation and measurement of clearly defined variables becoming critical for identifying causality and the scientific explanation of events. Crucially, these systems of thought are epistemological in nature: they focus on how we can be more certain about what we know about the world, rather than on what the world is actually like.

For *hermeneutical philosophy*, the recognition that all knowledge claims are uncertain led to an equally important focus, namely the development of explanations that explore this subjective fallibility. Whether the focus was the nature of human subjectivity, the shaping effect of discourses, the deconstruction of texts and signs, the power structures surrounding knowledge production or the networks that privilege certain types of knowledge, these projects explored the ways in which knowledge is conceptually mediated, influenced by power and socially constructed. While accepting that all these philosophical projects have a vital role to play in the production of knowledge, Bhaskar (1978, 1998) argued that their focus on epistemology (how we come to know the world), rather than ontology (what the world is actually like), has created logical contradictions in the types of explanations produced.

The basis of this contradiction lies in recognising that these philosophies contain an implicit ontology that is contradictory to the world we experience. This contradiction takes two forms. First, for realist thinkers, especially those concerned with the development of scientific methods, this implicit ontology tends to reduce reality to events that are observable and measurable. This reduction of the world to empirical experience is typified by claims such as: “if it is not measurable, it cannot be considered part of scientific explanation”. Second, Bhaskar argued that hermeneutical philosophies have a similar tendency to limit knowledge claims to reflections on the perspectives, discourses and world-views of the experiencing self. This means that what can be said about the world (our ontological commitments) is limited to the concepts and discourses present within experiencing selves. According to Bhaskar, this leaves an ontological contradiction in these philosophies which implies that the world beyond our experience may as well not exist, as an attempt to explain it would be contradictory to this implicit ontology.

Bhaskar’s key argument in response to both realist and hermeneutical philosophical projects is that there is no logical necessity in the relationship between how we come to know the world (our epistemological commitments) and what the world is actually like (our ontological commitments). He subsequently argues that making our ontological commitments explicit is important to explanation, and not doing so can leave us prone to an error in logic he named the *epistemic fallacy*. This fallacy is typified by attempts to explain the world through how we experience it. The effect of this is significant, in that the ontology of the world can be flattened (within theory) into only empirical events. He argued that this is a theory–practice contradiction as we know through experience that things exist that are not necessarily capable of being experienced. For Bhaskar (1978), therefore, ontology matters to explanation.

Critical realism is “realist” in the sense that it maintains that the social world exists outside of individual experience. However, it is also critical, meaning

that knowledge claims are recognised as being anti-foundational, conceptually mediated and influenced by discourses, power structures and the social milieu (Cruickshank, 2002). The core ideas of critical realism were developed to resolve the epistemic fallacy and emerged from a process of dialectical reasoning. Through asking what is agreed upon in these other philosophies of science, Bhaskar (1978) sought to identify what the ontology of the natural and social world must be like, if the things agreed upon within these other philosophies were real. This process of dialectical reasoning led to the development of the key ontological claims (the existence of causal powers, stratified ontology, emergence, open social systems, agency–structure relations) and their epistemological consequences (developing a causal explanation) for critical realist research.

### Causal powers

The first of these ontological claims emerged from accepting that within both realist and hermeneutic philosophies there is general agreement that our world is one in which the practices of science can take place *and* causal relationships can be identified. Bhaskar (1978) argued that the ontological consequence of this must be the existence of causal powers. This is because the identification of causal relationships requires scientific work. Identifying causal relationships requires the application of scientific methods (defining variables, careful observation, seeking event regularities) because causes do not always result in measurable effects (otherwise we would always see the effects and these would act continuously). This insight is crucial to explanations of causality. Scientific explanation suggests that experimental methods are designed to find causal laws. These laws are assumed to be universal and are normally stated as: whenever variable  $x$  exists, then event  $y$  will follow. However, if these types of relationships tend only to be found through scientific work (designing experiments, controlling intervening variables, etc.) then it must be possible for a cause to exist (variable  $x$ ) and an event *not* to follow (event  $y$ ).

Bhaskar argued that this means causes endure outside of scientific work (i.e. causes continue to exist) even when they are not producing effects. For example, gravity continuously exerts its force on a pen, but placing it on a table will stop the pen falling to the floor. However, while the event (the pen falling to the floor) is not present this does not mean the cause is not present (i.e. gravity stops working). Causes are therefore better described as causal powers, separate from the events they generate. The causal power of something, or its disposition, for instance the ability to speak, continues to exist whether or not it produces effects, is capable of being observed, or can be measured (e.g. we can decide not to speak). The epistemological consequence of this is that an explanation is insufficient if it

only includes observable events, as causal powers can continue to exist, be capable of acting and not necessarily result in a measurable empirical event. For Bhaskar (1998: 21) this means “that whilst the positivist (Humean) tradition is correct to stress there are causal laws, generalities at work ... it errs in the reduction of these laws to empirical regularities”.

Accepting the existence of causal powers means that the ontology of the world can be stratified into three layers (see Chapter 9 in this volume): first, a deep layer consisting of all causal powers and potential causal powers, whether acting or otherwise; second, an actual layer, where causal powers exist and act but are not necessarily producing effects or being observed; and third, an empirical layer where causal powers act, cause effects and where these effects can be identified. Recognising this stratified ontology has an important impact on research methodology. It means causal powers can affect a situation or context, even though their influence may not be available for empirical observation. Causes can exist and not produce effects, and effects may have many unidentified causes (Harré and Madden, 1975; Sayer, 1992).

### Stratification, emergence and open systems

Building on these insights concerning causal relationships, Bhaskar explores how different types of causality affect explanations of natural and social systems. A key insight is that the natural and social world must also be stratified into emergent layers, given the qualities of causal powers. Different causal powers can combine to create structures that are emergent from and irreducible to their constituent parts. For example, while biological systems have causal powers rooted in chemistry, which are in turn built upon the laws of physics, they also contain emergent causal powers that only operate at the biological level. For Collier (1994: 116) this means “each level is autonomous in the sense of having its own irreducible set of mechanisms, and distinct sciences, using different concepts and discovering different laws, will be required to study them”. A consequence of the emergence of causal powers is that the social world must be considered an open system, with new causal powers having the potential to come into existence and influence existing causal powers in unpredictable ways (Bhaskar, 1998). While it may be possible in laboratory studies to bring about closure to a physical or chemical system, this becomes more difficult at the level of biology and upwards (Collier, 1994).

### Agency–structure relations

Critical realism contains a unique argument for the relationship between social structures and human agency that builds on the insights into causal powers and

emergence. For Bhaskar (1998), processes of emergence imply that social structures are irreducible to people yet simultaneously necessary for human development and action. Social structures are considered autonomous to individuals, as it is their emergent causal powers that establish their position as independent of human agency. Yet they can be transformed or reproduced through human action. Social structures are therefore argued to be complex real objects, capable of being identified and explained (1998: 25–27).

Archer (2000) develops these insights further through arguing that human beings are reflexive agents, capable of self-determination. This reflexivity stems from our embodied practice in the world and provides a foundation from which the emergent properties of the self (and subsequently society) are able to develop. This argument is presented as an alternative to claims that it is language and discourses that shape and determine our agency. For Archer (2000), embodied practice is vital to the emergence of selfhood (our continuous sense of self), for the development of our dispositions or causal powers (e.g. our reflexivity) and ultimately for the emergence of social structures. The consequence of this argument is that because the social world is constructed through human action, it is not a deterministic world in which human beings lack reflective action, or the capacity for change.

For the critical realist researcher these arguments have a number of consequences. First, recognising that social structures are emergent and independent of human agency, yet can be reproduced and transformed by it, means it is possible to examine social structures and how they influence participants within interview settings. Second, if human agency is independent and reflexive, capable of reproducing or transforming social structures, yet also influenced by the causal powers of social structures, this means the cognitive strategies of participants become crucial pieces of evidence for completing a causal explanation. Hence, critical realism recognises the existence of emergent social structures while being capable of offering explanations of social events that are not purely structural or agential accounts. The cumulative effect of these ontological commitments (the nature of causal powers, emergence, reflexive human agency, the existence of social structures, open social systems) means a causal explanation needs to be cognisant of all these possibilities and also be capable of explaining the action *and* inaction of causal powers.

### Causal explanation

In critical realism the objective of empirical work is to develop a causal-explanatory account of your topic. Sayer (1992: 89) argues that a critical realist “must abstract from particular conditions, excluding those which have no particular effect, in order to focus on those that do”. This process of developing a causal explanation

must involve being able to distinguish between the internal (necessary) and external (contingent) relations of causal powers that are operating (Sayer, 1992). Causal powers endure because of their internal relations – the necessary and unique combination of properties that make them what they are. Taking something simple like a matchstick, its internal relations are the set of causal powers that make it what it is (wood, phosphorus, etc.)

External relations are those contingent relationships that prevail within a context, which causal powers can have an effect upon, or be affected by (for the matchstick this might be sandpaper for it to strike upon). Here, the matchstick exists because of its internal relations. The external relations are those things that it can act upon. Any causal explanation must attempt to distinguish between these (essential) internal and (contingent) external relations. Sayer (1992: 91) argues that doing this involves asking some seemingly simple questions to which the answers are often complex, such as: “What does the existence of this object (in this form) presuppose? Can it exist on its own as such? If not, what else must be present?”

A causal explanation is therefore not completed through trying to identify causal regularities but requires the investigation of what a causal power is, and what it can do (Sayers, 1992: 105). To avoid tautologous explanations, empirical work should aim to establish what gives the causal power its substance, as well as how it operates (or can operate) within any given context. A key method for the development of critical realist causal explanations is the DREI(C) approach (Pratten, 2007; Mingers et al., 2013). This is a five-step iterative process used within research in order to develop causal explanations. First, it requires describing (D) the phenomena at hand while seeking to identify theory–practice contradictions and anomalies (understanding the difference between causal powers, the events they can generate, and the events that are actually occurring). Second, explanatory mechanisms need to be “retroduced” (R) for the phenomena. Retroduction requires taking the conditions found in a research context and identifying which causal powers are needed to explain the context. In other words, given the unique context and the set of circumstances we encounter, we must ask what is necessary and what is contingent to these conditions. Third, this retroduction must include the elimination (E) of competing explanations, normally achieved through interrogating the contradictions and tensions between existing theory and the circumstances under investigation. The fourth and fifth steps lead to the completion of this analysis, which should result in the inference (I) of what causal (C) powers are at work (I-C).

## Conducting critical realist qualitative interviews

Critical realist qualitative research can use multiple methods because it is the object of investigation that determines what methods to use. Critical realism is



therefore methodologically plural – with methods determined by the needs of the causal mechanisms under investigation. Causal powers can be active within multiple strata, be operating, be latent, or be entirely unobservable. Qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences and world-views of participants, and it is within their experiences that agential causal powers and social structures can be uncovered. What follows is some guidance on how to translate these ideas into empirical practice. To aid the presentation of this guidance, I have split the research process into three broad categories (preparing empirical work; data collection; and data analysis) and will use examples from previous studies to demonstrate this in practice.

### Preparing empirical work

Using critical realism to inform research means certain types of research questions become more likely than others. The DREI(C) method tends to start either with an immanent critique of existing literature to identify theory–practice contradictions, or with identifying a practice (or practices) that lack satisfactory explanation. There are a few prescriptions within critical realist texts that can help with this process. Wilson (2019) recently described this as the “art” of the social science process. Uncovering which causal powers require explanation means we are part detective, part on a journey of discovery and part using our reflexive scholarly capabilities. In effect, we are trying to identify where existing theory fails to effectively describe or explain current practice. Theory can offer insight into the causal powers likely to be operating within any context. However, the restrictions other epistemological positions place on theoretical development often mean that the causal powers we experience in practice can remain unaccounted for within current theory. It is in identifying these types of situations that theory–practice inconsistencies can emerge, and this provides one avenue for developing research questions that have the potential for informing new causal explanations.

In my own work, seeking these theory–practice contradictions provided several opportunities for the development of research projects. For example, much creativity theory (especially within the discipline of psychology) has been developed through the use of scientific methods that require observation and measurement of identifiable variables. This led to an issue whereby the methods used to study creativity required the creative outputs of creative people to be recognised by a research panel (normally a group of experts) to be included within research studies (e.g. Kaufman and Baer, 2012). A theory–practice contradiction therefore existed whereby in practice we know that creative people can produce highly creative outputs that can remain unrecognised but these examples could not be studied

without contradicting the methods used to research creativity. Therefore theoretical explanations struggle to account for those whose creativity remains unrecognised (e.g. due to politics, power, race or gender) as their experiences demand explanation yet can remain excluded due to a lack of recognition. For my research, identifying this theory–practice contradiction within existing research led to the development of a series of studies that sought to explore creativity prior to its recognition. This required a research design that enabled the causal powers that block recognition to be identified.

The solution was to design research into those employed to be creative within the creative industries and to explore their creativity across the boundary of their workplace. The sample included individuals who are recognised in work but not out of work, out of work but not in work, both or neither (Martin, 2008; 2009; Martin and Wilson, 2017). Designing the research in this way provided case studies in which the causal powers influencing recognition could be investigated. The practical process for developing this research design was relatively straightforward and was guided by critical realist ontology. If the causal powers for creativity can exist in a latent state, be actualised and not observed, or actualised, observed and unrecognised, then the research sample needed to include each of these types of creativity. Offering a causal explanation of creativity that only included observed and recognised accounts of creativity would have resulted in incomplete causal explanations.

Theory–practice contradictions can also be found when investigating government or organisational policy. Evidence-based studies tend to inform policy development, but these studies can suffer from the epistemic fallacy described earlier (see Price, 2014, for examples), and policy can be influenced through political or power interests. This theory–policy interface can therefore prove to be another fruitful area for identifying critical realist research questions. For example, Martinez Dy et al. (2017) used this policy–theory interface to good effect when exploring internet-based female entrepreneurship. Here, policy initiatives held the implicit assumption that the internet can be a “great leveler” for those experiencing disadvantage because of their gender, race or socio-economic position. This is because internet communication technologies (ICT) were claimed to have affordances or dispositions that reduce the barriers to entry for potential entrepreneurs (Martinez Dy et al., 2017).

Such policy initiatives, if misdirected, can have negative effects on disadvantaged communities as they tend to focus on enabling individual action, rather than tackling the structural inequalities experienced. Given that founders of successful internet companies tend to come from more privileged backgrounds, a potential policy–theory contradiction existed that required empirical investigation. In this case, a study that was cognisant of structural inequality was needed and Martinez Dy et al. (2017) utilised critical realism, intersectional feminist theory and theories

of entrepreneurship to explore this and determine an appropriate sample. The sampling itself was informed through the need to understand the causal powers for entrepreneurship, how these interacted with structural inequality and what cognitive strategies could be employed to overcome them while working as an ICT entrepreneur. The results of this research and a further study (Martinez Dy et al., 2018) demonstrated that ICT policy focused on enabling individual action, rather than the removal of structural inequality, was unlikely to succeed. Hence, the theory–practice contradiction was confirmed.

Another source for critical realist research questions can be found through examining the restrictions placed on theory by research methodologies. Empirical realism requires identification and measurement of event regularities. However, utilising this methodology can limit the events to be considered within theory. Understanding these limitations and utilising critical realist dispositional ontologies provides continual opportunities for posing critical realist research questions. This directly influences the planning of qualitative studies. With the end goal of the research process being to construct causal explanations, being aware of this goal is crucial during the design of empirical studies, preparation for interviews, and for understanding the types of questions that can provide vital evidence for the causal explanation to emerge.

### Data collection

Knowing that a causal explanation is required means our participants need to offer their explanations of the world around them. If, as in the examples above, they feel unrecognised for their creativity by their surroundings, the job of a critical realist researcher is to find out exactly why they think this is the case, what processes they feel are causing it, who is preventing their recognition, and to identify what evidence they have for their views. While I recognise that their (and my) world-view is fallible, it is within their explanations that evidence can be found for the existence of agential and structural causal powers that could be operating, that are operating and that are being blocked from operating.

Having identified the tensions and contradictions within theory, developed the research questions, chosen the case study and participants and identified themes to explore in the interviews, the next step for the critical realist researcher is to prepare for and to conduct interviews. Despite the planning associated with conducting an immanent critique and the theoretical knowledge of causal powers that is needed to do this effectively, empirical work invariably throws up unexpected findings and it is crucial to be able to respond to these. In practice, as with other methodologies, conducting two or three interviews before pausing to complete the interview transcripts and conducting a first round of analysis can help identify

these unexpected issues. Likewise, if it is possible, conducting a period of observation prior to (and during) participant interviews can help understand any contextual influences (contingent relations) surrounding participants' behaviour. This can also provide source material for structuring interviews, as being able to ask questions about observed practices and events can deepen understanding of these contextual influences for both the interviewer and participant.

The immanent critique already completed should provide a set of themes to explore (the themes mirroring the causal powers thought important) and these themes will guide the interview questions. It can be helpful at the beginning of an interview to ask a series of questions aimed at understanding the participant within the context you are interested in (their role, expectations, attitudes, history, relationships, etc.). This is not always necessary but can help with the later identification of intervening causal powers (attitudes, lack of power, etc.). At this stage, attempting to structure questions in order to identify causal powers and their effects (or otherwise) is incredibly helpful. To achieve this, I try to ask questions that seek to understand the boundary conditions of a particular causal power (what makes it what it is? – its essential relations) and how it operates in this context. This translates into questions that alternate between information-gathering questions, to help define the causal powers (e.g. How would you describe your role? What is important to you here? What do you think creativity is?), and explanatory questions to help understand how the causal powers work (e.g. Why do you think it works that way? Why do you think that way? How do you explain this?).

This movement between questions helps when it comes to data analysis and the attempt to offer a causal explanation because participants describing their worldview and answering direct questions about how things work provide incredibly useful material for later analysis. At the least, if we do not ask these directed questions, we do not provide the opportunity for an explanation to emerge. Questions that offer scope to discover how participants perceive social structures, the cognitive mechanisms they employ to navigate their context and the explanations they offer for how things work are therefore vital as they provide the building blocks for theoretical explanation of their action in context.

### Data analysis

At the data-analysis stage, there are two practical goals that can help structure the analysis. The first goal is to provide an accurate representation of the data, which reflects the participant's world-views, identifies causal powers and offers a causal explanation of the context in question. The second, more general goal, is to condense the data into a form that other researchers can understand, while

being able to trust that the account is an accurate reflection of the transcripts. Achieving both these goals requires a systematic approach to data analysis and a clear description of the steps taken to conduct the research. The five-step DREI(C) process, described earlier, can guide the researcher to consistent causal explanations at this stage.

By the time data analysis begins, the data collected should enable: a description (D) of the phenomena at hand; the identification of theory–practice contradictions and anomalies; the uncovering or retroduction (R) of explanatory causal mechanisms; the elimination of competing theoretical explanations (E) through comparison of cases with existing theory; and a causal explanation to emerge through inferring (I) which causal powers (C) are at work (I-C). If the data do not enable this process to be fulfilled, it can indicate that either more data collection is required, or the questions being asked of participants may need adapting.

The forms of data analysis employed at this point depend upon the approach taken, and these methods might need a little adjustment to critical realist research. However, critical realism is compatible with most research methods, and there are excellent guides available for those interested in the application of particular methods (e.g. Edwards et al., 2014). In my own research, I tend to use the thematic analysis processes described by Braun and Clarke (2006), except the final stage they describe, of identifying higher-order categories. I also find that comparing interview cases at this stage can prove fruitful when developing a causal explanation. For example, if the participants are trying to achieve a particular outcome, comparing those who are successful with those who fail can help reveal the ways in which causal powers are enabled and constrained.

In my most recent research into sustainable creativity, the comparison between successful and unsuccessful sustainable change projects enabled the identification of causal powers that facilitate and block change, as well as the contextual influences the participants had to navigate. The coding process for this research cycled through four stages. The first stage involved identifying initial codes and categorising the data. This included a close reading of the transcripts and providing labels for sentences and paragraphs that accurately summarised the content. The second stage involved grouping these initial descriptive codes into related causal categories. Here, the focus shifts from classifying the content to identifying core themes, causal powers and processes described by participants. For example, the interviewees in this case discussed their understanding of the creative process and the things that can prevent the successful use of their creativity. This resulted in some sections of text being coded as “creative process” and elements of the same sections as “blocks to success”. The aim here was to identify where the participant is describing causal powers that are in action, or could be in action, were they not

being blocked. As this coding process continues, a sense of how the participants view their creative work begins to emerge and the links between causal powers can be identified.

The third stage begins as the participants' world-view and the explanation of their work emerge. At this stage, processes of constant comparison are useful, going back and forth between the categories and data in order to understand the differences in participant explanations, so as to reach a stage where the accounts can converge on a causal explanation. If a causal explanation emerges (and data collection does not need to continue) it is useful to share a summary of the explanation with participants, in order to gain their feedback. Through aggregating these accounts and participant feedback it is possible to explore different viewpoints on the same phenomena, identify consistencies in the accounts and compare them with existing theory. When the researcher is satisfied that a causal explanation is possible, the final stage of the analysis process is to write up the logic of this explanation. The purpose at this stage is to offer a causal account that best fits the available data and explains more of the data than alternative accounts. This need not merely be a reflection of the participants' explanations; indeed it is vital that these are challenged, interpreted and justified.

Bhaskar's (1978) arguments for judgemental rationality are crucial at this point. Critical realism recognises that not all explanations are viable and that it is necessary to make judgements between them. Taking an example from my research exploring unrecognised creativity, there were multiple accounts from participants who felt unrecognised because their ideas had disappeared into organisational committees, had been overruled, not invested in or dismissed despite being regarded by management as valuable. This left many of them frustrated at the lack of recognition and they reported no longer sharing their ideas. A senior manager in the same organisation expressed an alternative view of his team and their "lack of ideas" by claiming they were simply not creative – as he put it: "If they are creative, where are all their ideas?"

Clearly these are two competing accounts of an event and a causal explanation of this context needs to judge which of them best identifies and describes the causal powers which led to a lack of creative ideas being generated. The participant accounts explained this lack of ideas through demotivation arising from negative prior experience, while the manager explained it through an absence of creative ability. This example required a decision to be made that judged between the competing accounts. This involved comparing participant accounts, understanding the quality and timeliness of the ideas being generated, checking recognition process effectiveness and understanding whether the ability for creative ideas to be produced was greater than the need for them in this context (i.e. was there an over-production of ideas and subsequently an under-investment in them?).

In this case, a judgement could be made from exploring the interviews already completed, and biases in the recognition process clearly emerged. However, often-times competing accounts such as these can emerge at the start of data collection, in which case they can prove vital to the direction of future interviews and the questions being asked.

## Conclusion

In this chapter the focus has been on introducing some core ideas of critical realism and on offering practical advice for the use of this approach in qualitative research. However, critical realism contains arguments that are significantly more nuanced than can be presented here. Its core value lies in its detailed analysis of the importance of ontology to the philosophy of science and its influence on the research process. A single chapter, such as this, can only hint at the detail in these core arguments, and so there is significant practical benefit to be gained from studying the core critical realist texts (see the further reading suggestions at the end of this chapter). These texts detail a set of philosophical concepts that enable interrogation and critique of theory in unique ways. They offer the researcher the ability to ask questions that can tackle not only what is happening within a research context, but also what could potentially happen. Utilising critical realist ideas can result in novel research questions and useful empirical results. However, critical realism is not a finished intellectual project. Its core ideas were developed through a process of dialectical reasoning from the accepted premises held in other philosophical projects (scientific realism and hermeneutics), and so critical realism too is a fallible philosophy of science. Critical realist researchers should always be cognisant of this. Kantian uncertainty cannot be eradicated through Bhaskar's ideas.

By way of offering some concluding comments about the practice of conducting critical realist qualitative research, I would like to focus on two concerns that critical realist researchers should be mindful of. First, while there are clear abstract definitions of causal powers (e.g. Fleetwood, 2009, 2011), identifying the boundary conditions of a causal power is difficult in practice and requires careful judgement. Take, for example, a construct such as identity. The boundary conditions for identity (which of its relations are internal and essential and which are external and contingent) are difficult to discern. As with many human and structural causal powers, the unique emergent properties of a specific causal power are troublesome to identify and likely to be different for each participant. This means that the boundary conditions of a causal power are difficult to set in abstraction, and so identifying them can require empirical research. This practical process of

identifying and defining causal powers is therefore an essential part of the critical realist project, and the sharing of these definitions is vital for the continued emergence of critical realist theory.

The second concern involves understanding and sharing best practice for judging the adequacy of a causal explanation. There are some important abstract principles that can be found within the work of Bhaskar (1998) and Sayer (1992), but these require empirical application, and so the development of practically adequate causal explanations can only emerge from the success and failure of empirical research. Keeping this in mind and sharing our practical techniques is therefore crucial to the development of the critical realist project. The publication of this and future handbooks therefore provides a welcome forum for empirical researchers to share their capabilities.

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### Key concepts

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**Causal explanation** As causal powers can exist without producing empirical events, causal explanation cannot be achieved through making predictions about events. Rather, a causal explanation requires an event, context or the phenomenon under investigation to have its causal antecedents identified. This means uncovering the causal powers that produce the phenomenon and formulating a theory of how the causal powers operate and why they can explain the events under investigation.

**Causal powers** At a basic level, a causal power is the ability of something to bring about a change in something else by virtue of what it is. It is the essential characteristics of the thing, made up of the relationships between its internal structures (its essential or internal relations). Causal powers can exist without producing effects, so they are often described as having the potential or tendency to act.

**Immanent critique** This is a method of critique that takes the premises of existing theory and seeks inconsistencies or contradiction within the terms of the theory itself. There is an emphasis on seeking theory–practice contradictions (e.g. what must the world be like if this theory is true?), or seeking contradiction between the premises of the theory itself (e.g. can two distinct theoretical premises held within the theory be simultaneously true?).

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# 9

## CRITICAL REALISM: PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Amber J. Fletcher

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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The foundations of critical realism	174
Applying CR in qualitative research	175
Examining the local food system in a Canadian province	176
Doing applied CR in qualitative research	178
• Research design: considering the empirical, actual, and real levels	178
• The role of theory	180
• Coding qualitative data	181
• Issues of power and epistemology in data analysis	183
• Abduction	184
• Retroduction	186
Conclusion	189
Key concepts	190
Further reading	191
References	191

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Despite the usefulness and growing popularity of critical realism (CR) as a research philosophy, there are few examples of empirical research that clearly demonstrate its methodological application. The goal of this chapter is to introduce readers to CR as a framework for applied social research. After briefly outlining the key tenets of the philosophy, I demonstrate the application of those tenets in a participatory, qualitative research project on local food systems in Canada. Following the trajectory of a typical research project, I introduce key principles of CR relevant to each stage and show their application in the local food study.

### The foundations of critical realism

Born in the 1970s, CR is a relatively young philosophy of science, but one which is rapidly gaining popularity as a framework for social scientific research. According to Web of Science metrics, for example, the number of published articles on the topic of critical realism grew from only 20 in 1992 to 310 by 2018. CR's rise in popularity can be attributed, at least in part, to a certain uneasiness with two of the better-known philosophical traditions: positivism and interpretivism. Drawing selectively from both, CR combines a realist ontology with epistemological relativism to provide a type of "middle way" between these two philosophies.

The originator of CR, the philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2008, 2015), was critical of what he called the "epistemic fallacy" – the reduction of what is real (ontology) to what can be known or observed (epistemology) (Bhaskar, 2015: 133). In other words, Bhaskar argued that there is more to the world than we can outwardly measure or observe, and there is also more to reality than can be grasped by our individual experiences or captured by our linguistic systems. Reality runs deeper than individuals can comprehend. In this way, CR runs counter to both positivism and interpretivism, at least in their strict interpretations. Positivism asserts a singular reality that can be known strictly through scientific methods and observation. It asserts that these methods and observations constitute the limits of what truly counts as knowledge. In contrast, interpretivism suggests a multiplicity of realities and knowledge, each socially constructed through experience, language, and interpretation, and each equally valid by virtue of its serving as a premise for the beliefs and actions of individuals. While positivist research tends to seek prediction and identification of causal laws, often through broad nomothetic approaches to research, interpretivist approaches emphasise particularity, contextualisation and idiographic depth (van Ingen, 2016). From a CR perspective, however, *both* positivism and interpretivism

commit the epistemic fallacy by reducing what is real to what is experienced or observed.

According to Brown et al. (2002: 3), CR qualifies as a “full blown” philosophy of science because it has well-defined ontological and epistemological parameters. Ontologically, CR is realist and therefore aligns with positivism in its assertion of a knowable reality. However, in contrast to positivism, this reality runs deeper than what can be immediately observed or identified through data: data cannot necessarily capture the full picture of reality, including deeply rooted causal mechanisms that produce observable phenomena and cause phenomena to occur in the way they do. CR therefore aims to identify what is really driving social phenomena at a deeper, structural level.

Drawing its epistemology from interpretivism, however, CR acknowledges that this deep reality is conceptually laden and always understood through (or even shaped or constructed by) the inescapable realm of human knowledge, language, and experience (Bhaskar, 2015; Sayer, 1992). Our understandings of reality are dependent upon and mediated by concepts, theories, reasoning, and systems of explanation. Therefore, critical realists acknowledge that there are multiple and sometimes conflicting explanations of reality, but the scientist’s goal is to identify the explanation that gets us closest to reality using rational explanation and judgement, and by using reliable methods to discern between competing claims; this principle of CR is known as judgemental rationality. The challenge is that no single knower can comprehend the reality transparently and holistically. We must accept that our explanations are inherently fallible, and that we could always be proven wrong.

## Applying CR in qualitative research

Although CR is well developed philosophically, empirical applications are much less common. Bhaskar himself affirmed not only the important role of empirical data as a foundation for CR analysis, but also the general importance of applied CR research (Bhaskar, 2008, 2014). Nonetheless, most CR texts provide little concrete guidance for researchers, particularly for practical decisions such as data coding (Fletcher, 2017; Hoddy, 2019). Although CR does not prescribe a particular research design or methodology, its philosophical tenets may align better with some research designs than others. Given the CR emphasis on using both extensive (i.e. broad, nomothetic) and intensive (i.e. deep, idiographic) information (Danermark et al., 2002), some authors have suggested mixed methods and/or methodological pluralism (Lennox and Jurdi-Hage, 2017; Zachariadis et al., 2013).

The aim of identifying deeply causal structures seems to suggest the usefulness of qualitative data and analysis in CR (Hu, 2018), whether alone or as part of a mixed methods approach. Acknowledging that social science focuses on the “open” social world, where the complex interplay of structures, conditions, intentions, actions, and behaviours precludes prediction and constant conjunction of events, statistical data alone may lack sufficient depth to facilitate causal explanations (Lennox and Jurdi-Hage, 2017). At the same time, in order to identify extensive or broad trends that point towards causal mechanisms, a CR approach may require relatively large qualitative samples, or qualitative data that are contextualised within broader social trends already identified (e.g. census data).

To date, CR has been empirically applied in feminist research (Fletcher, 2017; Parr, 2015), organisational and business research (e.g. Edwards et al., 2014; Hu, 2018; Zachariadis et al., 2013) and studies of disability (e.g. Craig and Bigby, 2015; Danermark, 2002), among other areas. Some applied CR studies use a methodology derived from grounded theory (GT) (e.g. Hoddy, 2019; Oliver, 2012; Yeung, 1997). However, notable differences exist between GT and CR. As Charmaz explains (Chapter 10, this volume), GT is a primarily inductive and data-driven methodology aimed at explaining general social processes and/or generating theory. In contrast, this approach employs abduction and retroduction rather than induction and (as discussed further below) involves an explicit, intentional engagement with existing theory to explain structural causes.

This chapter contributes to the small but growing body of empirical work that explicitly employs CR as a framework for data collection and analysis. In the sections that follow, I provide an example of a research project informed by CR. In each section, I highlight some key considerations raised by CR, and then describe how such considerations were addressed within the project. This is not meant to suggest that there is only one method of doing CR. Rather, it illustrates the usefulness of this approach in making our ontological and epistemological assumptions transparent, ensuring alignment between those assumptions and our research decisions, and being accountable for our methodological choices at each stage. The example shows how a CR approach can direct our attention towards the causal mechanisms that underlie trends in qualitative data.

## Examining the local food system in a Canadian province

The aim of the “Local Food in Saskatchewan” research project was to identify the barriers to and opportunities for a robust local food system in the Canadian prairie province of Saskatchewan. In the context of Canada’s highly industrialised agri-food system, local food networks include a range of actors and initiatives – such as

farmers' markets, farm-gate sales, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) – that seek to reduce the geographical and social distance between food producers and consumers; as such, food localisation is seen as a type of alternative food system. The focus of this project was to examine social, economic, and policy barriers and facilitators of a local food system from the perspectives of farmers and other production-side food system actors (i.e. processors, policy experts, health inspectors, business/industry groups, and retailers/distributors/restaurateurs) in the province.

Located near the geographical centre of Canada, the province of Saskatchewan is landlocked and geographically widespread, with its population of nearly 1.1 million dispersed across more than 588,000 square kilometres (Statistics Canada, 2016). The climate is highly variable and marked by long, cold winters and short, hot summers. Saskatchewan's economy is heavily export based; it is a major global exporter of agricultural products such as grains, oilseeds, legumes and meat (Government of Saskatchewan, 2017). While relatively strong local food systems exist in other parts of Canada, including other prairie provinces with similar geographical and climatic features, data indicate that Saskatchewan's local food system remains the most underdeveloped among the Canadian provinces (e.g. Statistics Canada, 2017). The research team (a collaboration between university researchers, representatives from a local health authority, and a provincial agricultural organisation) sought to explain the causes of this apparent underdevelopment.

As noted previously, CR philosophy recognises a role for both extensive and intensive data, and the local food project used both. While extensive data provide breadth and context, intensive qualitative data are particularly central to a causal analysis. The intensive data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, two focus groups (one for farmers only and the other for other food system actors) and a participatory interpretation session, during which participants had the opportunity to comment on the initial findings. In total, participants included 60 diverse food system actors, including farmers, processors, policy experts, health inspectors, business or industry groups, as well as retailers, distributors, and restaurateurs. Interviews and focus groups covered topics ranging from participants' views of the food system generally to the specific factors, such as policies, that currently enhance or inhibit localisation efforts. Transcripts from the interviews and focus groups were independently coded by two researchers using NVivo software; the coded results were then separately analysed by four researchers. Notes from the interpretation session and other project meetings were added to the analysis to help identify participants' key priorities and recommendations. The following section provides a detailed exemplar of how CR philosophy informed the project methodology and analysis.



## Doing applied CR in qualitative research

### Research design: considering the empirical, actual, and real levels

CR research seeks causation (although not the predictive causal laws characteristic of positivism); therefore, it aligns well with explanatory research designs that aim to uncover deeply structural causes of social phenomena, such as strongly engrained ideologies or political-economic systems. Although critical realists are not prescriptive about research questions or topics, CR lends itself well to causal, explanatory research questions that ask *why* a certain phenomenon exists or occurs. Research questions may be informed by theory or existing literature but should be sufficiently general to allow consideration of multiple explanations. The “critical” aspect of CR aligns with emancipatory research questions aimed at social change; indeed, some authors support a notion of moral realism in CR (Price and Martin, 2018).

Identifying causation from a CR perspective requires an understanding of CR’s depth ontology. Reality is seen as stratified and multi-layered (Bhaskar, 2008; Collier, 1994; Danermark et al., 2002). The first layer is the *empirical* – the realm of events as understood through human experience. “Experience” can be construed here as both sensory experience, including empirical measurement and experimentation, and human experiences in the world, such as “common sense” explanations. Empirical knowledge is inevitably partial and only reflects a portion of the full reality of a situation.

Due to the difficulty of capturing and comprehending all aspects of an event or phenomenon at the empirical level, from its historical precedents to people’s various perceptions or experiences of it, the true extent of the phenomenon exists at a different ontological level than those (often individualised) empirical understandings. This is the level of the *actual*, which comprises both observed and unobserved aspects of the phenomenon that go beyond our immediate experience or observation. Collier (1994) provides the example of observing a muddy garden in the morning (empirical), which causes us to assume a rainstorm even though we were asleep and did not witness it (actual). Researchers may attempt to access the fuller picture of the event by drawing together different sources of data. Methodological individualism, which tries to explain social phenomena as an aggregation of human behaviour, or statistical analyses that try to explain a phenomenon through recourse to broad trends, are actualist analyses; that is, analyses that remain at the actual level. Although they move us beyond individual observations and towards broader trends, they do not necessarily reveal the deeper causes of those aggregated experiences, which may be unseen and not fully apparent in the trend alone

(McAnulla, 2005). Actualist analyses show us what is happening but do not explain *why* it is happening.

The third ontological layer is the real, which comprises the totality of the phenomenon, including its *empirical* manifestations, its *actual* dimensions, and the deeply rooted *real* mechanisms that necessarily cause the phenomenon to exist as it does (Figure 9.1). All social phenomena possess causal powers that may take effect in the world and are structured in a certain way. However, intervening conditions and contextual factors in the openness of the social world may at times interfere with the operation of a mechanism, potentially altering or even mitigating its effects in the world (Danermark, 2002; O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Mechanisms also rarely operate in isolation from other mechanisms, so most phenomena are a product of multiple mechanisms interacting (Collier, 1994; van Ingen, 2016).

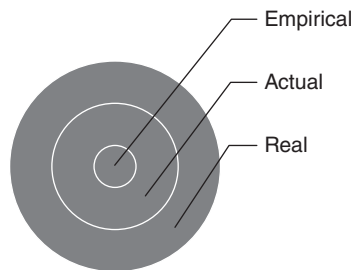


Figure 9.1 Nested diagram of CR reality

As noted previously, a key tenet of CR ontology is that an objective reality exists (albeit often outside our individual knowledge of it). If this point is taken too literally and without a full understanding of CR philosophy, it may appear that only the natural world – the realm of natural sciences such as biology, chemistry, and physics – is truly real. However, CR philosophy is anti-reductivist and rejects the notion that social phenomena can be distilled down to basic biophysical matter or processes. Rather, CR emphasises the principle of emergence. Across the multiple levels of reality and the openness of the world, mechanisms and contextual conditions combine to create phenomena that are larger than the sum of their parts and are, therefore, not reducible to low-level or basic causes (Bhaskar, 2015; Collier, 1994). For example, while biological cells are undoubtedly a basic causal mechanism for human societies to exist, human societies are more than the sum of these biological components; they are an emergent phenomenon, such that reduction to cells alone is an insufficient explanation for human societies. Social phenomena are real and have causes that are often primarily (although not entirely) social in nature.

Further, as Sayer (1992) pointed out, even the objects of natural science are only comprehensible to us through concepts and language, which can also be causal in their own way. Bhaskar (2017: 49) noted that CR ontology is “maximally inclusive”, meaning that anything which has a causal effect in the world can be considered, by virtue of its causal power, to be real. Real phenomena therefore include social objects such as social structures and systems of belief, which prompt action and most certainly can take effect in the world. Although social objects are distinct from natural objects such as rocks or trees in their degree of theory saturation, both can be effectual and casual. This point is essential for CR to be a truly critical philosophy of science: to posit knowledge as potentially emancipatory implies that knowledge must be able to affect and, potentially, change the world.

In line with these emancipatory values, the local food study was designed as a participatory, community-engaged project with the goal of producing recommendations for policy and system change. Existing literature on local food focuses heavily on the perspectives of consumers, with surprisingly little attention paid to farmers’ motivations, despite their obvious importance to agri-food production (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2019). A key part of the participatory research design was therefore to ensure inclusion of farmers’ perspectives throughout the project.

As a critical participatory project, the local food study valued participants’ perspectives and motivations, but also sought to move beyond them to identify structural issues shaping the current food system. Each interview began with a very broad question about the food system as a whole: “What are your views on our food system in general (here in Saskatchewan, Canada, or globally)?” Farmers in particular were asked about major challenges in agriculture: “What is your biggest challenge as a farmer today?”, followed by appropriate probing questions on the nature of these views and challenges. Placed early in the interview, such questions not only revealed the most significant “top of mind” issues identified by participants at an experiential (empirical) level – which led to the identification of several key demi-regularities to be discussed in the subsection after next – but also provided some indication of deeper structural issues in the food system.

### The role of theory

Although open-ended, the interview questions were nonetheless theory-informed. In contrast to inductive or theory-generating research, CR acknowledges the ongoing role of theory in framing our research and advancing our analysis (Bhaskar, 2015). The explicit acknowledgement of theory means that CR researchers can and should engage critically with existing explanations and examine the correspondence

(or lack thereof) between data and theory in order to find the best explanation of the reality. This analytical process will be described in more detail below.

The local food study was broadly guided by a critical political economy theory. Like other industrialised agricultural contexts (Baines, 2017; Lawrence et al., 2013), Canadian agriculture is governed by a paradigm that encourages large-scale, industrial, export-focused production (Müller, 2008). Increasing agri-food exports are facilitated by a discourse that encourages farmers to “feed the world” (e.g. Brownlee and Agricultural Manufacturers of Canada, 2016; Government of Saskatchewan, 2017). To increase productivity, prairie farmers increasingly rely on expensive (sometimes patented) seed varieties, synthetic fertilisers, herbicides, and pesticides produced by large corporations (Fletcher, 2013; Gertler et al., 2018; Kuyek, 2007). Taking a critical lens to this dominant system, we examined the possibility and potential of local food as a more equitable and environmentally sustainable alternative to the dominant neo-liberal system. Although CR analysis employs an existing theory, the fallibility of existing explanations means that our initial guiding theories may ultimately be supported, modified or rejected in favour of an alternative explanation. Ultimately, the final analysis both supported and challenged our initial expectations in sometimes unexpected ways.

### Coding qualitative data

CR research aims to identify patterns in data, which may point towards an active causal mechanism. Because we cannot identify causal mechanisms without observing their empirical effects (Bhaskar, 2015), the first step is the search for empirical “demi-regularities” (Danermark et al., 2002); for example, trends in data such as interviews or self-report surveys (Price and Martin, 2018). CR seeks probabilities or tendencies rather than prediction or law-like regularity. Demi-regularities are imperfect patterns or trends that indicate the probable operation of a causal mechanism, although its operation may sometimes be mitigated by other conditions or mechanisms in the openness and complexity of the social world (Danermark et al., 2002). In survey research, a demi-regularity may be, for example, if 85% of people supported a particular policy. The pattern is not 100%, perhaps because some other conditions or mechanisms have caused 15% of respondents to take a different view, but the pattern is sufficiently regular or notable (i.e. demi-regular) to warrant investigation. In qualitative data, demi-regularities may be themes identified through coding.

Data coding in the local food project followed a flexible deductive approach (Gilgun, 2011). Recognising the explanatory and theory-informed nature of CR (Danermark et al., 2002), our coding process was informed by both the research question and theory. For example, considering our research question on barriers and

opportunities, we began with similarly dualistic codes: “barriers to local” and “factors encouraging local”. Codes were also created for key questions in the interview guide, such as “biggest challenges”. Drawing on our critical political economy theory, we included codes to capture participants’ views of the agri-food system in general. Although guided by these codes, our *flexible* deductive approach meant that we also coded data that did not fall into our preconceived codes. This helped ensure that no important findings slipped through the cracks and helped prevent our codes from becoming self-reinforcing.

NVivo software helped identify demi-regularities through summative counts of coded data. As a particularly revealing example, 38 participants discussed factors that encouraged export to international markets, speaking to this theme a total of 106 times. Although our interviews asked exactly the same question about factors encouraging local sale, only three participants discussed such factors, with this theme mentioned four times in total. Considering that many of our participants were already engaging in local sale and would therefore be attuned to encouraging factors, such patterns clearly illustrate the dominance of export-oriented agriculture in Saskatchewan and suggest structures that facilitate it.

Similarly, the most commonly mentioned barriers to local sale were insufficient or absent infrastructure (e.g. for coordinated/collective marketing, local processing, distribution), as well as regulatory and policy barriers (e.g. lack of loans and programmes appropriately scaled to smaller producers’ needs; the need for inter-governmental coordination on inspection and regulation). A notable connection between many of these barriers was a lack of support for smaller-scale producers. One farmer/retailer, for example, spoke about the challenges in obtaining a loan. Surprisingly, his problem was not in finding a loan large enough, but rather that existing loans were scaled for larger operations: “\$5 million is minimum that you can borrow through [lending agency]. So a small company like us, \$5 million is too much. We would need maybe \$250,000.” Participants also mentioned climatic factors (e.g. long, cold winters) and Saskatchewan’s widespread geography as barriers to local food production and sale. However, these challenges are shared by the neighbouring provinces of Alberta and Manitoba which, notably, have more direct marketing and supportive infrastructures for local food than Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Although factors enabling local food were far less frequently mentioned, participants noted shifting attitudes towards food among both farmers and consumers: “They are food system warriors really, and they know this current system is broken in so many ways that [they] are trying to support an alternative food system” (policy expert). Participants also mentioned several notable initiatives such as an independent local food delivery business and a provincial farmers’ cooperative.

A particularly prominent demi-regularity across multiple codes was criticism of the dominant agri-food system. Criticisms ranged from mild questioning to more radical or revolutionary views, but most participants questioned some aspect of the status quo (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2019). Many were concerned about the environmental effects of herbicides, pesticides, and synthetic fertilisers – a finding likely influenced by the significant number of organic farmers, but also espoused by non-organic participants as well. One organic farmer stated:

I have a real problem with the amount of chemicals that we are dumping in ... I am disappointed in the fact that there isn't some sort of government policies to help us out ... I am a little disappointed in the fact that the farmers themselves are so gullible to buy whatever chemical companies say will help them.

Some farmers questioned the market power of large agricultural corporations, while others noted the growing lack of control by farmers over the conditions of production. One participant explained her motivation for starting a CSA business: “just realizing all the problems inherent in corporate capitalism and wanting to opt out”. When asked for their recommendations, participants often addressed concrete policy and infrastructure issues while implicitly taking aim at the dominant system in general: “I think, protect the family farm, [that] would be my view of a different policy. Protect the family farm, and maybe tax these corporate guys a little bit more because I am still running a family farm” (conventional farmer).

### Issues of power and epistemology in data analysis

CR epistemology acknowledges that reality is theory-laden and explanations are necessarily mediated through existing linguistic and conceptual systems (Sayer, 1992). Given CR's realist ontology, however, some explanations may be held as more accurate or closer to reality than others. A key function of critical realist social science is to identify and dismantle false explanations and ideologies, to reveal their functioning, and ultimately to find more accurate explanations using rigorous methods and judgemental rationality (Bhaskar, 2015). Nonetheless, the interpretivist leanings of CR epistemology may raise questions of knowledge and power during the data-collection stage, particularly for participatory researchers. If participants express conflicting views based on their experience, how can one be judged as more accurate than the other? To what extent is the researcher justified in critically evaluating participants' explanations? Is the researcher, then, the arbiter of truth? The CR principle of judgemental rationality may be critiqued for privileging the perspective of the researcher, whose interpretation could be seen as more inherently “rational” or real than that of the participants.

However, given the potential fallibility of all knowledge, it is entirely possible that our (social) scientific interpretations may be similarly corrigible. By positioning both scientific and “common-sense” or “lay” knowledge within the empirical realm, a CR perspective can help avoid the asymmetrical valuation of these forms of knowledge. Furthermore, participants’ own explanations can help us formulate the best possible explanation of reality (why else would we seek their perspectives?), even if our analysis ultimately supports the interpretations of some individuals over others. For participants, “the seeing of these structures is just assumed as the way it is”, but, combined with social scientific analysis, their insights may point the researcher towards identification of causal structures (Bertilsson, 2004: 382). Abduction and retrodution – the analytical tools available to us as critical scholars – help us move beyond individual explanations or experiences, to draw connections and build explanations through the integration of theory. Sometimes, retrodution may also challenge researchers’ own initial theories and expectations.

### Abduction

Abduction is the main mode of reasoning in CR analysis, moving the process from the descriptive level to more abstract theoretical analysis of the data. Abduction requires an active engagement with theory to interpret and reinterpret our findings, casting new and different lights on the phenomenon and allowing us to explain the data at a theoretical level. Abduction compels us to envision the data in different contexts and to “discern relations and connections that are not otherwise evident or obvious” (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013: Section 2.5).

One possible theoretical lens for interpreting the local food data is rational choice theory. From this perspective, market factors such as consumer demand motivate farmers to produce for local markets. In this view, farmers make rational choices according to market logic and cost–benefit analysis. Indeed, some participants were encouraged by growing consumer demand for local food. Although some farmers noted the potential financial benefit of going local, our analysis showed that the majority of farmer participants were more strongly motivated by a rejection of the dominant system and desire to reduce the social and geographical distance between producers and consumers (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2019). Market factors do play a role – after all, farmers need to make a living – but for most of the farmer participants, consumer demand was less relevant than political resistance and social connection to consumers (motivations which may not be entirely “rational” from a purely economic standpoint). This point was further reinforced by the willingness of participants to go local despite the strong infrastructural and policy barriers

identified previously. Although a rational choice approach may help explain the motivations of some participants, it was ultimately insufficient for fully explaining the demi-regularities and for accessing the more deeply structural factors that participants were pointing towards.

Abduction also presents an opportunity to consider unexpected findings or explore relatively minor themes that may otherwise be dismissed as irrelevant during coding. Guided by critical political economy theory, the researchers had an interest in exploring the possibility of local food as an alternative or challenge to the dominant system. Indeed, some scholarly literature (e.g. Marsden and Franklin, 2013) and significant public discourse (e.g. Dietitians of Canada, 2018) has suggested the critical potential of local food. Most participants generally did not question the inherent virtue of local food. However, a surprise occurred when one local farmer/retailer questioned the study's premise:

The word 'local' just irritates me when I see that on a study. People relate local as being healthy and so on; because it is local doesn't mean it is any healthier or any more beneficial to the consumer and I always worry, like I would substitute the word 'local' with 'sustainable'. I think it is more important than the word 'local'.

Another farmer/policy participant similarly said:

I don't mind people talking about local food, but you have to be careful that it is not being used to hide industrial, corporate practices. *How* it is produced is as important as *where* it is produced, and the economic relationships between the actors are important.

One farmer similarly noted that certain commodities (e.g. chickpeas) should not be grown in Saskatchewan's climate, regardless of demand and profit potential, because doing so would not be sustainable and would require large amounts of fungicide. Participants' cautions about local food pointed to deeper structural issues at play. Local food cannot necessarily be seen as a panacea for environmental sustainability or economic justice, and, depending on its manifestation, may still reinforce the dominant system.

Despite existing literature that emphasises market factors and/or consumer demand as the key driver of local food economies, our study found that farmers were strongly motivated by a desire to resist the dominant system (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2019). Political economy theory encourages us to analyse the structures these farmers are resisting. From a CR perspective, individuals act with intentionality within structures that shape both their circumstances and, to some extent, their intentionality itself (Archer, 2010; Bhaskar, 2015). However, our analysis showed that participants recognised (to varying degrees) some problems with the dominant system and acted with agency despite facing barriers.



As demonstrated here, abduction allows us to examine the findings – including those which surprise us or contradict our initial expectations – through the lens of theory, or even multiple theories, helping us move closer to the causal mechanisms at work and potentially allowing for support, modification, or rejection of existing theories.

### Retroduction

Retroduction is the main mode of inference used in CR. While abduction uses theory to provide an explanation that fits the data, retroduction involves a more vertical movement through CR's depth ontology with the explicit aim of identifying the most pertinent causal structures and mechanisms. Moving between data and theory, retroduction attempts to explain why the phenomenon occurs as it does, why it continues to occur as it does, and what mechanisms are necessary for its occurrence. A defining feature of retroduction is this movement from "the manifest phenomena of social life, as conceptualised in the experience of the social agents concerned, to the essential relations that necessitate them" – that is, the movement from empirical to structural/causal (Bhaskar, 2015: 26).

While some approaches to structural analysis may begin with the structures themselves (Brown, 2014), CR is helpful when the most relevant causal structure(s) and mechanisms are not necessarily known *a priori*. Beginning with the demi-regularities, our data revealed significant concern about insufficient infrastructure and policy to enable the local food system. If the CR notion of deep, stratified reality is not considered, we could quite straightforwardly state that the absence of enabling infrastructure and policy is the cause of Saskatchewan's underdeveloped local food system. However, such an explanation fails to ask the deeper question of *why* such infrastructure and policy are lacking in the first place. It also fails to address why many of our participants remained committed to local and alternative food production in the face of such substantial barriers.

A deeper explanation can be found by moving between data and theory, at which point retroduction begins to explicitly seek out causal mechanisms. Although policy and infrastructure barriers were commonly mentioned, participants also expressed substantial critique of the current "status quo" of the food system and a desire to do things differently. Their explanations are supported by existing political-economic analyses on the negative consequences of neo-liberalism and industrialisation in the agri-food system (Diaz et al., 2003; Qualman, 2001; Weis, 2010); in this way, theory helped elaborate the larger structures that participants' statements were pointing towards, even if participants did not necessarily name those structures specifically.

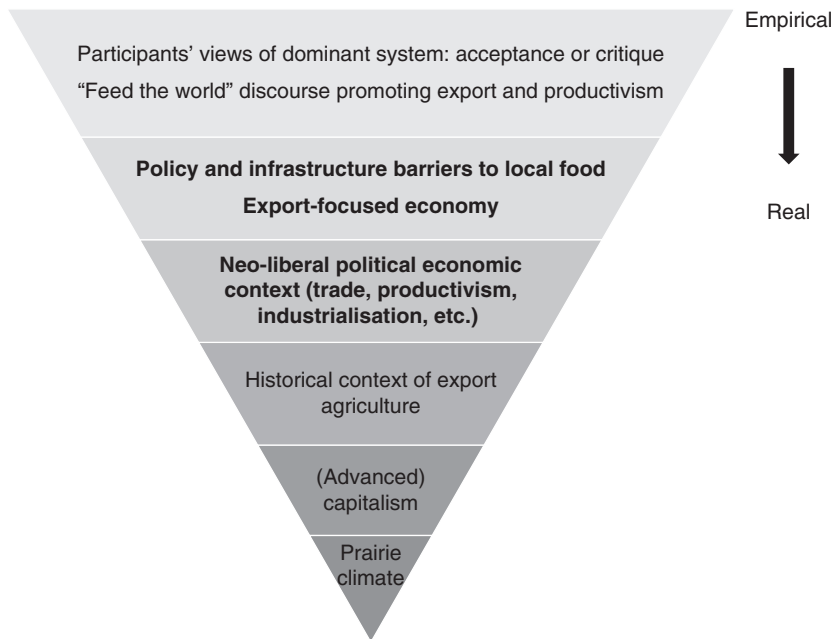
Although prairie agriculture was originally established in the late nineteenth century as an export-oriented system (Fowke, 1957) based on production of wheat (one of the few climatically feasible crops at the time), the relatively recent neo-liberal approach to agricultural policy has brought increased deregulation, corporatisation, and a strengthened emphasis on international trade. In this context, it is unsurprising that participants identified the policy preference for industrialised and export-oriented production. The neo-liberal political-economic structure of the Saskatchewan agricultural system therefore appears to be a necessary factor in the underdevelopment of a local food economy.

Contrastive explanation can be a helpful tool during retrodiction (Danermark et al., 2002). Lawson (1999) described contrastive explanation as the process of noting (demi-regular) differences between individuals, groups, events, or other phenomena, and then identifying the cause(s) of those differences. Analysing divergences allows the researcher to consider breaks or absences in demi-regularities while facilitating contrastive explanation of those differences. Indeed, as Brodsky (2008: 552) points out, “it would be highly unlikely in real life for everything to fall exactly in line and act the same”. Investigation of the gaps in demi-regularities may prove particularly insightful during contrastive explanation.

Although many participants expressed some degree of criticism of the dominant agri-food system, not *all* participants did. Larger conventional farmers and representatives of business/industry groups were more likely to convey praise or appreciation for the food system. An industry group representative, for example, stated that “we have more variety, more choice and safer food than we have ever had in our history and it is cheaper than it has ever been”. In contrast, many smaller-scale, local, and/or organic producers expressed criticism of a system that is, in the words of one farmer/retailer, “owned by evil bastards ... [and] designed to generate profits for a few corporations ... you know the nameless, faceless corporations are just trying to generate as much money as they can”.

CR philosophy reminds us that, unlike closed lab conditions, the social world cannot be understood through law-like regularities (Sayer, 1992). Patterns will rarely be complete; hence the importance of demi-regularities. In this particular example, we can observe a notable trend that those more embedded within the dominant system are less likely to express strong criticism. Political ideology and business interests aligned with the dominant paradigm caused an attitude of support or acceptance of the status quo. However, this trend was not entirely complete: even some of the more business-oriented participants still, at times, expressed mild criticism of the dominant system (Beingessner and Fletcher, 2019). Overall, even in the case of contrasting or divergent data, the dominant neo-liberal agri-food system continues to emerge as a key causal structure being referred to.

During retrodution, the principle of emergence reminds us to avoid reductionism; in other words, researchers should be careful not to reduce our explanations to overly basic causal mechanisms, because social phenomena are more complex than the sum of their parts. According to Bhaskar (2015), the phenomena we study are ultimately the product of a complex nexus of interacting social factors – but some factors may have stronger causal force than others. Retroductive analysis in the local food study revealed a set of layered mechanisms operating at different levels of reality (Figure 9.2). While there is a risk of failing to “retroduce” the deep causes of the infrastructure and policy barriers (e.g. as noted above, simply attributing a weak local food system to absent policy and infrastructure fails to explain why they are absent in the first place), acknowledging the deeper political-economic roots of these barriers could eventually lead us to a much more basic mechanism: capitalism as a structure.



**Figure 9.2** Mechanisms identified at multiple levels in the local food study, with key mechanisms in bold

Although the political-economic features of advanced capitalism – which have produced the dominant, productivist agri-food system – are a significant low-level causal mechanism in this study, capitalism-as-mechanism does not entirely explain why Saskatchewan’s food system is relatively underdeveloped compared to that of other (similarly capitalist) provinces in Canada. Geography and climate

are also insufficient explanations, considering that the neighbouring provinces of Alberta and Manitoba have similar geographic and climatic structures but stronger local food systems. However, based on an environmental scan of local food initiatives elsewhere in the country combined with observations of participants, we were able to identify a different political-social infrastructure in these neighbouring provinces (e.g. public efforts to encourage local food), which seems to have offset some of the barriers in those places. Policy and producer initiatives in other prairie locations have served to facilitate a stronger local food system, although still limited by climatic and geographical constraints.

Overall, the CR analysis points towards two particularly relevant, interconnected causal mechanisms at play at different levels of reality. First, at a deep level, the neo-liberal political-economic context of Canadian agriculture – which is particularly acute in Saskatchewan’s highly export-oriented and industrialised system – reinforces the status quo. Second, as noted by participants, this political-economic structure results in the associated lack of policy and infrastructure supports for local food in the province (see Figure 9.2). Both mechanisms appear to be necessary for the phenomenon – Saskatchewan’s weak local food system – to exist as it does. At the empirical level, participants’ own views, experiences, and activities within this system lead to either acceptance (or mild criticism) of the dominant “feed the world” system or the desire to engage in alternative agri-food practices as a form of resistance.

## Conclusion

Drawing tenets from both positivism and interpretivism, CR provides a useful philosophical framework for critical, explanatory social science. Perhaps due to its philosophical complexity, however, CR remains under-utilised in empirical research. This chapter has attempted to distil the key characteristics of this philosophy to provide an example of applied CR research in a qualitative study of local food systems in Canada. Through systematic engagement with existing theory, CR guides researchers to identify demi-regularities in the social world and, using abduction and retroduction as modes of explanation and reasoning, to explain the underlying structural causes of social phenomena. Despite the barriers, local and alternative food networks exist as a manifestation of agency and resistance to an increasingly globalised and industrialised food system.

In the local food study, CR helped researchers move beyond rational choice explanations to identify political-economic structure as a particularly relevant causal mechanism shaping Saskatchewan’s agri-food system into a highly industrialised, large-scale, and export-oriented model. This, in turn, causes policy and

infrastructure barriers to a robust local food system. Despite existing at different levels of reality (i.e. one causing another), these two mechanisms together contribute to the current status quo of agriculture and food in this Canadian province. CR philosophy is anti-reductionist, rejecting the oversimplification of complex social phenomena into very basic mechanisms. Although the state of Saskatchewan's local food system is underpinned by climatic, geographical, and capitalist structures, it is through the emergent results of these very basic structures that the system comes to exist as it does. For the CR researcher, a key challenge is to use the retroductive process carefully and judiciously to settle on the most relevant explanation of what is causing the phenomenon under study. Too little reduction can result in actualist analysis that fails to identify real causal mechanisms, while too much reduction fails to consider the complexity and emergent nature of social phenomena (see Figure 9.2).

Scholars encountering CR for the first time have commented that the approach simply “makes sense” and aligns with activities already recognised as good research practice. Although there is no predefined method associated with CR, the approach can help ensure methodological rigour and epistemological transparency throughout the research process, while also providing philosophical grounding for making claims about reality. By attributing reality to the social world, researchers and participants can make recommendations to change it for the better.

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## Key concepts

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**Abduction** Reasoning process used in CR. Abduction moves from thick description of data or context to more abstract and theoretical explanations of what is occurring. Abduction actively uses theory to view the phenomenon from multiple angles or explore alternative explanations.

**Demi-regularities** Partial patterns or broken trends in data, which may point towards a causal mechanism at play. While demi-regularities may indicate tendencies or probabilities associated with the acting mechanism, they are not predictive causal laws.

**Retroduction** Key mode of inference used in critical realism. Retroduction seeks to explain why phenomena occur, which helps identify the most pertinent causal mechanisms. Retroduction asks why the phenomenon occurs as it does, and what conditions are necessary for it to exist and/or persist.

**Stratified ontology** A theory of reality associated with critical realism, in which reality is multi-layered and consists of three main levels:

- Empirical – the level of events/phenomena as people experience and perceive them. Events/phenomena are filtered through human observations and interpretations, which are necessarily partial. Observed events at this level are produced by causal mechanisms at a deeper ontological level.
- Actual – the level of events/phenomena in totality (i.e. not filtered through human observation or experience). The actual level consists of events that we may not experience or observe directly, but which we can see evidence of at the empirical level.
- Real – the deepest level of reality, which not only encompasses the empirical and actual, but also contains structures and mechanisms (whether social or natural) that cause events/phenomena to occur.

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# 10

## GROUNDED THEORY: MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

Kathy Charmaz

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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The emergence and development of grounded theory	197
Formulating a research question and designing a study	199
The logic of collecting data in grounded theory	200
Studying meanings and processes	203
Coding	205
Raising focused codes to conceptual categories	209
Memo-writing	212
Theoretical sampling	215
Writing up	217
Conclusion	218
Acknowledgements	219
Key concepts	219
Further reading	219
References	220

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Consider the following statement from a lengthy interview about experiencing chronic illness.<sup>1</sup> Susan Nelson, a 47-year-old woman, has multiple chronic medical problems including diabetes, depression, vision loss and congenital myopathy (a disease affecting her muscles). Her declining health affects her everyday life and how she views herself. When responding to the interviewer's first question about her health, Susan explained what congenital myopathy meant:

Mine was adult onset, so it's milder – it's most common in children. But they don't live to adulthood because it eventually affects the muscles of the respiratory system and – and so then they die because they can't keep breathing. Mine just affects basically my extremities. Extreme muscle pain, extreme fatigue. Any repetitive use of any set of muscles just causes almost instant pain and fatiguing. Now I have managed to work around it – working and resting and working and resting and working and resting – um, but I couldn't get on an exercise bike and pedal it for 30 seconds. Just, it's – I never understood why when I would go on walks with my friends, you know, you're supposed to increase your endurance, you know, and I never got to feeling better. I always hurt so hard after I got home, I'd have to lie down and the next day I was, you know, just real, you know I wasn't able to do a whole lot of anything, and I thought this is really weird, you know. I don't understand this, and I complained about a lot of symptoms for a lot of years and it took me a long time for the doctors to take me seriously. Because I'm a Lab Tech, all my conditions, I've discovered on my own by running my own blood tests.

Susan's statement contains detailed medical information, but also reveals feelings, implies a perspective on self and situation, and offers insights into her illness history. Note her clarity when she first explains her health status and her bewilderment as she later describes experiencing symptoms. Susan's words foretell an interview filled with detailed information and intriguing views.

As a novice researcher, how can you analyse research participants' views and experiences such as Susan describes? How can you give all your data a fair reading? Which methodological guidelines can assist you throughout the research process?

This chapter answers these questions by showing you how to use the grounded theory method to collect and analyse qualitative data. Grounded theory is a comparative, iterative and interactive method that provides a way to study empirical processes. It consists of flexible methodological strategies for building theories from inductive data. As a comparative method, grounded theory keeps you interacting with the data and your emerging ideas about them. You could compare Susan's

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted by a trained student assistant for a mini-grant entitled "Identity Hierarchies and Identity Goals: Adaptation to Loss Among the Chronically Ill", awarded by Sonoma State University. All names of interview participants have been changed.

statements about experiencing pain and fatigue with similar statements from other people who also had no medical validation as well with those who received a quick diagnosis. While you examine Susan's statements, you label them with codes, such as "experiencing increasing pain", "feeling mystified", "working around it" and "lacking validation". Subsequently you can compare these codes with codes from other research participants' interviews. As the research proceeds, you can compare these data and codes with the tentative categories you develop from your codes.

Grounded theory demystifies the conduct of qualitative inquiry. Rather than applying a preconceived theoretical framework, your ideas about the data guide how you construct the theoretical analysis. The distinguishing characteristics of grounded theory (see Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) include:

- collecting and analysing data simultaneously
- developing analytic codes and categories from the data, not from preconceived hypotheses
- constructing middle-range theories to understand and explain behaviour and processes
- memo-writing – that is, analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories
- making comparisons between data and data, data and concept, concept and concept
- theoretical sampling – that is, sampling for theory construction to check and refine conceptual categories, not for representativeness of a given population
- delaying the literature review until after forming the analysis.

The logic of grounded theory influences all phases of the research process although the method focuses on analysis, which I emphasise here. Before outlining the analytic strategies of grounded theory, I provide a brief history of the method and an introduction to the theoretical perspective with which grounded theory is most closely aligned. Qualitative methods foster making unanticipated discoveries that shift earlier research questions and designs, so I describe how grounded theorists form research questions and construct research designs. I next discuss how grounded theory shapes data collection in pivotal ways that advance theoretical analyses. Subsequently, I detail specific grounded theory strategies and show how they foster theory construction. A brief discussion of criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies ends the chapter along with several examples of how researchers have used the method.

## The emergence and development of grounded theory

Grounded theory methods emerged from the collaboration of the sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1965, 1967) during the 1960s and took form in their pioneering book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Sociology has had a long tradition of ethnographic fieldwork, interview and case studies

from its beginnings to the present (see, for example, Adler and Adler, 2012; Dunn, 2010; Fine, 2010; Glaser and Strauss, 1965; Goffman, 1959; Hordge-Freeman, 2015; Lois, 2010; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958/1918–1920; Whyte, 1955/1943). However, that tradition had eroded by the 1960s, as sophisticated quantitative methods gained dominance.

Grounded theory holds a special place in the history of qualitative inquiry. In their cutting-edge book, Glaser and Strauss (1967) opposed conventional notions about research, methods and theory and offered new justifications for qualitative inquiry. They challenged:

- the arbitrary division between theory and research
- prevailing views of qualitative research as a precursor to more “rigorous” quantitative methods
- beliefs that qualitative methods were impressionistic and unsystematic
- the separation of data collection and analysis phases of research
- assumptions that qualitative research could not generate theory
- views that limited theorising to an intellectual elite.

Glaser and Strauss built on their qualitative predecessors’ implicit analytic strategies and made them explicit. As Paul Rock (1979) points out, early qualitative researchers had taught students through mentoring and immersion in field experience. Glaser and Strauss’s written guidelines for conducting qualitative research changed that oral tradition. Moreover, Glaser and Strauss justified and legitimised conducting qualitative research on its own canons instead of on the criteria for quantitative research.

Glaser’s rigorous quantitative training at Columbia University imbued grounded theory with its original positivistic epistemological assumptions, logic and systematic approach. Strauss’s training at the University of Chicago linked grounded theory with ethnographic research and symbolic interactionism, the sociological descendant of pragmatist philosophy. This perspective stresses human reflection, choice and action and is part of the interpretive tradition in sociology (Charmaz et al., 2019).

Grounded theory contains both positivistic and interpretive elements. Its emphasis on using systematic techniques to study an external world remains consistent with positivism. Its stress on how people construct actions, meanings and intentions is in keeping with interpretive traditions. Increasingly grounded theorists join me (see, for example, Bryant, 2003; Clarke, 1998, 2005, Keane, 2011, 2012; Thornberg, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014) in assuming that a researcher’s disciplinary and theoretical proclivities, relationships and interactions with respondents all shape the collection, content and analysis of data. Despite its usefulness, grounded theory is a contested method. Glaser’s (1978) self-published book *Theoretical Sensitivity* contained the most definitive

early statement of how to use the method and established it as a type of variable analysis. His book, however, lacked the enormous appeal of Strauss's co-authored books with Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990, 1998). Strauss and Corbin's books significantly revised grounded theory. Ironically, few readers discerned the disjuncture between their books and the original statements of the method (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Unlike Glaser, who emphasised emergent concepts and theory construction, Strauss and Corbin moved grounded theory towards verification and added preconceived technical procedures to be applied to the data rather than emerging *from* analysing them. In his scathing response, Glaser (1992) argues that Strauss and Corbin's procedures force data and analysis into preconceived categories, ignore comparative analysis, usurp the method and impose unnecessary complexity on the analytic process.

Perhaps the major challenge to the early grounded theory works is the constructivist revision (Bryant, 2002, 2003, 2017; Charmaz, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2014; 2015; Charmaz et al., 2018; Clarke, 2005; Clarke et al., 2018; Mills et al., 2006) that I first explicitly articulated in 2000. Constructivist grounded theory continues the iterative, comparative, emergent and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original statement; adopts the pragmatist emphasis on language, meaning and action; counters mechanical applications of the method; and answers criticisms about positivistic leanings in earlier versions of grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory preserves the useful methodological strategies of grounded theory but places them on a relativist epistemological foundation and integrates methodological developments of the past five decades (see Charmaz, 2000, 2009, 2014).

The constructivist approach illuminates what researchers bring to their studies and do while engaged in them. Constructivists scrutinise the researcher's actions, examine the research situation and locate the research process in the social, historical and situational conditions of its production.

## Formulating a research question and designing a study

Grounded theory is an emergent method (Charmaz, 2008). An emergent method begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge accrues. Beyond a few flexible guidelines, grounded theory is indeterminate and open-ended. You draw upon and develop specific methodological tools to answer emerging theoretical and empirical questions during the research process. Your research questions and study design evolve as you proceed, rather than emanating from deducing a hypothesis from an extant theory or following a tightly preconceived plan.

Grounded theorists must keep their research questions and research designs open-ended. We aim to study significant issues that we find in our field settings. Dissertation committees, institutional review boards and granting agencies, however, often require grounded theorists to produce research proposals using a conventional research question and design. Hence, grounded theorists must balance constructing general initial research questions that satisfy external audiences with building possibilities for refining their research design. In my 1991 study, I started with general questions about how serious chronic illness affected people's lives and how they experienced time. I moved on to develop more refined ideas about self, identity, time and suffering. This approach led to using intensive interviews as the main method of collecting data.

With grounded theory, you begin by exploring general questions about a research topic of interest. You collect data about what relevant people for this topic say and do about it. How might you devise your initial research questions? Grounded theorists' background assumptions and disciplinary interests alert them to certain issues and processes in their data from which they can develop research questions. Consistent with Herbert Blumer's (1986/1969) depiction of "sensitizing concepts", grounded theorists often begin their studies with general concepts that offer open-ended ideas to pursue and questions to ask about the topic. My guiding interests in living with chronic illness and experiencing time brought concepts such as self-concept, identity and duration into the study. I used those concepts as *points of departure* to form interview questions, to look at data, to listen to interviewees and to think analytically about the data. Guiding interests should provide ways of developing, rather than limiting, your ideas. Then you develop specific concepts through studying your data and emergent ideas during successive stages of analysis.

Sensitising concepts provide a place to start, not end. Disciplinary perspectives provide such concepts, but grounded theorists must use them with a critical eye. Professional researchers already hold epistemological assumptions about the world, disciplinary perspectives, and often an intimate familiarity with the research topic and the pertinent literature. Yet grounded theorists should remain as open as possible to new views during the research and critically examine how their own views may enter the research. The open-ended approach of grounded theory gives you an opportunity to learn things you never expected and to gain in-depth understanding of the empirical world.

### The logic of collecting data in grounded theory

Grounded theory methods rely on simultaneous data collection and analysis. Your early analytic work leads you to collect more data around emerging themes

and questions. For example, we sense Susan Nelson's efforts to account for her pain and fatigue in the interview excerpt above. Her remarks alert the interviewer to ask about discovering her other conditions and to explore how other people responded to both her search and her conclusions. Following up on an interview participant's comments allows for building further questions into subsequent interviews with other participants.

Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis helps you manage your study, without being overwhelmed by volumes of unfocused data that do not lead to anything new. If you have already collected a substantial amount of data, begin with it, but subsequently collect additional data about your emerging analytic interests and categories. That way, you can follow up on topics that are explicit in one interview or observation but remain implicit or absent in others. For example, a woman with multiple sclerosis mentioned having "bad days". She said, "I deal with time differently [during a bad day when she felt sick] and time has a different meaning to me" (Charmaz, 1991: 52). When we discussed meanings of time, I saw how she connected experiencing time with images of self. On a bad day, her day shortened because all her daily routines – such as bathing, dressing, exercising and resting – lengthened substantially. As her daily routines stretched, her preferred self shrank. After I saw how she defined herself in relation to mundane daily routines, I asked interview questions that addressed this relationship.

From the beginning, researchers actively construct their data with study participants. The first question to ask is, "What is happening here?" (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Then you have to think of ways to find out. Perhaps their enthusiasm for developing a method of theory construction led Glaser and Strauss (1967; Glaser, 1978) to imply that categories inhere in the data and may even leap out. I disagree. Rather, categories reflect interactions between the observer and observed. Certainly, social researchers' world-views, disciplinary assumptions, theoretical proclivities and research interests influence their observations and emerging categories (see also, Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Dey, 1999; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2014).

Constructing interview guides with open-ended questions is particularly helpful for novices. A well-constructed guide fosters asking open-ended questions, provides a logical pacing of topics and questions, avoids loaded and leading questions, and gives you direction as well as your interview participants (see Charmaz, 2014; Josselson, 2013; Olson, 2011). Constructing interview questions also helps you to become aware of your preconceptions.

Grounded theorists follow leads that we define in the data but may not have foreseen. Thus, I also found other topics that my respondents defined as crucial. As I listened to their stories, I felt compelled to explore their concerns about



disclosing illness although I had not anticipated moving in this direction. I studied how, when and why ill people talk about their conditions. My interest in time, however, alerted me to see whether people's accounts of disclosing their conditions changed over time.

What kind of data should you gather for grounded theory studies? To the extent possible, I advocate going inside the studied phenomenon and gathering extensive, rich data about it, while simultaneously using grounded theory strategies to direct data collection. Rich data reveal participants' thoughts, feelings, intentions and actions as well as context and structure. My call for rich, detailed data means seeking full or "thick" description (Geertz, 1973) such as writing extensive field notes of observations, collecting respondents' written personal accounts and compiling detailed narratives of experience (such as transcribed tapes of interviews).

Grounded theorists take different, sometimes contradictory approaches to data collection, although all assume that the strength of grounded theory lies in its empirical foundation. Glaser (1992, 1998, 2013) consistently stresses discovering what is happening in the setting without forcing the data into preconceived categories. For him, forcing data includes applying extant theories to the data, assuming the significance of demographic variables (such as age, sex, race, marital status and occupation; also called face-sheet variables) *before* beginning the study, and imposing evidentiary rules (*a priori* prescriptions about what stands as sufficient evidence) on the data. He also advocates short-cuts such as moving quickly from one empirical world to another to develop a category, and, until recently, urged accepting a group's overt statements about itself.

Rich data afford views of human experience that etiquette, social conventions and inaccessibility hide or minimise in ordinary discourse. To obtain rich data:

- describe participants' views and actions in detail
- record observations that reveal participants' unstated intentions
- construct interview questions that allow participants to reflect anew on the research topic
- look for and explore taken-for-granted meanings and actions.

"Tell me about", "how", "what" and "when" questions yield rich data, particularly when you buttress them with queries to elaborate or to specify, such as "Could you describe ... further" (for a sample interview guide, see Charmaz, 2014). Look for the "ums" and "you knows"; explore what they indicate. How might they reflect a struggle to find words? When might a "you know" signal taken-for-granted meanings? What do long pauses indicate? When might "you know" seek the interviewer's concurrence or suggest that the respondent is struggling to articulate an experience?

Throughout a grounded theory research project, you increasingly focus your data collection because your analytic work guides which further data you need. *The grounded theorist's simultaneous involvement in data gathering and analysis is explicitly aimed towards developing theory.* Grounded theory ethnographers, for example, move from attempting to capture the whole round of life to focused areas to explore, observe and analyse. Grounded theory interviewers adapt their initial interview guides; they add areas to explore and delete extraneous questions.

Grounded theorists follow leads to develop their emerging theoretical categories (Glaser, 1978). Other qualitative researchers may produce thick description of concrete behaviour without filling out, extending or refining theoretical concepts or making theoretical connections. In contrast, grounded theorists use thick description to ask theoretical questions. For example, young adults agonised over telling room-mates, acquaintances and dates about their conditions. Their stories sparked my interest in dilemmas of disclosing illness. Rather than obtaining thick description only about their difficulties in disclosing, I began to ask analytic questions about disclosing as a process and then gathered data that illuminated that process. These analytic questions included: what are the properties of disclosing; which social psychological conditions foster disclosing and which inhibit it; and how, if at all, does disclosing change after the person becomes accustomed to his or her diagnosis?

## Studying meanings and processes

How do you study meaning? Some grounded theorists believe they can readily discover what is significant in the research setting simply by looking or asking. However, the most important issues to study may be hidden, tacit or elusive. We probably struggle to grasp them. The data we “find” and the meanings we attribute to them reflect this struggle. Neither data nor meaningful interpretations of them simply await the researcher. We are part of the meanings that we observe and define. In short, our understanding of respondents’ meanings emerges from a particular viewpoint and the vocabulary that we invoke to make sense of them. A researcher has topics to pursue; research participants have goals, thoughts, feelings and actions. Your research questions and mode of inquiry shape your subsequent data and analysis. Thus, you must become self-aware about why and how you gather data. You learn to sense when you are gathering rich, useful data that do not undermine or demean your respondent(s). Not surprisingly, then, I believe the grounded theory method works best when the grounded theorist engages in data collection as well as data analysis phases of research. This way, you can explore nuances of meaning and process that hired hands might easily miss.

Respondents' stories may tumble out or the major process in which people are engaged may jump out at you. Sometimes, however, respondents may not be so forthcoming nor may major processes be so obvious. Even if they are, it may take more work to discover the subtlety and complexity of respondents' intentions and actions. The researcher may have entered the implicit world of meaning, in which participants' spoken words can only allude to significance, but not articulate it.

Many of my participants spoke of incidents in which their sense of social and personal worth was undermined. They complained, recounted hurtful conversations, and expressed incredulity about how other people treated them. I began to see their accounts as stories of suffering (Charmaz, 1999). These stories reflected more than a stigmatised identity – but what? I pieced together meanings behind their stories in a hierarchy of moral status that catapults downwards as health fails, resources wane and difference increases. Sufferers talked about loss, not moral status. Yet everything they said assumed a diminishing moral status.

The further we go into implicit meanings, the more we may conceptualise them with abstract ideas that crystallise the experiences eliciting these meanings. For example, I defined implicit meanings of “bad days” according to my participants' evaluations of intensified intrusiveness of illness; reduced control over mind, body and actions; and curtailed choices and actions. I synthesised, condensed and conceptualised participants' statements to make their tacit understandings explicit.

Perhaps the most important basic rule for a grounded theorist is: *study your emerging data* (Glaser, 1978, 1992). Studying the data sparks your awareness of respondents' implicit meanings and taken-for-granted concerns. How do you study data? From the very start, transcribe your audiotapes yourself or write your own field notes rather than, say, dictating them to someone else. Studying your data prompts you to learn nuances of your research participants' language and meanings. Subsequently, you learn to define the directions where your data can take you. Through studying interview audiotapes, for example, you attend closely to your respondents' feelings and views. They will live in your mind as you listen carefully over and over to what they were saying.

If you attend to respondents' language, you can adapt your questions to fit their experiences. Then you can learn about their meanings rather than make assumptions about what they mean. For example, when my respondents with chronic illnesses often talked about having “good days” and “bad days”, I probed further and asked more questions around my respondents' taken-for-granted meanings of good and bad days. I asked questions such as: “What does a good day mean to you?”, “Could you describe what a bad day is?”, “What kinds of things do you do on a good day?”, and “How do these activities compare with those on a bad day?”

By comparing interview accounts, I discovered that good days meant that participants' temporal and spatial horizons expanded and that possibilities increased for realising the selves they wished to be. But had I not followed up and asked respondents about the meanings of these terms, their specific properties would have remained implicit.

## Coding

Coding is the process of defining what the data are about. Unlike quantitative data, in which *preconceived* categories or codes are applied to the data, grounded theorists *create* their codes by defining what they see in the data. Codes emerge as you scrutinise your data and define meanings within them. This active coding forces you to interact with your data again and ask questions of them. (Thus, the interactive nature of grounded theory research is not limited to data collection, but also proceeds throughout the analytic work.) As a result, coding may take you into unforeseen areas and new research questions.

Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. It consists of at least two phases: an initial phase involving the naming of each line of data followed by a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesise and organise large amounts of data.

While coding, you use “constant comparative methods” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to establish analytic distinctions – and thus make comparisons at each level of analytic work. At first, you compare data with data to find similarities and differences. For example, compare interview statements within the same interview and with comments in different interviews. When conducting observations of an activity, compare what happens on one day with the same activity on subsequent days. Next, you can ask Glaser's two important analytic questions that separate grounded theory coding from other types of qualitative coding: What category or property of a category does this incident indicate? (Glaser, 1992: 39). What are these data a study of? (Glaser, 1978: 57; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These questions prompt you to think analytically about the fragments of data or incidents that you are coding. You begin to link the concrete data to more abstract ideas and general processes from the beginning, rather than remaining at a topical or descriptive level. Even taking mundane statements apart and looking at their implicit meanings will deepen your understanding and raise the abstract level of your emerging analysis.

Initial coding entails examining each line of data and defining the actions or events that you see as occurring in it or as represented by it – line-by-line coding

(see Table 10.1). Compare incident with incident; then, as your ideas take hold, compare incidents to your conceptualisation of incidents coded earlier. The code gives you a tool with which to compare other pieces of data. That way you can identify properties of your emerging concept.

Table 10.1 Initial coding: line-by-line coding

<b>Excerpt 1:</b> Christine Danforth, age 37, lupus erythematosus, Sjögren's syndrome, back injuries. Lupus erythematosus is a systemic, inflammatory auto-immune disease of the connective tissue that affects vital organs as well as joints, muscles and nerves. Sjögren's syndrome is a related auto-immune inflammatory disease characterized by dry mucous membranes of the eyes and mouth.	
Shifting symptoms,	If you have lupus, I mean one day it's my liver;
having inconsistent days	one day it's my joints; one day it's my head,
Interpreting images of self given by others	and it's like people really think you're a hypochondriac if you keep complaining about different ailments ...
Avoiding disclosure	It's like you don't want to say anything because
Predicting rejection	people are going to start thinking, you know, "God, don't go near her, all she is – is complaining about this."
Keeping others unaware	And I think that's why I never say anything because
Seeing symptoms as connected	I feel like everything I have is related one way or
Having others unaware	another to the lupus but most of the people don't know I have lupus, and even those that do
Anticipating disbelief	are not going to believe that ten different ailments are the
Controlling others' views	same thing. And I don't want anybody saying, you know,
Avoiding stigma	[that] they don't want to come around me
Assessing potential losses and risks of disclosing	because I complain.
<b>Excerpt 2:</b> Joyce Marshall, age 60, minor heart condition, recent small cerebral vascular accident (CVA) (stroke). In her case, the stroke left her with weakness, fatigue and slowed responses when tired.	
Meaning of the CVA	I have to see it [her CVA] as a warning.
	I can't let myself get so anxious.
Feeling forced to live one day at a time	I have to live one day at a time.
Having a worried past	I've been so worried about John [her husband who had had life-threatening heart attacks and lost his job three years before retirement] and preparing to get a job [her first in 38 years] ...
Earlier losses	It's just so hard with all this stress ...
Difficult living one day at time; concentrate on today	to concentrate on what I can do today.
Giving up future orientation	I always used to look to the future. I can't now;
Managing emotions through living one day at a time	it upsets me too much. I have to live one day at a time now or
Reducing life-threatening risk	else there may not be any me.

Line-by-line coding means naming each line on each page of your written data (Glaser, 1978), although these data may not always appear in complete

sentences. Through line-by-line coding, you take an analytic stance towards your work and, simultaneously, keep close to your data. Coding leads directly to developing theoretical categories, some of which you may define in your initial codes. You build your analysis from the ground up without taking off on theoretical flights of fancy.

In addition, line-by-line coding reduces the likelihood of imputing your motives, fears or unresolved personal issues to your respondents and to your collected data. Some years ago, a young man in my undergraduate seminar conducted research on adaptation to disability. He had become paraplegic himself when he was hit by a car while bicycling. His ten in-depth interviews were filled with stories of courage, hope and innovation. His analysis of them was a narrative of grief, anger and loss. When I noted that his analysis did not reflect his collected material, he realised how his feelings coloured his perceptions of other people's disabilities. His was an important realisation. However, had he assiduously done line-by-line coding, he might have arrived at it before he handed in his paper.

From the standpoint of grounded theory, each idea that you adopt from earlier theory or research should earn its way into your analysis (Glaser, 1978). If you apply theoretical concepts from your discipline, you must ensure that these concepts work. Do they help you understand what the data indicate? If they do not, use other terms that do.

Line-by-line coding forces you to think about the material in new ways that may differ from your research participants' interpretations. For Jim Thomas (1993), a researcher must take the familiar, routine and mundane, and make it unfamiliar and new. Line-by-line coding helps you to see the familiar anew. You also gain distance from both your own and your participants' taken-for-granted assumptions about the material, so that you can see it from new vantage points. If your codes define another view of a process, action or belief than your respondents hold, note that. Your task is to make analytic sense of the material. How do you make analytic sense of the rich stories and descriptions you are compiling? First, look for and identify what you see happening in the data. Some basic questions may help, such as: What is going on here? What are people doing? What is a person saying? What do these actions and statements take for granted? How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements?

Try to frame your codes in terms as specific as possible – and keep them short. Make them active. Gerunds give us linguistic tools to preserve actions because a gerund is the noun form of the verb. Short, specific, active codes help you define processes in the data that otherwise may remain implicit. What you see in these data derives from your prior perspectives and the new knowledge you gain during

your research. Rather than seeing your perspectives as truth, try to see them as representing one view among many. That way, you may gain more awareness of the concepts that you employ. For example, try not to assume that respondents repress or deny significant “facts” about their lives. Instead, look for how they understand their situations before you judge their attitudes and actions through your own assumptions. Seeing the world through their eyes and understanding the logic of their experience brings you fresh insights. Afterwards, if you still invoke previously held perspectives as codes, you will use them more consciously rather than automatically.

In the example in Table 10.1 of line-by-line coding, my interest in time and self-concept comes through in the first two codes. Note how I kept the codes active and close to the data. Initial codes often range widely across a variety of topics. Because even a short statement or excerpt may address several points, it could illustrate several different categories. I could use the first excerpt in Box 10.1 to show how avoiding disclosure serves to control identity. I could also use it to show either how a research participant learns that other people see his or her illness as inexplicable or how each day is unpredictable. Having multiple interviews allows me to see how social and emotional isolation begins and progresses.

Initial codes help you to separate data into categories and to see processes. Line-by-line coding frees you from becoming so immersed in your respondents’ world-view that you accept it without question. Then you fail to look at your data critically and analytically. Being critical about your data does not necessarily mean being critical of your research participants. Instead, being critical forces you to ask *yourself* questions about your data. These questions help you to see actions and to identify the significant processes.

Through coding each line of data, you gain insights about what kinds of data to collect next. Thus, you distill data and direct further inquiry early in the data collection. Line-by-line coding gives you leads to pursue. If, for example, you identify an important process while coding your fifteenth interview, you can return to earlier respondents and see whether that process explains events and experiences in their lives. If you cannot return to them, you can seek new respondents who can illuminate this process. Hence, your data collection becomes more focused, as does your coding.

After you have established some strong analytic directions through your initial line-by-line coding, you can begin focused coding to synthesise and explain larger segments of data. Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Thus, focused coding is more directed, selective and conceptual than line-by-line coding (Glaser, 1978). Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense and categorise your data most accurately and completely.

Yet, moving to focused coding is not entirely a linear process. Some respondents or events make explicit what was implicit in earlier respondents' statements or prior events. An "Aha! Now I understand!" experience prompts you to study your earlier data afresh. Then you may return to earlier respondents and explore topics that had been glossed over, or that may have been too implicit or unstated to discern. The strength of grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process. You *act* upon the data rather than passively read your material. Through your actions, new threads for analysis become apparent. Events, interactions and perspectives that you had not thought of before come into analytic purview. Focused coding checks your preconceptions about the topic.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) also introduce a third type of coding, axial coding, to specify the dimensions of a category. The purpose is to sort, synthesise and organise large amounts of data and reassemble them in new ways after open coding (Cresswell, 2007). When engaged in axial coding, the researcher also links categories with sub-categories, and asks how they are related. Whether axial coding helps or hinders remains a question. Whether it differs from careful comparisons also is questionable. At best, it helps to clarify; at worst, it casts a technological overlay on the data. Although intended to obtain a more complete grasp of the studied phenomena, axial coding may make grounded theory cumbersome (Robrecht, 1995).

Axial coding is an *a priori* procedure to apply to the data. In contrast, you may find that emergent methodological directions and decisions arise when you study your data. While studying disclosure of illness, I re-examined the data I had coded during open coding. Then I coded for the range between spontaneous statements and staged pronouncements. I linked forms of telling explicitly to the relative absence or presence of strategising. After discovering that people invoked different forms of telling, I looked more closely at the context of their telling and the conditions affecting how and whom they told, as well as their stated intentions for telling. I coded for how, when and why they changed their earlier forms of telling. These strategies may lead to charting causes and conditions of the observed phenomenon.

### Raising focused codes to conceptual categories

Focused coding moves your analysis forward in two crucial steps: it establishes the content and form of your nascent analysis; and then it prompts you to evaluate and clarify your categories and the relationships between them. First, assess which codes best capture what you see happening in your data. Raise them



to conceptual categories for your developing analytic framework – give them conceptual definition and analytic treatment in narrative form. Thus, you go beyond using a code as a descriptive tool to view and synthesise data.

Categories explicate ideas, events or processes in your data – and do so in telling words. A category may subsume common themes and patterns in several codes. For example, my category of “keeping illness contained” included “packaging illness” – that is, treating it “as if it were controlled, delimited and confined to specific realms, such as private life”, and “passing” – which means “concealing illness, maintaining a conventional self-presentation, and performing like unimpaired peers” (Charmaz, 1991: 66–68). Again, make your categories as conceptual as possible – with abstract power, general reach, analytic direction and precise wording. Simultaneously, remain consistent with your data. By making focused codes active (to reflect what is happening or what people are doing) and brief, you can view them as potential categories. Processes gain visibility when you keep codes active. Succinct focused codes lead to sharp, clear categories. That way, you can establish criteria for your categories to make further comparisons.

Grounded theorists look for substantive processes that they develop from their codes. “Keeping illness contained”, “packaging illness”, and “living one day at a time” above are three such processes. As grounded theorists create conceptual handles to explain what is happening in the setting, they may move towards defining generic processes (Prus, 1987). A generic process cuts across different empirical settings and problems; it can be applied to varied substantive areas. The two codes above, “avoiding disclosure” and “assessing potential losses and risks of disclosing”, reflect fundamental, generic processes of personal information control. Although these processes describe choices people with illness make in disclosing information, people with other problems may treat information control similarly. Thus, a grounded theorist can elaborate and refine the generic process by gathering more data from diverse arenas where this process is evident. In the case of disclosing, homosexuals, sexual abuse survivors, drug users and ex-convicts often face problematic issues in personal information control and difficult disclosure decisions, as well as people with chronic conditions and invisible disabilities. As you raise a code to a category, you begin to write narrative statements in memos that:

- explicate the properties of the category
- specify the conditions under which the category arises, is maintained and changes
- describe its consequences
- show how this category relates to other categories.

Categories may consist of *in vivo* codes that you take directly from your respondents' discourse, or they may represent your theoretical or substantive definition of

what is happening in the data. For example, my terms “good days and bad days” and “living one day at a time” came directly from my respondents’ voices. In contrast, my categories “recapturing the past” and “time in immersion and immersion in time” reflect theoretical definitions of actions and events. Furthermore, categories such as “pulling in”, “facing dependency” and “making trade-offs” address my respondents’ substantive realities of grappling with a serious illness. I created these codes and used them as categories, but they reflect my respondents’ concerns and actions. Novice researchers may find that they rely most on *in vivo* and substantive codes. What results is often a grounded description more than a theory. Nonetheless, studying how these codes fit together in categories can help you treat them more theoretically.

Through focused coding, you build and clarify your category by examining all the data it covers and by identifying variations within it and between other categories. You also will become aware of gaps in your analysis. For example, I developed my category of “existing from day to day” when I realised that “living one day at a time” did not fully cover impoverished people’s level of desperation. In short, I had data about a daily struggle to survive that were not subsumed by my first category of living one day at a time. The finished narrative can be seen in Box 10.1.

### Box 10.1 The category of “existing from day to day”

Existing from day to day occurs when a person plummets into continued crises that rip life apart. It reflects a loss of control of health and the wherewithal to keep life together.

Existing from day to day means constant struggle for daily survival. Poverty and lack of support contribute to and complicate that struggle. Hence, poor and isolated people usually plummet further and faster than affluent individuals with concerned families. Loss of control extends to being unable to obtain necessities – food, shelter, heat, medical care.

The struggle to exist keeps people in the present, especially if they have continued problems in getting the basic necessities that middle-class adults take for granted. Yet other problems can assume much greater significance for these people than their illness – a violent husband, a runaway child, an alcoholic spouse, the overdue rent.

Living one day at a time differs from existing from day to day. Living one day at a time provides a strategy for controlling emotions, managing life, dimming the future and getting through a troublesome period. It involves managing stress, illness or regimen, and dealing with these things each day to control them as best one can. It means concentrating on the here and now and relinquishing other goals, pursuits, and obligations. (Charmaz, 1991: 185)

As I compared different people's experiences, I realised that some people's situations forced them into the present. I then looked at how my rendering of living one day at a time did not apply to them. I reviewed earlier interviews and began to seek published accounts that might clarify the comparison. As is evident in the distinctions between these two categories above, focused coding prompts you to begin to see the relationships and patterns between categories.

## Memo-writing

In grounded theory, memo-writing consists of taking categories apart by breaking them into their components. Grounded theorists write memos throughout the research process to examine, compare and analyse data, codes and emergent categories. Memo-writing becomes the pivotal intermediate step between defining categories and writing the first draft of your completed analysis. This step spurs you to develop your ideas in narrative fullness and form early in the analytic process. Memo-writing is the logical next step after you define categories; however, it is also useful for clarification and direction throughout your coding. Writing memos prompts you to elaborate processes, assumptions and actions covered by your codes or categories. Memos help you to identify which codes to treat as analytic categories, if you have not already defined them. (Then you further develop your category through more memo-writing.) Think about including the following points in your memos:

- defining each code or category by its analytic properties
- spelling out and detailing processes subsumed by the codes or categories
- making comparisons between data and between codes and categories
- bringing raw data into the memo
- providing sufficient empirical evidence to support your definitions of the category and analytic claims about it
- offering conjectures to check through further empirical research
- identifying gaps in your emerging analysis.

Grounded theorists look for patterns, even when focusing on a single case (Strauss and Glaser, 1970). Because they stress identifying patterns, grounded theorists typically invoke respondents' stories to illustrate points – rather than provide complete portrayals of their lives. By bringing raw data right into your memo, you preserve telling evidence for your ideas from the start of your analytic narratives. Through providing ample verbatim material, you not only ground the abstract analysis, but also lay the foundation for making claims about it. Including verbatim material from different sources permits you to make precise comparisons. Thus, memo-writing moves your work beyond individual cases through defining patterns.

Begin your memo with careful definitions of each category. That means you identify its properties or characteristics, look for its underlying assumptions, and show how and when the category develops and changes. To illustrate, I found that people frequently referred to living one day at a time when they suffered a medical crisis or faced continued uncertainty. So I began to ask questions about what living one day at a time was like for them. From their responses as well as from published autobiographical accounts, I began to define the category and its characteristics. The term “living one day at a time” condenses a whole series of implicit meanings and assumptions. It becomes a strategy for handling unruly feelings, for exerting some control over a now uncontrollable life, for facing uncertainty and for handling a conceivably fore-shortened future. Memo-writing spurs you to dig into implicit, unstated and condensed meanings.

Start writing memos as soon as you have some interesting ideas and categories to pursue. If at a loss about what to write, elaborate on codes that you adopted repeatedly. Keep collecting data, keep coding and keep refining your ideas through writing more and further developed memos. Some researchers who use grounded theory methods discover a few interesting findings early in their data collection and then truncate their research. Their work lacks the “intimate familiarity” with the setting or experience that Lofland and Lofland (1995) avow meets the standards for good qualitative research. Cover your topic in depth by exploring sufficient cases and by elaborating your categories fully.

Memo-writing frees you to explore your ideas about your categories. Treat memos as partial, preliminary and eminently correctable. Just note where you are on firm ground and where you are making conjectures. Then go back to the field to check your conjectures. Memo-writing resembles free-writing or prewriting (Elbow, 1981) because memos are for your eyes only, they provide a means of getting ideas down quickly and clearly, and they preserve your natural voice. When writing memos, incorrect verb tense, overuse of prepositional phrases and lengthy sentences do not matter. You are writing to render the data, not to communicate it to an audience.

Use memos to help you think about the data and to discover your ideas about them. Later, after you turn a memo into a section of a paper, revise it for your prospective readers. You can write memos at different levels of abstraction – from the concrete to the highly theoretical. Some of your memos will find their way directly into your first draft of your analysis. Set aside others with a different focus and develop them later.

Direct much of your memo-writing to making comparisons, what Glaser and Strauss (1967: 105) call “constant comparative methods”. This approach emphasises comparing incidents indicated by each category, integrating categories by

delineating their relationships, delimiting the scope and range of the emerging theory, and writing the theory. As I suggested with Susan Nelson's interview excerpt, you compare one respondent's beliefs, stance, actions or situations with another respondent's, or one experience with another. If you have longitudinal data, compare a participant's response, experience or situation at one point in time with that at another time. Then, as you become more analytic, start to make detailed comparisons between categories and then frame them into a theoretical statement. Through memo-writing, you distinguish between major and minor categories. Thus, you direct the shape and form of your emergent analysis.

At each more analytic and abstract level of memo-writing, bring your data right into your analysis. Show how you build your analysis on your data in each memo. Bringing your data into successive levels of memo-writing ultimately saves time; you do not have to dig through stacks of material to illustrate your points. A section of a memo is provided in Box 10.2. Note that I first defined the category, "living one day at a time", and pointed out its main properties. Then I developed aspects of living one day at a time such as its relationship to time perspective, which is mentioned here, and to managing emotions. The memo also covered how people lived one day at a time, the problems it posed as well as those it solved, and the consequences of doing so.

### Box 10.2 Example of memo-writing

#### Living one day at a time

Living one day at a time means dealing with illness on a day-to-day basis, holding future plans and even ordinary activities in abeyance while the person and, often, others deal with illness. When living one day at a time, the person feels that his or her future remains unsettled, that he or she cannot foresee the future or whether there will be a future. Living one day at a time allows the person to focus on illness, treatment and regimen without becoming entirely immobilised by fear or future implications. By concentrating on the present, the person can avoid or minimise thinking about death and the possibility of dying.

#### Relation to time perspective

The felt need to live one day at a time often drastically alters a person's time perspective. Living one day at a time pulls the person into the present and pushes back past futures (the futures the person projected before illness or before this round of illness) so that they recede without mourning [their loss]. These past futures can slip away, perhaps almost unnoticed. [I then compare three respondents' situations, statements and time perspectives.]

## Theoretical sampling

Memo-making leads directly to *theoretical sampling* – that is, collecting more data to fill out the properties of your theoretical categories. Conducting theoretical sampling requires already having tentative categories to develop – and test – through rigorous scrutiny of new data. Thus, you seek more cases or ask earlier participants about experiences that you may not have covered before. You need more data to be sure that your category accurately describes the underlying quality of your respondents' experiences.

When I was trying to figure out how people with chronic illnesses defined the passage of time, I went back to several participants whom I had interviewed before and asked them more focused questions about how they perceived times of earlier crisis and when time seemed to slow, quicken, drift or drag. Because such topics resonated with their experiences, they even responded to esoteric questions. For example, when I studied their stories, I realised that chronically ill adults implicitly located their self-concepts in the past, present or future. These time-frames reflected the form and content of self and mirrored hopes and dreams for self as well as beliefs and understandings about self. Hence, I made “the self in time” a major category. Thereafter, I explicitly asked more people whether they saw themselves in the past, present or future. An elderly working-class woman said without hesitation:

I see myself in the future now. If you'd asked where I saw myself eight months ago, I would have said, “the past”. I was so angry then because I had been so active. And to go downhill as fast as I did – I felt life had been awfully cruel to me. Now I see myself in the future because there's something the Lord wants me to do. Here I sit all crumpled in this chair not being able to do anything for myself and still there's a purpose for me to be here. [Laughs.] I wonder what it could be. (Charmaz, 1991: 256)

Through theoretical sampling you can elaborate the meaning of your categories, discover variation within them and define gaps between categories. Theoretical sampling relies on comparative methods for discovering these gaps and finding ways to fill them. I advise conducting theoretical sampling after you have allowed significant data to emerge. Otherwise, early theoretical sampling may bring premature closure to your analysis.

Engaging in theoretical sampling will likely make variation visible within the studied process or phenomenon. One of my main categories was “immersion in illness” (Charmaz, 1991). Major properties of immersion include recasting life around illness, slipping into illness routines, pulling into one's inner circle, facing dependency and experiencing an altered (slowed) time perspective. However,

not everyone's time perspective changed. How could I account for that? By going back through my data, I gained some leads. Then I talked with more people about specific experiences and events that influenced their time perspective. Theoretical sampling helped me to refine the analysis and make it more complex. I then added the category "variations in immersion" to highlight and account for different experiences of immersion in illness. I filled out this category through theoretical sampling because I sensed variation earlier when comparing the experiences of people with different illnesses, different life situations and different ages but had not made clear how immersion in illness varied and affected how these people experienced time. Subsequently, for example, I sampled to learn how illness and time differed for people who spent months in darkened rooms and how both varied when people anticipated later improvement or faced continued uncertainty. Thus, initial demographic variations in immersion led to useful theoretical understandings of variations in immersion itself. Making comparisons explicit through successive memos enabled me to draw connections that I did not initially discern. The memo became a short section of a chapter that begins as in Box 10.3 and then goes on to detail each remaining point.

### Box 10.3 Variations in immersion

A lengthy immersion in illness shapes daily life and affects how one experiences time. Conversely, ways of experiencing time dialectically affect the qualities of immersion in illness. What sources of variation soften or alter this picture of immersion and time? The picture may vary according to the person's 1) type of illness, 2) kind of medications, 3) earlier time perspective, 4) life situation and 5) goals.

The type of illness shapes the experience and way of relating to time. Clearly, trying to manage diabetes necessitates gaining a heightened awareness of timing the daily routines. But the effects of the illness may remain much more subtle. People with Sjögren's syndrome, for example, may have periods of confusion when they feel wholly out of synchrony with the world around them. For them, things happen too quickly, precisely when their bodies and minds function too slowly. Subsequently, they may retreat into routines to protect themselves. Lupus patients usually must retreat because they cannot tolerate the sun. Sara Shaw covered her windows with black blankets when she was extremely ill. Thus, her sense of chronological time became further distorted as day and night merged together into an endless flow of illness. (Charmaz, 1991: 93)

When do you stop gathering data? The standard answer is that you stop when the properties of your categories are "saturated" and new data no longer spark fresh insights about your emerging grounded theory. But researchers disagree

about the meaning of saturation. As Janice Morse (1995) suggests, researchers proclaim saturation rather than prove that they have achieved it. Thus, like other qualitative researchers, grounded theorists may assume their categories are saturated when they may not be. The kinds of analytic questions and the conceptual level of the subsequent categories matter. Mundane questions may rapidly produce saturated but common categories, whereas novel questions may demand more complex categories and more sustained inquiry (Charmaz, 2014; Lois, 2010).

## Writing up

After you fully define your theoretical categories, support them with evidence and order your memos about these categories, start writing the first draft of your paper. Writing is more than mere reporting. Instead, the analytic process proceeds while writing the report. Use your now developed categories to form sections of the paper. Show the relationships between these categories. When you have studied a process, your categories will reflect its phases. Yet you still need to make an argument for your reader as to why this process is significant. That means making *your* logic and purpose explicit. That may take a draft or two. Then outline your draft to identify your main points and to refine how you organise them. (But do not start your draft from an outline – use your memos.) As your argument becomes clearer, keep tightening it by reorganising the sections of your paper around it.

What place do raw data such as interview excerpts or field notes have in the body of your paper? Grounded theorists generally provide enough verbatim material to demonstrate the connection between the data and the analysis, but emphasise the concepts they have constructed from the data. To date, qualitative researchers do not agree on how much verbatim material is necessary. Compared to those qualitative studies that primarily synthesise description, grounded theory studies are substantially more analytic and conceptual. Unlike some grounded theorists, I prefer to present detailed interview quotations and examples in the body of my work. This approach keeps the human story in the forefront of the reader's mind and makes the theoretical analysis more accessible to a wider audience.

After you have developed your analysis of the data, go to the literature in your field and compare how and where your work fits in with it – be specific. At this point, you must cover the literature thoroughly and weave it into your work explicitly. Then revise and rework your draft to make it a solid finished paper. Use the writing process to sharpen, clarify and integrate your developing analysis.



Through writing and rewriting, you can simultaneously make your analysis more abstract and your rendering of it more concrete and precise. In short, you hone your abstract analysis to define essential properties, assumptions, relationships and processes while providing sufficient actual data to demonstrate how your analysis is grounded in people's experience.

## Conclusion

The inductive nature of grounded theory methods assumes an open, flexible approach that moves you back and forth from data collection to analysis. Your methodological strategies take shape during the research process rather than before you began collecting data. Similarly, you shape and alter the data collection to pursue the most interesting and relevant material without slighting research participants' views and actions. By developing and checking your ideas as you proceed, you not only stay close to the empirical world but also learn whether and to what extent your analytic ideas fit the people you study.

Grounded theorists aim to develop a useful theoretical analysis that fits their data. The systematic strategies of grounded theory enable qualitative researchers to generate ideas. In turn, these ideas may later be verified through traditional quantitative methods. Nonetheless, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally claimed, grounded theory qualitative studies stand on their own because these works: explicate basic (generic) processes in the data; analyse a substantive field or problem; make sense of human behaviour; provide flexible, yet durable, analyses that other researchers can refine or update; and hold potential for greater generalisability (e.g. when conducted at multiple sites) than other qualitative works. But do most researchers who claim to do grounded theory research actually construct theory? No, not at this time, although notable exceptions like Jennifer Lois (2010) are increasing. Most researchers construct conceptual analyses of a particular experience instead of creating substantive or formal theory. These researchers pursue basic questions within the empirical world and try to understand the puzzles it presents. They emphasise analytic categories that synthesise and explicate processes in the worlds they study rather than tightly framed theories that generate hypotheses and make explicit predictions. Many researchers engage in grounded theory coding and memo-making but do not conduct theoretical sampling or pursue extensive analysis of their categories. However, grounded theory methods provide powerful tools for taking conceptual analyses into theory development. For this reason, grounded theory methods offer sociologists exciting possibilities for revisioning social theory as well as useful strategies for rethinking qualitative research methods.

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### Key concepts

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**Category** An abstract term that makes analytic sense of a set of codes. Categories are derived from compelling codes that subsume other codes or through constructing a new, more abstract, term to account for earlier codes. Developing these conceptual categories raises the theoretical level of the researcher's emerging analysis.

**Code** A label the researcher assigns to a piece of data to make analytic sense of it. Codes are transitional objects that connect data and analysis. Codes show how researchers portray and conceptualise research participants' actions and meanings. Coding expedites analysis and the resulting codes often provide the skeleton of the analysis.

**Constructivist grounded theory** A contemporary version of Glaser and Strauss's original statement which challenges earlier beliefs in the observer's neutrality and recognises that researchers must examine how their subjectivity, preconceptions and social locations affect the research process and product.

**Theoretical sampling** Sampling to develop the researcher's emerging theory, not for representation of a population or increasing the generalisability of the results. Theoretical sampling requires having already constructed tentative theoretical categories from conducting comparative analysis through coding and memo-writing.

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# 11

## SAMPLING AND CONCEPTUALISATION IN GROUNDED THEORY

Catherine Conlon

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Remaining open in grounded theory	225
Remaining open in practice	226
Theoretical sampling	228
• Where to begin: laying the ground for theoretical sampling in practice	229
Theoretical sampling in practice	231
Theory-building in grounded theory	234
Doing theory building in practice	235
Conclusion	238
Acknowledgements	239
Key concepts	239
Further reading	240
References	240

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Grounded theory (GT) follows symbolic interactionism in viewing humans as active agents in their own lives who create meaning in the processes of action and interaction. GT thus proffers that theory can be discovered *in* empirical data. This approach originates from a realist ontology positing that theoretical accounts of processes reside in data to be discovered by the researcher, independent of the researcher. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first outlined GT in 1967 in response to a social science they considered to be dominated by deduction (see the lengthier discussion on this in Chapter 10, pp. 197–198). The core premise of GT is that there are regularities to the social world out there, which the researcher can locate through systematic observation and analysis of human action and interaction. The inductive emphasis of GT challenges the prevailing model of research based on deductive hypothesis testing.

Since then researchers have proposed different variations of GT reflecting ontological and epistemological debates and turns in the intervening time. Concerns regarding the place of the researcher in social inquiry are attended to by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Corbin and Strauss (2015) who deal with issues of reflexivity in a GT inquiry. Charmaz (2006, 2014) goes further and develops GT in conversation with a social constructivist perspective. Her approach re-situates the researcher as fully implicated in all stages of the inquiry and she argues that what emerges are portrayals as opposed to a universalist, singular theoretical account. Clarke (2014) similarly addresses concerns about context and proposes a situational analysis approach premised on the position that any condition is situation-specific, which is why context as well as process should be investigated. More recently, the realist origins of the method have been taken up again by researchers working within a critical realist perspective (e.g. Kempter and Parry, 2011, 2014; Oliver, 2012; Lee, 2016). This recent branch of research asserts that even though reality is a phenomenon existing “out there”, the meaning of reality is specific to individuals and contexts and therefore fluid (for a further account of how the method evolved, see Chapter 10, pp. 198–199).

This chapter illustrates the use of GT in practice using the example of an inquiry entitled *Changing Generations* (see Timonen et al., 2013; Conlon et al., 2015). This study is concerned with intergenerational solidarity in Ireland in the period following the “great recession” that began in 2008. The study’s data set comprises qualitative interviews. My approach is inspired by Charmaz’s constructivist iteration of GT. However, I illustrate the generic processes of GT as well as its inflection in a constructivist approach. The emergent nature of GT is illustrated in the chapter through the following characteristics: the imperative to remain open; the iterative nature of GT achieved through theoretical sampling; the use of memos in GT; and the constant comparative procedures revealing processes in the data giving way to theory-building.



## Remaining open in grounded theory

The core premise of GT is that theory emerges from data generated in the course of the inquiry in which data generation *and* data analysis proceed iteratively so that both feature from the very outset of the study. All variants of GT involve simultaneous data collection and analysis, pursuing emergent themes through early data analysis, discovering basic social processes within data, inductive construction of abstract categories to explain and synthesise these processes, sampling to refine categories through comparative processes, and integrating categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions and consequences of the processes studied (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012: 348). Timonen et al. (2018) surveyed the various approaches to GT and note how all share a pragmatist influence; all ask questions that pertain to processes, interactions and context; and all strive to approach the inquiry with openness to new findings.

The role of extant theory has evolved in GT approaches. The method initially anticipated “pure” inductive reasoning from a blank-slate researcher able to throw off any pre-existing world-views. As ontology evolved to turn attention on the role of the researcher in shaping social inquiry, this was deemed an unrealistic proposition. Rather a present, active researcher with a scholarly past is proposed who acknowledges the prior theoretical perspectives and attachments s/he holds. This “theoretically contaminated” researcher can still follow the GT method crucially by applying the central tenet to *remain open* in how reasoning is pursued, now acknowledged to be better described as “abductive”.

Notwithstanding, GT still anticipates theory emerging from the data and, crucially, that data generation begins at the outset of the research process in an open way. It is not anticipated that data generation in a GT study will be preceded by lengthy engagement with extant literature and theory in order to generate key concepts or propositions at the outset. In a GT study, the phenomenon of interest is articulated (e.g. solidarity between generations), and the researcher moves quickly from articulating the phenomenon to generating data from the social world relating to it. It is the data that will refine the focus of inquiry, and the processes observed will reveal concepts to give meaning to the phenomenon. Data analysis and data generation run simultaneously and iteratively inform each other. Exploring the data for basic social processes begins as soon as data are available and is focused on revealing concepts. In line with this, the very concepts under inquiry are only tentatively specified at the outset of data collection so that even the parameters of the inquiry emerge from the data. This means that the parameters of a GT inquiry as well as the theory it generates are fully grounded in the data. As Charmaz states on p. 197 in Chapter 10, ‘[t]he logic of grounded theory influences all phases of the research process’.



## Remaining open in practice

The *Changing Generations* study illustrates how the principles of GT and its key device of remaining open entailed the focus of inquiry itself being kept open from the outset of the study by attending in particular to terminology. Charmaz in Chapter 10 outlines how grounded theorists are simultaneously managing the demands of a method that requires keeping their research questions and design open-ended with the demands of dissertation committees, institutional review boards and granting agencies who often require research proposals that specify bounded research questions and designs. In *Changing Generations* the very constructs framing the inquiry – “intergenerational solidarity” – were interrogated at the outset for what meanings they carry and what effects implicit meanings might have at the empirical level. “Intergenerational solidarity” represented a broad, abstract, even esoteric topic, and our concern was to formulate it in language through which research participants would be presented with our topic of interest using terms that were on the one hand familiar but on the other hand were capable of generating narratives that were broad ranging and complex (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011) so as to make for theoretically rich data. We began by breaking down and grounding the key constructs of “generation” and “solidarity” to strip out as much as possible the conceptual and theoretical baggage they held. This work was done to inform materials research participants would encounter such as notices seeking participants, information sheets and consent forms as well as a broad interview schedule.

A GT study of “solidarity” required that this abstract concept would assume content and meaning through human actions and interactions constituting myriad transfers observed in empirical data. Using the abstract, conceptual term of “solidarity” was considered potentially daunting as it could be taken to entail a high order of exchange with the effect of obscuring more mundane transfers, often the most fertile ground for yielding grounded theory. Instead two more mundane action-orientated terms were used: “give and take” or “help and support”. This formulation of our area of interest (or *points of departure* as discussed by Charmaz in Chapter 10) was deemed more accessible, instrumental and foundational, a formula that could animate talk about relationships and forms of exchange at familial, interpersonal and broader societal levels that occur in the everyday – the kind of talk GT strives for.

Referring to how generational location is often related to age, another initial move was to avoid prescribing chronological age as a key means for approximating where one resides in the life course. This was addressed in the interview schedule. Instead of asking people their chronological age, the first question to participants in interviews asked them to “Tell me about the stage you are at in

your life now” as a means to allow the person to locate their life stage in terms of their own choosing. The data showed that some people did begin by stating their age in years, but others talked about where they were in other arenas of their life such as their professional lives (“I’ve just retired” or “I’m two years out of college”) or their family lives (“I’m a grandmother” or “I’ve recently bought a house”).

The second question wanted to explore the relationship context from which the data were being generated. Aware of extensive discussion in extant literature relating to how solidarity features in familial and non-familial relations and regarding the fluidity of family forms, we wanted an open approach to “family”. The question “who would you say are the people closest to you?” was devised to allow people to define their significant intimate relationships on their own terms rather than to prescribe the familial structure as the only form these could take. This question did often generate accounts of people’s biogenetic kin or involve participants referring to normative or dominant familial structures as their main reference. However, it also generated some accounts of close relationships outside these dominant forms.

The interview guide then began with these two initial questions about life stage and close relations. They were followed by four “intermediate” questions that continued with the practice of translating solidarity into everyday terms of giving or receiving help or support, contributing to society and receiving from the state. The four intermediate questions were as follows:

- Can you tell me about the help and support, if any, you are receiving from other people at the moment?
- Can you also tell me about any help and support you are giving to others at the moment?
- Thinking about Ireland as a whole, in what ways do you think that you are contributing to Irish society?
- What do you see yourself receiving from the state?

The questions were designed to tap into two types of relationships (“giving” and “receiving”) in two spheres (“private” and “public”). Through probing, interviewers introduced time by asking participants whether they “had received” support in the past, “anticipated receiving” support in the future, and so on. There were also probes to ask participants how they *felt about* giving and/or receiving support.

To integrate the data, these questions were followed by two overarching questions that sought to explore perspectives on solidarity at societal level:

- What are your thoughts on the state’s role in supporting the young and the old?
- After reflecting on the giving and receiving you are involved in as an individual, what are your views on the balance between the “give and take” for you personally?

The guide concluded with “ending questions” reflecting Charmaz’s (2014) advice to choose a formula that invites participants to introduce something they consider relevant and to ask questions back to the researcher:

- Is there *something* I haven’t asked you that you think is relevant to our topic?
- Is there *anything* you would like to ask me?

While interviewing methods for GT studies can be much less structured than this, we followed Charmaz’s (2014) guidance to devise an interview guide comprising broad opening questions, more focused intermediate questions and closing questions that afford participants an unstructured, reflexive commentary on the process. In practice the guides were employed very flexibly but the exercise of formulating them at the outset entailed the research team interrogating closely the terminology we would employ, particularly with reference to how it could tap into the “mundane”. It also entailed our fully interrogating questions, positions and assumptions we were collectively and individually bringing to the inquiry, in keeping with the method’s concern for remaining open. Charmaz on pages 200–203 in Chapter 10 provides readers with a detailed account of interviewing for grounded theory studies and the kind of data the method requires.

### Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling is a key procedure in GT methodology for inductive and abductive theory-building. Theoretical sampling rests on data collection and analysis proceeding simultaneously, allowing nascent concepts to emerge that guide the focus and direction of data generation so that data, concepts and theory are all developed in an inductive, grounded manner. To get to theoretical sampling involves early data generation, simultaneous data generation and analysis, coding, memo-writing and constant comparative analysis to identify concepts and concerns for honing in on as data generation and interrogation proceed. Directing the focus of data generation with regard to what social locations or *attributes* of participants would facilitate constant comparison within the data set is one dimension of theoretical sampling. A more complex dimension is directing the focus of data analysis by pursuing *concepts* that are emerging inductively as salient to understanding and explaining the phenomenon of interest. Concepts are pursued through generating and interrogating further data specifically attuned to the emerging concepts as well as reinterrogating data generated to date for a concept that has now been recognised. This work continues until categories are saturated.

## Where to begin: laying the ground for theoretical sampling in practice

Every GT study needs to begin generating data to provide the initial data from which theoretical sampling can proceed. Purposive sampling, where you select participants based on key criteria of interest to your study, is often carried out by the GT researcher at the outset of an inquiry and was used to start data generation in the *Changing Generations* study. In developing purposive criteria we referred to how later iterations of GT have highlighted understanding data in its situational and social contexts (Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006, 2014; Oliver, 2012). Charmaz (2011) has argued that paying detailed attention to social and historical contexts is key to understanding central social justice concerns regarding resources, hierarchies, policies and practices in the theory-building process. To attend to this at the outset of *Changing Generations*, we anchored sampling in defined geographic areas, selected for diversity with regard to measures of social deprivation and advantage (Haase, 2010). Areas were profiled for key socio-economic and demographic characteristics, and sites comprising metropolitan, town/suburban and village/rural hinterland settings were selected as local areas from which data generation would be launched. This allowed researchers to become intimately familiar with local micro-contexts including how social policies, resources and hierarchies played out in participants' local environments. Interview participants were recruited from within these purposively defined areas selected for diversity with reference to age, gender, class and socio-economic status. This allowed us to generate early data as the starting-point for theory-building. Data analysis begins in a GT study as soon as there are data, and further data generation awaits direction from the outcome of early data analysis before it proceeds. Charmaz on p. 204 in Chapter 10 describes the importance of getting at implicit meanings in data and provides guidance for the researcher on how to handle interview data to support that.

Coding of qualitative, unstructured data is a device used across many qualitative methodological approaches as a means to conceptually capture abstract processes in the data and allow the analyst to navigate the detailed, thick description of everyday life (Charmaz on pp. 205–209 in Chapter 10 gives detailed guidance on doing coding in a grounded theory study). Coding entails the researcher noticing the meaning being given to actions, events, incidents, feelings, emotions and so on being portrayed in the data and conceptually labelling them as a device to think with at a remove from the detail of the data. GT methods employ coding, and, while each variant has particular terminology and slight differences in how coding of data proceeds, at least two stages of coding are often envisaged. In the initial phase of the project initial or “open” coding is used. This involves all of the data being considered through a general open question such as “what is going on

here?" in relation to the inquiry at hand. The grounded theorist then hones in on more specific questions such as "what is this talk 'doing'?", "how is it positioning the speaker?", "what meanings are being attributed to the actions, events, and actors?" and "what emergent processes are being observed?". This close attention to the data attends to the central principle in GT of remaining open, as discussed above. At the coding stage the principle of remaining open refers to ensuring data are not being forced by the researcher towards conceptual categories or constructs.

A second iteration of selective or focused coding involves the researcher making analytical decisions about what are the most conceptually rich threads in the data accounting for the phenomenon of interest. It is this level of coding that reveals salient concepts that will be "theoretically sampled". While codes, categories and concepts are being developed as emergent from the data, theoretical sampling drives the generation of more focused data and directs which data to focus on in analysis. Theoretical sampling involves generating new data related to a given concept, perhaps in a new and contrasting context to where data have emerged from previously. And here again we see the iterative character of the method in action: theoretical sampling for concepts directs theoretical sampling decisions in relation to generating new data with contrastingly positioned participants/events/incidents. By now, interview guides or other data collection protocols formulated at the outset of the study are being moved away from as data collection is being directed by emerging concepts. In *Changing Generations* this meant that while most interviews began with the opening two questions mentioned above, they moved from there through the terrain mapped out by the guide in pursuit of deepening emerging concepts rather than in order to ensure all areas of the guide were covered.

Theoretical sampling involves the researcher actively pursuing emerging concepts in newly generated data and, if necessary, revisiting their data set to collect instances of a concept in action that may not have been noted in earlier coding before the concept was identified as salient. While there is no clear standard procedure in the GT method on shifting from purposive to theoretical sampling, the active pursuit of key concepts and contexts in data generation and coding is a signal that the GT study is shifting to theoretical sampling. Charmaz on pp. 209–212 in Chapter 10 discusses raising codes to conceptual categories, which are the basis for theoretical sampling.

Theoretical sampling for concepts means that when a process is found in the data, this is noted and interrogated abductively and inductively – abductively through questioning how it fits with what we know already about the particular phenomenon, and inductively through constant comparison of data with other data about the process so as to confirm, challenge, extend or modify how the concept has come to attention in the analysis so far. The iterative process

continues in this vein until the conceptual category or categories of interest are saturated. In GT, the concepts and explanations emerging always work their way up out of the data and so are fully grounded in the data.

### Theoretical sampling in practice

The following is an example of theoretical sampling from the *Changing Generations* study relating to the concept of “obligation”. The example demonstrates three processes within a GT project: theoretical sampling for concepts during the data generation process (interviewing in this case); emergent interrogation of meaning-making within the data generation process itself; and the role of memo-writing in building emergent concepts or grounded theory.

Interviewing within a constructivist perspective generates data that can be viewed as a co-construction, a “third voice” (Atkinson et al., 2003) of collaboration between participant and researcher, emerging from the research encounter. The GT interviewer enters subsequent interviews while closely engaging with the data already generated. The interviewer is attuned to concepts that have been emerging as conceptually rich in the data already. The participant will have been selected for their potential to provide data with comparative value to the inquiry. The GT researcher proceeds through the data generation process primed for new, contrasting, emerging insights and goes after them when they arise. In a constructivist GT study, concepts under inquiry may undergo a process of emergent meaning-making, construction or reconstruction during the interview itself as this example demonstrates.

The interview with Sonya took place about midway through the data generation for the project. The first process illustrated in this excerpt is *theoretically sampling for participants who represented contrasting social locations*. Consistent with an abductive approach, the inquiry was initiated in awareness that extant explanations of intergenerational solidarity emphasise either normative principles or patterns of exchange. Analysis of the data generated up to the point of Sonya’s interview suggested taken-for-granted positions on providing elder care which the team were framing as “unquestioning obligation”. We asked how this “unquestioning obligation” fits with theoretical accounts of late modernity that propose self-identity as a reflexive project rather than taking for granted what roles we would occupy (Giddens, 1991). This line of questioning drove theoretical sampling in search of participants in non-traditional social locations. Sonya challenged normative gender and sexuality scripts by being a professional woman in her forties who was a lesbian with no children, thus representing a not-taken-for-granted identity category, fitting our theoretical sampling criteria.

The second feature of GT demonstrated here is *theoretical sampling for concepts within the interview encounter*. A memo for the concept of obligation had been developed by the team at this point in the project and “obligation” had been identified as a theoretically salient concept. The excerpt from the interview with Sonya below shows the researcher honing in on this theoretically salient construct when it arose in the interview.

### Box 11.1 Excerpt from interview with Sonya

The interview opened with the question asking Sonya to tell about the life stage she was in. Sonya began by first emphasising her professional life but as her account drew to an end she brought in her family of origin as beginning to feature more in her life now, owing to her father’s recent deteriorating health:

A: But my father is getting a lot older now, so that has really impacted on our family this year ... [Sonya made several identifiable statements here describing the structure of her family and her siblings’ current life situations that we removed to protect her anonymity.]

Q: That is what we were, that’s the next thing that we are interested in, is who you would say the people closest to you are? Is that, an answer to that question?

A: Well do I feel close to him, or is it just like obligation, family obligation thing?

Q: Well, tell me! That’s what really interests me, actually, is

A: Right, ok, ahm, gosh, yea, I suppose I would, it’s more like the last couple of years I would have probably started to have a better relationship with my father than I have had, but I wouldn’t have felt that close to him over the last twenty years, particularly. But the last few years, maybe because of ill-health, we’ve sort of maybe gotten to know each other a little bit better. I would probably go home more than I’ve ever gone home, you know, for the last few years. ... And it is more obligation, I will be honest.

Q: Is it? Yeah

A: Yea. But I feel, I guess I feel a bit more, I feel a bit closer to him in the last six months, I think more because as he is getting older, and maybe I feel a bit more, that it is more than just obligation any more, I feel a bit more of something else, maybe, kind of, yea.

Q: Can you describe, I know they’re kind of hard concepts, but can you describe what the difference is between the obligation and the closeness? Like when you thought of “just obligation”, what did that feel like? And what did that mean?

A: Well obligation is kind of “oh God I just have to do it”, “are you going home?” “No, I can’t, are you going” it’s like a bit of a, you know, it’s something you feel you have to do as a family duty, and you have to do it. But I suppose feeling a closeness is something that just kind of creeps up on you when you

see them in hospital a lot, and you see them frail, and you see them in a different kind of way, that I've never seen him in before. So seeing him like that in recent years, it does change your perception a bit, you kind of you start to see him as a person, again, who is scared and lonely and needs your help, kind of.

Q: Yea

A: So there is a sense, obligation, but it is more than that, I suppose it's a sense of maybe love, yea, he is my Dad, no matter what, so kind of, you know, a bit closer than I would have felt to him for a long time, yea.

The below excerpt from the memo on obligation refers to Sonya's interview and how the researcher directed interview talk so as to sample for theoretical salient concepts within the interview process itself. The memo illustrates the liveliness of data and the richness for the inquiry when the research participants themselves engage with the central concepts:

#### Box 11.2 Excerpt from memo on obligation

When Sonya narrates self and family in the interview and asks in relation to her feeling towards her father "is it just obligation?", I feel like I have struck gold and convey the significance of this question to her. "Groping" for language signifies a critical moment in an interview when the participant is engaged in forging meanings of phenomena through the interview talk rather than drawing on established discourses. Sonya conveys surprise with where our conversation has brought her. She takes time and care to find the "right" words to construct the particular meaning the term has come to hold for her through the practice of care giving. This is intimate and sensitive territory and it is a privilege as interviewer to hear her make this meaning in process.

Later her reference to "something else", strikes me as coming to the crux of the matter. I hear this "something else" as referring to something that could make a coherent identity and agency consistent with Sonya's life sit alongside this rekindled involvement in her father's life. Her talk is very reflexive. ...

The third process demonstrated here is the role of memo-writing for building concepts. This excerpt from the memo illustrates the process of emergent reconstruction mutually achieved by the researcher and research participant within the data generation process. Another excerpt from the memo demonstrates the emergent theory-building the interview data generated for the research team:



### Box 11.3 Excerpt from memo on obligation (continued)

Here Sonya contributes significantly to the theoretical direction of the project. The event of her father's recent deteriorating health emerged as a process that led Sonya to come to "question obligation" herself. Specifically whether such a traditional norm constraining and compelling action holds sway in her life and underpins her actions in recently spending time with and taking care of her father. Through our interview talk, she re-constructs her care relationship with her father from one based on traditional norms of "obligation" or "having to" to a relationship based on affective values of "love" and "wanting to" through memory and relational work. This suggests a process of reworking traditional norms through relational principles to maintain a coherent sense of self who is self-directing the roles and activities they engage in.

As the memo states, theory-building in the project was propelled forward by this new key insight that our earlier data had directed us towards. This signals a final transition in the GT project as theory-building begins to form. As before, this is not a discrete stage and the iterative feature of the method means theory-building happens while data generating, coding, theoretical sampling and so on all continue. The shift merely means that there is another new strand running in parallel, not that any part of the earlier process has come to a close – like adding another ball into the juggler's set as they get to grips with keeping each one in the air and as they move towards the closing stage of the act.

## Theory-building in grounded theory

Analysis in GT emphasises constant comparative analysis where the researcher notes how contrasting contexts may (or may not) give way to contrasting meanings attaching to similar events, incidents or actions. Asking how the same concepts manifest under different conditions and contexts as well as asking how contrasts in how the concepts present can be explained drives theoretical sampling. The final stages of coding in GT therefore involves theoretical integration through refining the most salient categories using codes and tracing relationships between categories. In this process a grounded "theory" is generated out of the data presenting new explanatory concepts and the relationships between them.

Memos are a key tool for moving between data, codes, categories, concepts, processes and theory-building (Charmaz on pp. 212–215 in Chapter 10 discusses memo-writing in grounded theory). GT anticipates the analyst engaging in memo-writing from the outset and this writing serving as an intermediary between the

data, researcher and inquiry. Memos record the tentative hunches the analyst has about the salience of a code/category, possible new lines of inquiry for further data collection through theoretical sampling, and emerging relationships between codes and categories. Some memos will not be attached to any particular code, category or concept but will be concerned with explaining overall processes observed in the data. These are more theoretically orientated memos. Memos are the primary record of *how* the researcher has engaged with the data in pursuit of concepts and theory and should be employed throughout the project from beginning to end (Timonen et al., 2018).

Memos are written notes on concepts that emerge from coding to capture the insights gleaned, to articulate the questions raised and to identify gaps in the data. Memos are written to capture the researchers' insights, interpretations and further questions that arise from noticing and naming codes and from formulating categories that integrate codes. They are the space between data and concepts out of which theory-building is articulated. Criteria for theoretical sampling as described above emerge from memos. Memos also capture what patterns and relationships the analyst notices between codes, suggesting overarching categories that can integrate codes. As the study progresses, the researcher will also move on to writing theoretical memos that hover above the individual categories, articulating broader processes and relationships between categories. This is the stage of theory-building in action.

As the project described in this chapter testifies, the focus for a GT inquiry is often of considerable breadth, in service to the commitment to remaining open. As the study progresses, specific processes in the data will be honed in on, reflecting the particular orientation of the researcher. The final excerpt from the *Changing Generations* project discussed in the exemplar below shows theory-building emerging in relation to giving and receiving care portrayed in data from interviews with women from across different levels of family generations. The exemplar demonstrates the GT methods of theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis and the theory-building process in practice.

### Doing theory building in practice

A unique aspect of the *Changing Generations* data set was how it encompassed viewpoints of both (prospective) care recipients and (prospective) care givers, categories that could also overlap. The data enabled analysis of both the expectations and aspirations of those who are ageing and contemplating the prospect of having support needs *and* the aspirations and practices of younger participants with regard to providing help, support and care for older family members. This was one

dimension of constant comparative analysis; another was socio-economic status, which emerged as a key salient category in relation to care giving in the data.

A category emerging from the data in relation to younger, lower socio-economic status women portrayed how they were *living enmeshed lives* forged across generations. The limited economic and social resources held by their families created high levels of interdependence across the life course. Younger women portrayed how they witnessed struggles and hardship “close up” within their families and support needs that arose among older generations as a result. The data revealed a process by which lower socio-economic status women assumed responsibility for meeting the needs of other generations in the family, as shown in Table 11.1 by the focused and theoretical coding from interview data with a 19-year-old, lower socio-economic-status participant we called Michelle.

Table 11.1 Coded excerpt from interview with Michelle

[My mother] sent me to school all those years. She used to get up to clean in [a supermarket] ... from three [am] to half [past] seven and then come home and get my little brother ready for playschool. ... That is why I really respect her. That is why I help her out with the bills now.	observing hardship
... It is the way our family is. We are all close together. We still all live in the same area together as well. I can't imagine my sisters moving off. ... [My mother] still talks to this day about [me] going to college and doing courses and if I need the money and all that [she would provide it] ... but at my age now, I wouldn't want to take money off her when she hasn't got it.	<b>forging enmeshment</b>
	staying close by
	being a drain
	forgoing opportunities

In this excerpt a number of concepts common to interviews with younger lower socio-economic-status women in the study feature: “observing hardship”, “staying close by”, “being a drain”, “forgoing opportunities”. The codes of “observing hardship” and “staying close by” were connected to codes emerging from other interviews with women from lower socio-economic-status groups, including “everybody helping everybody”, “exchanging short-term loans”, “doing grandmother care”. These focused codes were elevated in the analysis to a key conceptual category we called “living enmeshed lives”.

“Living enmeshed lives” created the conditions to become a carer for elders, as our data revealed how young women living enmeshed lives took decisions early in their lives that brought them along the pathway towards caring roles at an early life stage. This was often done in awareness of other life chances they were forgoing.

While “unquestioning obligation” featured in the interviews, more often the data referred to affective resources such as “respect” or “love” as well as to reciprocation as underpinning the commitment to provide intergenerational care. This demonstrates a connection with Sonya’s excerpt above to signal a broader process of reworking obligation as based on “wanting to” rather than “having to”. In an abductive move within the analysis, we noted how our data endorsed a critique that greater attention should be given to the place of affect as one of the key constituents driving intergenerational solidarity along with norms and exchange (see, for example, Funk, 2012; Silverstein et al., 2012).

Constant comparative analysis showed contrasting forms of interreliance and independence among family generations according to socio-economic locations. Young women in low socio-economic-status families lived closely enmeshed lives alongside other family generations and shifted towards feeling responsibility for others at a much earlier stage in the life course than their “generational peers” in middle and higher socio-economic groups. The latter portrayed their young adult years as characterised by freedom from responsibilities to other family generations and having resources to pursue educational and occupational opportunities. Focused codes relating to obligation for this group included “having options”, “pursuing experiences”, “fostering independence”, “being freed from responsibilities” and “being there supporting”, codes which we integrated into the category of “living freed lives”. Young women from lower socio-economic-status backgrounds who witnessed parents struggling as they grew up conveyed a commitment to be involved in both *caring for* and *caring about* older family members. Young women from middle and higher socio-economic-status families, whose parents had striven to foster independence, demonstrated commitment to care in the form of *caring about* but displayed a responsibility to pursue opportunities presented to them, as opposed to responsibility to care for other family members.

Residing in the space between data and coding, memos do the important work of capturing insights close to the data as well as hunches for connections, patterns and processes. They also spark creativity, allowing the researcher to theorise on prospective effects of emergent processes, as happened in this project. Noting contrasting care-related expectations and attitudes by socio-economic location, we used theoretical memos to integrate thinking and insights sparked from contrasting and integrating some broad categories in the data suggesting (some) older women were taking a critical stance on how the gendered ordering of care roles and responsibilities shapes and constrains women’s lives.

Memos noted how older women were observing younger women’s lives and integrating their observations with their own lived experiences in a process we theorised as “generational observing”. Putting this in conversation with extant literature on gender and caring, we identified a process in our data of older women

recognising how caring responsibilities constrain women's life chances as well as everyday choices regarding how to spend their time across the life course. We theorised older women withholding expectations and requests for help and support from younger women in the family *and* at the same time withholding providing care to grandchildren as instigating a shift in the place of care in intergenerational family relations. This we argued constituted complex forms of intergenerational solidarity at collective and private level evolving among women, so that the absence of *caring for* relationships is not an indication of lack of intergenerational solidarity but rather indicates changing forms of intergenerational solidarity. Where *caring for* or care labour was *not* a feature of intergenerational relations, this was not indicative of the absence of intergenerational solidarity. Rather, more complex forms of intergenerational solidarity were being practised, involving older women initiating change to the place of care work in their own lives and the lives of younger generations of women in an effort to break the chain of obligation to care (Conlon et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

A grounded theory study involves the researcher articulating out as openly as possible the phenomenon under inquiry, generating data portraying that phenomenon in action, considering these data for the concepts and processes they suggest and then returning to generate further data to pursue and interrogate nascent insights. Through a combination of empirical scrutiny and analytic precision, the grounded theorist connects the mundane and the everyday with the social and structural. Remaining open to the inquiry can mean that focused research questions are suspended until sufficient data are generated to allow questions to emerge inductively from the data. Theoretical sampling means actively seeking out new, contrasting contexts or alternatively positioned research participants. This process is directed by insights gleaned from data and it is driven by an interest to fully interrogate the comparative potential in the data. Theoretical sampling is not just sampling for research participants, events or cases, but most importantly sampling to develop concepts and categories that emerge within the inquiry. Residing in the space between data and coding, memo-writing does the important work of capturing insights close to the data of hunches about connections, patterns and processes with theoretical significance.

This is the process we worked through as we engaged with our emerging insights on how obligation is being replaced by affect-orientated process within intergenerational relations in the context of postmodernity involving greater emphasis on reflexive self-making. The place of care and intergenerational solidarity is shaped

by class and gender with lower socio-economic-status young women encountering constraints on their life chances as they attend to intergenerational care and support needs. In higher socio-economic groups, meanwhile, we noted a change being initiated in the role care plays in shaping intergenerational relations by older women. Withholding grandmother caring for grandchildren in this study emerged as *not* constitutive of an absence of solidarity towards younger generations. Rather it emerged as a complex intergenerational gender-based solidarity directed towards initiating change in the place of care in the lives of women.

Grounded theory work is iterative and no processes are discrete as the researcher moves constantly back and forth across the inquiry. The example of the *Changing Generations* study described in this chapter illustrates that no one process from the GT method occurs as a separate, distinct phase in the research. Rather, stages and processes of data generation, analysis and theory-building overlap and occur iteratively, rather than sequentially, always with a concern for data to be the ground for any theory that emerges.

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## Key concepts

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**Abductive reasoning** A form of reasoning that begins by studying empirical data and entertains all possible explanations for the data observed, and following this, forms hypotheses to confirm or discount in the data until the researcher arrives at the most plausible interpretation of the observed data.

**Constant comparative analysis** A method of analysis based on inductive processes of comparisons within the data set. It involves comparing data with data, data with category, category with category and category with concept as a way of developing analysis through iterative stages. Each stage generates successively more abstract concepts and theories.

**Inductive reasoning** A form of reasoning that begins with the study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates patterns and meanings from them to form a conceptual category.

**Memo-writing** A key stage between data collection and building meaning and theory. Memo-writing involves the researcher articulating their ideas about their codes and emerging categories, including links between them, in whatever way they are seeing these codes, categories and linkages in the data. In GT memo-writing is used from an early stage to prompt researchers to analyse their data and formulate emerging meanings from early in the research process. Memos are revisited and revised and successive versions are intended to reach further levels of abstraction to support theory-building. Memos are important building blocks for the GT researcher between collecting the data and writing up analysis.

**Pragmatism** A philosophical position that views reality as characterised by indeterminacy and fluidity and open to multiple interpretations. This perspective sees human actors as creative and active in bringing reality into being. Meanings emerge through practical action and in turn people come to know the world through action. Facts and values are interlinked as opposed to separate, and truth is relative and provisional as opposed to fixed and universal.

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# 12

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Small stories and narrative practices

Michael Bamberg

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Narrative analysis as qualitative inquiry – and the problems with narrative interviewing	244
Analysing “narrative practices”	247
• Narrative practices and the interactive context	248
• Identity navigation – three navigation spaces for character construal	249
Positioning and positioning analysis	251
Summary and outlook	252
Narrative analysis – an illustration	254
• What have you been doing with your days since it happened?	255
• Analysis of Chen’s bodily performance cues	259
• Analytic considerations	260
Conclusion/outlook	261
Key concepts	262
Further readings/viewings	263
References	263

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Opening with a brief explication of narrative analysis as part of qualitative inquiry, I will lay out how narrative analysis has evolved and changed as an analytic endeavour over the last twenty years, resulting in the emergence of an integrative approach that centres on *narrative practices*. This approach attempts to connect what in the next chapter will unfold as three particular analytic procedures (thematic, structural and interactional), with a fourth procedure (visual) under the header of *positioning analysis*. Positioning here is exemplified as taking place at three different levels: First, storytellers position characters *vis-à-vis* one another in the story they tell. Simultaneously, they position themselves *vis-à-vis* their interlocutors in the process of telling. Third – and this makes storytelling particularly interesting for identity researchers – storytellers position themselves *vis-à-vis* dominant master storylines/discourses and thereby convey a sense of who they are – to their interlocutors and to themselves. In addition to positioning analysis, the narrative practice approach analyses storytelling as a process of navigating and managing identities (constructing a sense of who we are). More specifically, I will lay out three identity dilemmatic spaces as central to the way identities are navigated in storytelling (sameness/difference, agency/passivity and continuity/change). In the last section, I will give a detailed demonstration of how to apply the three levels of positioning and take the reader through the navigation of the three dilemmatic spaces. The visual data are available on the web, including three more clips plus transcripts for class exercises.

### Narrative analysis as qualitative inquiry – and the problems with narrative interviewing

Having been tasked by the American Psychological Association to establish guidelines and reporting standards for qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018), the six of us tried to develop and take five general principles into consideration as general guideposts for qualitative inquiry: (i) allowing for inductive (non-hypothesis-testing) methodologies; (ii) allowing subjectivity and experience into research; (iii) interrogating the outsider perspective and allowing a blurred (though reflective) stance on the researcher–researchee divide; (iv) aiming for insights/findings that have “real-life implications”; and (v) taking language seriously as culturally embodied and intentional practices. While not necessarily every methodological approach or qualitative research project would have to make use of and apply equally to each of these guideposts, I will approach narrative analysis in this chapter as a methodology that does more than pay lip-service, and use these guideposts as points to return to when documenting narrative research in the concluding section.

In retrospect, central to the almost forty-year-old *turn to narrative* across the humanities and social life sciences has been the claim that narrative and storytelling deserve an elevated or “exceptional” place in the range of human sense-making tools. This kind of exceptionality thesis goes back to Bruner (1991), MacIntyre (1981) and Polkinghorne (1988) among others, where the distinction among the stories we *tell*, the stories we are said to *have* and the stories some claim we *live* was systematically blurred. At the core of this blurring seemed to have been the hope that narrative methods were a ticket to an authentic identity – people and organisations are said to *have* and *live*. And while this may originally have made the turn to narrative more attractive, this blurring soon became widely criticised (cf. Bamberg, 2010; Sartwell, 2000; Strawson, 2004) and traced back to psychotherapeutically rooted interview strategies that hoped to access people’s (and organisations’) internal and authentic sense of who they *really* were. Attempting to engage participants in confessional self-reflections by taking their accounts as disclosures of *true* identities was criticised as favouring interview strategies that orient participants to withdraw from everyday storytelling practices and ponder over the meaning of lives in a kind of Sunday performance.<sup>1</sup> This, in response, led us<sup>2</sup> to reorient narrative inquiry towards a deeper scrutiny of what became the *narrative practice approach* (Bamberg, 2006, 2011; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2007). This reorientation required, first, a disentangling of storytelling from other discourse modes, such as arguing, accounting, but especially also interviewing; second, a revision of the exceptionality thesis; and third, a return to where, how and why people in everyday and mundane situations engage in storytelling – including stories that do not thematise their selves. In addition, the move to analyse narrative as everyday, mundane and also affective relational practices required a reconsideration of the analytic toolkit that thus far had been in use under the header of narrative methods (or narrative methodologies).

Since Chapter 13 of this volume reviews and applies three traditional narrative approaches that first were first laid out by Riessman (1993) and then modified and expanded by Riessman (2008), I will comment here only on how these approaches originally sprang off from different disciplines, and how they became utilised and more integrated in the subsequent turn to the analysis of narrative practices. First, *content analysis*, in the form of *thematic patterns* (as an interpretive/

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1 In Bamberg (2010) I termed these practices “Sunday performances” because they aren’t common and in Christianity carry the connotation of “going-to-church” and “confession”.

2 I am using the first-person plural to indicate that I am standing on the shoulders of others – as we all do. I depart from this usage where I take on more of my own agency/responsibility.

qualitative method), had been utilised for all kinds of texts, and soon became extended to include group discussions, conversations, newspaper articles, advertisements and the like. However, when moving inductively to the exploration of personal experience, Riessman (and others) show how this type of textual analysis can illuminate participants' sense-making of themes such as alcohol abuse, illness, relational dimensions, hidden inequalities, power and the like – as strategically relevant for the analysis of interviews. As such, and as a note of clarification, thematic/content analysis in and of itself is not an analysis specific to narratives, though often applied to interviews in a first effort to compare (and contrast) interviews in term of what they are about.

Second, *structural narrative analysis* originated from segmenting clearly bounded stories into their component parts – such as setting, complication, highpoint, resolution and coda (see Chapter 13). This analytical procedure of segmenting stories into their component parts was developed through analysing large corpora of what were considered to be prototypical stories, and coincided with cognitive research that attempted to show that the human mind processes these segments as independent units.

In addition, this type of analysis also investigates what is called the core story (such as a core sequence of event clauses), and where (and how) narrators move out and away from constructing events into taking an evaluative stance on them. Again, segmenting stories into their sequential and hierarchical building blocks borrowed from cognitive and linguistic research and fused them in ways that were meant to contribute to the exploration of how narrators arguably placed certain aspects of experience or memory into specific orders and made them relevant to the here-and-now of the telling situation. Both thematic/content and structural analysis regard the cognitive/textual unit as the primary focus of analysis, and would consider the third analytic endeavour – the actual *interactional/dyadic* (or multi-party) *context* – as a performance factor, and as such of secondary interest. Riessman (2008: 105–140) makes this third analytic aspect of storytelling more central for narrative analysis, thereby beginning to move the analytic needle from textual form and thematic content to how and why meaning transpires in the storytelling context between interlocutors – where interviews become downgraded to only one among other discourse possibilities to do identity analysis. As such, these three methodological approaches (content, form and interactive function) display a sort of methodological pluralism of the early days of narrative analysis. In her chapter on *visual analysis*, Riessman (2008: 141–182) opens narrative analysis to incorporate photographs, paintings and video diaries to capture the subjectivity of storytellers that increasingly allowed analytic access to bodily performance features such as gestures, facial expressions and gaze – and thereby to the bodily navigation of affective stance-taking. It should be noted, however,

that the unit of analysis for all four approaches (content, form, interaction, visual) differed considerably – ranging from the form of actual story-texts, to whole interviews, to what is arguably taken to be “behind” the interview and the interviewee/author. These four different approaches have been considerably refined over the last decade (as shown in Chapter 13), though in parallel with a voice of concern that language was viewed as a more or less transparent window into people’s ways of constructing a sense of who they are. Furthermore, if these four analytic proposals were imagined to be sitting side by side, to be employed for the analysis of Sunday performances in often highly stylised interview situations, the latter two proposals (interactional and visual analysis) were more add-ons, and considered to be secondary to what is primary – namely the “*textualization* of experience” into form and content. Last, but not least, one may wonder how one could still hang on to – or what is left of – the exceptionality thesis that originally seemed to have catapulted narrative and narrative analysis into the centre of qualitative inquiry and the analysis of (narrative) identity.

### Analysing “narrative practices”

As our point of departure, Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I proposed working with storytelling as a form of interactive practice under the header of *small story theory* (Bamberg, 2006, 2011; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, Georgakopoulou, 2007) – later renamed the *narrative practice approach*. Taking off from Riessman’s interactional/performance approach and making this lens central to narrative analysis came as a critical response to the predominance of analytic frameworks that continued to work with interviews as privileged attempts to unearth authentic identity from people’s (and organisations’) deep-seated interiority. Our critique of the assumptions that had crept into qualitative interviewing under the hegemony of the therapeutic ethos (Illouz, 2008) worked off from the tenet that meaning emerges as agentive sense-making with and between human bodies interacting with each other in situated activities. Taking this premise seriously and applying it to storytelling practices, the question arises what is particular to storytelling – or better, what is it that is actually being *practised* when engaging in storytelling practices. Sure, narrators engage in attributing intentions (or non-intentions) and emotions to characters in story-worlds; that is, they model sequences of actions in accordance with particular folk psychologies of interiorities and exteriorities. (see Hutto, 2007, for further details; see also the discussion of agency/passivity navigation below). It is accepted knowledge that these models are typically practised in early book-reading and storytelling routines. However, in addition, and perhaps more relevant, with each telling of a story, narrators practise *how to say*

what to say, that is, to place their own emotionality and subjectivity as speakers into the performance of their stories. In an investigation of children's development of affect expression in their narratives, Judy Reilly and I (Bamberg & Reilly, 1996) took issue with investigations that qualified storytelling abilities in the form of signifying story characters' emotional stances and their relevance for plot developments as aspects of *narrative competence*, and the bodily expression of affect in storytelling as mere performance. In contrast, we argued that the role of affective practices (cf. Wetherell, 2013), that is the ability to express one's own bodily felt subjectivity when relating a world of story characters, is equally – if not more – important for the emergent processes of narrative practices and narrative analysis.

### Narrative practices and the interactive context

To start with, and returning to the issue of form and content, small story theory originates from the tenet that narrative activities are embedded in previous and subsequent turns in (everyday) interactions; that is, *interactive before*s and *after*s. The implication of contextualising narratives this way is that there is a conversational thematic and topical contiguity that is taken into account when stories surface. Interlocutors monitor each other (and themselves) by asking: "why this story here-and-now?" They try to figure out how and why a shift into storytelling mode – making something from a there-and-then of a (past or imagined) story-time relevant for the here-and-now of the telling time – is pertinent to the local interactive moment in a conversation. It is here that it becomes evident that shifts into storytelling mode are not random or accidental. Rather, interlocutors assume that storytelling is an intentional act – related to and making relevant what communicative and relational business at hand is supposed to be accomplished.

Along these lines, narrating a story requires a great deal of interactive coordination. Shifting into narrating is typically accompanied by a discursive bid to hold the floor for an extended turn, and, towards the end of telling the story, cuing interlocutors to respond. A great deal of breaking into an ongoing conversation with a story is signalled by bodily cues such as facial expression, gaze, shifting body positions, and by way of using intonation units to mark off segments – segments that signal whether the narrator intends to keep the floor or is coming to an ending (cf. Bamberg, 2012); and bodily cues that signal the ending of a telling typically transpire well before. Approaching narrative/story from this kind of narrative practice angle prioritises the interactive relational, affective and bodily business that storytelling accomplishes. It is relevant here that participants in communities of practice share cultural practices of storytelling, not necessarily in the form of technical or theoretical concepts, but due to continuous bodily and

verbal practices in their social interactions. Thus, while the discursive functions of storytelling may be manifold (e.g. to entertain, show regret or to embellish an argument), narrators are fundamentally doing relational affective identity work. It is my proposal that this kind of identity work may best be understood in terms of the following three kinds of navigation practices.

### Identity navigation – three navigation spaces for character construal

To start with, in our daily practices, we – as personas or organisations – mark ourselves off as different, similar or the same with respect to others. Integrating and differentiating a sense of who we are *vis-à-vis* others takes place in moment-by-moment navigations; and stories about self and others are good candidates to practise the construction of story characters as navigating this space, from childhood on. However, to position ourselves as narrators *vis-à-vis* our interlocutors is different from how we position the characters *vis-à-vis* one another inside the story-world. For instance, taking off from a well-known fairy tale, construing Hansel and Gretel in a girl–boy sibling relationship as the same (i.e. loyal to each other), but the girl as more resourceful and smarter than the boy, marks them off as different from the other story characters. In this fairy tale, they are starkly positioned *vis-à-vis* witches (outsider, weird and evil) and stepmothers (dominant, selfish and evil), and less strongly positioned *vis-à-vis* fathers (generous but weak), so that themes (what the story is about) can emerge – either as about a broken family in which children are abandoned, or about children having to claim agency to overcome obstacles in growing up, or *simply* as one of the first feminist fairy tales. To be clear, in narrative analysis, we analyse these third-person characters as constructed and positioned this way so that a particular story text (plot) and thematic aboutness can emerge. We are not analysing them as *born* Hansels, Gretels, witches, and so on; that is, as *having* these identities and *living* them. And it should go without saying that storytelling situations in which narrators construct themselves as first-person characters require the same analytic procedures: story characters (including the self of the narrator) are positioned for interactive purposes. To interpret them transparently as *having* and *living* identities would do injustice to narrative interactions within the parameters of the narrative practice approach and treat language as a transparent window into reality.

A second identity space for the practice of identity navigation is often termed “agency/passivity”. Here again, we are confronted with a traditional psychological folk theory assuming that people and organisations *have* agency – and maybe even that they *live* their agency – in the sense that agency is part of people’s interiority,



responsible for how and why they do what they do. In contrast, the concept of identity navigation theorises agency/passivity as a discursive space that is constructed in the form of a navigation process between two opposing directions of fit: one coming from world to person, the other from person to world. While it is possible to construct a sense of story characters as passive recipients of forces (typically biological/natural or social), it is equally possible to construct the world as a product of story characters' agency. In this latter case, characters are said to be agentively producing and changing world. The navigation between agency and passivity becomes particularly relevant for constructions of characters as accountable – either in terms of mastery and success or as responsible and blameworthy for mishaps or wrongdoing. Again, stories about (past) actions are good candidates to practise navigations of this sort.

Third, when relating past to present, narrators can highlight the constancy of personas or institutions, or contrastively construct them as having undergone gradual or radical change, resulting in a different, new persona or entity. While identity navigations of characters between sameness/difference and between the two directions of fit (from person to world and from world to person) do not require temporality as essential prerequisite, it seems that navigations between constancy and change necessitate a correlation of two events in time – which some narrative inquirers take to be the minimal definition of “story” (cf. Labov and Waletzky, 1997). Thus, it appears that navigations of constancy and change make a good argument for storytelling as an opportune and, as such, privileged space for identity practices. Another argument for why and how storytelling may provide a privileged space for identity analysis is the recognition of narratives and storytelling as intrinsically bound up with questions of value and moral order, as well as providing a particularly gripping location for bodily affective audience engagement. Due to space limitations, this argument cannot be followed up here in the detail it deserves. However, I will try to illuminate these aspects in the analysis of a small story below.

Summing up thus far, I hope to have cleared the ground for what is to follow: while rejecting an *a priori* exceptionality of narratives that equates life and narrative, and avoiding essentialising entities (individuals as well as organisations or institutions or *society*) as *having* a self-contained narrative (that is taken to be the identity they *live*), I am proposing to work from the premise that identities and narratives are processual; that is, part and parcel of our mundane interactive, affective and continuous business of negotiating and navigating who we are in relation to one another. This is the realm where storytelling activities have their place in accomplishing identity work – and, at an analytic level, it is the empirical location where these interactions unfold as storytelling practices and can be interrogated via narrative analysis.

## Positioning and positioning analysis

Recent debates on the concept of positioning (Bamberg, 1997; Deppermann, 2013) reflect and pick up on the kind of identity navigation processes in storytelling activities touched on in the previous section. Designed to strategically explore plots and storylines, positioning theory originally paid little attention to the analysis of narrating as interactional, conversational activity. In conversations, due to the intrinsic interactional forces of conversing, people position themselves in relation to one another in ways that traditionally had been defined as roles. More importantly, in doing so, people “produce” one another (and themselves) situationally as “social beings”. This approach explicitly addresses the analysis of language in terms of how people locally and relationally/affectively attend to one another. Although traditional narrative analysis along the lines suggested by Labov and Waletzky (1997) addresses what stories referentially and thematically are “about”, namely sequentially ordered events and their evaluations, narrative practice analysis pushes to go further. It suggests positioning for a finer-grained analysis of *in situ* and *in vivo* storytelling activities. For this purpose, the process of positioning is to be investigated at three different levels that are outlined below.

In a first analytic step, the question is addressed how story characters are constructed in position to one another within the specific sequence of narrated events. More concretely, positioning level I analysis aims at the linguistic and paralinguistic means (i.e. expressive, non-verbal behaviour) that do the job of navigating the characters through the three identity spaces discussed in the previous section: sameness/difference, agency/passivity and continuity/change. At a second level, the analysis turns to how narrators position themselves *vis-à-vis* their interlocutors. At this level, linguistic, paralinguistic and bodily means (facial, gesture, proximity) are interrogated for their contributions to the discourse mode that may be “under construction”. Does the narrator, for instance, attempt to instruct listeners in terms of what to do in the face of adverse conditions, or engage in making apologies for their actions and attribute blame to others (or both)? This level of analysis typically aims to develop an understanding of why the particular story was told at this point in the conversation. This is where the reading of linguistic and non-linguistic markers at positioning level I is reinterpreted in terms of what John Gumperz (1982) termed “contextualization cues” – how linguistic and non-linguistic, affective signals become interpretive cues for where co-conversationalists are in conducting their relational affective business, and where they are headed. On one hand, it appears as if at this level (positioning level II) we as analysts/interpreters *are leaving* the seemingly safe grounds of what actually has been said (and arguably can be captured

in transcriptions) and entering the layer of multimodal performance features of storytelling (with all its slopes and bumps that on the surface invite a multitude of interpretations). However, what we gain is that a narrative practice approach takes this level of the interactive co-construction of narratives serious as foundational and constitutive for what is *textualised* at level I, and also what becomes the constitution of a sense of self at level III (below). To clarify, the local and situated relational business at hand between co-conversationalists is the foundation from where themes and content are making it to the surface for level I analysis. And, in the same vein, this also holds for the construction of a sense of self positioned at level III – to which we will turn next.

Having opened for empirical investigation the questions how narrators position story characters *vis-à-vis* one another (level I) and how narrators position themselves *vis-à-vis* their audience (level II), the final step attempts to address an arguably trickier problem, namely whether and how narrators actually may position a sense of who they are *to themselves*. More succinctly, this question attempts to explore whether there is anything in narrative practices that we as analysts can interrogate in the form of claims or stances of narrators that goes above and beyond the local conversational situation. In other words, at level III, positioning analysis interrogates whether and how the linguistic devices and bodily manoeuvres employed in narrative practices actually point to more than the content of what the narrative is “about” (level I), and directives *vis-à-vis* the interlocutor in their interactional business (level II). For the business of level III positioning, it is posited that in constructing content *and* audience, narrators observably appeal to dominant discourses (master narratives), and construct local answers to the question: “Who am I?” (Bamberg, 2011; De Fina, 2013). To be clear, however, attempted answers to this question do not necessarily hold across contexts; rather, they are *projects of limited range*. Nevertheless, we as analysts assume that these repeated and continuously refined navigation practices rub off and produce and transmit a sense of how to engage effectively and productively in sense-making procedures that endure and may turn into habits – and this also to the extent of a sense of self that is perpetual (and analysable) at positioning level III.

## Summary and outlook

So far, I have attempted to clarify the role of narratives – specified as narrative practices – for requesting a special (or privileged) space in the business of organising and sense-making in the world of interpersonal affective relationship construction, including how individuals or organisations arguably *relate to themselves*. Positioning as an analytic framework combines traditional textual analysis (see

Chapter 13) focusing purely on what seemingly was captured in transcripts (positioning level I), and the analytic attempts to capture and describe what is happening in the local and relational context of the interaction (positioning level II) – while both in concert are taken to orient towards analytic endeavours at positioning level III, the constitution of a sense of self. It should be noted and underscored again that this kind of analysis does not rely on any recourse to meaning-making processes as springing off from a psychological interiority (a *soul* or *mind* or *brain*). While we, as positioning analysts, in alignment with certain ethnomethodological approaches, strongly oppose traditional psychological theorising that starts from internal constructs and considers them to be engines for action and behaviour, we nevertheless posit that the (narrative/affective) practices in which people engage each other find effect in repetitive and routinised communal and cultural practices that have repercussions.

Overall, I hope to have contributed to a clarification of what constitutes units for the analysis of stories told as narrative practices, and laid out a strategic position for the analytic procedures for dealing with them. Insisting on the context in which narrative form and content emerge (i.e. where and how narrators *break into narrative*), I departed from starting with internal constructs, which are construed as causes for surfacing stories (in interaction). Thus, a narrative practice approach shifts the unit of analysis from textualised products as (arguable) reflections of experiences of actual events or memories thereof. Instead of claiming to investigate *reality*, or the experience or memory thereof, such as with approaches that restrict themselves to biographies or biographical memories elicited in therapy-like biographic interviews, the narrative practice approach analyses storytelling situations. And although there is nothing wrong with confining one's investigations to narrative textualisations in which narrators reflectively thematise themselves, especially for institutionalized interview purposes, these kinds of Sunday performances, however, are less telling than narrative practices *in vivo* and *in situ* of everyday interactions. Claims that equate interviewees' narratives with their memories or experiences – assumptions by which narrative researchers claim language to be transparent to gain privileged access to people's interiority – become especially problematic. A word of caution, though: this does not imply a denial that we (as people – and relational beings in the world) *have* a sense (a modern folk psychology) of an interiority, or even that there probably may *be* an interiority. The argument here simply is that starting from an assumed interiority as pressing itself onto an outside world is a (typically Western and late Modern) supposition that gets in between a fruitful analytic approach to sense-making processes (with and without narratives) that should have their genesis in interaction, where self and other mutually constitute each other as continuous *processes*.

## Narrative analysis – an illustration

In this section I will work micro-analytically through a short segment of an interaction that is publicly available on YouTube.<sup>3</sup> Edison Chen, a high-profile actor and entrepreneur in the Asian entertainment industry, was interviewed by Anjali Rao in June 2009 for *Talk Asia* on CNN. The interview followed up on a sex scandal that had broken in February 2008, when photographs Chen had taken of himself engaging in sex acts had surfaced on the internet. These pictures compromised others and destroyed their careers. According to Rao, this scandal had “forced him out of Asia and the entertainment industry”, and when he returned, more than a year later, he requested this interview with Rao to be aired on *Talk Asia*. The brief segment chosen here is the fifth in the sequence of adjacency pairs (question–answer units) between Rao and Chen, and it is in this segment that Chen launches what we originally had termed a “small story”. The reason for selecting this particular interactional unit is to document the navigation between the three identity dilemmas, and how positioning analysis can contribute to a deeper and more detailed analysis of narrative identity practices. After identifying the core story and how it is embedded in other discursive segments, I will first work through positioning level I, identifying the characters and how they are positioned *vis-à-vis* one another. Then I will work through the three identity spaces, add a brief analysis of visual cues and conclude by showing how this analysis contributes productively to the analysis of identity; that is, becomes part of a more general approach to analytically investigating “who-am-I questions” at positioning level III. At the very end, I will present three links to subsequent segments of the same interview that can be used as further exercises into “small story” analysis.

### Edison Chen, Transcript 1

- 1 /Q: you were a highly visible presence in this part of world
- 2 until the scandal really blew up
- 3 what have you been doing with your days
- 4 since it happened?
- 5 EC: heh (exhaling)
- 6 've been doing a lot of things
- 7 he-he (laughing)
- 8 ehm eh (.) it took me a little while
- 9 but you know with eh with eh with the constant support of everyone around me
- 10 and you know my family (.) especially and my girlfriend and (.)
- 11 I I kind of got through that shell again

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3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ox945LO3z8M> (or, for readers who are blocked from access to YouTube, <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/mbamberg/classes/>).

12 I kind of got through this  
 13 I'm nothing and (.) I'm done and I might as well give up (.) stage  
 14 and you know 've started to see what I could do  
 15 what I was valuable (.) in the area that I was in  
 16 and I was in America  
 17 I was in LA and New York mostly  
 18 and I'm in I always wanted to either direct or produce movies (.)  
 19 so I you know decided to take some sm crash courses  
 20 following some producers  
 21 and try to learn the game of produ production  
 22 not only did I have time to do some of the things I enjoyed  
 23 uhm some of the things that (.) I dreaded at first  
 24 like . doing my laundry (.)  
 25 or throwing out garbage  
 26 or (.) going to the grocery store (.)  
 27 ehm actually become something that really grounded me  
 28 and really . really gave me a different perspective of life  
 29 because I've been working in the entertainment industry since I was nineteen  
 30 was very young  
 31 ehm I didn't really have a great outlook on life to be honest with you  
 32 I was just out of school .  
 33 stis was like a party you know  
 34 every ding was like a party  
 35 ehm I kind of got accustomed to that life  
 36 where (.) everything was taken care of  
 37 where I thought I was eh a a pretty good person (.)  
 38 where and then I went back  
 39 and I kind of had to do all these things by myself  
 40 and I kind of reflected on the way I treated people  
 41 and (.) the way I saw things  
 42 and I got a a lot more grounded (.)  
 43 and I am thankful for that you know (.)  
 44 I mean everything I believe that everything happens for a reason

Short pauses are marked by (.)

What have you been doing with your days since it happened?

In this segment, Anjali Rao gives Chen the floor with a request to account for what she had qualified in her opening trailer as “hiding and silence” between February 2008 and the here and now at the time of this interview. In line 6 he gives a short and offhand answer: “a lot of things”, followed by laughter, potentially marking it as an opener to be followed up with more detail. And indeed, details follow in lines 16/17: he went to America (Los Angeles and New York), where he took courses and followed producers (lines 18/19), and where he did laundry, took garbage out and

went to grocery stores (lines 24–26). If this forms his core story, the sequence of events that may be report-worthy, the rest of his turn can be segmented into three additional units: (i) how he came to consider leaving Hong Kong (lines 1–14); (ii) the effects of his move to Los Angeles and New York (lines 27–28 and 38–44); and (iii) reflecting back on the time-period during which he had engaged in taking the pictures (embedded between lines 28 and 38).

This, strictly speaking, is exactly what the “small story” concept attempts to capture: Chen’s layout of a skeleton spatiotemporal sequence of action clauses in which he figures as the main character – moving to the USA, trying to learn more of his trade, and engaging in normal, everyday, mundane and boring activities like anyone else. This by no means qualifies as a tellable narrative with a problem, a highpoint and a resolution (cf. our structural part of narrative analysis above). However, in concert with the surrounding segments, it is carefully assembled as a peg for how to navigate his agency/responsibility, his sameness/difference and his change. However, before working through these three dilemmatic identity spaces, let me briefly start with position level I to give a feel for how he himself and other characters are positioned *vis-à-vis* each other. Lines 8–15 serve to mark the decision to leave for Los Angeles and New York; however, not instantaneously. Instead, his move is made possible by and due to support from family and girlfriend – both not insignificant, especially in the cultural context of Asia/Hong Kong. Being able to rely on the continuous trust (“constant support”, line 9) of those who (apparently) know him best, and in addition being in a seemingly stable heterosexual relationship, both serve as promising licence for being trustworthy and honest. No other specific characters are made relevant for the period under consideration, assigning the agency initially to others (family and girlfriend) – for a time in which he presents himself as low in agency and dejected – and enabling him so that he can regain some of his (previous) agency (“started to see what I could do”, line 14) and to make decisions (to go to the USA, lines 16–17) that ultimately result in change.

Change seems to be the central dilemma that is woven into and around Chen’s response to Rao’s question regarding his whereabouts. It serves as the centre for the navigation of agency/responsibility and sameness/difference woven into and around it. The first dimension of change was already mentioned in the analysis of character positioning: Chen claims a change from a low point in his life, the time when he was at the recipient end of the world-to-person direction of fit, with the help of family and girlfriend, towards regaining agency (and responsibility). The second, and more relevant, dimension of change is attributed to the list of activities as leading to a sense of “groundedness” (lines 27 and 42) that is set in stark contrast to an “ungroundedness” during the time before (lines 24–26). Interesting in the characterisation of these times before becoming “more grounded” is that

Chen de-emphasises his own agency: “everything was like a party” – a life to which he “got accustomed”, and “where everything was taken care of”. Note that these phrasings are subjectless and agentless – as if there was no choice for anyone *not* to participate. In this context, two potential master narratives are mobilised: youth as a mitigating factor and the habits coming with celebrity status. We will return to them with our discussion of positioning level III. Chen’s apparent digression before elevating his agency with doing laundry and taking out the garbage, namely that he at first dreaded these activities, but ended up enjoying them (*sic!* – lines 22/23), should not go unnoticed: although viewers of the interview may chuckle at this point, providing specific details of behavioural changes that exemplify some major change in character may serve as a subtle and humble way to (re-)establish trustworthiness.

Agency (as coupled with responsibility) and Chen’s navigation of the two directions of fit has been touched on in the previous paragraphs. To summarise and highlight, his agency, apart from starting to see what he could do (line 14) and deciding to take courses (line 19), (literally) peaked with referring to himself as doing laundry, throwing the garbage out and going to the grocery store (lines 24–26) – and having to do all these things by himself (line 44). If this had been the whole story surfacing in his account of where he had been and what he had done, this small story would have been ineffective. However, his claims to agency become relevant in contrast to the lack of agency during his years before he was caught – effectively accounting for when he took pictures of women which compromised them and destroyed their careers. Thus, constructing his actions – and thereby himself – within the frame of a direction of fit from world to him may come across as an attempt to remove the accountability for his actions from himself and transfer it to the kind of agencies that are “responsible” for what celebrities, especially when young, engage in. Whether or not one believes that Chen actually now enjoys taking out his garbage, his construction of himself as highly agentive when in Los Angeles and New York nevertheless (only) makes sense when heard and viewed in contrast to his construction in retrospect of having no say (no agency) in his actions and activities before he came to the USA. As such, the navigation of the two directions of fit from world to person and person to world in this excerpt is only understandable in the service of intending to bring off an exculpatory identity and re-establish a trustworthy self – one that seemingly had had some kind of currency previously. His final and turn-concluding statement in line 44 (“I mean everything I believe that everything happens for a reason”) seems somewhat uncalled for and surprising: hasn’t he just claimed to have acquired a new agency that is more responsible and morally superior – at least superior to his characterisation of his previous identity – and this arguably with a lot of effort? While this statement may be interpreted as handing back a good deal of his



newly claimed agency to some higher moral “ground”, such as fate or a spiritual determination, his way of navigating the two directions of fit here also may be interpretable as attempting to show a kind of humility, one that his followers and the viewers of this interview would appreciate from someone who is very different from them and whom they look up to, but at the same time someone they adore and identify with – as being just like them.

However, how is this possible? For celebrities (as well as for politicians; cf. Bamberg, 2010), to argue that the person you relied on and trusted – whether by buying their products or voting for them – is no longer the same may run the risk of total fallout. This, however, is where the navigation of sameness versus difference may have to kick in more forcefully and do a trans-fixing job. Being a high-profile celebrity (or politician) makes them different – though in an interesting and dilemmatic way: on the one hand, a high profile is exciting and desirable; and therefore, if navigated well, may lead ordinary folk to align and affiliate themselves; on the other hand, high-profile individuals stand out and are construed as dissimilar, and may be met by ordinary folk with envy, disaffiliation and a certain disalignment. Chen navigates this sort of double dilemma by first aligning his new identity with family values and commitment to his girlfriend, and as such reasserting his not irrelevant heterosexual male identity. His claims to be like everyone else who takes their garbage out (even for those of us who do not), as we discussed above, assert his new identity as settled, mature and humble – in contrast to his former “spoiled celebrity” identity, which is more likely to act irresponsibly and immature. The link between his old and new identity is provided by a folk developmental (and culturally shared) master narrative that constructs adolescents as immature and confused, and not yet fully accountable or responsible for their actions and activities. In addition, although more subtly, he orients towards the master narrative of self-development when he claims to take agency by leaving the location of his wrongdoing, distancing himself in order to engage in learning (lines 19/20) and self-reflection (line 40), which takes him to a new and more humble identity, one that treats people better (line 40). This master narrative calls up a Western model of identity development – where the alternative would have been to submit one’s personal advancement to religious fate or a therapeutic master narrative. In sum, Chen seems to navigate an identity with which ordinary folk, and here probably especially an Asian generation that spans teenagers and emerging adults, can affiliate as different but the same. This required a balancing act that built on traditional values such as family and romantic commitment, as well as being subjected to everyday and mundane shared chores, and finally, the character type of becoming a normal and responsible person – just like (presumably) everyone else – while still remaining distant as a rich (and crazy) Asian celebrity.

## Analysis of Chen's bodily performance cues

My analysis of visual cues, a way to document how bodily cues are woven into what originally had been placed under narrative performance features, will have to be localised and limited. Of the range of bodily cues that typically go along with the performance of storytelling in dyadic interactions, I will focus on three – and on these three only for the first five seconds of Chen's response to Rao's question, covering lines 5/6 of the transcript. The three are gaze, head movement and one intake of breath, plus the coordination between them. The purpose of singling out these three is twofold: first, to give a sense of the complexity of when and how to make bodily performance cues relevant to narrative analysis; and second, to prepare the reader for one of the three exercises offered below in working independently with the same kind of data.

From what we as viewers of the video material online can see in terms of Chen's facial expression, during the time Anjali Rao formulated her question, his gaze was directed towards her face. This is a standard or normal listening position in dyadic interactions – institutional or otherwise. When it comes to his response, Chen averts his gaze, and engages in two full rotations of his head, ending with a smile – and at this point locking back into a mutual gaze with his interviewer. In other words, during the four seconds of rotating his head, his gaze is directed away from his interlocutor. Again, starting a new turn by averting one's gaze is standard/normal, and this has been theorised as doing cognitive, expressive and interactive work – such as engaging in collecting one's thoughts, lessening the tightened emotional attentiveness *vis-à-vis* the interlocutor, and just simply signalling that the turn-taking signals have been read correctly: *it is now my turn*. In addition, it should be noted that it would be hard, if not impossible, to engage in head rotation while keeping one's gaze fixed on the co-conversationalist. Thus, Chen's aversion of gaze in these seconds requires to be interpreted as part of a bodily move that comes across as not only shifting posture into a new turn, but also simultaneously shifting the bodily resonance between speaker and audience/viewer. While labelling this type of move as a “squirming” gesture may spring to mind, it definitely signals a certain uneasiness or discomfort, and this before an answer has been formulated. Marking off his exhaling in line 5 – before his answer in line 6 – is due to the fact that Chen makes it visibly hearable – unlike any other time when he inhales or exhales. Upon closer inspection of how and where he exhales, however, it should be noted that it occurs at the end of his first head rotation, followed by turning his gaze downwards, a communicative gesture one would not necessarily expect. Rather, a speaker, when given the floor for an extended turn, is more likely to start by inhaling – potentially with an upward gaze as a thinking gesture. Here, however, the packaging of gaze, head movement and exhaling

comes across as signalling a decrease in force or power, and as such an unassertive and deferential turn initiation.

Chen's laughter following the second rotation of his head fits the typical case of an evaluative response to line 6 ('ve been doing a lot of things'), performing it as a "fake" laughter (Haakama, 2012) and marking it thereby as an incomplete or failed answer – as something that may be in need of further repair, which we explicated above. However, in this particular case, and in line with his bodily performance of what could be called *doing being uneasy*, coupled with a deferential manner, his laughter orients his audience/viewer to the delicacy of the overall particular interactional context – as loaded with the ambiguity of, on the one hand, intending to be forthcoming and, on the other, being uncomfortable and not knowing how to. In our summary of working through both verbal and bodily displays to which we will turn next, we will return to the navigation of the three dilemmatic spaces and how this may contribute (or not) to what we called above the display of authenticity (doing being authentic).

### Analytic considerations

Opening with a brief analysis of the textual segments of the excerpt under examination and of how Chen constructed the characters in his narrative in positions *vis-à-vis* one another (positioning level I), we deepened the analysis by moving into the construction of how he (as speaker/interlocutor in the interview situation) navigated himself as character in the story through three dilemmatic positional spaces. We identified his navigation of constancy and change as his major communicative goal (becoming *the new Edison*), being sustained by gaining a new agency (reorganising the direction of fit) and a new "sameness character" (in the sense of becoming a more ordinary, everyday, and as such more relatable person). While in the excerpt analysed here he did not explicitly address any wrongdoing, it nevertheless received coverage covertly: he can be heard arguing that the act of wrongdoing was committed when his agency – and as such responsibility – had been diminished. He claims to have changed and realigned his new identity with those who in the past already had been fans, followers, consumers of his products, and thereby may be viewed as successfully navigating a continuity between past, present and future. In our analysis thus far, we occasionally incorporated aspects of positioning levels II and III, to which we will briefly return as analytic dimensions for the purpose of narrative identity analysis.

As laid out above, narrators navigate the interactional territory (positioning level II), and in doing so draw on different kinds of background assumptions (master narratives – level III) – bringing off a sense of how they intend to come across (communicative intent), and in turn practising their answer to the who-am-I question

(engaging in identity practices). Here, in the segment under consideration, Chen navigates the interactional territory between him and Anjali Rao – and simultaneously the viewership of *Talk Asia* – as a space between empathy and admiration: empathy for someone who had fallen from a pedestal; and admiration for someone who is able to pull himself up again (with a little initial help from family and partner). He makes good use of the interview giving him space to explore the confessional (Sunday) territory to interrogate the redemptive self as a master narrative for the purpose of giving a lesson in how to navigate self-management and renewal. The redemptive self, originally claimed to be a master narrative for American identity renewal (cf. McAdams, 2006), built here on the underlying assumption that “everything happens for a reason” (line 44), which ultimately makes us a better person, is a close to perfect narrative to navigate this fine line between interlocutor/audience sympathy and admiration. In his attempts to bring off the redemptive self, it is noteworthy that Chen relies on other background (master) narratives already mentioned in our analysis above. One is the widely shared cultural assumption that adolescents are unruly and immature, and that their developmental trajectory ultimately may take them to more mature actions and activities. Another master narrative Chen employs is that distance and (self-)reflection lead to a better and higher moral ground – in his case being physically away from Hong Kong, and reflecting on what it means to take your garbage out, resulting in a more positive self-evaluation and catharsis. Finally, claiming celebrity status by “working in the entertainment industry” (line 29), he calls upon the master narrative of a larger range of moral freedom for those *in the limelight*.

## Conclusion/outlook

The above demonstration of how to apply the resources that were made available for analysing storytelling practices in the first parts of this chapter has zoomed in on one small story, and attempted to work this story “to the bone”. In essence, I demonstrated how to identify Chen’s core story – going to the USA and taking his garbage out – and, working up from there, the positioning work that he performed visually and ostensibly, as well as by way of navigating his three identity dilemmas, and how this formed the core of narrative analysis. The following link provides access to three more segments from the same interview (including the transcripts) to implement or practise, for instance in the form of a class exercise, the kind of narrative analysis demonstrated in this chapter: <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/mbamberg/classes/>

In sum, the resources made available in the first parts of this chapter build on traditional narrative analytic procedures that will be laid out in more detail in the

next chapter, namely thematic, structural and dyadic-performative approaches to narrative analysis. Adding a fourth approach, namely the analysis of visual-performative narrative analysis, and attempting to integrate all four into an overall integrative approach to narrative analysis, earmarks the essential quality and strength of the narrative practice approach. As such, the narrative practice approach aims to overcome the methodological pluralism of earlier days of narrative analysis as an arena of methodological approaches that all share a commitment to qualitative inquiry. To clarify, my attempt to bring together and integrate should not be misunderstood as imperative or (even worse) complete and exclusive. Rather, readers may be able to isolate certain analytic procedures and apply them to their work with narrative (practices). Still, it may be easier to realise the limitations of different analytic approaches when we have ways to see them in relation to each other – in their overall attempt to assist our qualitative endeavours. However, I would like to add by way of a warning that narrative analysis requires a clear delineation of the unit of analysis – in the sense of what is the analytic focus, and why narrative. Whether we as qualitative researchers claim to be studying experience or memories, or whether we claim to be studying accounts or justifications, if our work centres on – or attempts to make use of – narratives, a clarification of our analytic focus on narrative, and a justification for why narrative, both have to accompany our interpretive undertaking.

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### Key concepts

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**Identity dilemma navigation** Identities are constructions of characters in three dilemmatic spaces that require careful navigating: being different, similar or the same in relation to other characters; characters as in control versus being the product of forces that control their actions; and constancy (i.e. staying the same over time), as against having changed. These spaces are dilemmatic, because narrators have choices; and these choices are analysable in their storytelling interactions.

**Identity/identity analysis** Identity is a second-order theoretical construct, implying that identities (plural – as first-order concepts) are constructed and continuously reconstructed in everyday interactive processes. The term *identities* is used to enable the empirical investigation of how people and organisations are able to gain a sense of self, and give answers to the who-am-I question – engaging interactively in identity work.

**Narrative/story** Narratives/stories are interactional discourse units; texts, interviews, conversations, arguments, route descriptions and recipes are not. What distinguishes stories/narratives from other discourse units is their temporal contour in which characters are constructed as navigating identity dilemmas.

**Positioning/positioning analysis** Positioning in discourse/interaction presupposes agentive speakers (narrators) who position a sense of who they are at three analytic (empirical) levels in their storytelling interactions: how they position story characters *vis-à-vis* one another; how they position themselves *vis-à-vis* their audience; and how they attend to dominant discourses (master narratives) and thereby convey a sense of self.

## Further readings/viewings

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# 13

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: THEMATIC, STRUCTURAL AND PERFORMATIVE

Tea Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ditte Andersen

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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The case: Celia's story	267
The three approaches	267
Interview excerpt	268
Thematic analysis: what is Celia's story about?	270
Structural analysis: how does Celia organise her story?	272
Performative analysis: in what context does Celia present her story?	275
Conclusion	277
Key concepts	279
Further reading	280
References	280

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Narrative analysis considers how people select, organise and connect events and characters in stories. This chapter presents three types of approaches to narrative analysis – thematic, structural and performative – corresponding to the categories devised by the American sociologist Catherine Riessman (2008; see also Chapter 12, this volume). A *thematic* narrative analysis focuses on the content of the story, on “what” is being told (2008: 53). The story is maintained as a whole and interpreted via themes identified by the researcher. A *structural* narrative analysis focuses on the components of the story and studies “how” the narrative is conveyed (ibid.: 77). The emphasis is on how different elements are used to construct the narrative – in other words, on the narrative’s “rules”, which play an important role in linking events and creating meaning for the audience. A *performative* narrative analysis focuses on the meaning of the context – it asks “who” the story is for, and “when”, “why”, and “for what purpose” it is told (ibid.: 105). This is a broad approach to analysing narratives, and it draws on elements from both the thematic and structural analyses, but adds dimensions by including how the narrative emerges in the interaction between the storyteller and the listener. The chapter illustrates these three approaches by applying them to a step-by-step analysis of a qualitative interview.

Other types of narrative analysis may be more appropriate for analysing other types of data (Stanley and Temple, 2008); for example, narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008) may be useful for an analysis of observation material (Andersen, 2015). Narrative analyses can also be conducted on documents (Sandberg, 2013) and images (Esin and Squire, 2013).

In general, narratives link events and characters around a plot (Labov, 1972, 2010; Labov and Waletzky, 1997). As a rule, the plot is the focal point that one event is linked logically to and causally explains another one (I was sick because I drank too much). The plot determines which events are relevant to include, as well as the nature of the characters (nice, funny, evil, etc.). The classic story has a beginning, a middle and an end, and often includes normative points; that is, points that are not value-neutral but have a moral that makes some actions problematic, while others are good and desirable (Sarbin, 1986). As such, narratives serve an important social function by helping to determine how humans understand themselves, each other, their opportunities and their place in the world (McAdams, 1993; Frank, 2010, see also Chapter 12, this volume).

A range of disciplines and studies make use of narrative analyses. Thomson et al. (2002) employ them to study narratives of transition, explaining how young people make sense of their lives by looking at where they have come from and where they are going. Griffin et al. (2009) use them to study social and cultural practices; for example, how drinking stories produce insights into the normalised alcohol culture so central to many young people’s social lives in Britain. Langellier and Peterson

(2011) demonstrate how narrative analyses can provide unique insights into small and often mundane aspects of everyday life (e.g. family storytelling around the dinner table). By contrast, Roy (2008) demonstrates how powerful narratives play a dramatic role in the recruitment of young suicide bombers in Britain and Europe. In short, narrative analysis is a highly useful tool for studying how people of all ages produce meaning (Phoenix et al., 2010) and for providing new insights into different spheres of the social world (see also Chapter 12, this volume).

In this chapter, we start by introducing the empirical case (an interview with a young woman) and the three approaches to narrative analysis (thematic, structural and performative). This is followed by an excerpt from the interview and three analyses, illustrating the three approaches in practice. The chapter ends with a discussion of the knowledge generated by the three different approaches to narrative analyses, as well as how they complement each other.

### The case: Celia's story

The case stems from a research project on risk-taking practices among vulnerable young people. The researchers interviewed 17–19-year-olds who had been in care and had a history of drug or alcohol abuse, crime or self-harm. The project was designed to generate knowledge about how young people experience their day-to-day lives and the meaning they assign to their risk-taking practises.

The empirical case consists of an excerpt from an interview with 17-year-old Celia, sharing her experiences of self-harm and life in out-of-home care. The interview was structured around open-ended questions to let her tell her story and talk about what she found important. It was recorded on a mobile phone, transcribed and anonymised (names of people and places were changed). Furthermore, all facts deemed irrelevant to the analysis were expunged or changed.

### The three approaches

As mentioned, our analysis of the interview uses three approaches: thematic, structural and performative (Riessman, 2008). The *thematic* analysis looks at Celia's story as a whole and studies its meaning via the themes she opts to include. The overarching question is: what is Celia's story about? The *structural* analysis looks at the distinct parts of the story and how they are assembled into a narrative. The overarching question is: how does Celia organise her story? The *performative* analysis looks at the context for the story and at how both the interview situation and the broader social context lead to specific opportunities and limitations.

The three approaches generate different types of knowledge about how Celia understands her self-harm, the care she receives and her social relationships, as well as new knowledge about the prevailing social conditions that constitute the setting and context of her story. The three approaches are not mutually exclusive, but elucidate different aspects of Celia's narrative, and enhance our understanding of her perspective. The approaches also draw on other analytical traditions, discussed in other chapters of this book. For example, the thematic approach has multiple parallels with the hermeneutic tradition presented in Chapters 6 and 7, while the performative approach draws on the interactionist tradition presented in Chapters 2 and 3. However, irrespective of the other traditions upon which the approaches presented here draw, the narrative remains the primary analytical focus in this chapter.

### Interview excerpt

The excerpt (Table 13.1) is from the start of the interview and has been translated from Danish into English. The lines are numbered (left-hand column) to make it easy to refer to specific parts of the text. The right-hand column lists the narrative elements on which the structural analysis is based (readers may ignore them at this stage). The codes and line numbers used during the analysis are not usually included in the final text. The analysis of the interview starts with a meticulous reading and a decision on which of the three approach to adopt first. No matter which approach or combination of approaches is chosen, the analysis is based on repeated reading and is a cyclical process that leads to new insights.

Table 13.1 Transcript section of interview with Celia

1	C: Okay, should I just start from the beginning?	
2	I: Yes, start wherever you would like to.	
3	C: I started being ill when I was 8. My mum has been an alcoholic for all	AB1
4	of my life. And I've had difficulties in school, I haven't had many friends.	OR1
5	When I was 11, I started to cut myself. And then I got into a lot of	
6	problems with drugs, bad friends and the like.	
7	I: Did you live with your mum when you were 8?	
8	C: Mmm-hmm [confirmative], and the drug thing, I was about 12–13.	
9	I: Okay. Were you living at home?	
10	C: Yeah, I didn't move out until I was 13. I was put in a residential home.	
11	I drank too much and smoked hash. One time, they had to call the doctor,	CP1
12	who came and looked at me. I was contacted by my own GP the next day,	
13	who referred me to the consultative team in Esbjerg, and then I was put in	RE1

14	hospital, in an open ward. I was there for seven weeks and my self-	EV1
15	harming reduced. There were others who cut themselves, and I learned a	
16	bit from that – I thought it was a bit cool that I wasn't the only one cutting	
17	and had people I could talk to. I was there for seven weeks and then I went	
18	to Odense. That was because after the seven weeks I had run away with	CP2
19	another patient. We had gone to Esbjerg, where we got drunk and were	
20	caught on the train without tickets. In the station, I had been so drunk and	EV2
21	stupid that I jumped out in front of a train. I was 15 at the time. I was	OR2
22	pulled back up again before the train arrived. I was really close to being	
23	hit.	
24	I: And were the police called?	
25	C: Mmm-hmm [confirmative]. I was taken back to the ward. A few days	OR3
26	later I was moved to the secure unit. I developed an eating disorder and	CP3
27	lost 12 kilos in the seven weeks I spent there.	
28	I: Oh my!	
29	C: Then I was sent to a home called The Green House, where I lived for	OR4
30	eight months. I was still self-harming a lot, drinking a lot and smoking a	CP4
31	lot of cannabis. Lots of it. But I didn't go to many parties, it was more with	
32	the others who lived there. I was in and out of hospital – the psychiatric	
33	hospital – because I swallowed some pills and did various other things. I	
34	realised that I couldn't stay there. I was self-harming so much that I	EV4
35	needed more support. So I moved into a place 50 metres from The Green	
36	House, to a place called The Hill – where I still live. After I moved there, I	
37	was referred to a place called Department 18, a secure psychiatric unit for	RE4
38	young people. Everyone there has been referred, and I have been there	
39	really, really often. When I moved to The Hill, the self-harming got far	CP5
40	worse, and I started to need a lot of stitches.	
41	I: What?	
42	C: Because I was cutting myself, I needed a lot of stitches. I've lost count	
43	of how often I've been to A&E, and during the first six months [at The	
44	Hill] it was almost every day. I was in hospital many, many times – just	
45	constantly in and out. I was hospitalised, I wasn't in the residential home	
46	[The Hill] for even two weeks in a row. I'd manage maybe 10 days before	
47	I was sent back to hospital because I felt so bad. I've lived there [at The	
48	Hill] for three years now, and I'm moving out on Tuesday. To a residential	
49	home for adults.	
50	I: And how do you feel about that?	
51	C: Great. I can get on with my life. I've moved around so much. [...] I	
52	haven't had a normal life. Because my family – they've not [...] I've	
53	always had a really good relationship with my gran, but she's a bit scared	
54	of me, I think [...] I've actually – 37 days ago – as of today, I've taken no	
55	drugs for 37 days.	
56	I: Well done.	

(Continued)

Table 13.1 (Continued)

57	C: Thanks. I'm really pleased. I'd started to have an amphetamine and	
58	coke problem, a bad one. And I've been going to a place called	
59	Birchwood, an addiction centre, where they've tried to help me. [...] My	
60	family, my gran at least, has always liked me. I've always been her girl,	
61	even though there are four of us – I've got a sister and two brothers – plus	
62	my mum. We don't see my dad. [...] My mum was always drunk, but my	
63	gran has always been there for me. But I think she's a bit scared of me	
64	now because of all the self-harm and the drugs, and I've been very	
65	unpredictable. Also, she can't be alone with me. It's kind of ruined our	
66	relationship. My brothers have done stuff with my mum and gran [...] I	
67	just ruin things, ruin things for them. But actually, I've felt good for two	CO1
68	months now, and haven't self-harmed at all. I haven't cut my arms for two	
69	years.	
70	I: It's great that you've stopped that.	

### Thematic analysis: what is Celia's story about?

Celia's story is based on events and characters she chooses and assembles into a dramatic and (mostly) coherent narrative. According to the sociolinguist William Labov (2010), the person telling a story always has to decide: "Where should I start?" The obvious answer is "at the beginning" – and Celia asks the interviewer whether she should do just that. However, it is always possible to start at more than one place, and so her choice of beginning defines what the story will be about. Before the interview, Celia received a letter containing information about the research project on self-harm and life in care. This could be interpreted as a trigger that suggested themes and provided a framework for her to fill out during the interview. She starts her story with: "I started being ill when I was 8. My mum has been an alcoholic for all of my life." Her words introduce two themes: illness understood as self-harm, and her mother's neglect due to problems with alcohol.

One well-known story structure is to have a beginning, middle and end, all advancing a central plot (Sarbin, 1986). Celia's introduction of the two themes of "illness" and "neglect" is used to make a coherent narrative; her beginning (with the presentation of the themes) is linked to the middle (how did illness and neglect develop and manifest themselves?) and an outline of the end of the story (how is she doing today?). Attention is paid to "what" is said, rather than "how" or "for what purpose", and the two themes in Cecilia's story are therefore primarily analysed as part of her biographical account, rather than the interview conversation (Riessman, 2008).

The first theme (illness) develops as part of a relatively straightforward plot. At the beginning, Celia becomes ill. This is followed by a middle, describing repeated admissions to hospital and treatments, and an end, describing how she feels now on her way to recovery. The second theme (neglect) is more complicated. Celia explains that her mother has been an alcoholic all of Celia's life. In a sense, this makes her birth the beginning. During the middle of the story, Celia is taken into care, which she says she found really hard. From line 62 onwards, she extends the theme of neglect to include her relationship with her maternal grandmother, comparing her to her mother: "My mum was always drunk, but my gran has always been there for me." However, Celia also tells us that her self-harm has at least partly "ruined" the relationship with her grandmother (line 65). The end of this theme is left rather open. On the one hand, Celia indicates that her mother has let her down while she herself has let her grandmother down, and that relationships within the family *have* been destroyed. On the other hand, the end also leaves open the possibility of reconciliation and a hope of better family relationships: "I just ruin things, ruin things for them [mother, grandmother, siblings]. But actually, I've felt good for two months now, and haven't self-harmed at all" (lines 66–69).

Thematic analyses usually keep the story intact and therefore often address a single case (interview) at a time. This makes it possible to maintain the sequence of events throughout the story and preserve its uniqueness. The next step may be to link the individual story and the themes identified to other interviews or sources, such as previous research on the themes, and possibly create a thematic typology across interviews.

Hence, one approach to linking Celia's story to those of other disadvantaged young people would be to study all the interviews in the project, to identify recurring themes, and look at the similarities and differences between themes across narratives. In this project, narratives about the correlation between self-harm, mental illness and child neglect recur in other interviews. Some of the young people link mental illness and neglect more directly than Celia. For example, 19-years-old Line says: "I'm borderline, it's because [...] if you don't get a decent upbringing and you don't get enough care when you're really small, that's why you become borderline."

Another way to continue with the narrative analysis would be to relate Celia's story to personal narratives in other research (e.g. studies of illness narratives). The long tradition of narrative analyses of illness stories shows that serious illness disturbs our sense of who we are and where we are heading (Frank, 1995: 53ff.). Illness narratives enable us to both rediscover ourselves and our direction in life and tell the rest of the world what is happening to us and what help we need (Bury, 1982, 2001; Hydén, 1997; Thomas, 2010; see also Chapter 10, this volume).

For Celia, her illness is central in making her actions meaningful, and it acts in her narrative as the key justification of her actions.

To develop the analysis of the neglect theme, it might be valuable to view it in the perspective of studies of “victim narratives”: a form of narrative which the sociologist Donileen Loseke (2003, 2007) has identified as well-established contemporary “formula stories”. For the storyteller, the consequences of such narratives are sometimes ambiguous – victim narratives may mobilise the help the storyteller needs, but they may also be difficult to reconcile with more amiable self-presentations, featuring a strong and proactive individual (see, for example, Holstein and Miller, 1990; Järvinen, 2001, 2004; Davis, 2005; Sandberg, 2009). Celia presents herself as a victim of neglect at the beginning of the narrative and conveys an impression of long-term, unmet needs for care. At the same time, she is not actively seeking empathy from the interviewer and therefore her story does not appear as a classical victim narrative.

Even the most uniquely personal story is likely to draw on collective cultural “formula stories” (cf. Loseke, 2007) building on universal elements that make the story recognisable and understandable (as well as sociologically interesting). Celia draws on certain cultural references (e.g. the understanding of self-harm as an illness), while other young people draw on the same cultural references, but possibly in different ways (e.g. rejecting the idea that self-harm is an illness). This illustrates how the story and themes within the story are positioned in the socio-cultural context and how young self-harmers attribute meaning to their practices in different ways (Curtis, 2016). The thematic narratives thus represent and draw on recognisable rules and norms in our collective cultural universe and represent something greater than the sum of individual experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012).

### Structural analysis: how does Celia organise her story?

A structural analysis examines the way a story is organised and focuses on narrative elements and characters. The point is to illustrate how the narrator uses these elements to create a meaningful story.

William Labov (1972) devised the most widely used system for analysing narrative elements. His work on systematic sociolinguistic analyses led him to conclude that fully developed narratives consist of the following structural elements: (a) an abstract (AB) that briefly summarises the story; (b) an orientation (OR) indicating the time, place, situation and participants; (c) a complication (CP), which describes a problem, crisis or turning point; (d) an evaluation (EV), in which the narrator steps forward from the unfolding events to comment on the meaning of

the story and the emotions involved; (e) a resolution (RE) describing the outcome of the complication; and (f) a coda (CO), which is a conclusion that returns the narrator to the present. In Table 13.1, Celia's story has been coded according to these categories. Here, we outline the considerations behind the coding applied to the first part of the transcript. Structural coding is an in-depth process involving extensive references to the original text, and we do not have space here to review the coding for the whole excerpt.

The individual narrative elements may overlap and, based on the research interest and research questions, the researcher decides how to code a statement. Celia begins her story with an abstract (AB1), declaring that she became ill at the age of 8 and that her mother has been an alcoholic for the whole of Celia's life. She then provides further information about her school, friends and self-harm. We code this information as an orientation (OR1), based on readings of the whole transcript, which reveal that she often talks about her problematic situation in general terms before presenting specific examples. In other words, elements are not coded in isolation, but on the basis of our evaluation of their function as part of the whole story. A statement like "and then I got into a lot of problems with drugs" could be coded as a complication. However, we code it as a general orientation (OR1) in the light of her subsequent descriptions of further complications.

We also use the general orientation code when Celia talks about being taken into care aged 13, leading to her description of the first complication (CP1): "I drank too much and smoked hash." Unlike the general orientation that she "got into a lot of problems with drugs", Celia is here talking about a specific complication, the outcome of which (the resolution) is hospitalisation (RE1). After this, she takes a step back to reflect. She evaluates (EV1) that while in the open unit, her "self-harming reduced" and that she "learned a bit from that" because she found a community where she could talk about her problems.

Immediately after this, Celia describes the next complication (CP2): she ran away to Esbjerg with another patient from the ward, they got drunk and she jumped in front of a train. Her short evaluation is that she was "drunk and stupid" (EV2) and she informs the interviewer that she "was 15 at the time" (OR2). The place and situation then change. She is sent to a secure unit (OR3), where a third complication arises (CP3): she develops an eating disorder and loses 12 kilos in seven weeks. Her circumstances then change again, as she is sent to live in a home called The Green House (OR4), which results in new complications (CP4). Along with the other residents, she was "drinking a lot" and "smoking a lot of cannabis", she "swallowed some pills" and was "in and out" of the psychiatric unit. At this point in the narrative, Celia briefly steps back from events to comment that "they" (the context suggests she is referring to the staff at the residential home) realised that she had to go because of her "self-harming" (EV4). The resolution to



these complications (CP4) was to move her to another residential home (The Hill), and then to a secure psychiatric youth unit (RE4).

The sub-story about the move to The Hill exemplifies the classical pattern for a sequence of narrative elements. Celia continually informs about time and place, refers to complications, and evaluates and describes solutions. In direct extension of this sub-story, she begins to describe a new set of surprising complications (CP5): "When I moved to The Hill, the self-harming got far worse, and I started to need a lot of stitches." Structurally speaking, this is a surprising turn because The Hill had been narrated as the resolution to the shortcomings of the previous residential home. This is reflected in the interviewer asking: "What?" Narrative conventions predispose us to expect that the description of a complication will be followed by the description of an improvement (a resolution). Celia's assertion that she got "worse" (CP5) at The Hill is the exact opposite of what the interviewer expects because it breaks with the conventional narrative structure in which the resolution presented actually *is* a resolution.

The subsequent series of narrative elements relate to Celia's time at The Hill and her family. For reasons of space, we will not analyse these elements in greater depth. The interview excerpt ends with a short coda (CO1) that returns the story to the present, where she says she feels better now.

Such detailed coding facilitates closer analysis of the pattern of the narrative elements. In Celia's story, it reveals two particularly interesting aspects. Firstly, it is noticeable how much time she spends on complications compared to orientations, resolutions and evaluations. In a fully fledged narrative, these elements would be expected to be linked (Labov, 1972), but in Celia's story not all complications are linked to a resolution and evaluation. Secondly, it is interesting that the resolutions she describes are replaced by new complications, which override the effects of the resolutions, even to the extent that they no longer appear to be resolutions at all. The stay in the open psychiatric unit, for example, appears to be a resolution (RE1) to the first complication (CP1). Celia says that her self-harm was reduced at the unit and that she met other young people to whom she could relate. However, she then goes on to describe a course of events that end with her jumping out in front of a train and almost being killed (CP2). It is unclear how these events are related to the fact that she says that she feels better, which fragments the structure of the interview. This makes parts of her story sound inconsistent to the listener (the interviewer). Celia's descriptions are reminiscent of what Frank (1995) calls a "chaos narrative". The common characteristic for chaos narratives is a syntactic structure in which the narrator tells us that "X happens", and "then Y happens" without it being clear how X and Y are linked (Frank, 1995: 99). This lack of coherence leaves an overall impression of things just happening at random in Celia's life. There may be a sequence of events, but there is no clearly explained context.

When it comes to the structural analysis of characters, narrative analyses usually draw on the folklorist Vladimir Propp's (1968) prototypes, which are based on systematic analyses of Russian folk tales. It is not just fairy tales that have heroes, villains, helpers, false heroes and princesses, but stories in general. Nor are characters always people – phenomena count, too. In Celia's story, illness can be seen as a villain that the hero (Celia) has to fight. The princess (what Celia aspires to) is freedom from illness as well as family reconciliation. However, the story lacks a clear helper. Despite multiple points of contact with the social welfare system, it is not clear whether any of them serve as helpers in Celia's life. For example, she describes complications related to her eating disorder and losing 12 kilos while in a secure psychiatric unit. Celia presents the unit as the place where complications develop, rather than a place where she meets professional helpers. She also describes the addiction centre as a place where "they've tried" to help, rather than somewhere where she actually received the help she needed. Her grandmother also appears as a character who would like to help but who is unable to do so. Consequently, Celia portrays herself as a character with no clear helpers.

### Performative analysis: in what context does Celia present her story?

The performative analysis looks at the context for Celia's story. This approach to narrative analysis draws on symbolic interactionism (see Chapters 2 and 3), which focuses on how narratives are created and assigned meaning in the interaction with other people in a given social context. "Stories don't fall from the sky" (Riessman, 2008: 105) but are performed, composed and received in contexts. Erving Goffman's well-known dramaturgical metaphor is often used to analyse how social actors stage performances of desirable selves (Goffman, 1990). What constitutes the relevant and possible contexts for successful performances of narrative identity is bound to time and space. A distinction can be made between an immediate context (e.g. the interview situation, where Celia tells her story in a particular place and at a particular time) and a social context (where a further distinction can be made between a specific context, such as the social welfare system, and the wider historical and socio-cultural context). A performative analysis can show how changing from the immediate context to the broader context aids deeper understanding and brings previously hidden nuances to the fore.

The starting-point for the performative analysis is the immediate interview situation. The information letter Celia received before the interview, which focused on her time in out-of-home care and self-harm, sets the context of the interview by inviting her to convey her experiences with these topics. Her experiences are

addressed from the outset as important social problems, which may lead Celia and the interviewer to expect that she will explain them both to herself and to the interviewer. Celia tells her story in such a way that the interviewer understands that being taken into care and self-harm were not her active choices (cf. the “accounting” concept introduced in Chapter 2). On the contrary, she describes an unusually difficult life, which explains her dramatic experiences of care and self-harm in a way that seems culturally understandable and legitimate. Celia’s story presents her as decent (Goffman, 1969), and her “performance” helps her not to lose face in the interview situation (Goffman, 1955), even though the story is also about her experience of letting her family down.

Looking at how the information letter serves as one context for the interview, it is clear that the immediate context is linked to broader historical and socio-cultural contexts, and that these have an impact on expectations of what must be explained and what is self-explanatory. In a performative analysis, it can therefore be interesting to look at what the interviewee does *not* explain (Hilario et al., 2018). The interview with Celia implies an underlying understanding of the emotional and physical pain caused by self-harm and neglect, upon which she does not need to expand. This does not mean that she is incapable of incorporating pain into her story – she may have omitted the theme deliberately to avoid reliving traumatic events (De Haene et al., 2010).

The immediate context can also be valuable as a means of illustrating how the interviewer actively participates in both the production and the ongoing interpretation of the narrative (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The researcher’s questions, interjections and interest shape Celia’s narrative (Valentine, 2007). At the start of the interview, the researcher asks more than once whether Celia was living at home at the time, and this shapes Celia’s reply and story. In the narrative analysis, the interviewer’s role and questions should not be concealed from the reader. One way of avoiding this is to include the interviewer’s questions and comments about the situation in the final text. However, it is important only to include relevant information that has informed the process, as too much detail will make the analysis less coherent. In the interview with Celia, it is relevant to include the researcher’s surprised interjection, as it illustrates that Celia’s tale is dramatic and not what the interviewer expected. On the other hand, it would be irrelevant to describe what she and the researcher are wearing, although this information might be relevant in other types of analysis.

The immediate interview context also includes the café where Celia wanted the interview to take place. When analysing the significance of this context for the interview, it is worth noting that she is talking openly in a semi-public venue about personal relationships, even about an attempted suicide, matters usually considered intensely private under prevailing socio-cultural norms. One explanation

for this may be that she is accustomed to telling her story to many different people and does not consider it private in the sense of being reserved for intimate and confidential spheres. This explanation is reinforced by the substance of her story, which indicates that she is used to talking about herself and her problems with people (professionals) in multiple contexts.

In the performative analysis, we do not solely consider the immediate context of the interview (the café) but also the wider context, such as Celia's long-term experiences with social workers and health-care professionals. In general, these welfare systems work on the assumption that a need for help will be identified via dialogue and descriptions of problems and solutions. As a result, Celia's story is influenced by the welfare systems' understanding of what constitutes a legitimate story (e.g. about illness and neglect). In short, she is used to complying with certain expectations about how to tell her story, and these expectations also frame the interview.

Inspired by Bakhtin (1981), a performative analysis can also involve analysing voices present in the story. Concepts such as illness, alcoholism, self-harm and psychiatry can be seen as ideological concepts that bring certain meanings into play – meanings that are not only controlled by Celia, but also closely interwoven with social perceptions. For example, the analysis could pursue how the concept of psychiatry is linked to ideological notions of individual responsabilisation of illness and problems, and therefore also linked to individualised diagnoses and treatment. As such, the performative analytical approach opens up the insight that neither stories, nor the interpretation of them, are predetermined but depend on the context of the interview and how it informs the analysis.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how narrative analysis can be conducted on the basis of Riessman's (2008) three approaches: thematic, structural and performative. It has shown how an interview can be analysed in different ways, depending on the approach best matching the research interest. The thematic analysis reveals what the story is about, the structural analysis sheds light on how the narrators organise their story, and the performative analysis focuses on how the context influences the way in which the story is presented. The three types of analysis should not be seen as being mutually exclusive – in practice, they overlap. Often, depending on one's research question, one of the approaches will be foregrounded. However, it can always be useful to see if the other approaches may provide relevant new insights that the chosen approach missed.

Based on our analysis of the interview excerpt with Celia, the three approaches together provide insight into how she relates to and understands her troubled

and dramatic life. The three analyses, in different ways, provide knowledge about her experience of illness and neglect, and about her encounters with the Danish welfare system. However, in writing up the findings one must choose, depending on the research question, what findings from the analysis are relevant to include. Combining all three approaches equally, across a number of qualitative interviews, will seldom be possible or needed and can lead to lengthy and unfocused texts.

The thematic analysis in this chapter shows how themes of illness and neglect recur throughout Celia's story, and how she relates to and understands her life. Here the focus is on how mental illness, self-harm and abuse are presented as external factors influencing her life, while her current problematic family relationships are presented as originating from her and her own actions. Celia accepts blame when she says that she "just ruins things" for her family. However, this acceptance does not stand alone, because at the start of the interview she introduces her mother's alcoholism as a cause of neglect and her current problems. A family pattern of recurrent neglect emerges; the mother has failed Celia, and Celia has failed her grandmother. Thematic analyses can therefore show how and when narrators make themselves morally responsible for problems, and when they describe their problems as inflicted on them (see Järvinen, 2001). This makes it possible to analyse not only how Celia holds herself morally responsible but also how the different themes of her story relate to the increased individualisation of social problems in contemporary society. Celia's story can be related to existing research showing how vulnerable young people, even in highly marginalised social positions, often hold themselves morally responsible for their difficulties, and how this serves as a barrier to receiving professional help (MacLean et al., 2013).

The structural analysis shows that Celia's story has both a recognisable narrative structure and elements of chaos, and that what she presents as solutions often lead to new complications. The lack of clear causal links indicates that the experiences have been overwhelming and that it is still unclear (to Celia and the interviewer) why one complication is continually replaced by another. The findings of the structural analysis can also be set in perspective by the inclusion of other research describing patterns of subjective experiences of chaos (X happened, then Y, without it being clear how and why X led to Y). This literature on chaos narratives interprets the lack of syntactic structure or causal links as an indication that the narrator lacks control over her own life (Frank, 1995). The structural analysis also provides an insight into how young people like Celia, who have had multiple points of contact with the welfare system, feel that the system has (or has not) resolved the complications in their lives. The people who appear to have helped Celia are not the welfare professionals but her family and other self-harming young people. She only refers to the staff of psychiatric wards and the residential homes impersonally, as an anonymous "they". The value of this analysis

is that it generates insight into how some vulnerable young people experience the world as devoid of (professional) helpers, despite the fact that they have access to the interventions and support of a comprehensive welfare system.

The performative analysis shows that Celia's story is embedded in, and influenced by, a variety of different contexts. The story unfolds within the interview framework where the focus from the beginning is on her self-harm and care experiences. Another important context for her narrative is her encounters with, and experience of, various parts of the Danish welfare system. The value of the performative analysis lies in its ability to reflect how different contexts shape the story.

The three analyses of Celia's narrative in different ways give voice to a young woman, and link her story to wider social and cultural contexts. Narrative analysis shows how stories, despite their often intensely personal nature, are social and cultural constructions. Narratives are found everywhere, not just in interviews. We all use them to show who we are. Narratives are not just used by individuals, but also by organisations and nations in order to create images of what they (wish to) represent. Narrative analysis therefore provides ample opportunity to identify narratives at any level, in a range of contexts, and in different kinds of qualitative material.

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### Key concepts

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**Genres** A genre indicates what type of plot a story has. The most common distinction of genres recognises four main genres. Plots within the comical genre describe regular people, who seek temporal joys and want to avoid pain. Plots within the romantic genre describe extraordinary people, who heroically fight great challenges. Plots within the ironic genre describe regular people, who meet meaningless conditions in a chaotic world. Plots within the tragic genre describe extraordinary people, who are overwhelmed by devastating events that they, in spite of their personal qualities, cannot overcome.

**Narrative** A narrative (or story; these terms are often used synonymously) is an oral or written presentation of a sequence of events, organised in a meaningful configuration: the narrative describes something that has happened, or will happen, in a way that makes a point. Beyond this minimal definition, the concept of "narrative" carries different meanings in various streams of narrative research (see Polletta et al., 2011, for a review). Some definitions emphasise how narratives draw on a cultural stocks of plots, others how they are populated by recognisable story characters, and others still point out how narratives appeal to audiences through emotional engagement and social identification, rather than through appeal to standards of logic and proof.

**Performative narrative analysis** A performative narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the context of where, when, and for what purpose a story is told. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “who” the audience of a story is, and the analysis identifies how the context produces certain possibilities and limitations for the storyteller.

**Plot** A plot is the focal point of the story, which usually outlines a cause–effect relationship; that is, an event in the story is logically tied to another event (e.g. she was part of the wrong crowd, and then started doing drugs). The plot determines which events are relevant for the narrator to single out during the storytelling, and how the characters of the story are presented (e.g. sympathetic, funny, mean).

**Structural narrative analysis** A structural narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the components of the story. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “how” a story is told, and the analysis identifies structural elements of the story.

**Thematic narrative analysis** A thematic narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the content of the story. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “what” is being told, and the analysis identifies main themes in the story.

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# 14

## MICHEL FOUCAULT'S DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Kaspar Villadsen

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Discourse is a fragment of history	285
The order of discourse	287
How to analyse discourse	289
The relation between words and things	292
Case examples	294
Who should do the talking?	296
• The divided subject	296
• The “listening expert”	297
• Strategic anchoring points	298
Conclusion	300
Key concepts	301
Further reading	303
References	303

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Michel Foucault's work can be described as an effort to make our self-evident ways of thinking a bit less self-evident. He sought to challenge our modern self-perceptions by demonstrating that the discourses through which we experience ourselves have emerged in history and have no inner necessity: "We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without landmark or point of reference" (Foucault, 1984: 89). Once Foucault's historical excavation has been at work, what we considered to be our most fundamental human qualities and experiences turn out to have no solid foundations.

Foucault studied a number of fundamental divisions that structure our experiences: madness and reason, sexuality and perversion, normality and deviance, and state and society. He situated these experiences in long historical processes characterised by fractures, displacements, controversies, accidental happenings – hence, he regarded them as "contingent", understood as possible but not born from necessity. The starting-point is that our thinking is fundamentally historical and social, that is, influenced by interests, depending on specific technologies, embedded in institutional practices and regulated by diverse rituals, rules and taboos. For example, when a modern psychiatrist makes a diagnosis on the basis of the patient's speech, the position of the psychiatrist who listens and the patient who speaks are deeply inserted in a discursive structure. Foucault (1972b: 217) said:

We have only to think of the systems by which we decipher this speech; we have only to think of the network of institutions established to permit doctors and psychoanalysts to listen to the mad and, at the same time, enabling the mad to come and speak, or, in desperation, to withhold their meagre words.

Several important points can be derived from this quote. Both the investigating subject (the psychiatrist) and the investigated object (the patient) are part of the same "system", which regulates what can be observed and said. This system is not a purely linguistic structure governed by conventions and requirements that speakers must adhere to. In fact, there is a "network of institutions" that structure how the patient can speak (already before he or she has spoken) and how the doctor can listen. In so far as the clinic is a crystallisation of psychiatric knowledge as well as the overall regime of modern medicine, it constitutes a framework within which a particular type of discourse can legitimately be produced. Foucault (1980: 131) emphasised that "[e]ach society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true", thereby indicating that his aim was to explore how the production of discourses was deeply interlinked with various power mechanisms and institutions.

Foucault's emphasis on the institutionalisation of discourse means that discourses are both reinforced and accompanied by a set of practices. To say that he understood the social as constructed through language is not an accurate portrayal of his approach. In fact, Foucault used the linguistic turn in the 1960s not to give language a univocal privilege, but to reconsider the relationship between language and practice. In this revision, discursive practice, constituted by acts of speaking and writing, was to be understood as inseparable from the institutions and technologies that support and give shape to them. This premise undermines the duality between a discourse that "constructs" and a world which is "being constructed". How Foucault finds his way out of this duality will be addressed in the following sections.

This chapter first introduces Foucault's aspirations to establish a non-reductive approach that permits an analysis of discourse in its own right. The next section explains how Foucault sought to make the discourse emerge in all its "disturbing presence", situating it in a trajectory that has no overall direction or necessary progression, but is marked by contingent and transient forces. Then two sections follow on how to use discourse analysis as an analytical strategy. These sections consider how to approach texts as "monuments" rather than "documents", and they discuss how Foucault considered the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive. Finally, a study of "dialogue technology" is offered to exemplify how to conduct discourse analysis inspired by Foucault.

## Discourse is a fragment of history

Before examining Foucault's concept of discourse, it is necessary to stay clear of a number of possible misunderstandings. Foucault did not argue for relativism. His goal was not to show that people have had different views of a *particular object* over time, for example madness. His analysis did not demonstrate that madness has been the object of different representations or that it is a problem that has spurred different reactions throughout history. According to Foucault, such relativism is based on a "false continuity" and a universalising conception of madness (Veyne, 1997: 168). What we regard as madness in a given historical period is inextricably linked to prevailing perceptions of what reason is. In other words, Foucault takes the radical starting-point that everything is historical and can be explained through historical analysis. This point of departure also guides Foucault's view of discourse which, as he wrote, "is from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself" (Foucault, 1972a: 117). Foucault also insisted that the object of analysis is solely the discourse in its "positivity", or what was actually said: "Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of

the origin, but treated as and when it occurs" (1972a: 25). Approaching discourse "when it occurs" means that the analysis must be fixed on the statements in themselves, and that one must avoid invoking explanatory substitutes (which are not immediately observable in the discourse). Foucault (1972a: 25) insisted: "We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden."

Foucault departed from hermeneutical approaches such as Max Weber's historicist hermeneutics. Weber sought in his seminal study of 1905, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), to explain the historical emergence of modern capitalism by reconstructing the interpretative horizon that early capitalists were supposed to hold. It was a horizon of speculations about redemption and possible signs that would indicate that God had chosen an individual to be redeemed. Symbolising that one had lived a reverent and industrious life, wealth became a key symbol of redemption. Based on this interpretative reconstruction, Weber elaborated the ideal type of "Protestant ethic", a category that summarised and synthesised features in the Protestant personality type that practised the values of diligence, industry, savings and reinvestment of returns. Foucault (1991: 80), by contrast, did not think that historical material required a speculative interpretation produced from the researcher's privileged position, since the rationalities were directly observable in the textual archive. For Foucault, it is not inside a consciousness that one should seek the creation of an idea or an object, but in a discursive field that is imminently observable.

Foucault's (1972a: 125) playful comment that he was quite happy to be called a positivist must be understood in the light of his attempt to establish discourse as an independent object of analysis, irreducible to the speaking subjects or semantic structures. Approaching discourse at the level of what was actually said entails abandoning the search for hidden meanings, individual intentions or an overarching ideology. It is especially in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* from 1969 (Foucault, 1972a) that Foucault developed his ground-breaking programme for discourse analysis. First and foremost, the discourse's regularity and development must not be reduced to something exterior, more fundamental or transcendental. Instead, Foucault (1972a: 28) wanted to "restore to the statement the specificity of its occurrence". This entailed avoiding explanatory factors such as collective mentality, the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the time), the logic of history, subjects' intentions or the rules of the language system. In Foucault's (1972a: 8) view, such explanations are reductionist, and they essentially serve to confirm the infinite continuity of discourse. Foucault thus eschewed a number of prevailing theories on language and linguistic practice (see also Gutting, 1989). Discourse analysis does not reconstruct underlying structures (as Lévi-Strauss or Saussure sought to do) or

interpret the statement to find out the speaker's intentions, meaning or life-world (phenomenology, hermeneutics). It does not search for what was unconsciously revealed in the statement (Freud) or explain discourse as an ideology rooted in the relationships of production (Marxism). Instead of referring to something exterior, discourse itself takes centre stage, "posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformation" (Foucault, 1972a: 117). Foucault carved out a space for the analysis of anonymous discursive practices, whose specific rules of formation must be established.

## The order of discourse

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* took as point of departure the linguistic and structuralist turn within the humanities, which since the early twentieth century had dissolved the human subject as the ultimate locus of meaning. Language, in its broadest sense, could now be considered as constitutive of social reality and the subject's place within it. Psychoanalysis, ethnology and linguistics were already evacuating the idea of human consciousness as the centre of meaning and cognition. Instead, they located the human subject in structures that shaped its ideas and creations. These sciences decentred the constitutive subject by asserting that cultural, symbolic and linguistic structures were fundamental to what the subject can desire, experience and perceive (Foucault, 1972a: 13). This movement paved the way for a new way of perceiving history, whose potentials Foucault set out to explore.

At the same time, a new way of writing history was emerging (Foucault, 1972a: 3–16). Historians could now refrain from explaining historical events, including the development of discourse, by means of overarching schemas, explanatory and final instances or historical teleology (assumptions about the inner necessity of history). Hitherto, historians had been working to conceal all the fractures, struggles and coincidences of history by assuming various forms of continuity under myriad events. Now, historical analysis allowed these discontinuous events to emerge in their singularity, which entailed recognising that historical events are created from history itself, a site of interrelating and contradicting forces which have no natural direction or progressive evolution. This view meant that the discourse's accidental and discomfiting trajectory should be displayed.

Although developments across diverse scientific disciplines led to a growing recognition of discourse as fundamentally historical, a number of obstacles remained. Foucault discussed these in his inaugural lecture "L'Ordre du Discours" at the Collège de France in 1970, published in English as "The Discourse on Language" (1972b). He opened this lecture by describing the discomfort, perhaps even the fear, that most of us feel when we have to speak in formal contexts, including the

scientific institution. He said that he would like to find an imperceptible way to “enter this risky world of discourse”:

I would have preferred to be enveloped in words, borne way beyond all possible beginnings. At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices .... All I want is to allow myself to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck (Foucault, 1972b: 215–216).

Here Foucault entertained the idea of entering into an anonymous discourse, where he would not speak himself but rather serve as a medium for the discourse, which would “speak itself through him”, as it were. On closer inspection, Foucault’s slightly cryptic introduction displays several of his fundamental premises. First, the quote displays Foucault’s attraction to the idea of dissolving the constitutive subject in the anonymous structures of language. Foucault had already found this idea in surreal, modernist literature that pushed individual consciousness and reason in the background by constructing texts that followed strictly formalistic and anonymous principles (Gutting, 2005: 4–6). Secondly, Foucault occasionally expressed the idea that one could “lose oneself”, break away from one’s identity, through the experience of reading and writing. If one could reach the border of language, catch a glimpse of the unthinkable, one would at the same time reach the limit of one’s own subjectivity. This idea of transgression was expressed in Foucault’s (1972a: 17) proclamation: “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face.” Third, Foucault’s desire to seek refuge in the discourse can be read as a reference to the pressure of expectations, conventions and prohibitions which language users must submit to. Institutions (in this context, the elite university) use numerous procedures that control and conceal the uncomfortable arbitrariness of language, since institutions “impose ritual forms upon” language (1972b: 215). Foucault ends his lecture by noting that he and the institution apparently share the same anxiety over what the discourse is and might become.

In the rest of his lecture, Foucault describes a range of ways in which speaking and writing are regulated in modern societies: “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers” (1972b: 216). The use of language is always ingrained in a constraining and enabling order of discourse that acts on speakers, even before they speak. This order filters and categorises what is said, excluding utterances that do not belong. There are overall cultural conventions and more specific ones, which are integral to the scientific disciplines. The deep-seated cultural conventions cut across different areas such as science and literature. For example, if you write a novel



or dissertation, it must be assigned an author name. The text must also be placed within its genre – is it fiction or factual? If the text is scientific, it must be placed in a discipline, for example economics or linguistics. Placement in a discipline means that the text must adhere to the conventions of the discipline, applying its concepts and complying with its principles of inclusion. Indeed, “one would only be in the true, however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive ‘policy’ which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke.” (Foucault, 1972b: 224). Those who write or speak are assumed to control their own discourse; if not, others are ready to sanction their use of language. Foucault (1972b: 217) proclaimed that the order of discourse is “invested with terrible powers”, since it meticulously sanctions those who speak, granting some speakers the right to state the truth about others.

### How to analyse discourse

How can one develop a method to demonstrate the discomfoting arbitrariness of discourse and all the procedures that are established for regulating it? A central move in Foucault’s discourse analysis is to go beyond the immediate discursive divisions to recover systematics that seem to have regulated the production of discourse across the pre-given divisions in a period (1972a: 25–26). Foucault believed that the researcher should not accept the ready-made discursive groupings in the historical archive. Instead, he developed an approach that could demonstrate systematics and shared assumptions across separated domains of knowledge:

Of course, I shall take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given (such as psychopathology, medical science or political economy); but I shall not place myself inside these dubious unities in order to study their internal configuration or their secret contradictions. I shall make use of them just long enough to ask myself what unities they form ... according to what laws they are formed against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether they are not, in their accepted and quasi-institutional individuality, ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. (Foucault, 1972a: 26)

The quote displays one of Foucault’s fundamental principles: to interrogate how different discourse groups might rest on the same basic premises or “historical a priori” (1972a: 187). Historical analysis can show surprising continuities diachronically over time, whereas a synchronous break can reveal unexpected continuities across discrete discursive domains.

Foucault’s approach to history abandons the search for absolute objectivity and exhaustive reconstruction of the past. Instead, the exploration of the textual archive is governed by a particular “problematization” (Castel, 1994). For example, a problematisation could sound like this: correctional imprisonment is today



perceived as the self-evident response to offences, resulting from a process of humanisation of criminal law. Foucault, however, problematised this self-evidence of the prison and the idea of a progressive humanisation by showing the more complex and contingent process that gave birth to the modern, correctional prison. Problematisation causes the examined object to appear in a new light, deprived of its identity and apparent necessity. This way of writing history is rarely strictly chronological, since the pursuit of a particular problem (and related themes) is given preference over historical chronology.

Foucault wished to read texts horizontally in search for observable discursive regularities rather than to read in depth to recover the author's intention, meaning or subconscious mind: "The statement is not haunted by the secret presence of the unsaid, of hidden meanings, of suppressions" (1972a: 110). Statements can only be understood within a field of texts, concepts and propositions that Foucault termed a "discursive formation". It is the system of references, or interdependencies, said Foucault, "on the basis of which coherent (or incoherent) propositions are built up, more or less exact descriptions developed, verifications carried out, theories deployed" (1972a: 182). A discursive formation is therefore not an immobile structure that forces the speaker to submit to a set of fixed rules. Indeed, its principles of *formation* allow new utterances that presuppose, support, anticipate or contradict already existing utterances within the same field of discourse. Hence, a discourse is always in transformation, as it exists in a "temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed" (1972a: 25).

When it comes to reading specific texts or an author's work, Foucault (1972a: 23–24) argued that one must tear away the self-evidence of such unities as the "oeuvre", the "book", or "science" and "literature". Hence, the task is to investigate which relationships a text takes up with other texts, concepts and statements. One must study the system of references that the text contains and on which it depends for its existence. Foucault (1972a: 23) wrote: "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network." Instead of texts being isolated entities, they constitute points in a network. This network consists of other texts, statements, concepts and materials, all of which can be analysed as statements. Foucault (1972a: 138–139) emphasised that his analysis "does not treat discourse as document, as a sign of something else, as an element that ought to be transparent", but it is "concerned with discourse in its own volume, as a monument". This entailed considering the texts not as documents (which document a hidden meaning or reflect the intentions of writers), but as monuments. The principal difference between monuments and documents is that the document is approached from the assumption that it can be interpreted.

The monument, on the other hand, is regarded as a point in an extensive discursive structure which must be analysed in its own right, as a set of practices obeying certain rules.

Foucault did not provide many concrete directions for the selection of texts, so it is necessary to reconstruct the methodological implications of his analyses and his brief comments on methods. It has been proposed that reading the system of references contained in texts can be a useful methodological principle for discourse analysis (Andersen, 1994; Villadsen, 2006). This entails seeking the explicit as well as the implicit references of the text, understood as either specific references assigned an author name or the text's use of concepts whose original sources one must track.

Through this search for explicit and implicit references, one can build up an archive of texts, and when one begins to see a circularity of the texts' mutual references, one has established a good archive (Andersen, 1994: 32). The next step is to select texts from the archive that are defined as monuments and which the analysis gives extra attention. These may be texts that display an important discovery in one's analysis, such as a particular discursive figure, the premise for an argument, a fundamental division, a significant break or a surprising continuity (Villadsen, 2006: 101). Monuments are typically texts that contain reflections on how to generate knowledge and how to govern, manage, punish or cure. Often it can be particularly interesting to study texts that seek to problematise existing conventions, theories and practices; that is, texts that take part in struggles around defining what should be known and what should be done. Examples include reform programmes, instructions, committee reports and scientific accounts. Such texts often make a difference in the discursive field by constructing arguments which extend or contribute to transforming the discursive structures.

Foucault's works often describe historical processes that are marked by both continuity and discontinuity. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he first described a break constituted by the transition from the dramatic display of public torture to the unexciting routines of correctional punishment. Next, he described all the small, gradual displacements, struggles and innovations that made this break possible. It is in the light of this analytical strategy that one should understand Foucault's insistence that he was not a historian of discontinuity (Foucault, 1980: 112). His strategy was not to represent history as fundamentally discontinuous in order to contest the conventional idea of a calm historical continuity; his strategy was rather to carefully describe the gradual transformations and singular processes in their own right. Foucault believed that emphasising discontinuity was often used by historians to confirm a fairly conventional and rooted tradition, in which the discovery of discontinuity becomes the justification for seeking the underlying continuity (1972a: 8–9). According to Foucault, this quest for constructing

order in history corresponds to another major quest in Western thinking in the nineteenth century: saving the sovereignty of the constitutive subject.

### The relation between words and things

Foucault's rendering of the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive remains controversial. Some critics argue that he never gave a satisfying answer regarding this relationship (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 145, n. 13). Other commentators suggest that Foucault realised that his early scholarship ended up in an unsuccessful theory of the primacy of discourse, and for this reason he began, in the early 1970s, to incorporate the non-discursive in the form of institutions and practices (Dreyfuss and Rabinow, 1982: 102). One solution to the problem of the non-discursive could be to consider materials, practices, images and architecture as "statements" equivalent to verbal and written statements that are part of the discourse. This solution does not seem entirely remote from Foucault's approach, for example, when he analysed Bentham's panopticon as a "statement" that emblematically expressed the rationalities of discipline (Foucault, 1977).

Another solution would be to consider physical materials, social practices and institutions as discursive anchor points. Institutions, for example, inscribe the discourse in materials that have durability and longevity and hence bind communication longer than purely verbal statements. This solution, which places the intertwinement of statements and materials at the centre of the analysis, brings Foucault's discourse analysis close to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* can be read as an analysis of the production of true knowledge, which in key aspects parallels Latour and Woolgar's analysis in *Laboratory Life* (1979). A significant parallel is that, on Foucault's account, the discursive practice is supported by and inextricably interlinked with technologies, institutions and practices (Schaanning, 1997). This entanglement, or "network", of discourse, practices and institutions conditions what can be said. Or put differently, the historical conditions of appearance consist of the already said as well as associated instruments, practices and institutions. This interpretation emphasises that for Foucault, the discourse is deeply embedded in and intertwined with institutionalised practices, and hence not easily changeable by specific individuals or groups.

Some brief examples will explicate these points. We have already noted that for Foucault, madness is not a natural or permanent object. In addition, we can say that the object of madness is correlated to a set of practices (Veyne, 1997: 155–157). It is possible that there exist specific neurological processes and particular behaviours that could be termed madness. However, Foucault pointed out that

this “material” only becomes madness by virtue of a series of practices that determine it as madness. This material could become something else, another object, if it were inserted into another system of discursive practices.

Thus, there are no permanent and natural objects such as “the mad”, “the governed” or “the state”. We should not conceal the heterogeneous conditions of historical appearance for such objects by accepting statements that confirm the existence of naturally given entities. It is worth reiterating that these conditions of appearance are not only of a linguistic nature; they consist of texts and statements, as well as institutions, technologies and practices that support and intertwine with the discourse. Marking up such conditions, Foucault decentred the asylum, the medical clinic, the prison, the state and so on. The immediate self-evidence and unity of such objects were thereby dissolved and, instead, the multiple events and processes from which they emerged became visible. For example, we should not search for the unity of the state or civil society but reconstruct the multiple practices that permit these objects to *appear as* unities (Villadsen, 2016).

The relationship between a discursive object, such as the state or madness, and a set of practices is not straightforward, but Foucault offers clarification at certain places. In his 1979 lecture series he pointed out that, although something is produced in discourse, this does not mean that it is pure illusion or an ideological construct (Foucault, 2008: 36). Foucault followed the assumption that “universals do not exist” (2008: 3), but that there are practices organised with reference to a particular “universal” which is believed to exist. Examples of such universals include the state, madness and civil society. Even though these objects are discursively constructed, they are still real in so far as real practices refer to them, articulate them and organise themselves with reference to these objects. It is precisely because of the belief that the discursive object exists that it has real effects. Hence, the object “is not an illusion since it is precisely a set of practices, real practices, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality” (2008: 19).

The moment that a whole set of practices are linked to a regime of truth (e.g. modern psychiatry or political economy), this linkage “makes something that does not exist able to become something” (2008: 19), to become inscribed into reality. Civil society, in Foucault’s view, is a universal that does not exist in itself but invests real practices that refer in various ways to something called civil society (Villadsen, 2016). Foucault placed the concept of civil society within a modern liberal regime of truth, which in the late eighteenth century began to reconceptualise issues of appropriate governance. This regime made it possible to submit governance to the division between true and false. These judgements on how to organise governmental practices permitted “one to judge all these

practices as good or bad, not in terms of a law or moral principle, but in terms of propositions subject to the division between true and false. Thus, in this way a whole section of governmental activity enters into a new regime of truth" (2008: 18). Henceforth, truthfulness could be assessed in relation to the new concept of civil society, defined as a reality that required specific forms of governance. In this way, Foucault escaped the choice between idealism (civil society as pure abstraction) and realism (the specific actors and groups that constitute civil society). Instead, he would analyse the object as embedded in practices from which it cannot be isolated; that is, in a system of statements, laws, programmes and theories (Veyne, 2010: 31). The discursive object is thus immanent to a whole set of practices that refer to it.

### Case examples

It has hopefully been demonstrated that Foucault's discourse analysis has a broad range of possible applications. This section presents some illustrative examples of studies inspired by Foucault. The first example is a recent study of the management of a category of unemployed, "the occupationally disabled", at the Swedish state-owned company Samhall (Holmqvist et al., 2013). This study vividly describes the contradictions that arise from the company's attempt to integrate a medical-disciplinary discourse with a confessional-pastoral discourse. Samhall describes itself as striving "to create work that furthers the development of people with functional impairment causing reduced working capacity" (<http://www.samhall.se>). It provides sheltered employment on market-like conditions and has become one of Scandinavia's largest employers, operating within areas such as medical technology, telecom equipment, cleaning and home care.

To be assigned to Samhall, an unemployed person must be identified as "occupationally disabled" by the National Employment Office. This identification relies on measurable criteria such as the person's previous track record in the labour market and a number of mental and physical impairments, social skills and proficiency in Swedish. This is the "formal disability coding" (Holmqvist et al., 2013: 199). However, some criteria of disability are not immediately visible, hence requiring more detailed examination. An official mentions numerous "grey-zone cases": "Physically or mentally they may seem ok, but still you sense that there is some kind of handicap underlying their behaviour" (2013: 200). Hence, transgressing the citizen's status defined by measurable criteria, a series of discrete impairments must be uncovered to identify the occupationally disabled subject. However, identifying the impairments is not sufficient; the individual must verbally "commit to the 'truth' about his or her new identity as occupationally disabled" (2013: 205).

This is a pastoral-confessional discursive practice which creates individuals who subjectify themselves as “occupationally disabled”.

The notion of the occupationally disabled allows the organisation to merge the legal and the pastoral discourse, in so far as the use of regulatory decisions on eligibility are justified by pastoral care for the individual. While the official aim of Samhall is to integrate unemployed persons into the labour market, the study shows that, paradoxically, its discursive order produces people who distinguish themselves from “normal employees” and actively take up a subject position as “disabled”. The example illustrates the contradictions that may exist between discourses and the accompanying paradoxes in working practices. In this perspective, Samhall appears like many other modern organisations as a place where discursive arbitration and integration efforts must constantly be made.

Another example is Lisa Blackman's (1998, 2000) work on the Hearing Voices Network (or HVN), inspired by Foucault and supplemented with post-structural theory on identity. The HVN is a self-help group of voice-hearers who practise ways of reconceptualising voice-hearing that stand in radical opposition to the psychiatric system and its medical discourse. A key objective of the group is to loosen the grip of institutional psychiatric expertise on voice-hearers in order to reinsert them into society. A self-help manual produced by members of the network says: “It is important to see yourself as an individual rooted in society and not as a patient rooted in psychiatry” (Coleman and Smith, cited in Blackman, 1998). Exploring a counter-discourse, Blackman's (2000: 57ff.) study describes how individuals constitute themselves in opposition to the psychiatric system, thus striving to become different subjects.

The voice-hearers construct themselves in almost diametrical opposition to the modern “psy-sciences” (Blackman, 2000: 63–69). First, the HVN conceptualises voice-hearing as a gift and a sign of sensitivity as opposed to seeing it as a lack and sign of disease. Second, modern psychiatry views distress as an irrational threat to rational self-control that needs medical and custodial supervision. By contrast, the HVN adopts a discourse of acceptance and integration of voices which allows voice-hearers to transform their relation to the experience. Third, where the psychiatric regime conceives of voices as random, uninvited assaults on the patients, HVN rearticulates voices as a capacity that can serve as a key to spiritual development. Finally, whereas the psychiatric discourse turns the voice-hearer into a passive recipient of a disease, the telepathic discourse of the HVN constructs them as active persons who have received a gift, which is a special sensitivity.

Blackman's study shows that there are other ways of discursively shaping subjectivity than the discursive order of psychiatry with its privileging of medical expertise and diagnosis. Her research “was a strategic attempt to de-naturalise and

de-stabilise ‘psy’ understandings and show that they are historically contingent and not natural” (Blackman, 1998: 40). The recovery of the voice-hearers’ counter-discourse thus demonstrates the contestability of psychiatry and its institutionalised truths. However, the implications of the study reach further. It reveals the possibility of negotiating or breaking loose from the subject positions assigned by modern welfare institutions such as health care, schooling and social work, which all normalise according to “desired images of selfhood” (Blackman, 2000: 70). In analysing voice hearers, Blackman also reflects on the condition that her choice of study object and her scientific description are always inevitably an intervention in an established discursive order.

### Who should do the talking?

There now follows a more extensive example of how to conduct discourse analysis inspired by Foucault. This example comes from a study of the increasingly popular “dialogue technologies” called “Who Should Do the Talking?” (Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008). The study started from the observation of a general quest, which appeared across different discursive domains and institutions. Within health promotion, social work and leadership development, the same idea was voiced: the ones who used to speak (health counsellor, social worker, manager) should speak less, while the formerly silent (patient, client and employee) were invited to speak more. Instead of one party diagnosing, problem-defining and executing leadership over the other party, an equal dialogue should be established.

In health care, the counsellor was instructed to act as a “reflexive listener” who brings patients to express and recognise the truth of their own speech. This truth procedure was allegedly the only effective way to approach patients with defective self-control and will power. Similarly, in social work, the social worker should refrain from dominating the meetings with clients. Instead, the professional’s statements should serve as “a wall that the client can play the ball up against” (Carstens, 1998) – a wall that not only returns the ball but also gives it speed and direction, which encourages the client to change behaviour.

### The divided subject

In our study, we pursued Foucault’s fundamental principle in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972a) of identifying discursive patterns and shared premises across apparently distinct discursive domains. Specifically, we searched for such transversal regularities in texts derived from health counselling, social work and leadership development. What these regularities exactly consist of cannot be determined in



advance, as they must be established from reading the specific textual archive. In our case, we found shared premises regarding the speaking subject (the client or patient), which was constructed as split by an internal divide (motivation versus resistance, self-control versus dependency, and will-power versus powerlessness). The texts that we gave the status of "monuments" all revealed this shared premise of the "divided subject". This idea of the rational self that must control the irrational "lower self" is not unique to our texts but reflects a deep-rooted distinction in liberal thought between passion and reason (Valverde, 1996).

### The "listening expert"

Our study made the assumption that power is inevitably at play in the discursive structuring of the relationship between the speaking subject and the listening subject. Below it will be evident that dialogue technology not only structures the space within which the subordinated (patient or client) can speak. It also obliges the superior (health counsellor or social worker) to follow particular rules of discourse. The "listening expert" exerts power when listening in accordance with dialogue techniques, but the expert is at the same moment submitted to certain discursive procedures. The experts must put limitations on their own professionalism, learn new working practices and take up new positions in relation to their clients. We thereby pursued Foucault's premise quoted at the beginning of this chapter: discourse is a system that structures how something can be said as well as how the listener can decipher what was said.

During the last 15 years, a number of new methods of education and counselling have been developed in health promotion under the overall term "motivational therapy", many of which can be traced back to Carl Rogers's (1951) seminal work on client-centred therapy. These methods are adopted in the treatment of a wide range of health problems, including smoking, obesity, alcoholism, drug addiction and pathological gambling. The aim is to overcome patients' lack of motivation and non-compliance with health instructions, in order to make decisive changes to their risk behaviour. We analysed several of the tools of motivational therapy applied in health counselling, including the tools termed "reflective listening" (Miller and Rollnick, 1991). Interestingly, these tools reappear in a wide range of publications across different areas of disciplines and institutions, which traditionally centred on their own distinctive problems and were rooted in specific forms of knowledge. Tracing how a discursive formation adopts concepts from other fields can be an effective move in discourse analysis. Foucault (1972a: 57) wrote: "The configuration of the enunciative field also involves forms of coexistence. These outline first a field of presence (by which is understood all statements formulated elsewhere and taken up in a discourse."



Reflective listening involves echoing and summarising the patient's speech, while emphasising certain statements rather than others. Employing this method of reflective listening, the therapist can encourage the patient to speak and ensure that his or her speech takes certain directions. More importantly, however, the therapist can bring the patient to recognise the spoken statements as his/her own. This organisation of discourse changes the conditions for how objects such as illness, addiction and motivation can be discursively produced. What is at stake is a transformation of the conditions for making true statements. Reflexive listening makes possible a specific truth production, in which the truthfulness of the statements is guaranteed neither by the therapist's expertise nor by medical science. Instead, truthfulness is guaranteed by the patient him/herself whose speech is taken to express a fundamental truth about his/her subjectivity.

The problem of how to bring clients to formulate their problems themselves has been discussed in social work during at least the last 30 years. In this domain, demands have been voiced that social workers should meet their clients in a more open and listening fashion, instead of observing and categorising clients through "system glasses". The problem is allegedly that social workers tend to interpret their clients' statements and actions according to their own professional horizon, instead of recognising the client as a unique and complex individual. Thus, the knowledge produced in the meeting between social worker and client is no longer to be exclusively interpreted (and validated) by means of the sciences that throughout the twentieth century underpinned social work: psychology, law and sociology. Now, the knowledge is instead validated with reference to the fact that it is the individual client who speaks. The social worker must believe in the client as an active partner in problem-solving and respect the client's expertise in relation to their situation (Bundgaard, 1997: 29). Our focus on tools for structuring patients' or clients' speech was inspired by Foucault's analysis of pastoral power as a truth procedure which requires that the speaker reveals his/her inner thoughts.

### Strategic anchoring points

Karlsen and Villadsen (2008) also considered how the discourse becomes invested in instruments and materials that stabilise discursive practices beyond the spoken word. This move focuses attention on how the discourse achieves solidity by becoming strategically anchored in a particular materiality (e.g. a scientific dissertation is a strong medium for scientific statements, whereas a church building is a strong medium for appeals for charity). In this perspective, one of the key tools in motivational therapy, the so-called "balance sheet" (Botelho et al., 1998), can be understood as a medium that materialises the patient's self-motivating statements.

The sheet is designed as a box of four blank fields that the patient must fill in, either in the presence of the therapist or as homework. The fields contain the following statements: “Advantages of continuing” (e.g. smoking, drinking or overeating), “Disadvantages of continuing”, “Disadvantages of quitting” and “Advantages of quitting” (Figure 14.1). Fields 2 and 4 frame and record the patient’s own reasons for changing behaviour, thus constituting a reservoir of self-motivating statements that the counsellor can draw upon in conversations with the patient.

<b>Advantages from continuing...</b>	<b>Disadvantages from continuing...</b>
<b>Disadvantages from quitting...</b>	<b>Advantages from quitting...</b>

Figure 14.1 Balance sheet

In the perspective of discourse analysis, the balance sheet has an additional, more refined function. By its simple contrast of pros and cons, the balance sheet reconstructs the well-known conflict between health counsellor and patient as a conflict which is internal to the patient. In this way, the patient’s “inner” ambivalence is rendered an objective fact, while the “external” conflict between the counsellor’s instructions and the patient’s resistance is represented as a mere symptom of this inner ambivalence. It follows that health advice given unilaterally by the counsellor is assumed to be counterproductive for motivating the patient.

The game is thus about luring future-oriented talk out of the mouth of the marginalised individual. In working with the marginalised, the professional must give up his self-confident professionalism and seek to structure and filter the conversation to ensure that future-oriented wishes are voiced by the client. Again, power is clearly at play when the “partners of dialogue” speak. The discursive order is

one that uses dialogue to produce potential subjects that the client can identify with. The analysis showed, then, how the discourse both establishes positions from where individuals can speak and structure the relationship between subjects.

By way of conclusion, let us consider some consequences and possible scenarios ensuing from the proliferation of the demand for dialogue. One might hypothesise that as long as the deep-seated modern idea pervades that speaking out is inherently liberating, new and more advanced dialogue technologies will emerge. The quest to allow the silenced to speak will probably continue to create a fertile discourse on dialogue that will reconfigure traditional disciplinary divisions, professional privileges, and hierarchies of authority. However, our analysis also revealed an inherent paradox in dialogue technology: it is driven by a quest for free and authentic speech but it nevertheless requires a careful structuring of the space for talking and the subjects' positions within it. This is not a paradox arrived at by speculation, but is directly observable in statements by experts who discuss the challenges in implementing dialogue technology. This paradox means that, along with the proliferation of dialogue, we will likely see sceptical professionals who distrust the authenticity of the statements made. It is up to future studies to investigate how innovations in discourse, technologies and institutions arise from this paradox.

## Conclusion

Foucault's analyses were guided by the social and political problems of his time. Rather than taking over Foucault's themes and critical insights, we must consider what current issues and social transitions our analyses should address. The discourse analyst is always writing within – and against – existing narratives that have told the history of, for example, the progressive understanding of madness, the advances of medicine or the development of social work. Against such histories, our analysis displays surprising continuities and interrupts deep-rooted narratives of progress. Foucault often described historical transitions that we are still dealing with today. These transitions include the move from punishment by exclusion of the culprit to punishment aiming to integrate the criminal, or the passage from sovereign power over a territory to government of a living population. Foucault offered an analysis that moves back in history to describe general ordering principles, which seem to have regulated the production of discourse. We noted that this strategy entails reconstructing the systematic patterns of the discourse, and that an archive can be built by following texts' mutual references. We also noted that the researcher can reconstruct a statement's conditions of possibility by virtue of how it activates a set of concepts, conventions of writing, discursive divisions, and principles of inclusion and exclusion. This analysis centres on the horizontal

relationships of the statement instead of scrutinising it through in-depth interpretation of intentions and meaning. Finally, we saw how the analysis must select monuments, which display a discursive break, a fundamental premise or how the discourse is invested with strategies of power. A monument can be a text, but can also be a symbol, a picture or a building, all of which may be part of the discourse.

Discourse analysis inspired by Foucault also implies that we focus our attention on how the discourse is embedded in institutions, scientific disciplines and administrative practices. There are traditions, rituals, rules and taboos that structure the production of discourse. They all ensure that the discourse appears rational, concealing its arbitrariness and excessive surplus of possibilities. Foucault-inspired discourse analysis must follow the epistemological premise that we cannot separate the object in itself from the set of discursive practices that produces it. The task, however, is not to uncover the illusory nature of discursive objects or unveil that they are part of ideology. Instead, the analysis must explore the practices that articulate and refer to a particular object (madness, the state, civil society, the client). Finally, one must consider the effects of power of the discourse, since real practices are organised by reference to the truth about the object and the truth about how this object is best governed or managed.

Some potentials of the acute attention to the practical organisation of discourse were demonstrated in the study of dialogue technology in health counselling. That study took as a central question how the discourse structures the relationship between speaker and listener. We also pursued another fundamental question in Foucault's discourse analysis: can shared premises and regularities be identified across the immediate discursive divisions? Here, we found a notable reorganisation of the relationship between the expert who used to speak and the previously silent client or patient. We drew attention to how the discourse was invested in certain materials, such as schemes and rituals for conversation, which gave it both solidity and strategic efficacy. Finally, we noted how the study examined a key question for Foucault (1982: 208): how individuals are divided from each other (the motivated and the unmotivated) and how individuals are divided within themselves (rational will power versus irrational desire and addictions). We sought to write in a Foucauldian spirit rather than reproduce his concepts and insights, centring our analysis on the relation between truth, subjectivity and power in our contemporary context.

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### Key concepts

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**Conditions of possibility** The basic premise of discourse analysis is that the construction of objects (madness, sexuality, civil society) is possible, but not necessary. Hence, one must reconstruct the historical conditions of possibility for a specific

object (e.g. madness). This entails considering how the construction relies on a set of concepts, discursive divisions and principles of inclusion and exclusion. One must also consider the practices and institutions that articulate the object and give the discourse stability by anchoring it in something more durable than the spoken word.

**Discourse** Discourse is an independent object of analysis, irreducible to the speaking subjects or semantic structures. The discourse must be studied at the level of *what was actually said* which entails giving up the search for hidden meanings, individual intentions or an overarching ideology. Furthermore, discourse is from beginning to end historical, which means that the discourse unfolds in a trajectory that has no necessary direction or rational progression, but is marked by contingency and transient forces.

**Discursive formation** Discourse analysis entails reconstructing the systematic patterns of discourse. Rather than reading texts in depth to recover the author's intention or meaning, one must search for discursive regularities. Texts and statements can only be understood within a field of statements, a discursive formation. This formation is a system of references and interdependencies on the basis of which propositions can be made, descriptions developed, and concepts elaborated. Discursive formations are products of history and must be recovered empirically.

**Monuments** Treating texts as monuments contrasts with the conventional notion of historical documents. Whereas the document is approached as an object of interpretation, the monument is viewed as a point in a discursive structure. First, one must build a textual archive by following texts' and statements' mutual references. Second, one must choose monuments which particularly clearly display discursive regularities, ruptures or discontinuities. A monument can be a text, but it can also be a symbol, a picture or a building.

**Order of discourse** This term defines how any statement, spoken or written, takes part in a discursive order which consists of conventions of writing, rituals, rules and taboos that structure the production of discourse. This order is embedded in institutions, scientific disciplines and administrative practices that are crucial for what can be said and written. The order of discourse is both pervaded by deep-rooted cultural conventions that cut across different areas such as science and literature and by specific orders inherent in disciplines.

**Power** A key premise of Foucault's approach is that power is always at play in discourse. This entails that the discourse creates specific positions that subjects need to take up if they wish to speak in a meaningful and rational fashion. They need to follow particular conventions for speaking, comply with certain divisions and abide by the rules of exclusion that exist in a given discursive field. The question of power is thus not "added on" to the analysis subsequently. Given Foucault's premise that power is integral to the discourse and its operations, discourse analysis is always already an analysis of power.

**Subject positions** Studying how the discourse structures the relationship between subject positions is a way to study how power is integral to discourse. The order of

discourse sets conditions for both the speaking and observing subject and the subject who is listening or being examined. However, the discursive is not an immobile structure that forces the speakers to entirely submit to a set of fixed rules. The principles of formation allow new utterances that presuppose, support or contradict already existing utterances.

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# 15

## CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>

Teun A. van Dijk

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Introduction: what is critical discourse analysis?	306
Conceptual and theoretical frameworks	307
• Macro versus micro	308
• Power as control	308
• Control of the text and context of discourse	310
• Mind control	311
• Discourses of domination	313
Research in critical discourse analysis	314
• Gender inequality	314
• Ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, nationalism and racism	314
• Traditional media discourse	315
• Social media discourse	316
• Political discourse	318
• Professional and institutional power	318
Conclusion	319
Key concepts	320
Further reading	320
References	321

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## Introduction: what is critical discourse analysis?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is discourse-analytical research that primarily studies how social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take an explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately challenge social inequality. This is also why CDA may be characterised as a social movement of politically committed discourse analysts.

One widespread misunderstanding of CDA is that it is a specific method of doing discourse analysis. There is no such method: in CDA all methods of the humanities and social sciences may be used (Titscher et al., 2000; Wodak and Meyer, 2008). To avoid this misunderstanding and to emphasise that many methods and approaches may be used in the critical study of text and talk, we now prefer the more general term 'critical discourse studies' (CDS). However, since most studies continue to use the well-known abbreviation CDA, this chapter will also continue to use it.

CDA as an analytical practice is not one direction of research among many others in the study of discourse. Rather, it is a critical perspective that may be found in all areas of discourse studies, such as discourse grammar, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics and the psychology of discourse processing. In other words, CDA is discourse study 'with an attitude'.

Some of the tenets of CDA can already be found in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School before the Second World War. Its current focus on language and discourse was initiated with the critical linguistics that emerged (mostly in the UK and Australia) at the end of the 1970s (Fowler et al., 1979). CDA also has counterparts in 'critical' developments in sociolinguistics, stylistics, pragmatics, psychology and the social sciences, some already dating back to the early 1970s (Birnbaum, 1971; Calhoun, 1995; Wodak, 1996). As is the case in these neighbouring disciplines, CDA may be seen as a reaction against the dominant formal paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s, for instance in structural and generative linguistics, as well as textual analysis and conversation analysis.

Critical research on discourse focuses primarily on social problems, instead of presenting a new theoretical paradigm. Given the complexity of social problems, CDA research is typically multidisciplinary (e.g. relating linguistics and semiotics with the social sciences, on the one hand, and with cognitive science, on the other hand). Besides its general practice of *describing* many types of discourse structures and strategies, CDA also aims to explain them, for instance in socio-cognitive, socio-political or cultural-historical terms. More specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society.

Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak (1997) summarised the main tenets of CDA as follows:

- 1 CDA addresses social problems.
- 2 Power relations are discursive.
- 3 Discourse constitutes society and culture.
- 4 Discourse does ideological work.
- 5 Discourse is historical.
- 6 The link between text and society is mediated.
- 7 Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory.
- 8 Discourse is a form of social action.

Against this general background, this chapter focuses on some theoretical issues that are central in CDA, such as the relations between social macro- and micro-structures, domination as abuse of power, and how dominant groups control text and context and thus also the mind. After sketching this multidisciplinary theoretical framework, we review some CDA research on discourse and gender, racist text and talk, and the way power is reproduced in the mass media, political discourse and the professions.

## Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

Since CDA is not a specific direction of research, it does not have a unitary theoretical framework. Within the general aims and properties mentioned above, there are many types of CDA, and these may be theoretically and analytically quite diverse. Critical analysis of conversation is very different from an analysis of news reports in the press, posts on Facebook, or lessons and teaching at school. Yet, given the common perspective and the general aims of CDA, we may also find overall conceptual frameworks that are closely related. As suggested, most kinds of CDA will ask questions about the way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of, or resistance against, social dominance, whether they are part of a conversation, a news report, or other genres and contexts. Thus, the typical vocabulary of many scholars in CDA will feature such notions as power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination, interests, reproduction, institutions, social structure and social order, besides the more familiar discourse-analytical notions.

This section focuses on a number of basic concepts and thus devises a triangulated theoretical framework that relates discourse, cognition and society (including history, politics and culture) as the major dimensions of CDA and discourse studies more generally.

## Macro versus micro

Language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication belong to the micro level of the social order. Power, dominance and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro level of analysis. This means that CDA must bridge the well-known gap between micro (agency, interactional) and macro (structural, institutional, organisational) approaches (van Dijk, 1980).

In everyday interaction and experience, the macro and micro levels (and intermediary meso levels) form one unified whole. For instance, a racist speech in parliament is a discourse at the interactional micro level of social structure in the specific situation of a debate, but at the same time may enact or be a constituent part of legislation, or the reproduction of racism at the macro level (Wodak and van Dijk, 2000). That such level distinctions are relative may be seen from the fact that this very parliamentary speech may again feature semantic macrostructures, as well as semantic microstructures, such as local propositions and their concepts (van Dijk, 1980).

There are several ways to analyse and bridge the societal macro–micro gap, and thus to arrive at a unified critical analysis:

- 1 *Members–groups*. Language users engage in a discourse as members of (several) social groups, organisations or institutions; and conversely, groups thus may act by or through their members.
- 2 *Actions–process*. Social acts of individual actors are thus constituent parts of group actions and social processes, such as legislation or news-making.
- 3 *Context–social structure*. Situations of discursive interaction are similarly part or constitutive of social structure. That is, local and more global contexts are closely related and both exercise constraints on discourse.
- 4 *Personal and social cognition*. Language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition, as well as cognitions shared with members of the group or culture as a whole. In other words, whereas the other links between societal macro- and microstructures mentioned above are merely analytical relations, the real interface between society and discourse is socio-cognitive because language users as social actors mentally represent and connect both levels. This also resolves the well-known structure–agency dichotomy in sociology.

## Power as control

A central notion in most critical work on discourse is that of power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions. Summarising a complex philosophical and social analysis, I define social power in terms of control (van Dijk, 2008b). Thus, groups have power if they are able to control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups. This ability presupposes a power base of privileged

access to scarce social resources such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information, culture, or indeed various forms of public discourse and communication (Mayr, 2008).

Different types of power may be distinguished according to the various resources employed: the coercive power of the military and other violent agents will be based on force; the rich will have power because of their money; the more or less persuasive power of parents, professors or journalists may be based on knowledge, information or authority. Note also that power is seldom absolute. Groups may more or less control other groups, or only control them in specific situations or social domains. A judge controls people only in the courtroom, and a teacher only the students in the classroom. Moreover, dominated groups may more or less resist, accept, condone, collude or comply with, or legitimate such power and even find it natural.

The power of dominant groups may be integrated in laws, rules, norms, habits and even a quite general consensus, and thus take the form of what Gramsci (1971) called 'hegemony'. Note also that power is not always exercised in obviously abusive acts of dominant group members, but may be enacted in the myriad of taken-for-granted actions of everyday life (Foucault, 1980), as is typically the case in the many forms of everyday sexism or racism (Essed, 1991). Similarly, not all members of a powerful group are always more powerful than all members of dominated groups: power is only defined here for groups as a whole.

Thus, for our analysis of the relations between discourse and power, we first find that *access* to specific forms of discourse (e.g. those of politics, the media, education or science) is itself a power resource (van Dijk, 1996). Secondly, as suggested earlier, action is controlled by our minds. Therefore, as we shall see in more detail below, if we are able to influence people's minds (e.g. their knowledge, attitudes or ideologies) we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation. Finally, closing the discourse–power circle means that those groups who control the most influential discourses also have more chances to control the minds and actions of others indirectly.

The issue of discursive power can be split into three interrelated questions for CDA research:

- 1 How do powerful groups or institutions control the text and context of public discourse?
- 2 How does such a power discourse control the minds and actions of less powerful groups and what are the social consequences of such control (e.g. social inequality)?
- 3 What are the properties of the discourses of powerful groups, institutions and organisations, and how are such properties forms of power abuse?

## Control of the text and context of discourse

We have seen that among many other resources that define the power base of a group or institution, access to, or control over, public discourse and communication is an important symbolic resource, as is the case for knowledge and information (Kedar, 1987; van Dijk, 1996, 2008b, 2014).

Most people only have active control over everyday talk with family members, friends or colleagues, whereas they are more or less passive targets of public text or talk (e.g. of the mass media, teachers, bosses, police officers, judges or welfare bureaucrats, among other authorities) that may simply tell them what to believe or what to do.

On the other hand, members of the more powerful social groups and institutions, and especially their leaders (the 'symbolic elites'; see van Dijk, 1993), have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse. These social groups and institutions could be teachers' educational discourse, journalists' media discourse, lawyers' legal discourse, and politicians' policy and other public discourse. Those who have more, control more (and more influential) genres of discourse (and more discourse properties) and are by that definition also more powerful. In other words, we have here a discursive definition of one of the crucial constituents of social power (van Dijk, 1996, 2008b).

These notions of discourse access and control are very general, and it is one of the tasks of CDA to spell out these forms of power and especially their abuses; that is, forms of domination. Thus, if discourse is defined in terms of complex communicative events, consisting of text and context, access and control may be defined both for the relevant categories of the communicative situation, defined as context, as well as for the structures of text and talk.

The communicative situation consists of such categories as setting (time, place), ongoing actions (including discourses and discourse genres), participants in various communicative, social or institutional roles and identities, as well as their goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and ideologies (for references, see van Dijk, 2008a, 2009). Controlling the communicative situation involves control over one or more of these categories. More specifically, such control may focus on the subjective definition of the communicative situation, that is the context models of the participants, because it is the context model that in turn controls the pragmatic appropriateness of the of discourse (van Dijk, 2008a, 2009).

Thus, professors and not students control the setting (time and place) of an exam, and who qualify as participants. Police officers or judges define the overall communicative situation of an interrogation, such as who may ask questions or who must reply (Shuy, 1998). Institutional speakers may abuse their power in such situations (e.g. when police officers use force or threats to get a confession from a suspect).

Besides the control of speech acts or genres, or other properties of the communicative situation, powerful groups may control various aspects of the structures of text and talk. Thus, crucial for all discourse and communication is who controls *topics* (semantic macrostructures) and *topic change*, as when editors decide what news topics will be covered in the media (van Dijk, 1988) and teachers decide what topics will be dealt with in class (Manke, 1997). Publishers and editors may thus give priority to negative topics about immigrants in the media, and ignore or ban topics about white elite racism (van Dijk, 1991, 1993). In times of crises, also in democracies, politicians may justify censorship of topics or information that is alleged to threaten national security, as was the case in the USA after 9/11.

In sum, many levels and structures of context, text and talk can in principle be more or less controlled by powerful speakers and institutions, and such power may be abused at the expense of specific recipients, groups or civil society at large. It should, however, be stressed that talk and text do not always and directly enact or embody the overall power relations between groups: it is always the context that may interfere with, reinforce or otherwise transform such relationships.

### Mind control

If controlling the contexts and structures of text and talk is a first major form of the exercise of power, controlling people's minds through such discourse is an indirect but fundamental way to reproduce dominance and hegemony. Indeed, discourse control usually aims to control the intentions, plans, knowledge, opinions, attitudes and ideologies – as well as their consequent actions – of recipients. A socio-cognitive approach in CDA thus examines social structures of power through the analysis of the relations between discourse and cognition. Cognition is the necessary interface that links discourse as language use and social interaction with social situations and social structures (van Dijk, 2008b, 2014).

Specific discourse structures, such as topics, arguments, metaphor, lexical choice and rhetorical figures, among many other structures to be dealt with below, may influence the contents and structures of mental models in ways preferred by the speakers, as in most forms of interaction and communication, as we know from classical rhetoric as well as contemporary persuasion research (Dillard and Pfau, 2002; O'Keefe, 2002). If such discursive control over the mental models of recipients is in the best interest of the speakers or writers, and against the best interests of the recipients, then we have an instance of discursive power abuse usually called 'manipulation' (van Dijk, 2006).

Speakers of powerful groups may want to control not only *specific* knowledge and opinions represented in the subjective mental models of specific recipients – as is most typically the case in news reports and parliamentary debates – but

also the *generic* knowledge, attitudes and ideologies shared by whole groups or all citizens. By repeated political or media discourse about similar events, and by specific discourse moves of generalisation, they may condition the generalisation and abstraction of specific mental models to more general structures of knowledge and ideology, for instance about immigration, terrorism or the economic crisis.

Discursive control of specific situation models and shared generic social representations, such as socio-cultural knowledge as well as group attitudes and ideologies, depends not only on the persuasive structures of text and talk, but also on contextual conditions. Thus, recipients tend to accept the beliefs, knowledge and opinions of what they define as authoritative, trustworthy or credible sources, such as scholars, experts, professionals or reliable media. In some situations, participants are obliged to be recipients of a discourse (e.g. in educational and many job situations). Lessons, learning materials, job instructions and other discourse types in such cases may need to be attended to, interpreted and learned as intended by institutional or organisational authors. In many situations, there are no public discourses or media that may provide information from which alternative beliefs may be derived (Downing, 1984). Finally, recipients may not have the knowledge and beliefs needed to challenge the discourses or information they are exposed to.

Besides these contextual influences on interpretation, CDA especially focuses on the ways discourse structures may influence specific mental models and generic representations of the recipients, and especially how beliefs may thus be manipulated. Here are some well-known examples, among many, taken from my own research on dominant discourses on immigration (van Dijk, 1984, 1991, 1993):

- *Headlines and leads* of news reports express semantic macrostructures (main topics), as defined by the journalists, and thus may give rise to preferred macrostructures of mental models. A demonstration may thus be defined as a violation of the social order, or as a democratic right of the demonstrators. A violent attack may be comprehended as a form of resistance against the abuse of state power, or as a form of terrorism.
- *Implications and presuppositions* are powerful semantic properties of discourse to obliquely assert 'facts' that may not be true, as when politicians and the media focus on the 'violence' of demonstrators or the 'criminality' of minorities.
- *Metaphors* are powerful means to make abstract mental models more concrete. Thus, the abstract notion of immigration may be made more concrete, and hence more threatening, by using metaphors such as 'waves' of immigrants – thus creating fear among the other citizens of 'drowning' in immigrants.
- *The lexical expression* of mental models in the discourse of powerful speakers may influence not only the knowledge but also the opinions in the mental models of the recipients. Thus, immigrants may be labelled 'illegal' or 'undocumented' in political discourse, thus influencing public opinion on immigration.

- *Passive sentence structures and nominalisations* may be used to hide or downplay the violent or other negative actions of state agents (e.g. the military, the police) or ingroups (e.g. We, British). Thus, media or political discourse may speak about 'discrimination', without being very explicit about who discriminates against whom.

The theoretical framework sketched above for the discursive reproduction of power and domination thus links social structures of groups and institutions to their control of the structures of context, text and talk of communicative events, and indirectly to the influence of the personal models and the socially shared attitudes, ideologies and knowledge of individual recipients and whole groups. Personal and social cognition thus influenced may finally in turn control the social actions that are consistent with the interests of powerful groups in general, and of the symbolic elites in particular, thus closing the circle of the discursive reproduction of power and domination.

### Discourses of domination

The power of dominant groups not only shows in their control of the discourse of others, but also in their own discourse. Studies of social styles have paid extensive attention to how language and discourse may vary and index power differences between speakers and recipients, such as:

- *Morphology*. Men may use diminutives when addressing women as a way to belittle them.
- *Lexicon*. The paradigmatic case of domination is the use of racist slurs when talking to or about ethnic minorities (Essed, 1991; van Dijk, 1984, 1987), for instance as a legitimization of neighbourhood crimes (Stokoe and Edwards, 2007).
- *Pronouns*. Power differences, deference and politeness between speakers and recipients are typically marked by pronouns and special morphology (Brown and Gilman, 1960).
- *Syntax and lexicon*. In rape trials, passive syntax and euphemistic lexical items may be used by men to mitigate their responsibility for their violence against women (Ehrlich, 2001); male-controlled mass media may similarly mitigate male violence in news reports.
- *Metaphor*. As is the case for mitigating syntax and lexicon, metaphors may also be used in court to suggest that rape victims may be lying (Luchjenbroers and Aldrige, 2007). Carol Cohn (1987) shows how sex and death metaphors characterise the discourse of the military.
- *Storytelling*. Stories in many ways index social identities (De Fina et al., 2006) and may also be used to show power, as when female managers may tell stories to show how tough they can be as leaders.
- *Conversation*. Many properties of talk show differences of power or status, for instance in turn-taking, sequencing (e.g. opening and closing), interruptions, or topic initiation and change (see, for example, Hutchby, 1996) – studied especially



for gender differences (see below). Depending on culture and context, the more powerful speakers may speak first (but not in the African language Wolof, where lower-ranking speakers must speak first).

These and many other properties not only characterise dominant discourses as such, but also are especially powerful because of their social effects and the control of the minds and actions of recipients.

## Research in critical discourse analysis

After the theoretical account, defining a critical approach to discourse, we now briefly review some research in CDA. Although many discourse studies dealing with any aspect of power, domination and social inequality have not been explicitly conducted under the label of CDA, we shall nevertheless refer to some of these studies.

### Gender inequality

One vast field of critical research on discourse and language that was not initially carried out within a CDA perspective is that of gender. In many ways, feminist work on discourse has become paradigmatic for much CDA, especially since much of this work explicitly deals with social inequality and domination, so much so that there is now a branch of feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005; Wodak, 1997).

Whereas research on discourse and gender initially focused on assumed gender differences of text and talk (such as the use of diminutives or tag questions by women), a more critical approach paid special attention to male access and domination in interactions, such as interruptions and the control of topic introduction and change.

Current research emphasises that gender differences (if any) are closely related to other aspects of the social and communicative context – such as the social class, status, or role of the participants (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; see also van Dijk, 2008a). Incidentally, it is remarkable that while critical discourse studies of gender and race are numerous, there is still very little critical research on dominant and resistant social class discourses outside of sociolinguistics and stylistics (but see, for example, Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2000).

### Ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, nationalism and racism

Many studies on ethnic and racial inequality reveal a remarkable similarity among the stereotypes, prejudices and other forms of verbal derogation across discourse

types, media and national boundaries. For example, in a vast research programme from the early 1980s, we examined how minorities and ethnic relations in Europe and the Americas are represented in conversation, everyday stories, news reports, textbooks, parliamentary debates, corporate discourse, and scholarly text and talk (van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1993, 2005, 2009; Wodak and van Dijk, 2000). We found common topics of difference, deviation and threat, as well as stereotypical story structures, conversational features (such as hesitations and repairs in mentioning Others), semantic moves such as disclaimers ('We have nothing against blacks, but ...', etc.) and negative lexical descriptions of Others (as 'illegals'). The aim of these projects was to show how discourse expresses and reproduces underlying prejudices about Others in the social and political context.

The major conclusion of this project is that racism is a complex system of social domination, reproduced by everyday discriminatory social practices. Since the symbolic elites control public discourse, they are the ones who are most directly responsible for the discursive reproduction of racism in society.

Especially since the 1990s, many other studies on the discourse of racism, anti-Semitism, nationalism and xenophobia have been published (see, for example, Billig, 1995; Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Foster, 2013; Henry and Tator, 2002; Hill, 2008; Jäger, 1992; Reisigl and Wodak, 2000, 2001; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). In the 2010s, many of these illiberal and anti-democratic tendencies have only increased (e.g. in populist and nationalist extremist right-wing developments in many countries) and have received ample attention in CDA studies (see, for example, Wodak et al., 2013). The same is true for the increasing interest in dissident and anti-racist discourse, often on social media, such as the Arab Spring (Guzman, 2016) or Black Lives Matter in the USA (see, for example, Stewart et al., 2017).

### Traditional media discourse

Critical analysis of traditional media discourse had and has a central place in CDA, but it was initially introduced in critical communication studies. The critical tone was set by a series of 'Bad News' studies by the Glasgow University Media Group (1976) on features of TV reporting, such as in the coverage of various issues (e.g. industrial disputes (strikes), the Falklands (Malvinas) war and the media coverage of AIDS). At the same time the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, directed by Stuart Hall, made significant contributions to the critical study of media messages and images, their role in 'policing the crisis', and the reproduction of racism (see, for example, Hall et al., 1980). In a similar critical spirit, Cohen (1980) studied the 'moral panic' about the mods and the rockers as (re)produced by the British tabloid press.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the first critical study of the media in linguistics was introduced by Roger Fowler et al. (1979). These authors showed, among other things, how the very structures of sentences, such as the use of actives or passives, may enhance the negative representation of outgroup actors, such as black youths, and downplay the negative actions of ingroups or the authorities, such as the police (see also Van Dijk, 1988, 1991). Fowler's later critical studies of the media continued this tradition, but also paid tribute to the British cultural studies paradigm that defines news not as a reflection of reality, but as a product shaped by political, economic and cultural forces (Fowler, 1991). More than much other critical work on the media, he also focuses on the linguistic tools for such a critical study, such as the analysis of transitivity in syntax, lexical structure, modality and speech acts.

In the last two decades, CDA approaches to the media have multiplied. These studies investigate not only the social and communicative contexts of news and other press or broadcast genres, as is the case in critical media studies, but also relate these to a systematic analysis of the structures of media discourse, such as the lexicon, syntax, topics, metaphor, coherence, actor description, social identities, genres, modality, presupposition, rhetorical figures, interaction, news schemas and multimodal analysis of images, among many others (for an introduction, see, for example, Richardson, 2007). These critical analyses are applied to the coverage of pressing social and political issues, such as the Gulf and Iraq wars, the war on drugs and terrorism (especially the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center), on the one hand, and globalisation, sexism, racism and Islamophobia, on the other hand, but from a more discourse-analytical point of view (see also the papers published in the journal *Discourse and Society*).

### Social media discourse

The last two decades have seen the emergence of many types of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (see for example, Altheide, 2016; Bruns et al., 2016; Fuchs, 2014; Hunsinger and Senft, 2014; Mandiberg, 2012). Although many publications on social media are dedicated to the role of social media in marketing and commerce, (critical) discourse studies have also found a rich field of research on social media (see, for example, Jones et al., 2015; Kalyango and Kopytowska, 2014; Page, 2012, 2018; Seargeant and Tagg, 2014; Tannen and Trester, 2013; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011; Zappavigna, 2012).

Theoretically, social media represent a challenge to the theoretical framework of elite discourse and domination summarised above. Whereas ordinary citizens had a marginal role in the production and diffusion of traditional media, such as

newspapers, radio and television, today they may be speakers and writers, heard and read by thousands and even millions, thus acquiring a new type of power and influence unthinkable just a few years ago.

Critical analysis in this case may be formulated in terms of *resistance* against the many forms of discursive domination described above; that is, as a form of counter-power, for instance in the comments section of online newspapers, or in Facebook or Twitter posts. As with all kinds of power, their influence increases with organisation and cooperation, as is the case for the internet presence of social movements and their websites, blogs and Facebook accounts. In this case, social media discourse has been welcomed as a new form of democratic resistance against (media and other) domination and inequality (Askinus and Østergaard, 2014; Carr et al., 2018; Castells, 2012; Çoban, 2016; Gordon, 2017; Jacobs and Spierings, 2016; Lievrouw, 2011; Loader and Mercea, 2012; Melgaço and Monaghan, 2018).

On the other hand, social media may also be used and manipulated by elite groups, organisations and institutions, such as governments, business corporations (especially huge new media organisations) and political parties, in their own interest and against the interests of ordinary citizens (Kaul and Chaudhri, 2017; Mintz, 2012).

Generalised access to social media not only facilitates democratic communication against many forms of power abuse, but also access of undemocratic, racist, sexist or nationalist groups, as has been the case of many forms of extremist right-wing populist movements in many parts of the world (see, for example, Atton, 2006; Ekman, 2015; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).

More recent CDA research has thus focused on the study of the many structures and strategies of these forms of illiberal discourse and its influence on the knowledge, attitudes and ideologies of the population at large, as well as their inevitable social and political consequences, for instance in the election of authoritarian, racist or sexist leaders, as has been the case in the USA, Brazil, Hungary, Italy, Turkey and other countries at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century (see, for example, Block and Negrine, 2017; Padovani, 2016; Krizsán, 2013; Lockhart, 2019; Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016; see also Wodak, 2015).

New theory and analyses are needed to account for these new forms of access to public discourse and the public sphere, again combining systematic discourse analysis and contexts of access, and socio-cognitive analysis of knowledge, attitudes and ideologies on the one hand, and social and political structures on the other hand. Thus, with the huge growth of the scope of the social media and the new technologies, the fields of discourse and discourse analysis have also increased tremendously. Indeed, ongoing and future CDA research on social

media discourse would require a new paradigm, new theories and new methodologies, ignored in this chapter.

### Political discourse

Since CDA is especially interested in the critical study of power abuse – and its resistance – it is not surprising that political discourse has been a central focus in CDA, even before CDA was used as a label, for instance in the early work of Paul Chilton on the nuclear arms debate, Orwellian language and security metaphors (Chilton, 2004; Chilton and Schäffner, 2002).

Across many countries, issues, genres, empirical studies and methods, it has been Wodak and her collaborators who have played a leading role in the CDA approach to political discourse. In a vast number of books and articles, first in German and later in English, she examined anti-Semitism, racism and nationalism, as well as the political discourse of and about Waldheim and Haider, and the everyday ‘making’ of politics in Brussels (see, for example, Wodak, 1989, 2009; Wodak and van Dijk, 2000).

Fairclough’s studies of political discourse, often conducted from a political-economic perspective, have paid detailed attention to issues of globalisation (Fairclough, 2006) and British politics, such as the discourse of New Labour (Fairclough, 2000) – after his foundational studies of language and power (Fairclough, 1989) and CDA (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough’s approach to CDA especially emphasises the need to relate discourse structures and discursive practices to social and political structures at the macro level.

### Professional and institutional power

The CDA focus on domination and resistance implies special interest in institutional and organisational discourse, as is the case for politics and the mass media, as well as in the discourse of members of communities and social groups. There are of course many other social domains in which professional and institutional power and power abuse have been critically studied from a discourse-analytical perspective (besides more sociological approaches), such as:

- institutional discourse in general (Bhatia and Evangelisti Allori, 2011; Geluykens and Kraft, 2008; Mayr, 2008; McHoul and Rapley, 2001; Thornborrow, 2002)
- text and talk in the courtroom (Shuy, 2015)
- bureaucratic discourse (Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996)
- medical discourse (Briggs and Martini-Briggs, 2003; Charteris-Black and Seale, 2010)
- educational discourse (Rogers, 2003)

- academic and scientific discourse (Bonnafous and Temmar, 2013; Duszak and Kowalski, 2015)
- corporate and organisational discourse (Fox and Fox; 2004; Grant et al., 2004; Mayr, 2008; Mumby; 1993)
- discourse of the unions (Reshev and Keim, 2016).

In all these cases, power and dominance are associated with specific social domains (politics, media, law, education, science, etc.), their professional elites and institutions, and the rules and routines that form the background of the everyday discursive reproduction of power in such domains and institutions. The victims or targets of such power are usually the public or citizens at large, the 'masses', clients, subjects, the audience, students, and other groups that are dependent on institutional and organisational power. Unfortunately, their discourses of resistance and dissent have been much less studied in CDA.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that critical discourse analyses deal with the relationship between discourse, domination and dissent. We have also sketched the complex theoretical framework needed to analyse discourse and power, and provided a glimpse of the many ways in which power and domination are reproduced by text and talk.

Yet, several methodological and theoretical gaps remain. First, the cognitive interface between discourse structures and those of the local and global social context is seldom made explicit and usually only appears in terms of the notions of knowledge and ideology (van Dijk, 1998, 2014). Thus, despite a large number of empirical studies on discourse and power, the details of the multidisciplinary theory of CDA that should relate discourse and action with cognition and society are still on the agenda.

Second, there is still a gap between more linguistically oriented studies of text and talk, and the various social and political approaches. The first often ignore concepts and theories in sociology and political science on power abuse and inequality, whereas the second seldom engage in detailed discourse analysis. Integration of various approaches is therefore very important to arrive at a satisfactory form of multidisciplinary CDA.

Third, there are still large areas of critical research that remain virtually unexplored, such as the study of dominant or resistant social class discourse, as well as many other discourse genres.

Finally, we need a more explicit analysis of the very notion of what it means to be 'critical' in CDA, and more generally in scholarship (e.g. in terms of legitimacy,

human rights and the basic democratic values of equality and justice). It is ultimately in those terms that CDA may and should act as a force against the discursive abuse of power.

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### Key concepts

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**Context** Whereas context is traditionally defined as the communicative, social, cultural and political situation in which a discourse is functioning, it is here defined as the *subjective mental context model* of the participants of this situation. In order to speak or write appropriately, language users need to adapt the structures, meanings and functions of their text or talk to the communicative situation, as they construe or interpret it in their mental context models of that situation.

**Critical discourse studies** Critical discourse studies (CDS), also known as critical discourse analysis (CDA), is an approach to discourse and an academic movement that specifically focuses on discursive power abuse (domination) and resistance. CDA analyses discourse structures and relates them to social and political structures of social inequality via a socio-cognitive interface, such as knowledge and ideologies. CDA or CDS is not a method, but a multidisciplinary approach that uses many different methods of the humanities and social sciences.

**Mental models** Mental models are the subjective mental representation of people's experiences of specific events or plans of action, stored in episodic or autobiographical memory. Discourses about such events, such as personal stories or news reports, are expressions of the mental models of language users. Language users also construe mental models of the communicative situation in which they participate, such as a conversation, writing a news report or reading the newspaper.

**Social cognition** Social cognition consists of the mental representations shared by the members of a group or community, such as socio-cultural knowledge, attitudes or ideologies. Both the personal and the public production and comprehension of discourse, as well as social interaction and communication in general, presuppose these forms of collective (social, political or cultural) cognition, as they are (slowly) acquired by the members of these communities.

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# 16

## ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY AS ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Lise Justesen

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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A theoretical approach	329
Human and non-human actors	330
Network	331
Translation processes	332
Analytical principles	333
Collating empirical material and presenting analyses	335
Empirical example 1: UK cervical screening programme	335
Empirical example 2: project management in a construction project	336
Conclusion	341
Key concepts	342
Further reading	342
References	343

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Actor-network theory (ANT) is an interdisciplinary approach to research, sufficiently well established now to be called a research tradition. ANT scholars emphasise empirical work, and the perspective is particularly well known for its focus on *translation processes* and the role played by *non-human actors* in different empirical settings. The counterintuitive concept of non-human actors, which is expanded upon below, draws attention to materiality, an aspect that ANT claims has been neglected or misrepresented in much social science. Non-human actors may include artefacts, technologies, documents and biological materials such as microbes, plants or animals (Latour, 2005: 10; Sayes, 2014). In ANT the social phenomena we study are never merely social phenomena. The social, the natural and the material are not viewed as separate domains but as entangled in specific constellations in practice. This basic ANT premise affects the ways in which empirical material is analysed, whether it consists of interviews, observations, documents or something else because the purpose of the analysis is usually to trace and follow these entanglements as they unfold in practice.

The chapter starts with a general introduction to ANT before turning to empirical examples that illustrate how ANT-inspired analyses can be conducted in practice. ANT is not a strictly defined research programme, but a multi-faceted approach that has taken several different directions, and ANT key concepts are still developing and changing (Law, 2009; Michael, 2017). Nevertheless, a number of shared basic ANT premises and concepts can be defined, and these premises and concepts have consequences for analytical work. The chapter focuses particularly on *human and non-human actors*; *networks*, including the neologism *actor-network*; and *translation*. These are all key concepts in what we might call classic ANT (Michael, 2017) and concepts that have proven particularly productive in empirical analyses. To illustrate how ANT can inspire analytical work in the social sciences the chapter refers to two empirical examples. The first example draws on an article by Singleton and Michael (1993) on the UK cervical screening programme. The second empirical example, which is referred to in more depth, stems from a research project about organisation and project management in the construction industry<sup>1</sup> that had an overall focus on how technologies and materiality interact with organisational processes.

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<sup>1</sup> The research project was based at the Center for Management in the Construction Industry in the Department of Organization at Copenhagen Business School. Part of the data collection was done in collaboration with Annie Bekke Kjær. The chapter draws on publications that emerged from the project: Justesen et al. (2009), Justesen and Mouritsen (2009), Tryggestad et al. (2013) and Sage et al. (2016).



## A theoretical approach

ANT emerged in the 1980s, when Bruno Latour and Michel Callon (France) and John Law (UK), working both in parallel and as part of various collaborative projects, developed a set of concepts and analytical approaches that would later come to be known as actor-network theory. Originally, ANT emerged from science and technology studies. Although many ANT-inspired social science scholars still have an empirical interest in this area, ANT has subsequently inspired many other fields of research, such as accounting (Justesen and Mouritsen, 2011, 2018), organisation studies (Czarniawska, 2016), economic sociology and social studies of finance (MacKenzie, 2009), human geography (Whatmore, 2006), and design and architecture (Yaneva, 2009). From the outset, ANT has been collective and interdisciplinary, and it is telling that both Latour and Callon have worked in different disciplinary fields. Latour has studied philosophy, anthropology and sociology, while Callon, who now holds a professorship in sociology, has a background in physics and economics (Blok and Elgaard Jensen, 2011: 7–9).

The collective nature of the project, and the fact that the acronym ANT was only attached to the work of these and other authors afterwards, make it difficult to pinpoint precisely when ANT emerged (Law, 1999). Many consider Latour and Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* (1979) an important precursor to ANT because its focus on scientific practice and detailed ethnographic studies of laboratory work is reflected in later ANT studies. Others contend that ANT began with the article "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan" (Callon and Latour, 1981), which introduced several of the concepts, including *translation* and *black box*, that would later come to define ANT (Czarniawska, 2016). This text also questioned established dichotomies in the social sciences, such as micro–macro and actor–structure, another defining trait for ANT.

Although Latour also identifies this article as part of ANT's origins, he claims that actor-network theory took its real starting-point with the publication of three texts in the latter half of the 1980s by Callon (1986), Law (1986) and Latour (1988) himself (Latour, 2005: 10). These three texts all incorporated non-human actors as a key element in their analyses: "It was at this point that non-humans – microbes, scallops, rocks and ships – presented themselves to social theory in a new way" (Latour, 2005: 10). This concept of the non-human helped researchers to direct their attention to what non-humans *do* in the empirical settings they are studying, and this particular orientation has become a key aspect of ANT that distinguishes it from other related research approaches.

ANT is a variant of constructivism. Yet, it is also based on a realistic ontology, in the sense that reality is, *at the same time*, seen as objective, "out there" and constructed. Latour has repeatedly stressed that this version of constructivism



is to be clearly distinguished from social constructivism. When ANT asserts, for example, that facts are constructed, this implies an analytic interest in accounting for *how* a solid – and objective – part of reality is composed in a way that is real but could have been different. According to Latour, such an approach is markedly different from social constructivism, which seeks instead to identify what is behind this “solid reality” and explain it via something else – the social – on which it is built (Latour, 2005: 91). Latour expresses himself somewhat cryptically and provocatively when he insists on describing ANT as realistic, and the reality analysed as objective, but the key point is that neither reality nor the explanations are to be found under the surface or behind the backs of the actors involved in our studies. The critique also reflects the fact that the social is not accorded privileged status in ANT.

In line with other constructivist approaches, ANT builds on the anti-essentialist premise that characteristics are not inherent in either social or material phenomena but are a consequence of specific relations of which they form a part in special situations. It is crucial to grasp this premise in order to understand the key concepts of “actor”, “network” and “translation”.

## Human and non-human actors

Actors and action play a significant role in ANT, but who are the actors, and what does ANT mean by “agency”? Latour defines an actor as “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference” (Latour, 2005: 71). This definition is inspired by semiotics, an influence explicitly articulated by Law (1999, 2009), who calls ANT *a semiotics of materiality*. As in semiotics, the relational aspect enjoys analytical primacy in ANT and the concept of the actor is detached from usual connotations of intentionality and subjectivity. To avoid misunderstandings, early ANT texts, in particular, often referred to “actants” or entities instead of actors. At the same time ANT is not simply semiotics, but a semiotics *of materiality* because it puts emphasis not only on language but also on materiality. This is the context in which the concept of non-human actors should be understood.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the focus on non-human actors is a defining element of ANT, which leads to an analytical focus on materiality and technologies. The non-human is considered an actor, rather than something to which humans ascribe meaning (Latour, 2005: 10). ANT is interested in what actors *do*, not what they mean. For Latour, it is a matter of taking the non-human seriously as actors that make a difference in practice.

However, the actor never acts alone. Action is always collective, distributed and a network effect (Law, 1992). In this sense, the actor’s identity and agency are always

a consequence of the relations of which the actor is part. It is in this light that we must understand the concept of the actor-network from which the perspective takes its name. Every actor is *also* a network. To illustrate this point, Law provides a simple yet illustrative example: “If you took away my computer, my colleagues, my office, my books, my desk, my telephone I wouldn’t be a sociologist writing papers, delivering lectures, and producing ‘knowledge’. I’d be something quite other – and the same is true for all of us” (Law, 1992: 383–384). In this sense, the sociologist is a heterogeneous network, whose actions are woven into a network of socio-technical relationships. Non-human actors (like human actors) do not have an inherent essence, but still, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, ANT argues that materiality can imbue relationships with a higher degree of stability. This is reflected in another example by Law: prison walls prevent inmates from escaping, but this also depends on the additional effect of prison officers keeping an eye on inmates and making sure they do not break down the walls. The walls make a real difference and are quite effective, but they do not determine what actions are possible. In some cases, escape is still possible (Law, 1992: 387).

## Network

Like the concept of the actor, the importance of the network concept is also reflected in the name “actor-network theory”. However, the term ‘network’ not only has an intuitive appeal but has been massively popularised with the growth of the internet. According to Latour, this has led to so many misunderstandings that he has, at times, been sceptical about whether the concept is still productive (Latour, 1999).

First, as Law’s examples above illustrate, networks are always heterogeneous and consist of *both* the material and the social, which are entangled in practice (Law, 1992). Secondly, as Latour points out, “network” is an analytical concept, rather than a description of something out there in the world that has a particular network-like form (Latour, 2005: 131). The concept of the network is useful because it helps us trace tangible links between actors in given situations. Thirdly, the hyphen in actor-network should be taken seriously and understood correctly. It does not reflect the classic dualism between actor and structure, but should be read precisely as a challenge to this dichotomy. On the one hand, the network is created by and consists of heterogeneous actors, who are temporarily linked together as a result of specific “translation processes” in more or less stable constellations. On the other hand, the actions of the actors are effects of their specific network. This means that each network is also an actor, and each actor a network.

## Translation processes

In line with other constructivist perspectives, ANT scholars are interested in processes of becoming and how phenomena are contingently constructed in practice. The black box metaphor was often used in early ANT to capture the fact that many phenomena, including scientific facts and well-established technologies, are seen as non-controversial and taken for granted in everyday life (Callon and Latour, 1981). The metaphor stems from cybernetics and describes a situation in which we only know input and output, but nothing about the complex processes in between. The messy process, epitomised by uncertainty, hesitation, controversy and competition among the many different actors involved in creating it, is left out of sight and largely forgotten (Latour, 1987). The basic idea of stability as a temporary and potentially fragile result of complex processes is still a recurring one in ANT and is also sometimes encapsulated in the broader term “order” (e.g. Law, 1992, 2009).

ANT scholars often study the processes that lead to temporary order and stabilised phenomena such as a scientific fact, a technology, or an organisation. In some cases, the point is to open the black boxes that surround us, but often ANT researchers are concerned with following processes *before* the phenomenon finally stabilises. They study things “in the making” and “in action” (Latour, 1987).

To capture such processes analytically, Latour and Callon developed the analytical concept of “translation”, inspired by the French philosopher Michel Serres (e.g. Callon and Latour, 1981; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). Even though the concept plays a key role in ANT, it is somewhat difficult to pin down, as it is defined and applied in slightly different ways in different texts and at different times. Nevertheless, a general definition is possible.

Translation is about creating links and establishing equivalences between elements that are not directly related and do not resemble each other (Law, 2009). Analytically, it is about studying *how* links and equivalence are created between different actors and how they come to form a cohesive order despite their heterogeneity. It is through translation that specific phenomena take shape and a temporary order is established. The links created are neither socially determined nor naturally given, and could always have been established differently. Translation concerns processes because the links are created through displacement and transformation. Translation is always also a transformation – the actors form and change the network, and the network forms and changes the actors.

This concept of translation was prominent in classic ANT, when the focus was often on how specific actors act as translators, who actively translate other actors, and how this makes other actors do the same. Callon and Latour (1981: 279) defined the concept as follows: “By translation we understand all the negotiations,

intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force.” As the quote shows, translation is also about relative strengths and about actors struggling to be the ones who establish a strong network. To capture this analytically, the translation process is sometimes broken down into sub-strategies or tactics such as *negotiations*, *calculations* or *acts of persuasion*, as in the above quote. In other texts, translation is presented as analytical moments that describe how some actors translate other actors (*problematisation*, *‘interessement’*, *enrolment* and *mobilisation*), and in doing so eventually develop the strength to act and speak on behalf of others (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987). Those actors who succeed in translating others and making them allies in their networks achieve the status of spokespeople. Callon’s (1986) article about scientists, fishermen and scallops in St. Brieuc Bay in France is an oft-quoted example of an analysis that applies the translation concept in this way.

However, translation is not only about bringing actors together but also about spreading them and creating new networks. For example, when a scientific fact or a technology is established, it will rarely spread through society in its existing form. It will change in the hands of other people and depend on what new actors do with it (Latour, 1987). In this sense, the translation – and therefore the transformation – continues when phenomena are enrolled in new relationships.

Critics have accused early ANT of tending to focus on how powerful, individual strategic actors manipulate others to achieve dominance and close black boxes (Star, 1991). However, it is important to point out that strength is never a characteristic that actors possess in advance of the process. Strength stems from the network (Latour, 1986). In more recent ANT, there is less analytic focus on what individual actors do to enrol other actors in the network, but there is still a clear analytical interest in tracing how links between heterogeneous elements are created in practice. In Latour’s more recent works, translation is still a key concept, but he uses the term “sociology of associations” instead of “translation sociology” (Latour, 2005). This reflects that activities that create links are still important, but these are considered decentred to a higher degree and there is less of a focus on the tactics of the individual actors.

## Analytical principles

It might be argued that ANT is more of a method than a theory. Although it is possible to identify and define some underlying and shared premises, it is only once it has been deployed in real empirical case studies that ANT actually has substance

(Law, 2009: 41). In that sense, ANT is first and foremost a certain sensibility and a conceptual toolbox that enables the researcher to conduct empirical studies in novel ways (Law, 2009: 42). Still, ANT concepts and tenets can be translated into a series of principles that can inspire the analysis of specific empirical material.

The first principle relates to anti-essentialism, which has clear consequences for the analysis. If an analysis is based on the premise that characteristics are not inherent, but a consequence of relations, then the analytical focus must be on mapping the relations between different actors. In this context, it is important to recall that an actor in ANT makes a *visible* difference, and leaves behind tangible traces that can be identified in the empirical material. As Latour (2005: 53) says: "An invisible agency that makes no difference produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is *not* an agency .... In ANT you are not permitted to say: 'No one mentions it. I have no proof, but I know there is some hidden actor at work here behind the scene.'"

Secondly, ANT is basically an agnostic approach. It does not privilege certain actors in advance, but keeps an open mind about who or what will play an important role, and how this role will be played out in interaction with other actors. This can never be decided *a priori*, but only through empirical analysis. This principle is related to the principle of generalised symmetry (Callon, 1986), which involves using the same vocabulary in the analysis regardless of what entities are being studied. In other words, the same set of concepts is used to describe both human and non-human actors.

Thirdly, ANT assumes that change is the norm and stability a temporary state that calls for explanation. This means that the researcher should not only identify and map relations, but also be interested in *how* relations change over time and how these transformations have consequences for the phenomenon studied. This is expressed in the sloganeering precepts "follow the actors" and "follow translations" (Latour, 2005).

Fourthly, controversies are often a good starting-point for an analysis because these types of situation help to illustrate how translation processes play out through a series of strategies and tactics, and how phenomena that appear ordered are established in practice (Latour, 2005).

Yet, these general guiding principles give rise to practical questions about *which* actors and translations to follow. Given the broad definition of "actor", the number of potential actors seems endless, and each actor is woven into a network of relationships that points in many different directions. So how do we know which actors and relations to follow? According to Latour, there is no clear answer to this question. Any analysis necessarily begins *in medias res* (Latour, 2005: 123) – in the middle of things. The analytical boundaries are always the result of a choice that

may well have been different had the researcher begun the empirical work earlier or later on, or had s/he chosen to follow other actors. In this way, the researcher and his/her text also become actors that translate the material in a way that could have been different.

## Collating empirical material and presenting analyses

Ethnographic studies and fieldwork have traditionally played a major role in ANT. This is not surprising because the purpose of ANT is usually to study phenomena in practice and in the making (e.g. scientific practice in laboratories). Still, ANT is not limited to this form of empirical material, but has a fairly broad view of what might serve as data. This may include not just fieldwork and participant observations, but also interviews and documents, including historical sources, numbers and pictures. Again, practical decisions are made on the basis of what makes sense in the specific analysis and, in particular, based on the direction indicated by visible traces that the researcher encounters.

ANT focuses on processes, and as such it is also not surprising that the analyses are often presented in a narrative form, capable of encapsulating temporality, processes and the multiplicity of actors who make a difference. A good ANT analysis is a text that clearly *shows* all of these elements. Latour (2005: 128) puts it like this: “I would define a good account as one that traces a network .... A good ANT account is a narrative or description or a proposition where all actors do something and don’t just sit there.” For Latour, there is no fundamental difference between description and analysis, and he is critical of those scholars who privilege explanations and denigrate analyses that, in their view, resemble “mere” descriptions. In Latour’s view, a good, rich description *is* a good analysis.

### Empirical example 1: UK cervical screening programme

Researchers in very different fields have been inspired by ANT in their analytical work of a varied empirical material. Singleton and Michael (1993), for example, analysed how the UK cervical screening programme was set up (and in time black-boxed) as a programme that brought together various actors (women, doctors, cervical cells) in new ways. Singleton and Michael show how document analysis and interviews supplement each other in an analysis of how an actor-network was established and maintained, and also how it was challenged and changed over time. Their analysis starts by showing how different actors were defined and linked

in new ways in official documents, and how this had significant consequences for women and general practitioners, among others. The authors show in empirical detail how these texts played a significant role in the establishment of the cervical screening programme, which they term an actor-network. In the documents, the screening programme appears to be an unproblematic and straightforward procedure, in which all women should take part, and in which the GP plays a crucial role as the person carrying out the test. The analysis shows how the documents played a key role in establishing the programme as a black box. At the same time, Singleton and Michael's analysis also shows that this actor-network changed over time and was continually problematised by other actors in the network when it was translated into practice. This demonstrates the fragility and ambivalence that, according to ANT, is present in every actor-network. The second part of the analysis is based on interviews with GPs. Singleton and Michael (1993: 241) explain their choice of empirical focus as follows:

In exploring the intricacies of marginality and ambivalence in actor-networks, we could have examined the role of any of the actants – laboratory, technicians, feminist commentators, women, recipients, health promotion officers. However, we will focus on the GP's role primarily for the following reasons. GPs constitute a prime conduit between numerous actors.

On the one hand, the quote shows that the researchers were making a contingent choice when they chose to "follow" a certain actor instead of others. On the other hand, the choice was not random but empirically based, as it is often the actors who are central nodes in the network who are the most interesting to follow. When Singleton and Michael zoomed in on the GPs' practices, they found that the actor-network was, in fact, expanded with actors not revealed by their document analysis. In this way, Singleton and Michael focused on how the doctors helped to maintain, problematise and translate the screening programme in practice.

In line with ANT's symmetrical approach, the authors included both human and non-human actors in their analysis of the interview material, and identified a number of important actors, including the speculum, the women's very different cervixes and a system of rewards that set targets for the proportion of the female population each doctor should test. All of these actors made a difference.

## Empirical example 2: project management in a construction project

Another empirical example that illustrates in more detail how ANT may inspire analyses is taken from a study of project management and organisation in the

construction industry in Scandinavia. Both in research and in practice, a series of normative and rationalised precepts govern the ideal form of project management. Yet, there is often considerable distance between these idealised descriptions and practice (Tryggestad et al., 2013). The starting-point for our study was an interest in project management in practice. The research project began as an explorative study of the relationship between companies, projects and project management in the construction industry. We chose a developer company for our case study. Halfway through an initial interview with one of the project managers from the case company, the subject turned to a project for which he had overall responsibility. The question we asked was: “Can you tell us about some of the challenges you have to struggle with in this project?” It may have been an open question, but there was also a clear pre-understanding that project management generally involves problems to be “struggled with” and as such paves the way for the respondent to talk about the problematic aspects of the project.

The following quite long excerpt from the transcribed interview shows his answer and our subsequent dialogue:

*Project manager:* Well, it's all much the same as ever. There are always challenges. But this particular project has thrown up something that will make you laugh. We've got a ... frog out there [*interviewers laugh*] – the moor frog [*everybody laughs*]. It's a really funny story that's worth spending five minutes on because it's a challenge we've never encountered before. We bought [name of the site] and started to look at the ground on which all these homes were to be built. There were two waterholes [on the site], but it was some rush or grass like stuff .... In fact, you couldn't see them if you didn't know they were there. And actually, we didn't know. But then some people with very green mindsets thought they should be preserved. ...

So there's a rule that says that if a waterhole is more than 90m<sup>2</sup>, it's automatically protected. You can't build on them. And that's fine. So we asked the county council for an exemption, and it was granted. But people weren't happy and appealed to the Environmental Board of Appeal. After a long wait, the Board upheld their appeal and said the county couldn't grant us an exemption. So we couldn't start after all. At the same time, we were also told that the moor frog lives out there as well .... The funny thing is that it's protected by an EU directive because it's an endangered species in some EU countries. ... So these Green activists made a big thing out of saying: “The moor frog ... [*bangs on the table*] ... is protected and should be free to live out there. We don't think you should be allowed to build anything ... [*interviewers laugh*] ... because each frog needs about 1,000m<sup>2</sup> of



living space [*interviewers laugh*]. Then they do well – really well”. We didn’t let ourselves be fobbed off with that and fought back. But then there are rules that make it possible to keep on filing complaints with the Environmental Board of Appeal and this had a delaying effect on the construction process. It was clear to us that this process could go on for years before it would be decided if we could obtain approval to move these frogs or not. ...

So, we ended up turning things around, saying “ok”, instead of fighting, they [the frogs] should be allowed to live there. But we must build anyway, so we need to know something about how this kind of frog would like to live. Then we ... recruited the country’s leading moor frog experts as our advisors. They told us all about the frog and agreed to take the job. Partly so that the frogs would be able to live and thrive there when we were finished, but also because during the building phase ... a frog like that, it lives in thickets. It doesn’t live in the waterhole. It’s only during breeding season – about one month a year – that they might cross the area where diggers are working, or where building is underway. Each time we start doing something we have to bear in mind that the frogs are there. So we need to sit down with the advisers and find out ... “Let’s go there ... the frogs live in the thickets up there ... but at this time of year ... and how does this fit with ...” [*everybody laughs*]. There is a particular time schedule for handling the frogs. When it is their breeding season, they want to use the waterhole. Then a frog fence will be erected to keep them on the trail. There is a frog fence where they exit the waterhole, so they don’t escape. Then there will be a bucket dug into a hole in the ground and the frogs will fall into it. Then every morning before sunrise, the frog expert arrives to count if all the frogs are there. ...

There are corridors where they [the frogs] can wander, and in case they can’t wander there, we have built a tunnel under the road. There are a lot of challenges. ...

*Interviewer:* Did you meet with them? I mean the environmentalists ...

*Project manager:* Yeah ... we [did] but ... it didn’t go very well. It’s two different worlds.

Prior to the interview, we knew very little about this specific building project, and so the project manager’s answer came as a surprise to us. However, the fact that he raised the frog issue when asked about challenges for project management led us to look at the incident more closely.

Given the agnosticism of actor-network theory, we adopted an open approach to the actors that could make a crucial difference to the project management. In this case, a key actor turned out to be the frogs on the building site and we

thought it would be interesting to focus on these non-human actors. We conducted a week of fieldwork on the building site in question. During this fieldwork, we shadowed another project manager at work on the site (formal and informal meetings, tours of the site, time spent in his office, etc.), taking field notes as we went along. Additionally, we conducted nine qualitative interviews and collated a range of documents relevant to the frog issue (Sage et al., 2016). These documents constituted a significant part of the empirical material. Although the interview referred to in this chapter, including the excerpt above, constitutes only a small part of the overall empirical material, it serves to illustrate how the larger analysis was approached, and how ANT inspired this analysis.

We employed several specific and sometimes quite simple tools in the analysis of the overall empirical material. This helped us to organise the material which enabled the analysis. First, and largely based on the documents gathered, we reconstructed a timeline on which we marked what we identified as significant events in the process. Translations are processes, and as such always have a temporal aspect. The timeline provided an overview of the changes and displacements. It became a skeleton on which to assemble the narrative form used in the final presentation of the analysis (Tryggstad et al., 2013; Sage et al., 2016). Looking at the excerpt from the interview above, the project manager mentioned several of the events that we studied in more detail and added to our timeline. These included the project management becoming aware of the presence of the waterholes and later of the frogs; asking the county council for an exemption; “turning things around”; hiring their frog experts; and so on. It was not possible to plot events on the timeline solely on the basis of the interview, nor could the interview in itself provide all the knowledge that we needed about the project process. It did, however, provide us with visible “traces” (to use ANT terminology) that we could follow in the documents (case files, project plans, newspaper articles, etc.). The timeline was therefore not only a chronology of events, but also, to a greater degree, a construction in which we, as researchers, made certain choices. We both started and finished *in medias res*, as Latour (2005) put it. On the basis of our analytical interest, we decided which episodes to highlight. The timeline was, therefore, our translation of the process.

Second, we systematically searched for links between actors. In the first instance, this meant focusing on who or what were actors in this situation. We attempted to map this network, based on the principle that an actor is somebody or something that makes a visible difference in the case you are studying. Based on the interview excerpt, it seems as if the project management made a difference, as did the “environmentalists”, “the Environmental Board of Appeal”, “the county council” and “the frog experts” – but so too did the non-human entities, “the frogs”, “the waterholes”, “the EU directive”, “appeal rules”, “timetables”, “buckets” and so on.

Even if an entity can be considered a non-human actor, it is important to be aware that their status as an actor does not imply anything particular in advance or ensure that the entity has a specific effect. It depends on its network, as described in the empirical analysis. Establishing a list of actors is only a first step. What is more interesting are the relations between the actors. As such, the next analytical step consists of mapping these based on the material. One way to approach the analysis in this phase is to illustrate these links visually.

Third, we were interested in *how* the changing relations were formed, and how this affected the organisation of the project. At this point, we had made an explicit choice to follow the project management and the translation processes that were linked to project management as an actor, including its relationship to the frogs. The interview excerpt shows how the project management managed, over time, to build up and stabilise a network in which the frog was one of the actors enrolled as an ally.

The excerpt shows that, at the beginning, the frogs were not part of the project management network. On the contrary, their existence came as a surprise to the project manager. At first, their presence posed difficulties and was unwelcome as the frogs threatened to delay the project or, in the worst case scenario, put a stop to it completely (Tryggestad et al., 2013; Sage et al., 2016). Later on, however, the frogs were enrolled as allies in the project. This is shown in the interview, with the project manager telling us: “So, we ended up turning things around, saying ‘ok’, instead of fighting, they [the frogs] should be allowed to live there.” The frogs went from unwanted elements to allies of the project management. They became part of the project network. This had consequences for the way in which the project management worked because it required effort and other actors to keep the frogs in the network. The excerpt shows how the project management became allied with a range of both human and non-human actors, such as the external frog experts, but also with non-human actors such as buckets, fences and frog corridors, as well as new project management tools, including an additional timetable that took into account the frogs’ life cycle. In this sense, the project and project management changed as new actors became part of the work. The time management of the project suddenly became more complex because the previous timetable had to be adapted to reflect the frogs’ needs (Tryggestad et al., 2013; Sage et al., 2016).

Fourth, we focused on controversies in the empirical material. It is clear from the interview excerpt that there was a conflict between the project management on the one hand and the environmentalists on the other. According to the project manager, these are “two different worlds”. He rejects the very idea that it would have made any sense to include them as allies. Instead, the situation became a trial of strength – a struggle between these two actors to translate the frogs and speak on their behalf. In the first instance, the activists tried to position themselves as

spokespersons for the frogs and ally themselves with, among others, the Appeals Board. They claimed to know what the frogs wanted and to represent their interests. However, the project management then “turned things around”, allied itself with the frog experts and used various materials, and became the spokespersons for the frogs. It was the project management that ended up having the strongest network. They were granted permission to finish the project, and the environmentalists failed to stop it. From an ANT perspective, the point is not that the developers were the powerful actor from the beginning, pushing other less powerful actors around. The project management *became* powerful and strong because, in the actual situation – with the help of different strategies – it enrolled a series of allies, including the frogs, in its network. In this sense, strength is an *effect* of the network, not a *cause* of it (Latour, 1986; Law, 1992).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide a general introduction to actor-network theory, with a particular focus on how its concepts and principles can inspire empirical analyses. The chapter has shown that ANT analyses focus on how links between heterogeneous actors (human and non-human) are created and change in practice and how materiality plays an often overlooked role in these processes. When the empirical material is extensive, perhaps even overwhelming, we need to reflect on how best to approach reading the material, and how the material can be organised and analysed in a way that ultimately enables a presentation of the analysis.

A good ANT analysis results in a rich description that clearly shows how the many different actors make a difference in practice. However, given the very open empirical approach to the material, how do we ensure that the analyses are not merely mundane, uninspiring descriptions of the empirical evidence? Latour (2005: 125) himself remarked that many social science analyses are uninteresting or even downright boring. What, then, makes a description *also* a good and interesting analysis? It might be argued that it is important to ensure that the analytical points are clear and that the analyses, based on the empirical evidence, succeed in saying something interesting about a more general phenomenon in the area we are studying.

Our empirical example 2 is discussed exclusively in relation to our initial attempt to draw on ANT to read and organise the empirical material. It is beyond the scope of this chapter also to illustrate the results of the analyses and the way they were presented. Instead, the chapter has sought to show the initial and very practical first steps of the analysis, which ultimately facilitate the presentation.

However, based on our empirical analysis of the case outlined in this chapter, we could address more general questions of relevance to organisational theory and project management literature, for example about stakeholders and interests (Tryggestad et al., 2013), temporality (Tryggestad et al., 2013) and organisational boundaries (Sage et al., 2016). Even though ANT analyses consist of empirically detailed descriptions of specific situations, they can still inform analyses of phenomena of wider relevance.

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### Key concepts

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**Actor** Any element that makes a tangible, visible and traceable difference in a given situation. Actors can be both human and non-human (e.g. texts, technologies, objects, plants or animals). An actor's agency depends on its networks. Actors only ever act within their networks, never in isolation.

**Black box** A metaphor borrowed from cybernetics. It describes a network that is taken for granted, and whose origins and complex, messy processes of becoming have been forgotten. Many classic ANT analyses seek to open black boxes by showing how the network was established in the first place by means of specific translation processes.

**Network** An analytical concept to describe how actors are linked and the consequences of those links. It is a basic ANT principle that it is always networks that act. The relational aspect takes precedence in analyses. A network is always an actor-network because actors never act alone. Networks consist of heterogeneous elements, and almost always of both human and non-human actors that do different things.

**Principle of generalised symmetry** The methodological principle that human and non-human actors must be described with the same vocabulary. The principle stems from the fact that ANT adopts an agnostic approach and no actor or type of actor is accorded precedence in advance of the empirical analysis.

**Translation** A concept used to describe how human and non-human actors are linked and, therefore, form new networks. The translation concept also underlines the fact that actors change as a result of entering into a new constellation. As a result, the focus is on both how the links are created and on how they result in shifts and changes.

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# 17

## ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Jakob Demant and Signe Ravn

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### CHAPTER CONTENTS

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Empirical context: young people, drugs and alcohol	346
• Actor-network theory and its application in drug and alcohol research	347
Methodological considerations	350
• Three challenges in ANT-inspired analyses of interview material	350
Analysis	353
• ANT for analysis of non-human actors	353
• ANT as situated network analysis	354
• ANT as an extended analysis of a network	356
Conclusion	359
Key concepts	361
Further reading	361
References	361

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In this chapter we illustrate how actor-network theory (ANT) can be applied in empirical research. We do so by briefly introducing a number of concepts from ANT before applying them to an empirical case to illustrate how ANT helps us shed light on new facets of this. ANT is not a sociological theory but a conceptual framework that is brought to life in empirical analysis where the concepts from ANT help us identify potential actors<sup>1</sup> and networks rather than defining them in advance. ANT is not tied to a particular discipline or research field; rather it has been applied to topics as diverse as health (Cresswell et al., 2010; Greenhalgh and Stones, 2010; Prout, 1996), crime prevention (Demant and Dilkes-Frayne, 2015; van der Wagen and Pieters, 2015), consumption research (Cochoy and Mallard, 2018), urban studies (Storper and Scott, 2016) and management studies (Smith et al., 2017). What unites these studies is an interest in the material, physical, spatial or temporal aspects of a phenomenon, which ANT is particularly well suited to investigating. In contrast, researchers interested in questions about identity, everyday life or the attribution of meaning would typically turn to narrative analysis (Chapters 12 and 13 of this volume) or symbolic interactionism (Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume). In this chapter we focus on young people's relationships with alcohol and drugs as a case in point to illustrate how an ANT perspective generates new types of questions and adds to our existing knowledge. It is worth noting that our application of ANT will be based on data from an interview-based study, as opposed to the ethnographic observations on which the majority of ANT-inspired studies are based. The chapter also discusses the potentials and challenges when applying ANT to this type of data – a point to which we will return.

### Empirical context: young people, drugs and alcohol

From the 1990s, research flourished on young people's use of drugs and binge drinking in different parts of Europe, particularly in England (Measham et al., 1998). Growing concern about drug and alcohol use by young people led some British researchers to argue for the normalisation of recreational drug use (Parker et al., 2002). This increased consumption was at least partially linked to the advent of changes in the night-time economy. Since the 1990s, most major European cities have seen the emergence of a service economy based on entertainment, food and drinking. This trend was very much driven by a commercialisation of binge drinking and has created new environments for drug-taking (Hadfield et al., 2009). Scholars argue that this new night-time economy has transformed the centres of

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter alternates between the terms 'actors' and 'actants', both of which are used to represent ANT's broad understanding of 'actors', which we introduce later. We use the term 'actants' to underline the potential for action inherent in non-human actors.

larger cities (particularly in England) into spaces structured around intoxication (Bellis and Hughes, 2011; Jayne et al., 2008; Lindsay, 2005), and that illegal drugs are now part of commercial nightlife, in particular in relation to the electronic dance scene (Measham and Moore, 2009).

In what Latour describes as a “sociology of the social”, classic qualitative studies of drug use have tended to focus on its social and symbolic dimensions. Howard Becker’s seminal study *Outsiders* (1963) was one of the first to look at drug-taking as a social learning process, through which individuals learn to ascribe the correct meaning to their drug use. Becker stressed the importance of the social setting to this process. His study paved the way for a social constructivist perspective on drug-taking, which influenced numerous sociological studies of drug users (e.g. Järvinen and Ravn, 2011; Pedersen and Sandberg, 2013) and dependency (May, 2001). These studies generated wide-ranging and comprehensive knowledge of the meanings attributed to alcohol by different segments of the population, and how these meanings relate to social situations (Sulkunen, 2002).

From an ANT perspective, one objection to this approach is that it “sociologises” the drug – it turns it into a symbol that is interchangeable with something else (see Weinberg, 2013). For instance, studies have shown that alcohol has symbolic significance for how young people maintain friendships because it symbolises partying (MacLean, 2016), but one could argue that a shared interest in a particular television series or sport could have the same effect. In other words, the constructivist perspective focuses on the *social* elements of drug-taking, at the expense of (for example) the spatial and material aspects. If we wish to include these aspects in our understanding of young people and drugs, we must look for approaches that incorporate a wider range of elements into our analysis such as ANT. ANT allows us to study the effects of space, materiality (e.g. the actual substance), social relations and time. By identifying the significant elements in a network, ANT facilitates a broader understanding of the factors that are involved in young people’s alcohol and drug consumption. Empirically, the chapter is based on data from qualitative interviews with young drug users. Before turning to these interviews, we introduce the concepts from ANT that guided us in the analysis.

### Actor-network theory and its application in drug and alcohol research

ANT<sup>2</sup> shifts the focus from individuals and their actions to how elements are *connected* in a network in time and space. The best-known aspect of ANT studies is

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<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough explanation of the concepts we briefly introduce here we refer to Chapter 16 of this book. For further introductory reading we suggest Law (2009) and Mol (2010).

what is known as the *principle of symmetry*: that human as well as non-human actors appear in the analyses. This marks a departure from traditional notions of who or what is capable of acting (Latour, 2005). Instead, ANT identifies how human and non-human actors relate to each other and how this affects their characteristics. In simple terms, according to ANT the drug user is not the only actor; the drug, the physical space, the music and so on all “do” something as well – the action is generated by multiple actors. As such, any actor is both active and enacted by other actors because its capacities are established, limited or otherwise mediated by its network (Latour, 2005; Law, 2009; Mol, 2010). Since no actor, human or non-human, acts in isolation, it becomes redundant to talk about individuals as actors that can be observed meaningfully on their own. This is a radically different perspective than that found, for instance, in relational micro-sociology and symbolic interactionism. ANT shifts the focus away from how we understand the individual in a social context towards how we read the actual relational network and identify which actors have the potential to act. As such, it can be seen as an expansion of Goffman’s (1983) concept of the “social situation”. ANT retains the relational perspective central to micro-sociology but abandons the idea of the self as a central focal point of the analysis. This radical shift is one of the key characteristics of ANT.

The *network* concept is the second key element we apply in our analysis. In general, networks are not clearly delineated. They consist of interconnected elements that exist in relation to one another but do not have a defined centre. As we will show, a network analysis is a way of mapping the various actors (e.g. people who take drugs, dealers, the substances, the nightclub as a space) and their relationships to each other. A network does not exist simply because we identify relationships between actors – the actors must be made relevant to each other. This relevance emerges through *translation* – in other words, the way in which actors transform each other through their relationships (or interaction) with each other. One example is the way a drug is transformed from a source of pleasure to an addiction via the part it plays in legislation, institutions, social relations, global conflicts and so on. For instance, the point is not only that the global “war on drugs” in discourse and policy translates drug use into drug misuse through the way drugs are classified, but also that this process is related to a regulation regime with specific control instruments (e.g. Demant and Dilkes-Frayne, 2015) enabling certain behavioural changes besides the more discursive aspects. The drugs’ concrete characteristics are determined by the network of which they form a part, and the relationships by which they are translated within that network.

One of the keys to any ANT analysis is to retain an open-minded approach by not defining in advance the types of actors that have the potential to act. This is underlined in the concept of *enactment*. We can understand actors as being enacted

by the relational network. Their characteristics are determined purely by the connections of which they form part within the network; that is, actors derive their capacities and potentials through their relationships with others (Latour, 2005). One result of this is that the same actor can have a range of different capacities if it is part of relationships with multiple other actors within the network (Law, 2009). In her study of nicotine replacement therapy, Keane (2008) used an ANT perspective to ask what happens with *the drug* (nicotine) in this type of treatment, as opposed to simply focusing on how humans are affected. Nicotine replacement therapy allows people to ingest nicotine without smoking and was seen as potentially revolutionising the way in which people weaned themselves off tobacco. Drawing on academic literature, public health studies, clinical guidelines and official stop-smoking websites, Keane mapped and described the network and the translations that occurred as different elements made themselves relevant to each other. Using an ANT approach, Keane was able to demonstrate how nicotine replacement therapy allows nicotine to become an agent that can both hinder and facilitate dependency.

Similarly, Emilie Gomart used an ANT approach to study the difference between the psychoactive drugs methadone and heroin – specifically, whether the difference is a matter of interpretation. Given the contrast between how methadone and heroin are “labelled” – the former as “legal” and “therapeutic”, the latter as “illegal” and “harmful” – it would seem reasonable to invoke differing interpretations to explain the difference between them (Gomart, 2002). Gomart provided an ANT analysis based on data from two experiments, in the United States and France. The experiments involved medical practices that prescribed methadone as a substitute for heroin, in order to reduce the user’s (illegal) drug use. Her use of comparative cases presented a clear opportunity to identify the actor-networks. She showed that there are too many elements that vary from trial to trial to say that the “interpretation” of the substance explains the central variation. Instead, her conclusion was that what varies is the *substance*, not the interpretation of it. What she identified were different enactments of methadone, enabled by the different experimental setups.

More recently, Jukka Törrönen and Christoffer Tigerstedt (2018) have drawn on ANT to analyse autobiographical data on alcohol dependency. By approaching addiction as a phenomenon made up of multiple actors (in some form of ANT research described as an assemblage) they demonstrate how alcohol dependency

is not the decision, will or self-control of an actor alone that can tame addiction. Rather, this decision, will or self-control needs to have assemblages that enable it to act, i.e. it needs to be combined with other elements that help the actor to make the harmful effects of alcohol absent. (2018: 65)

In other words, changing the effects of alcohol requires a change in the actor-networks that this alcohol use is part of.

## Methodological considerations

Traditionally, ANT studies draw on qualitative data – primarily ethnographic observations and documents – but also, to some extent, on qualitative interviews. Few classic ANT studies were based on qualitative interviews alone. Observation and documentation are considered better ways to “follow the actor” and maintain an open mind about the field of study (Latour, 1987, 2010). In the studies that do incorporate qualitative interviews, they tend to be embedded in ethnographic fieldwork or, in some cases, form part of historical documents. The main objection to using qualitative interviews is that the interview contradicts the fundamental premise (the “principle of symmetry”) of ANT – that human actors should not be privileged over non-human actors. Interviews very much focus on human actors, on the interviewee and interviewer, and on how human actors create *meaning* – another concept that is difficult to work with in an ANT framework. Furthermore, Latour (2005) argues that qualitative interviews, due to their researcher-driven approach, not only collect but also filter the data, making them a less suitable method for ANT-inspired research. However, over the last decade or so, a number of studies have sought to apply ANT concepts to interview material, often with a focus on mapping interactions between human and non-human actors (Blok et al., 2008; Demant, 2009; Jóhannesson, 2005; Konrad, 2006; Ravn, 2012a; Tatnall and Burgess, 2002; Törrönen and Tigerstedt, 2018). We place ourselves in this tradition but acknowledge that applying ANT concepts to interview data requires careful consideration. In the following section we discuss three particular challenges.

### Three challenges in ANT-inspired analyses of interview material

In employing an interview-based methodological approach, it is crucial that the interview becomes a space in which to “engage the explored” (Despret, 2005) – a space in which interviewees are given the opportunity to articulate those elements in the networks that are important to them. In other words, the interview needs to adopt a relatively open and exploratory or experimental approach. This fundamental challenge must be addressed early on in the design phase of a study. We will present some of the ways in which we overcame this challenge in our own studies.

Although materiality and space often form part of interview data, the challenge from an ANT perspective is to describe these aspects of a phenomenon in sufficient detail to facilitate an analysis of how they are enacted in a specific network. While we refer to interview-based studies below, similar considerations also apply to ethnographic studies. In other words, observational studies do not automatically generate data that are suitable for an ANT-inspired analysis. If, for example, you want to observe the role of alcohol in nightlife settings, it is not necessarily enough simply to follow the movements of young people in licensed venues and on the streets. You also need to consider issues such as how clubs (and streets) shape particular experiences of intoxication through the ways in which they are governed politically (by the licensing authorities) or how the club economy is linked to the sale of drugs.

Demant's (2009) analysis of young people's alcohol use serves as an example of how the study design is central for facilitating data on materiality. The research focused on 14–15-year-olds' first experiences with alcohol, particularly what they thought and had to say about who drinks what. Including actual alcohol products (beer, wine, alcopops, etc.) as stimulus material in the focus group setting allowed the participants to touch the bottles, compare them and use them to recall specific stories. This exercise not only prompted the participants to share stories, but also enhanced their ability to enact other elements of the network relevant to their drinking than those identified beforehand by the researcher and allowed for an investigation of what these elements "do" in the situation. Although the interview will always prioritise the human actor, it can also be a way to enact other elements.

In another study, Ravn (2012a) developed a drawing exercise called a "map-task" to assist her in interviews designed to generate knowledge about private parties, where participant observation was difficult. During the interviews, it quickly became clear that the descriptions of the parties were often short and one-dimensional – the interviewees' primary concern was whether the party had been "fun" or "boring". To learn more about the parties, an approach was needed that would encourage the participants to reflect on the parties and describe them in a different light – an approach that, in an almost ethno-methodological way, sought to "make the familiar strange" (Mannay, 2010). The solution was to ask the interviewees to "draw a party". Specifically, the exercise required interview participants to first make a "floor plan" of the house or apartment where the party took place (including furniture, etc.). They were then asked to use arrows and numbers to indicate how the partygoers used the different rooms as the party progressed. This made both space and time, as dimensions, central parts of the data. While drawing, the participants also described the party in far more detail than before. Overall, the combination of the maptask exercise and the accompanying description afforded rich insight into the parties, including aspects such as time, space,

materiality and sociality (see also Ravn and Duff, 2015). The analysis below will return to the analytical potential of this method.

The maptask exercise can be seen as one among a number of creative or innovative methods that are becoming popular in qualitative research. Other creative methods include the use of photos and other visual materials, music, objects and neighbourhood walks. This list is by no means exhaustive. Employing new methods in interview-based research can generate a wide range of data, and while the examples mentioned here tend to focus on meaning-oriented and affective analyses, methods that involve thinking outside the box of the traditional interview format offer a way to produce data suitable for ANT-inspired analyses.

A second challenge in ANT analyses concerns how we view the data material and what the informants tell us. One of sociology's core tasks is to show how social structures operate in relation to human actors. ANT has a different starting-point. One consequence of the principle of "following the actor" is that we cannot presume in advance that social structures exist and exert influence on the actors' behaviour. This has to remain an open, empirical question. This brings us to one of the main points of contention between ANT advocates and more structurally oriented social scientists, including the heirs to Bourdieu. Latour makes the point that we must take the actors' statements (e.g. in interviews) at face value, instead of explaining their statements with reference to factors outside of the data. For instance, we should not assume that social categories such as "ethnic minority", "working class" or "gender" are necessarily relevant for understanding a given situation. An ANT analysis requires that the relevance of these and similar categories is demonstrated in the data – that these categories "act" in the data – before they can be assigned relevance in the analysis (see also Nielsen and Houborg, 2015).

As touched upon earlier, the third challenge is presented by the shift in focus in ANT-inspired analyses from the symbolic to the material level. Scholars who are used to working within a more interactionist-oriented analytical tradition are trained to look for the symbolic meanings associated with different objects. One example of this could be symbolic consumption – a preference for cocaine rather than amphetamines may be rooted as much in the desire to show off wealth by distancing oneself from what drug users call "poor man's coke" as it is due to the effect and experience of the drug. An ANT analysis, by contrast, is more "flat" and "straightforward". It is not about how cocaine is incorporated into individuals' self-presentation. Rather, the overall drug experience depends on a number of elements, including the cocaine's specific (chemical) properties – specifically, its purity, which in turn depends on the user's position in a global network. This approach draws attention to how important elements outside the users' control influence drug-taking.



## Analysis

In this section we illustrate how concepts from ANT can be used in an empirical analysis. The analysis is divided into three subsections, each centred on a particular concept, but these subsections also form a coherent whole. Depending on the analytical interest and the nature of the data, different ANT analyses will have different focal points. We draw on interviews with young people about clubbing and drug use, conducted as part of a larger study of young people, drugs and alcohol in Denmark (Järvinen et al., 2010). The study was undertaken in autumn and winter 2008 at five different nightclubs in various parts of the country. Taking inspiration from British researchers (Demant et al., 2010; Measham and Moore, 2009), participants were recruited via a short questionnaire (Demant et al., 2010). Respondents who said they had experience of taking drugs were asked whether they were willing to participate in an interview – and, if so, to provide their telephone number. A total of 53 young people (35 men and 18 women) took part in focus group interviews and individual and pair interviews. The interviews differ slightly depending on the format, but to varying degrees they all address five themes: a description of the nightclub as a space, a description of a night out, drug-taking, knowledge of drugs and risk perceptions, and discussion of specific experiences in the clubs.<sup>3</sup> As stated, the aim of this analysis is to demonstrate how the ANT perspective paves the way for new insights into young people's drug use compared to the well-established research tradition described earlier.

### ANT for analysis of non-human actors

Alcohol and drug research has been relatively quick to adopt ANT, as it offers very useful ways of conceptualising the effects of substances (Demant, 2009; Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Nielsen and Houborg, 2015). When extending an analysis to include a wider range of actors than just humans, a guiding principle is to frame the question as “what happened?” as opposed to “who did it?” (Mol, 2002). In other words, the study begins by determining what *changed* or *was influenced* in the material, and only then consider what caused these changes, or in other words what attained significance as an actant. In the example below, Emma, a regular drug user, talks about her experience of taking cocaine.

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<sup>3</sup> Analyses of these data are found in Järvinen and Ravn (2011), Ravn (2012a, 2012b, 2012c), Ravn and Demant (2012) and Ravn and Duff (2015).



*Interviewer:* When you take coke now, what's it for – it's not to keep you awake?

*Emma:* It's just for fun.

*Interviewer:* For fun?

*Emma:* And also because you get so numb, your whole face ... That's a good thing if you like fighting, you know – you wouldn't feel it if you got hit in the head!

*Interviewer:* Yeah, I can see that. [*laughs*]

*Emma:* I haven't tried it, I hate fighting, but it's a good thing, because you just get so numb ... your whole skull. And if you put some [cocaine] directly onto your gums or your tongue, you go completely numb there too. You just get so numb ... that sensation in your body.

*Interviewer:* In a good way?

*Emma:* Yeah, in a good way.

If we now ask “what happened?”, it is clear that the cocaine, as a specific substance, functions as an actor that leads to a specific form of intoxication that cannot be reduced to the drug's symbolic meaning as a “luxury substance”. Emma finds cocaine relaxing and enjoyable because of its specific effect on her body. It creates a distinct bodily sensation, numbness in her face, and she finds that particularly enjoyable. The pleasure arises from the link between the cocaine, Emma's body and the specific way in which she consumes the substance (applying it strategically, for example to her gums) and the spatial dimension of this, her flat, where she takes cocaine to chill out. Emma also explains how cocaine, by inducing numbness, has the potential to alter the bodily experience of fighting by diminishing the impact of being hit. However, it is important to point out that the materiality-oriented analysis prioritised by ANT can also be linked to more “social” analyses. In this example about violence, factors such as values, social relations and friendships do not have less importance just because we *also* include non-human actors.

### ANT as situated network analysis

Another separate task in an ANT analysis is to map *networks* of actants – that is, to not simply expand your perspective on who or what is acting, but also consider how those heterogeneous actants form part of a network. The network concept is used to focus on the *situation* as the analytical unit of interest. The aim is to identify all of the actants that make up the situation – a private party at which drugs are taken. It can also be viewed as a socio-material analysis, in which we examine social aspects *as well as* aspects of space, time and materiality. The following example is based on the maptask exercise we described earlier. Let us begin by looking at a drawing from one of the interviews. As mentioned,

participants were asked to draw the house or flat where the party was held, and to mark how they moved around during the course of the evening. One of the focus groups comprised four young men, Marius, Dan, David and Steven, who are good friends and often party together. They produced the drawing shown as Figure 17.1.

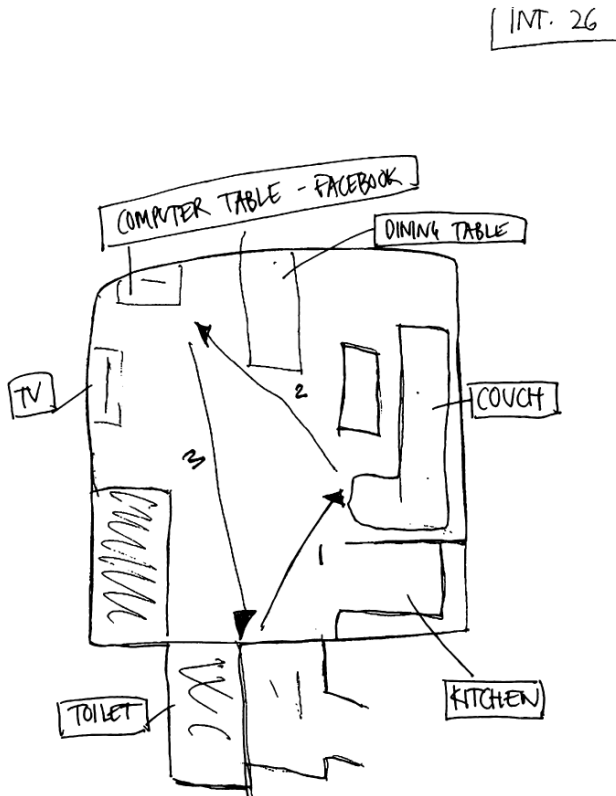


Figure 17.1 Maptask exercise

The drawing provides an overview of the different rooms in the flat, as well as the movements between them during the evening (arrows 1, 2 and 3). Note that as well as the furniture, the partygoers considered it important to draw the computer. The reason for this becomes clear during the conversation – Marius feels compelled to use the computer to check Facebook. His need to be on Facebook during the evening appears to be something that the group has discussed on earlier occasions, and something which has become part of the way they make jokes with each other. As David puts it, “Yeah, Marius went over to check Facebook because he is so ‘big’ [important]”. Later on in the interview, Marius feels the need to defend himself: “The flat was 46 [square metres], so you could say that we were all pretty close together when that happened, so

[*all laugh*] ... so you are always close to each other, so even if someone is sitting here [*points to the computer*], and some people are sitting here [*points to the sofa*], and someone is standing here playing *Guitar Hero*, you can still talk to each other, and we all join in." According to Marius – and the others back him up on this – his Facebook activity does not stop him taking part in the party. In fact, the opposite turns out to be the case. He reads out numerous Facebook posts – news, status updates, other people's party photos – which become a source of entertainment for those around him.

In addition to the four young men and the drugs, which they mentioned earlier on in the interview, the computer used to access Facebook is therefore another important actant in the network. As well as bringing something new to the party as a situation, and contributing in a specific way to its sociality, Facebook also establishes a connection between the interviewees' own party and the activities of other friends in other "time/space" units. Further, the flat, especially due to its limited size, is an important material dimension of the party. Marius emphasises how the size of the space implies a "closeness" that promotes a sense of community and of being part of the same situation, even if you are doing different things. In this example, the private party is, therefore, a network that emerges as a result of translation between the actors. The arrows also afforded detailed insight into how the party progressed over the course of the evening, and how time and space were linked; that is, how certain rooms in the apartment (the toilet where the drugs were taken, the Facebook corner, etc.) were enacted as actants at different times during the evening.

### ANT as an extended analysis of a network

The final example also focuses on networks but moves beyond the situation as the unit of analysis. This example illustrates how an ANT approach to risk management by young people who take drugs opens up a new understanding of the challenges associated with the topic. As we will show, young people's drug use is woven into a complex network that extends beyond factors within their control. In the quote below, two young men, Laus and Kristoffer, with extensive drug use experience, discuss how they seek to manage their drug use.

*Interviewer:* How do you know what you're buying?

*Laus:* Well, you can't get it wrong, you just can't. You know what it looks like, much of it, how it tastes, you never forget that. [*giggles*]

*Kristoffer:* Plus, you know where you're getting it from. You don't just go out into the street and buy it from some random person.

*Laus:* No.

- Interviewer:* So it's about knowing your dealer ...?
- Kristoffer:* Yeah.
- ...
- Laus:* If you buy something [drugs] from your friends, you either taste it, or maybe not taste, but smell it and try a little bit on your finger.
- Interviewer:* What if it's a pill?
- Laus:* If it's a pill then it's just ecstasy, you know?
- Interviewer:* Yes.
- Kristoffer:* Although you don't know that 100%.
- Laus:* No, no.
- Interviewer:* So you don't know what's in it?
- Kristoffer:* You know from [your] experience and from others' experiences. Plus, you can test pills. There's a thing called a z test that lets you test whether there is MDMA in it [the pill], and that means that you can see if it's from amphetamine or any other substance. But you can't say exactly what's in it, of course.
- Interviewer:* No, ok. But do you use those sort of tests or what? Or is it more the case that you –
- Laus:* No, you don't.
- Kristoffer:* Plus, I don't take ecstasy anyway.
- Laus:* ... If you buy it from him [your dealer], he's probably sitting taking a line of it too, right? So, you know that if it's shit, he wouldn't be taking it himself and selling it.
- Kristoffer:* Some of the drugs we take, we know for sure that they're completely pure, they are imported and have never been cut ....
- Interviewer:* Ok, so it's about building up your network?
- Laus:* Yeah, exactly. Let me put it this way, it really depends on where you are in the chain [user and dealer], whether you're number 300 [giggles] or 3.
- Kristoffer:* The longer you have been [part of the scene].

Based on this interview excerpt, we have identified the actors in the actor-network described by Laus and Kristoffer with regard to how they manage their drug use and the risks associated with it. This network is illustrated in Figure 17.2.

Laus and Kristoffer clearly have extensive experience with the topic. When we map the range of actants that affect the way in which they manage their drug use and the associated risks, the result is a network that is complex in terms of both temporal and spatial aspects. It is important to stress that our analysis is based on the actants highlighted by the two interviewees, without any evaluation of the accuracy of their information, for instance in relation to the specific pharmacological tests. The key is to establish how different actors

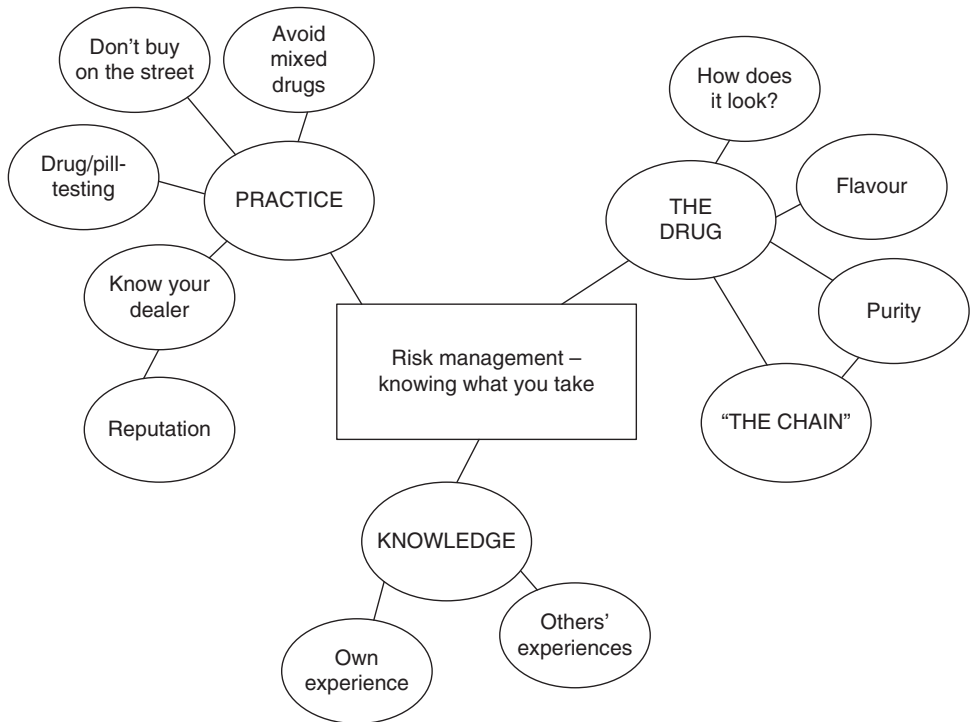


Figure 17.2 Actor-network of risk management in drug consumption

in the network are translated and become important in the two young men's risk management strategies. This strategy is not based merely on their subjective (lay) relationship with the drug, but is the result of how experiences, reputation, tests, taste and so on are incorporated into both local and global networks.

In sum, the network that emerges from this analysis includes not only aspects that are close at hand (where and how people buy drugs) – which we describe collectively as their practice in Figure 17.2 – but also other, more remote elements, such as the accumulated knowledge of the drug scene and the drugs themselves. The network also extends beyond the quote, for example in the form of empirical knowledge gleaned from digital forums, the global drug market and the knowledge and encryption technologies used for online trading. This analysis has focused on how, via translation, the various elements become relevant to risk management. Bearing Figure 17.2 in mind, it is clear that, in this perspective, risk management is not a straightforward case of rational considerations, but rather a matter of navigating a complex network that extends beyond that in which the interviewees are directly involved. In that sense, an ANT perspective allows for a substantially different and more complex understanding of

the risks and risk management strategies than other types of analyses might do in this field.

One question often asked about ANT analyses is where the network stops? Any network will always be extensive, with many branches. There will always be other actants associated with the ones already described. We need to know some of these to understand how key elements are enacted. This makes it crucial that we define the limits of the network. In the analysis presented in this chapter, one of the key constraints is our choice of methodology – we cannot follow the drugs further than the relatively limited time/space horizon enacted by the subjects. In a “fully fledged” ANT analysis, this methodological constraint would not qualify as sufficient reason to limit the scope of the network. A more pragmatic understanding, and one that we also use here, would be to acknowledge that the network is limited by the interview method, and to be aware, therefore, of what ANT is capable of contributing to the analysis of the data at hand.

## Conclusion

Our case study of young people and drugs in this chapter has shown how ANT-inspired analyses are particularly useful for drawing out the material aspects of a phenomenon. We have attempted to show how ANT widens our analytical focus to include non-human actors, while insisting that these have no significance *per se*, only when enacted in a particular network. We have also shown how the actual shape of the network imbues each actant with its specific significance. As a result, the physical effects of a substance can be included without being reduced (or stabilised) to a one-dimensional neurological or chemical process. As demonstrated by Emma, this allows us to conceptualise what is happening when users emphasise the fact that cocaine has certain effects on the body, depending on how and where it is taken. We have also shown that ANT is suited for the inclusion of spatial aspects into an analysis. Of course, it is possible to include space and time in, for instance, a symbolic interactionist analysis, but we believe that the reason why ANT analyses offer additional perspectives is that space and time are not just neutral backdrops or “contexts” for social interaction, but constitutive of this as an element that is enacted in the network. The ability to combine space and time with physical and material aspects is what makes the ANT perspective distinct and an ideal choice for studies centred on these aspects. The examples mentioned earlier – Gomart and Hennion (1999) as well as Keane (2008) – both show how ANT-inspired studies always look at *some* network relations but not others. Keane’s study also highlighted how diverse data – as opposed to interviews alone – are

useful in drug and alcohol research. For instance, inspired by Keane's study, it would be interesting to observe how cannabis is translated into very different forms of drugs in the complex network regulating medical and non-medical use, levels of THC and methods of consumption. Following these translations would require a combination of interviews with recreational drug users, as well as a number of policy documents, drug analysis reports and so on.

Despite its name, it is important to recognise that ANT does not actually offer a *theory* about the relationship between objects, people, space and time and so on. What it does offer is a relatively loosely formulated strategy for empirical analysis – it encourages us to conduct studies that are broadly defined to make it empirically possible to include in the answer to our research questions. It prompts us to answer how actors in a network relate to each other. This radical and empirical openness is often highlighted as one of ANT's strong points. However, it is also one of the difficulties that researchers have to learn to cope with when adopting an ANT perspective. The question of how far a network extends and at what point you have adequately described the relationships within it remains a concrete empirical and practical question that it is impossible to answer definitively purely by means of a well-established methodology principle. This is one of the points that need to be borne in mind when deciding on the strategy to adopt for a particular analysis.

As mentioned earlier, the explorative and open strategy inherent in an ANT approach to interview-based material comes with certain difficulties. The interviews that we drew on in this chapter sought to elicit elaborate and detailed descriptions of actual practices. While one example focused on the "social situation" and the local actor-network that shaped the party, in the final example the network extended beyond the specific time and space. This underlines Latour's point that the actants in a network do not need to be situated in the same physical time or space (Latour, 2005: 166). It also suggests that one benefit of using interviews (and documents), as opposed to ethnographic observations, is that they allow us to identify actors not directly observable in the situation. Interview data make it possible to pursue the extent of a network beyond the local (see also Blok et al., 2008). The point is that the interview will always be *researcher*-driven and privilege human over non-human actors. Savage and Burrows (2007) argue that sociology has stalled in terms of new methodological developments because of the tendency to adhere to a handful of tried-and-tested instruments such as qualitative interviews and surveys. ANT as a tradition can be seen as constituting a response to this stasis, in that one of its key analytical tasks is to pursue any lines of enquiry that may emerge, *irrespective* of the methods used. As such, ANT challenges not only how we think about relationships between human and non-human actors, but also our

methodological habits and ways of thinking and the ways in which we establish and pursue methodological lines of inquiry.

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## Key concepts

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**Actant** Use of the term “actant” instead of “actor” underlines the fact that networks consist of non-human as well as human elements. All actants are enacted (i.e. get their specific characteristics and properties) from the actor-network of which they form part.

**Actor-network** A network is not strictly defined. It conceptualises elements that are linked and exist in relation to one another but without a defined centre. The “actor-network” is the network that is formed by the various actors. Networks often consist of both human and non-human actors (or actants) and translations are what make them dynamic.

**Enactment** The concept of enactment describes the process by which a specific actant in a network acquires certain characteristics or potential. Rather than defining in advance which type of actor has the potential to act, ANT works this out on the basis of the empirical evidence. As such, we might say that in ANT the actor has no essential characteristics. One result of this approach is that multiple meanings may be attributed to the same actor depending on the relationships the actor is part of in a network.

**Principle of symmetry** This concept refers to the obligation to ensure that we assign equal significance to human and non-human actors. Every effort must be made not to predefine actants.

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# APPENDIX: KEY CONCEPTS

The approach a term is derived from appears in brackets, where relevant.

**Abduction (Critical realism)** Abduction moves from thick description of data or context to more abstract and theoretical explanations of what is occurring. Abduction actively uses theory to view the phenomenon from multiple angles or explore alternative explanations.

**Abductive reasoning (Critical realism)** A form of reasoning that begins by studying empirical data and entertains all possible explanations for the data observed, and following this, forms hypotheses to confirm or discount in the data until the researcher arrives at the most plausible interpretation of the observed data.

**Actant (ANT)** Use of the term actant instead of actor underlines the fact that networks consist of non-human as well as human elements. All actants are enacted (i.e. get their specific characteristics and properties) from the actor-network of which they form part.

**Actor (ANT)** Any element that makes a tangible, visible and traceable difference in a given situation. Actors can be both human and non-human (e.g. texts, technologies, objects, plants or animals). An actor's agency depends on its networks. Actors only ever act within their networks, never in isolation.

**Actor-network (ANT)** A network is not strictly defined. It conceptualises elements that are linked and exist in relation to one another but without a defined centre. The "actor-network" is the network that is formed by the various actors. Networks often consist of both human and non-human actors (or actants) and translations are what make them dynamic.

**Black box (ANT)** A metaphor borrowed from cybernetics. It describes a network that is taken for granted, and whose origins and complex, messy processes of becoming have been forgotten. Many classic ANT analyses seek to open black boxes by showing how the network was established in the first place by means of specific translation processes.

**Category (Grounded theory)** An abstract term that makes analytic sense of a set of codes. Categories are derived from compelling codes that subsume other codes or through constructing a new, more abstract, term to account for earlier codes. Developing these conceptual categories raises the theoretical level of the researcher's emerging analysis.

**Causal explanation (Critical realism)** As causal powers can exist without producing empirical events, causal explanation cannot be achieved through making predictions

about events. Rather, a causal explanation requires an event, context or the phenomenon under investigation to have its causal antecedents identified. This means uncovering the causal powers that produce the phenomena and formulating a theory of how the causal powers operate and why they can explain the events under investigation.

**Causal powers (Critical realism)** At a basic level, a causal power is the ability of something to bring about a change in something else by virtue of what it is. It is the essential characteristics of the thing, made up of the relationships between its internal structures (its essential or internal relations). Causal powers can exist without producing effects, so they are often described as having the potential or tendency to act.

**Code (Grounded theory)** A label the researcher assigns to a piece of data to make analytic sense of it. Codes are transitional objects that connect data and analysis. Codes show how researchers portray and conceptualise research participants' actions and meanings. Coding expedites analysis and the resulting codes often provide the skeleton of the analysis.

**Conditions of possibility (Foucault's discourse analysis)** The basic premise of discourse analysis is that the construction of objects (madness, sexuality, civil society) is possible, but not necessary. Hence, one must reconstruct the historical conditions of possibility for a specific object (e.g. madness). This entails considering how the construction relies on a set of concepts, discursive divisions and principles of inclusion and exclusion. One must also consider the practices and institutions that articulate the object and give the discourse stability by anchoring it in something more durable than the spoken word.

**Constant comparative analysis (Grounded theory)** A method of analysis based on inductive processes of comparisons within the data set. It involves comparing data with data, data with category, category with category, and category with concept as a way of developing analysis through iterative stages. Each stage generates successively more abstract concepts and theories.

**Constructivist grounded theory** A contemporary version of Glaser and Strauss's original statement which challenges earlier beliefs in the observer's neutrality and recognises that researchers must examine how their subjectivity, preconceptions and social locations affect the research process and product.

**Context (Critical discourse studies)** Whereas context is traditionally defined as the communicative, social, cultural and political situation in which a discourse is functioning, it is here defined as the *subjective mental context model* of the participants of this situation. In order to speak or write appropriately, language users need to adapt the structures, meanings and functions of their text or talk to the communicative situation, as they construe or interpret it in their mental context models of that situation.

**Critical discourse studies** Critical discourse studies (CDS), also known as critical discourse analysis (CDA), is an approach to discourse and an academic movement that specifically focuses on discursive power abuse (domination) and resistance. CDA analyses discourse structures and relates them to social and political structures of social inequality via a socio-cognitive interface, such as knowledge and ideologies. CDA or CDS is not a method, but a multidisciplinary approach that uses many different methods of the humanities and social sciences.

**Dasein (Phenomenology)** The experience of being for human beings. Also described as the entity in which the self and world belong together. To Heidegger, this was a central

concept to encapsulate the idea that people are thrown into, or always engaged with, the world and cannot step outside of it.

**Deduction** Deductive reasoning starts with theories, models or laws and infers statements from certain premises, defined by these theories, models or laws.

**Definitive concepts and sensitising concepts (Symbolic interactionism)** Definitive concepts refer to what is common to groups of objects by the use of attributed and fixed benchmarks. Sensitising concepts are more open orientation tools serving as inspiration in empirical analyses. As Blumer (1986: 49) stated: “definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see; sensitizing concepts suggest directions along which to look”.

**Demi-regularities (Critical realism)** Partial patterns or broken trends in data, which may point towards a causal mechanism at play. While demi-regularities may indicate tendencies or probabilities associated with the acting mechanism, they are not predictive causal laws.

**Descriptive phenomenology** The original phenomenological methodology, developed by Edmund Husserl, as a science to describe the essences of phenomena that appear in our consciousness.

**Discourse (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** Discourse is an independent object of analysis, irreducible to the speaking subjects or semantic structures. The discourse must be studied at the level of *what was actually said* which entails giving up the search for hidden meanings, individual intentions or an overarching ideology. Furthermore, discourse is from beginning to end historical, which means that the discourse unfolds in a trajectory that has no necessary direction or rational progression, but is marked by contingency and transient forces.

**Discursive formation (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** Discourse analysis entails reconstructing the systematic patterns of discourse. Rather than reading texts in depth to recover the author’s intention or meaning, one must search for discursive regularities. Texts and statements can only be understood within a field of statements, a discursive formation. This formation is a system of references and interdependencies on the basis of which propositions can be made, descriptions developed and concepts elaborated. Discursive formations are products of history and must be recovered empirically.

**Empathy (Tradition)** Experiencing the experiences of others is called “empathy”. Empathy describes the relationship between self and others, and constitutes the phenomenological approach to intersubjectivity.

**Enactment (ANT)** The concept of enactment describes the process by which a specific actant in a network acquires certain characteristics or potential. Rather than defining in advance which type of actor has the potential to act, ANT works this out on the basis of the empirical evidence. As such, we might say that in ANT the actor has no essential characteristics. One result of this approach is that multiple meanings may be attributed to the same actor depending on the relationships the actor is part of in a network.

**Essences (Tradition)** The essential structures of subjective experiences.

**Face-work (Symbolic interactionism)** As with most of Goffman’s concepts, face-work is an interactionist concept that highlights the moral aspect of human encounters.

Individuals can act in either an improper (“wrong-face”) or proper (“in-face”) way. As individuals mainly strive to be “in-face”, they will do everything they can to save face and avoid acting improperly – an endeavour that their co-actors typically support them in. Face-work relates to the rules of practice as well as the social skills of the participants – the joint goal of the participants is to help each other to avoid crossing social boundaries that could threaten their faces.

**Fusion of horizons (Hermeneutics)** This is an expression of the process of understanding that occurs when two horizons merge and form a new meaning. In a research context, this refers to the confrontation between the phenomenon that the researchers want to explore and understand, and their own pre-understandings. Via this process, the phenomenon is brought into the researcher’s horizon, and the researcher enters the phenomenon’s horizon.

**Genres (Narrative analysis)** A genre indicates what type of plot a story has. The most common distinction of genres recognises four main genres. Plots within the comical genre describe regular people, who seek temporal joys and want to avoid pain. Plots within the romantic genre describe extraordinary people, who heroically fight great challenges. Plots within the ironic genre describe regular people, who meet meaningless conditions in a chaotic world. Plots within the tragic genre describe extraordinary people, who are overwhelmed by devastating events that they, in spite of their personal qualities, cannot overcome.

**Hermeneutic circle** The hermeneutic circle describes a process of moving back and forth between the sub-elements of a phenomenon and the context of which they are a part. In this way, sub-elements become meaningful in the light of their importance in the overall context, while an overall understanding of a phenomenon is reached by combining and comparing the sub-elements.

**Hermeneutics of action** The hermeneutics of action presupposes that the meaning of what people say, write or do is defined by social context. The hermeneutics of action focuses on intentional explanations (explanations of purpose). Hence, observers interpret the actor’s intentions in the light of the context of the action. Interpretations of texts often build on the same principles as interpretations of actions, because language and conversations *are* actions.

**Horizon (Hermeneutics)** Everyone has a horizon of meaning that they use to interpret the world. According to Gadamer, this is a basic human condition, and a principle that can be put to systematic use in research. The fact that people understand the world from a horizon underlines the fact that researchers are not neutral observers, who simply expose the objective properties of a given phenomenon, but individuals who question them from their own horizons.

**Identity dilemma navigation (Narrative analysis)** Identities are constructions of characters in three dilemmatic spaces that require careful navigating: being different, similar or the same in relation to other characters; characters as in control versus being the product of forces that control their actions; and constancy (i.e. staying the same over time), as against having changed. These spaces are dilemmatic, because narrators have choices; and these choices are analysable in their storytelling interactions.



**Identity/identity analysis (Narrative analysis)** Identity is a second-order theoretical construct, implying that identities (plural – as first-order concepts) are constructed and continuously reconstructed in everyday interactive processes. The term *identities* is used to enable the empirical investigation of how people and organisations are able to gain a sense of self, and give answers to the who-am-I question – engaging interactively in identity work.

**Idiographic approach (Critical realism)** IPA relies on idiography, which means that researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal. The idiographic approach implies a complete, in-depth understanding of single cases in their unique context. Researchers analyse data to identify what is distinct to one case (e.g. the account of one participant), while balancing this with what is shared in all the cases studied. The idiographic approach is contrasted with nomothetic research, which is about attempting to establish general laws and generalisations.

**Immanent critique (Critical realism)** This is a method of critique that takes the premises of existing theory and seeks inconsistencies or contradiction within the terms of the theory itself. There is an emphasis on seeking theory–practice contradictions (e.g. what must the world be like if this theory is true?), or seeking contradiction between the premises of the theory itself (e.g. can two distinct theoretical premises held within the theory be simultaneously true?).

**Induction** Inductive reasoning begins with the study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates patterns and meanings from them to form a conceptual category.

**Institutional identities (Symbolic interactionism)** Institutional identities are templates for self-understanding, defining the character of specific problems, their background and possible solutions. Human service organisations work with such templates (although with variety in their openness or rigidity) in order to adapt the diffuse and various troubles of their clients into standardised definitions and categories, necessary for interventions.

**Intentionality (Phenomenology)** Consciousness is always consciousness of something. For example, every act of loving is a loving of something. Structures of experience involve intentionality, or what Husserl called directedness of experience towards things in the world. Note that this is distinct from contemporary definitions.

**Interaction order (Symbolic interactionism)** Interaction order emphasises that human encounters are meaningful when taking the situation in which they unfold into consideration. The concept underlines that individuals and social structures are not separate and competing entities, and that individuals continuously have to take other people's expectations into consideration when they (inter)act. The interaction order displays the rules and procedures of the situation in which the encounter takes place.

**Interpretive phenomenology** An approach to phenomenology, pioneered by Martin Heidegger, that emphasised how interpretation is an integral aspect of any understanding of experience. To Heidegger, we exist or are always in the world, such that our context informs the meanings we use to interpret the world. Heidegger's interpretive work was a departure from Husserl's earlier descriptive approach.

**Labelling (Symbolic interactionism)** Labelling theory states that people's self-identity and behaviour are affected by the way they are defined and categorised by other people. Labelling theory asks researchers to focus on all parties involved in the



process, and on the interaction between those alleged to be involved in wrongdoing and those making the allegations. Howard Becker, who introduced the theory, later renamed it an interactionist theory on deviance.

**Lived experience (Phenomenology)** Phenomenological researchers use the term “lived experience” to capture “the embodied, socio-culturally and historically situated person who inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world” (Eatough and Smith, 2011: 5). When researchers want to uncover this experience, they attend to (without participating in) everything from individuals’ emotions, motivations, networks of plans, belief systems, to how these emerge and are conducted in social action.

**Memo-writing (Grounded theory)** A key stage between data collection and building meaning and theory. Memo-writing involves the researcher articulating their ideas about their codes and emerging categories, including links between them, in whatever way they are seeing these codes, categories and linkages in the data. In GT memo-writing is used from an early stage to prompt researchers to analyse their data and formulate emerging meanings from early in the research process. Memos are revisited and revised and successive versions are intended to reach further levels of abstraction to support theory-building. Memos are important building blocks for the GT researcher between collecting the data and writing up analysis.

**Mental models (Critical discourse studies)** Mental models are the subjective mental representation of people’s experiences of specific events or plans of action, stored in episodic or autobiographical memory. Discourses about such events, such as personal stories or news reports, are expressions of the mental models of language users. Language users also construe mental models of the communicative situation in which they participate, such as a conversation, writing a news report or reading the newspaper.

**Monuments (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** Treating texts as monuments contrasts with the conventional notion of historical documents. Whereas the document is approached as an object of interpretation, the monument is viewed as a point in a discursive structure. First, one must build a textual archive by following texts’ and statements’ mutual references. Second, one must choose monuments which particularly clearly display discursive regularities, ruptures or discontinuities. A monument can be a text, but it can also be a symbol, a picture or a building.

**Multiple hermeneutics** Actors always develop “first-order interpretations” based on their experiences and evaluations. Social scientists interpret these interpretations, thus creating “second-order interpretations”. Actors often incorporate scientific concepts in their own interpretations, a phenomenon called “double hermeneutics”. However, communications also take place among actors and among researchers. The concept of “multiple hermeneutics” is used to cover all these processes of meaning-making.

**Narrative** A narrative (or story; these terms are often used synonymously) is an oral or written presentation of a sequence of events, organised in a meaningful configuration: the narrative describes something that has happened, or will happen, in a way that makes a point. Beyond this minimal definition, the concept of “narrative” carries different meanings in various streams of narrative research (see Polletta et al., 2011, for a review). Some definitions emphasise how narratives draw on a cultural stocks of plots, others how they

are populated by recognisable story characters, and others still point out how narratives appeal to audiences through emotional engagement and social identification, rather than through appeal to standards of logic and proof.

**Narrative/story** Narratives/stories are interactional discourse units; texts, interviews, conversations, arguments, route descriptions and recipes are not. What distinguishes stories/narratives from other discourse units is their temporal contour in which characters are constructed as navigating identity dilemmas.

**Network (ANT)** An analytical concept to describe how actors are linked and the consequences of those links. It is a basic ANT principle that it is always networks that act. The relational aspect takes precedence in analyses. A network is always an actor-network because actors never act alone. Networks consist of heterogeneous elements, and almost always of both human and non-human actors that do different things.

**Neutralisation (Symbolic interactionism)** An umbrella term for the accounting strategies people use to legitimise their actions. Some of the most common forms of accounting are: rejection of responsibility, reference to exception, denial of negative consequences and condemnation of the “condemners”. Neutralisation is common in all human interaction but especially in situations where people feel accused of wrongdoing.

**Order of discourse (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** This term defines how any statement, spoken or written, takes part in a discursive order which consists of conventions of writing, rituals, rules and taboos that structure the production of discourse. This order is embedded in institutions, scientific disciplines and administrative practices that are crucial for what can be said and written. The order of discourse is both pervaded by deep-rooted cultural conventions that cut across different areas such as science and literature and by specific orders inherent in disciplines.

**Performative narrative analysis** A performative narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the context of where, when and for what purpose a story is told. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “who” the audience of a story is, and the analysis identifies how the context produces certain possibilities and limitations for the storyteller.

**Phenomenological attitude** The phenomenologically inspired researcher has an attitude characterised by openness. Openness towards self, others and the world makes it possible to focus on the description of “things in their appearing” and of experiences as “lived experience” described by actors. It also implies refraining from, at least in the initial phases, determining frameworks and prejudiced interpretations.

**Phenomenology** A philosophical movement and a family of qualitative research methodologies that examine the structures of experience or consciousness. The suffix *-ology* means “study”, while *phenomenon* describes what appears to us in our consciousness. Thus, phenomenology is the study of the objects that appear in our consciousness, or the ways we experience these objects.

**Philosophical hermeneutics** The central principles of philosophical hermeneutics are: that human beings think and act on the basis of pre-understandings, opinions and prejudices; that these conditions form the actors’ horizons of meaning; and that understanding is about people’s horizons approaching each other.

**Plot (Narrative analysis)** A plot is the focal point of the story, which usually outlines a cause–effect relationship; that is, an event in the story is logically tied to another event

(e.g. she was part of the wrong crowd, and then started doing drugs). The plot determines which events are relevant for the narrator to single out during the storytelling, and how the characters of the story are presented (e.g. sympathetic, funny, mean).

**Positioning/positioning analysis (Narrative analysis)** Positioning in discourse/interaction presupposes agentive speakers (narrators) who position a sense of who they are at three analytic (empirical) levels in their storytelling interactions: *how they position story characters vis-à-vis* one another; *how they position themselves vis-à-vis* their audience; and *how they attend to dominant discourses (master narratives) and thereby convey a sense of self.*

**Positivist and constructivist epistemologies** In qualitative research, a positivist/realist paradigm sees empirical data (interviews, observations, documents) as representing facts about the world. Reality exists “out there” independent of our knowledge about it, and the goal of the researcher is to describe this reality as neutrally as possible. In contrast, constructivists (or constructionists) argue that data are displays of perspectives – the researcher’s as well as the participants’ – and that the social world to be analysed is processual, complex and ambiguous.

**Power (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** A key premise of Foucault’s approach is that power is always at play in discourse. This entails that the discourse creates specific positions that subjects need to take up if they wish to speak in a meaningful and rational fashion. They need to follow particular conventions for speaking, comply with certain divisions and abide by the rules of exclusion that exist in a given discursive field. The question of power is thus not “added on” to the analysis subsequently. Given Foucault’s premise that power is integral to the discourse and its operations, discourse analysis is always already an analysis of power.

**Pragmatism** A philosophical position that views reality as characterised by indeterminacy and fluidity and open to multiple interpretations. This perspective sees human actors as creative and active in bringing reality into being. Meanings emerge through practical action and in turn people come to know the world through action. Facts and values are interlinked as opposed to separate, and truth is relative and provisional as opposed to fixed and universal.

**Presentation of self in everyday life (Symbolic interactionism)** Presentation of self in everyday life is a concept that directs attention to the fact that social life is a drama, and that the unit of analysis is the interaction and mutual meaning-making of people in their everyday life. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals put on a performance that resonates with the social situation in which they are acting. Goffman sees the social self as deriving from the reactions of others as well as from the set of rituals and procedures defining the situation in which people interact.

**Pre-understanding (Hermeneutics)** Everybody, including researchers, has pre-understandings of phenomena, which are shaped by personal experience and form the basis of our interpretation of the world. In other words, our life experiences give rise to “prejudices” or “pre-judgements” that are necessary for our understanding of the phenomena we encounter – in research as well as in life in general.

**Principle of compassion (Hermeneutics)** In order to understand what actors mean by what they say, write or do, hermeneuticists start with the idea that most actions are

intentional and in a certain sense true. Furthermore, when analysing people's actions, hermeneuticists consider social actors as rational. Only if this proves impossible do researchers look for different interpretation strategies.

**Principle of generalised symmetry (ANT)** The methodological principle that human and non-human actors must be described with the same vocabulary. The principle stems from the fact that ANT adopts an agnostic approach and no actor or type of actor is accorded precedence in advance of the empirical analysis.

**Principle of symmetry (Tradition)** This concept refers to the obligation to ensure that we assign equal significance to human and non-human actors. Every effort must be made not to predefine actants.

**Qualitative research** Qualitative research can be defined in many different ways, but the following hallmarks constitute a common denominator: focusing on meanings and interpretations; working with process as much as content; seeing the studied phenomena as rooted in – and made possible by – specific spatial, temporal and social contexts; working inductively or abductively rather than deductively; and using sensitising concepts rather than definite concepts.

**Reflexivity** Researchers' self-scrutiny about their place, decisions and actions during the research process. Reflexivity includes examining one's own social locations, privileges, perspectives and priorities and questioning how they may affect research participants and the research process.

**Retroduction (Critical realism)** Key mode of inference used in CR. Retroduction seeks to explain why phenomena occur, which helps identify the most pertinent causal mechanisms. Retroduction asks why the phenomenon occurs as it does, and what conditions are necessary for it to exist and/or persist.

**Self in symbolic interaction** Mead saw the self as socially created, and as a process rather than a substance. Mead's well-known *I/me* distinction reflects his dual understanding of the self – the *I* is the impulsive and unpredictable part, while the *me* is the social, socialised and controlled part. Mead's *me* is society's voice inside the individual. The *I*, on the other hand, is the individual acting in the present.

**Social cognition (Critical discourse analysis)** Social cognition consists of the mental representations shared by the members of a group or community, such as socio-cultural knowledge, attitudes or ideologies. Both the personal and the public production and comprehension of discourse, as well as social interaction and communication in general, presuppose these forms of collective (social, political or cultural) cognition, as they are (slowly) acquired by the members of these communities.

**Stigma (Symbolic interactionism)** For Goffman, stigma refers to a state of "undesired differentness". The tendency of "normal people" to consider the stigmatised person as different often leads to discrimination (e.g. against people with physical disabilities, mental disorders). However, as with other concepts developed by Goffman, stigma is a relational phenomenon. In other words, what constitutes stigma changes over time, and in accordance with the norms, rules and procedures of the situations in which people interact.

**Stratified ontology (Critical realism)** A theory of reality associated with critical realism, in which reality is multi-layered and consists of three main levels:

- Empirical – the level of events/phenomena as people experience and perceive them. Events/phenomena are filtered through human observations and interpretations, which are necessarily partial. Observed events at this level are produced by causal mechanisms at a deeper ontological level.
- Actual – the level of events/phenomena in totality (i.e. not filtered through human observation or experience). The actual level consists of events that we may not experience or observe directly, but which we can see evidence of at the empirical level.
- Real – the deepest level of reality, which not only encompasses the empirical and actual, but also contains structures and mechanisms (whether social or natural) that cause events/phenomena to occur.

**Structural narrative analysis** A structural narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the components of the story. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “how” a story is told, and the analysis identifies structural elements of the story.

**Subject positions (Foucault’s discourse analysis)** Studying how the discourse structures the relationship between subject positions is a way to study how power is integral to discourse. The order of discourse sets conditions for both the speaking and observing subject and the subject who is listening or being examined. However, the discursive is not an immobile structure that forces the speakers to entirely submit to a set of fixed rules. The principles of formation allow new utterances that presuppose, support or contradict already existing utterances.

**Symbolic interaction** Implies that actors reflect on the meaning of their actions, and in doing so take into account the other party’s (presumed) perception of those actions, and thereby anticipate likely outcomes. In other words, when we act, we step out of ourselves and try to see ourselves and our actions, including what we think and say, from the perspective of other people.

**Thematic narrative analysis** A thematic narrative analysis is an approach that forefronts the content of the story. This implies that the analytical attention is turned to “what” is being told, and the analysis identifies main themes in the story.

**Theoretical sampling (Grounded theory)** Sampling to develop the researcher’s emerging theory, not for representation of a population or increasing the generalisability of the results. Theoretical sampling requires having already constructed tentative theoretical categories from conducting comparative analysis through coding and memo-writing.

**Translation (ANT)** A concept used to describe how human and non-human actors are linked and, therefore, form new networks. The translation concept also underlines the fact that actors change as a result of entering into a new constellation. As a result, the focus is on both how the links are created and on how they result in shifts and changes.

# INDEX

Page numbers in *italics* refer to figures.

- abduction 3–4, 22–3, 184–6, 190–1, 225, 239
- ableism 52–3
- accounting/legitimising explanations 42–4
- actant, definitions of 330, 361
- action and intentional explanations,  
hermeneutics of 124–8, 131
- Acton, C. and Hird, M. 61
- actor-network theory (ANT) 292, 328, 341–2
  - analytical principles 333–4
  - collating empirical material and presenting analyses 335
  - human and non-human actors 330–1
  - network 331, 342, 348, 361
  - theoretical approach 329–30
  - translation/translation processes 332–3, 342, 348
- actor-network theory (ANT) and interviews 346–7, 359–60
  - extended network analysis (risk management) 356–9
  - non-human actors 353–4
  - situated network 354–5
  - methodological considerations 350–2
- agency
  - in identity negotiation 249–50, 256–8, 260
  - and structure 159–60, 308
- Alvesson, M. 9–10
- ambivalence and coherence in interviews 11–12
- Anderson, N. 5
- anti-Semitism, nationalism and racism,  
empirical example 314–15, 318
- Archer, M. 160
- Asian and African immigrants and Norwegian  
health service, empirical example 121–2, 128
- “association sociology” 333
- axial coding 209
  
- Becker, H. 4, 30, 33–4, 35, 347
- “being-in-the-world”/*Dasein* 75–6, 89, 120
- Benner, P. 82–3, 87
- Bhaskar, R. 157, 158, 159, 160, 167, 174, 175,  
178, 180, 181, 183, 186, 188
- black box metaphor 332, 342
  
- Blackman, L. 295–6
- Blumer, H. 4, 30, 31, 32, 53, 200
- bodily cues 248–9, 259–60
- Bourdieu, P. 12
- bracketing 75, 79, 80, 81, 98, 101
- Butler, T. 142–5
  
- Callon, M. 329, 333, 334
  - and Latour, B. 329, 332–3
- Campbell, F.K. 52–3, 64
- care and employees with disabilities, empirical  
example 58–62
- categories/categorisation 7
  - and coding 209–12, 219, 234–5, 236–7
  - symbolic interactionist analysis 57
- causal explanation 160–1, 169
- causal powers 158–9, 169
- CDA *see* critical discourse analysis
- change
  - actant causing 353–4
  - and constancy 250
  - as norm 334
- Changing Generations* (intergenerational  
solidarity, Ireland), empirical example  
224, 226–8, 229, 230, 231–3, 235–8
- Charmaz, K. 176, 199, 201, 204, 210, 211,  
215, 216, 217, 224, 225, 226, 228, 229  
et al. 198
- Chicago School 30, 33
- chronic illness 196, 200, 201–2, 203, 206,  
210–11, 214, 215–16
- circular understanding/hermeneutic circle  
140–2, 151
- co-construction 231, 251–2
- coaching young people from ethnic minority  
backgrounds, empirical example 145–8
- coding 7, 181–3, 205–9, 229–30
  - and categories 209–12, 219, 234–5, 236–7
- Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. 4
- cognition, personal and social 308,  
313, 320
- coherence and ambivalence in interviews  
11–12
- Collier, A. 159, 178, 179

- compassion, principle of 117–18, 131  
 constant comparative method 205, 213–14, 234, 237, 240  
 construction industry, project management  
   in, empirical example 336–40  
 constructivism and realism 8–10  
 constructivist grounded theory 199, 219, 224, 231  
 constructivist interactionism 35–44  
   interviews as symbolic interactionism 40–2  
   social problems 36–7  
   social problems work in organizations 37–8  
   content analysis 245–6  
 critical discourse analysis  
   text and context of discourse 310–11  
   discourses of domination 313–14  
   macro vs micro 308  
   power as control 308  
   media discourse 315–16  
   political discourse 318  
   professional and institutional power 318–19  
   social media discourse 316–18  
 critical realism 156, 168–9, 174, 189–90  
   abduction 184–6, 190–1  
   agency–structure relations 159–60  
   causal explanation 160–1, 169  
   causal powers 158–9, 169  
   commitment to ontology 156–8  
   foundations of 174–5  
   power and epistemology issues 183–4  
   retroduction 186–9, 191  
 critical realism research  
   data analysis 165–8  
   data coding 181–3  
   data collection 164–5  
   design 178–80  
  
*Dasein*/“being-in-the-world” 75–6, 89, 120  
 deductive reasoning 3, 22  
 “definition of the situation” 55  
 definitive concepts 4, 23  
 demi-regularities 181, 182, 183, 185, 187, 190  
 Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. 6  
 descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi) 79–80  
 descriptive phenomenology 74–5, 78, 89  
   vs interpretive phenomenology 85–6  
 deviance, labelling and 33–4, 36, 41–2, 46  
 Dilthey, W. 114, 116–17, 124, 128  
 disability: discourse analysis 294–5  
 disability: symbolic interactionist  
   research 52–5  
   data and analytical procedure 57  
   othering 58  
   categorising with other deviations 62–6  
 discourse, definition of 301–2  
  
 discourse analysis 283–4  
   discourse as fragment of history 285–6  
   order of discourse 287–9  
   relation between words and things 292–4  
   discursive formation 290, 302  
 discursive power 309  
 divided subject 296–7  
 double and multiple hermeneutics 128–30, 131  
 drink-drivers, empirical example 42–4  
 dual structure of self 35  
 Durkheim, E. 129  
  
 Edison Chen sex scandal interview, empirical  
   example 254–61  
 eidetic reduction 75, 79  
 empathy 101, 110, 117  
 enactment, concept of 348–9, 361  
 epistemic fallacy 157, 174  
 epistemological issues 8–10  
   critical realism 183–4  
 epoché *see* bracketing  
 ethnocentrism, nationalism and racism,  
   empirical example 314–15  
 experiences of life-worlds *see* lived experience  
 explication and application 115  
  
 face-work 54–5, 68–9  
 Fairclough, N. 318  
   and Wodak, R. 307  
 Finlay, L. 96  
 first-order interpretations 128, 129, 130  
 focus group interviews 12–13  
 focused coding 7, 208–9, 230  
 “follow the actor”, principle of 350, 352  
 Foucault, M. 283–302  
 Fowler, R. et al. 306, 316  
 Freud, S. 118, 287  
 Furedi, F. 37  
 fusion of horizons 121, 139–40, 151  
  
 Gadamer, H.-G. 114, 115, 119–21, 122–3, 124, 139  
 Geertz, C. 202  
 generalised other 32–3  
 generalised symmetry, principle of 334, 342, 347–8, 350, 361  
 Gibson, S.K. 81–2  
 Giddens, A. 114–15, 126, 128, 129, 130  
 Giorgi, A. 79–80, 87  
 Glaser, B.G. 198–9, 201, 202, 203, 205, 206–7, 208  
   and Strauss, A.L. 5, 197–8, 199, 201, 205, 212, 213–14, 218  
 go-along interviews 13  
 Goffman, E. 4, 5, 30, 33, 34–5, 38, 53–5, 59, 62, 276, 348



- Gomart, E. 349  
 and Hennion, A. 353, 359
- Goode, E. and Ben-Yehuda, N. 36
- grounded theory 5, 7, 196–7, 218, 224, 238–9  
 and critical realism 176  
 data coding 205–9, 229–30  
 and conceptual categories 209–12, 219, 234–5, 236–7  
 data collection and analysis 200–3  
 formulating research question and designing study 199–200  
 memo-writing 212–14, 233–5, 237–8, 240  
 openness  
 in practice 226–8  
 in theory 225  
 theoretical sampling 215–17, 219, 228–31  
 in practice 231–4  
 theory-building 234–5  
 writing up 217–18
- Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A. 38
- Habermas, J. 121  
 “habitual system of relevance” 98, 103
- Hall, S. 315
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. 6
- Hearing Voices Network (HVN), empirical example 295–6
- Heidegger, M. 75–6, 78, 82, 83, 103, 114, 123
- hermeneutic circle 140–2, 151
- hermeneutic phenomenology  
 (Van Manen) 80–2
- hermeneutical philosophy 157
- hermeneutics 76, 114–15, 130–1, 136–8, 149–50  
 of action and intentional explanations 124–8, 131  
 double and multiple 128–30, 131  
 history of 115–17  
 philosophical 119–24, 131  
 principles 117–19
- “hermeneutics of suspicion” 118
- HIV/AIDS, empirical example 36–7
- Holstein, J.A. and Miller, G. 37–8
- horizon 139, 150–1  
 fusion of horizons 121, 139–40, 151
- Huberman, A. M. and Miles, M.B. 8
- human and non-human actors 330–1
- Husserl, E. 74–5, 78, 80, 97, 98
- identity negotiation 249–50
- identity work 38, 39, 40
- idiographic approach 102–3, 111
- immanent critique 162, 165, 169
- inductive reasoning 3, 22, 225, 239
- information systems, development of 142–5
- initial coding 7, 205–7, 208, 229–30
- institutional identities 39–40, 46  
 institutional power 318–19  
 institutionalised discourse 284–5  
 intentional explanations, hermeneutics of  
 action and 124–8, 131  
 interaction order 54, 68  
 interactionism  
 and positivism 8–10  
*see also* constructivist interactionism;  
 symbolic interactionism
- interactive context of narrative 248–9
- interpretations  
 first-order 128, 129, 130  
 and meanings 3  
 second-order 129, 130  
 as situated activity 138
- interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)  
 (Smith) 83–4, 86–7, 102–3
- interpretive phenomenology 75–6, 78, 89  
 vs descriptive phenomenology 85–6
- interviews  
 focus group 12–13  
 go-along 13  
 individual 11–12  
 online 14  
*see also under specific approaches*
- Kant, I. 156
- Keane, H. 349, 359–60
- Keen, E. 5–6
- labelling and deviance 33–4, 36, 41–2, 46
- language *see* critical discourse analysis;  
 discourse analysis
- Latour, B. 292, 329–30, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 341, 347, 348, 350, 352, 360  
 Callon, M. and 329, 332–3  
 and Woolgar, S. 329
- Law, J. 329, 330–1, 334
- legitimising explanations/accounting 42–4
- lexicon/lexical expression 312, 313
- life stories 41
- line-by-line coding 205–7, 208
- lived experience/experiences of life-worlds  
 81, 86–7, 96–7, 98, 103, 110–11  
*see also under* phenomenology and  
 researcher–field relationship
- local food in Saskatchewan, empirical example  
 176–7, 180, 181–3, 184–90
- maptask exercise 351–2, 354–5
- Mead, G.H. 30, 31, 32–3, 35, 41, 53
- meanings  
 actor-network theory (ANT) 350  
 and interpretations 3  
 interpretive phenomenology 82  
 and processes, grounded theory 203–5  
 symbolic interactionism 53



- media discourse 311–12, 315–16  
 social 316–18
- memo-writing 212–14, 233–5, 237–8, 240
- mental models 311–12, 320
- Merton, R.K. and Kendell, P.L. 12
- metaphors 312, 313  
 black box 332, 342
- military officers, empirical example *see under*  
 phenomenology and researcher–field  
 relationship
- monuments 290–1, 297, 301, 302
- moral career 34–5
- moral panic 36, 315
- Morgan, D. 74, 86
- multiple hermeneutics 128–30, 131
- narrative, definitions of 262, 279
- narrative analysis 244, 266–7  
 approaches and problems with interviewing  
 244–7  
 identity negotiation 249–50  
 performative analysis 275–7, 279  
 structural analysis 272–5, 278–9  
 thematic analysis 270–2, 278
- neo-positivism 9–10
- network: actor-network theory (ANT) 331,  
 342, 348, 361
- neutralisation theory 41–2, 46  
 and strategies 42–4
- Nietzsche, F. 118
- non-human actors 330–1
- online interviews 14
- online observations 16
- ontology  
 commitment to 156–8  
 hermeneutic 137  
 stratified 159, 178–9, 190
- open systems 159
- openness  
 grounded theory 225, 226–8  
 phenomenological attitude 109, 110
- order of discourse 287–9, 302
- othering *see under* disability: symbolic  
 interactionist research
- out-of-home care, empirical example 267,  
 277–9
- Park, R. 30
- participant observations 14–15  
 symbolic interactionism 60–1
- performative narrative analysis 246, 267–8,  
 275–7, 279
- personal and social cognition 308, 313, 320
- phenomenology 5–6, 9, 10, 74  
 and differences between 76–84
- similarities between 86–7  
 philosophical types 74–6
- phenomenology and researcher–field  
 relationship 96–7, 109–10
- philosophical hermeneutics 119–24, 131
- plot 266, 280
- Polkinghorne, D.E. 150
- Pollock, L. 136
- positioning and positioning analysis 251–2
- positivism and interactionism 8–10
- power  
 discourse analysis 297, 299–300, 301, 302  
 and epistemology issues 183–4  
*see also* critical discourse analysis; critical  
 discourse analysis research
- pragmatism 32, 239
- pre-understandings and prejudices 120–3,  
 139–40, 150
- professional and institutional power 318–19
- qualitative research/analysis  
 definitions of 2–4  
 development of 5–7  
 epistemological issues in 8–10
- racism 314–15, 318
- realism *see* critical realism; positivism
- recording observations (audio/video) 15–16
- reflective listening 297–8
- relational network 348–9
- researcher  
 –field relationship *see* phenomenology and  
 researcher–field relationship  
 –informant relationship  
 hermeneutics 128–30  
 power and epistemology issues 183–4
- resistance against discursive domination 317
- retroduction 186–9, 191
- Riessman, C.K. 245–6, 266,  
 267, 270, 275
- roles and scripts 54
- Sayer, A. 159, 160–1, 180, 183
- Schleiermacher, F. 114, 115–16
- Scott, M. and Lyman, S. 42
- second-order interpretations 129, 130
- self  
*Dasein*/“being-in-the-world” 75–6, 89, 120  
 in symbolic interactionism 32–3, 35, 46
- semi-structured interviews 11
- sensitizing concepts 4, 23, 54, 200
- sentence structures and nominalisations 313
- Silverman, D. 8–9, 10, 17
- situated activity, interpretation as 138
- situated network 354–5
- small story theory and analysis 247, 248,  
 254–61
- Smith, J.A. 83–4, 86–7, 102–3  
 and Osborn, M. 96, 100, 102, 103
- social cognition 308, 313, 320

- social problems *see under* constructivist interactionism
- social problems work 37–8, 39–40
- ‘social situation’ 348
- “sociology of the social” 347
- Spector, M. and Kituse, J. 36
- Spradley, J.P. 6
- stigma/stigmatisation 34–5, 53–4, 61, 62, 69
- storytelling 244, 248–9, 313
- life stories 41
  - small story theory and analysis 247, 248, 254–61
- stratified ontology 159, 178–9, 190
- Strauss, A.L.
- and Corbin, J. 199, 209
  - see also* Glaser, B.G.
- structural narrative analysis 246, 267–8, 272–5, 278–9
- structure and agency 159–60, 308
- structured and unstructured interviews 11
- Sykes, G. and Matza, D. 41–2
- symbolic interactionism 30–1, 44–6
- definitions of 31
  - self in 32–3, 35, 46
  - stigma and moral career 34–5
  - see also* constructivist interactionism; disability: symbolic interactionist research
- symmetry, principle of 334, 342, 347–8, 350, 361
- syntax and lexicon 313
- Taylor, S.J. and Bodgan, R. 6
- text
- discourse analysis 290–1, 297–8, 310–11
  - hermeneutics 115–16, 118, 123, 125–6, 127
- thematic narrative analysis 245–6, 267–8, 270–2, 278, 279
- theoretical sampling *see under* grounded theory
- theory–practice contradictions 162–4
- theory-building *see under* grounded theory
- ‘thick’ description 202, 203
- Thomas, W. and Thomas, D. 33, 138
- Thomas theorem 33, 138
- transgender identities, empirical
- example 39–40
- translation/translation processes 332–3, 342, 348
- Tryggestad, K. et al. 337, 339, 340, 342
- understanding 7
- circular/hermeneutic circle 140–2, 151
  - and explaining 116–17, 138–9
  - practical 123
  - pre-understandings 120–3, 139–40, 150
- UNESCO programmes, empirical
- example 137
- unrecognised creativity in work organisations 162–3, 164, 166–8
- Van Manen, M. 80–2, 87, 96, 102
- Verstehen see* understanding
- visual analysis 246
- voice-hearers: discourse analysis, empirical
- example 295–6
- Weber, M. 7, 129, 286
- ‘Who Should Do the Talking?’: discourse analysis, empirical example 296–300
- Whyte, W.F. 5
- Wittgenstein, L. 96
- work organisations
- disability and othering in 58–66
  - unrecognised creativity in 162–3, 164, 166–8
- workplace bullying, empirical example 37
- writing up 217–18
- Young people, drugs and alcohol, empirical
- example 346–7, 359–60





