

### CHAPTER 3

## *Philosophy, social science and method*

In the last chapter we saw that the physical sciences face a number of difficulties in the search for a method that can provide certain knowledge. Despite these, there appears to be general agreement that the whole point of the exercise is the pursuit of universal explanations. Therefore, most philosophers of science tend to agree upon the ends of science, but disagree upon the means for the attainment of such ends. The social sciences do not enjoy such a level of consensus. A fundamental disagreement lies at the heart of social science about whether social phenomena can be subject to the same kinds of explanatory goals as physical phenomena. Doubters maintain that social phenomena are distinct enough to require not just different standards, but a distinctive conceptual framework upon which social investigation can be based. For those who believe there can be a “unity of method”, there are not just the difficulties of justification and verification to be faced, but how to deal with the very obvious differences that social phenomena present in comparison to physical phenomena.

In their infancy, sitting in the shadow of the physical sciences, the social sciences experienced no such widespread crisis of confidence and were distinguished by an empiricist method. Indeed positivists, notably Durkheim, based their claim for the scientific nature of social science on the assertion that the methods used to study the social world did not differ in any important way from the methods used to study the physical world. The crisis of method was yet to come. As such, it was with some confidence that the positivists could make this assertion.

Given the strong emphasis on method, the actual nature of what was to be discovered was thought unproblematic. Only the subject matter itself

distinguished one discipline from another and it was unthinkable that the subject matter might dictate the appropriateness of method. After all, physicists, chemists and zoologists all studied quite different phenomena, but it was held that this made no difference to the methods they employed. Though positivism appeared to be at the leading edge of social science, it did not have an epistemological monopoly. An important alternative tradition existed in the form of hermeneutics that held the view that there were crucial differences between the physical and the social worlds, although the “*verstehen* sociology” of Max Weber, in particular, offered a serious empirical alternative to positivism. Though Weber was equally as concerned as Durkheim to establish the “scientific” credentials of social science, he emphasized that human consciousness was a distinguishing feature of the social world. Quite simply, because human beings have the capacity for autonomous reflection, they cannot be studied in the same way as inanimate objects.

Today no-one seriously doubts that subject matter makes a difference to method. However, how these differences manifest themselves and what their implications are for the study of social phenomena, are matters of some controversy; all of which have important implications for research methodology. Therefore, this chapter is concerned with examining two very distinct views on the social sciences. First, the view that the physical and social sciences are constrained to share key logical, epistemological and methodological features. Although the subject matter is important, social research should be just as scientific as research in the physical sciences. It follows from this position that it is legitimate for the social sciences to pursue the same goals of explanation, generalization and prediction that characterize the physical sciences.

In contrast, a second position argues that the differences in subject matter are so important that any attempt to study them in the same way is doomed to failure. Those who take this view cite the inability of the social sciences to produce any “law” like statements such as those in physics and chemistry. This argument rests on the premiss that the nature of social life precludes both explanation, such as that found in the physical sciences, or any form of prediction that can hold true for all people at all times and in all places. In other words, if science necessarily is about explanation and prediction, then the social sciences are different, but not inferior to, the physical sciences. Thus, we begin our discussions by asking can social research share, with the physical sciences, the goals of prediction and explanation and if not, what are the alternatives?

## EXPLANATION, PREDICTION AND GENERALIZATION

### *Explanation, prediction and generalization*

When a scientist investigates a phenomenon, the desired outcome might be an explanation of that phenomena. The explanation for a substance turning litmus paper blue is that it is alkaline. The explanation for a moon remaining in a particular orbit is the nature of the gravitational attraction of a nearby planet. In everyday life we seek explanations that will satisfy us and although what will satisfy the scientist is perhaps more rigorous than what will satisfy us, it remains the case that science and everyday life both seek forms of explanation. It is important to note, however, that philosophers of science differ in what kind of things can count as an explanation, or whether universal explanation is possible.

More disagree about the goal of prediction in science. As we have seen, the method and success of prediction is by no means settled in physics or chemistry. Some believe that our predictions can rest upon the principle that the future will resemble the past in important ways; others argue that we can only show what cannot be the case. Yet explanation can be said to presuppose prediction. Take, for example, our simple litmus paper example. If it remains true that an alkali turns litmus paper blue, then we can predict that all other alkalis will have the same effect. Even a falsificationist would agree that this prediction is legitimate because it may be subjected to continual testing. If an explanation is a good one then it will lead to successful prediction. The reverse also holds: a prediction, if correct, becomes an explanation. Our prediction is that if a substance is alkaline it will turn litmus paper blue. A substance is explained as alkaline if it does this, or an acid if it turns the paper red. Thus, "the logical structure of a scientific prediction is the same as that of a scientific explanation" (Hempel 1994:45).

In everyday life we routinely predict and explain. Perhaps you will predict that on your birthday you will receive gifts from friends and relations; that one day of the year you are the sole recipient of gifts is explained by it being your birthday. On the other hand, predictions about birthdays and similar social events may turn out to be wrong. For instance, an incident may occur with the result that your relatives no longer speak to you. Alternatively, you may move to a society in which it is expected that you will give gifts to your friends and relatives on your birthday! Despite such possibilities we seem to get by with these sorts of predictions in our everyday lives. In the physical sciences, however, there is a desire for something stronger than predictions that are "quite likely" to be

accurate. After all, a great deal of important technology rests on the success of scientific prediction. Science requires invariable laws of nature in order that our predictions about the tensile properties of steel, or the escape velocity of space shuttles, do not end in disaster.

Scientists can and do routinely and successfully predict events and produce explanations. Although Kuhn may be correct in his observations that, from time to time, whole paradigms are overthrown in science, prediction and explanation are still conducted with high degrees of success in "normal" science. Scientific laws tend to hold true. Disasters to do with bridges, or space shuttles, are the results of error or forces of nature that are beyond the control of human beings, not exceptions to laws as such. Though our understanding of the status of a particular "law" may change, as with the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, the empirical consequences remain, for most purposes, similar. For instance, the advent of relativity did not seem to make any difference to the odds of toast falling buttered side down!

Despite these observations, the question remains as to whether we can predict with such degrees of certainty when it comes to social life. As social scientists, the types of events that interest us are more like birthdays than gravity. Predictions and explanations concerning crime levels, for example, are fraught with problems. Even economics, often assumed to be the most "legitimate" of the social sciences, does not have a good record on prediction and explanation; the success of which will depend upon whether one is a neo-classical, Keynesian, or Marxist economist.

Three reasons, in particular, have been offered for the apparent lack of success in prediction and explanation in the social sciences (Scriven 1994). First, the generalizations made in social science are more complex than the physical sciences. More "standing conditions" must be specified in order to describe even the most simple of relationships. It follows that more variables must be measured to obtain the most basic data upon which to base generalizations. For example, a specification of the "standing conditions" needed to explain the boiling of water are pretty well exhausted once we know that under conditions C water will boil if heat is applied. Once we have this information, it is easy to predict in what circumstances water will boil in the future. Contrast this with the controversial attempts to measure intelligence in humans (Eysenck 1953:19–40). Just one aspect of this seems to present insurmountable difficulties. Quite simply what it is that is being measured will be culturally specific. What it is to be "intelligent" in Western Samoa will be manifested in a very different way to what it is to be intelligent in the US, and in the UK there will be cultural

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 1

*European integration and housing policy predictions*

Social researchers, particularly those engaged in quantitative research, routinely make predictions and such predictions often begin from explanations of past events. This can take the form of statistical analysis, and modelling prediction may arise from an examination of existing or newly implemented policies, or the research may seek to adjudicate between two or more differing viewpoints. Priemus et al. (1994), for instance, conducted analyses of the likely outcomes of the 1991 Maastricht Treaty on the European Community. The research question centred upon the consequences of European integration for national housing policies. Their work begins with a description of the key features of economic and monetary union and then moves on to examine the consequences of the liberalization of markets and the probable economic effects that will, in their turn, impact upon decisions at a national level concerning housing. Their conclusion was that whereas such decisions will continue to be made at a national level, economic and social policies made at a European level will produce a tendency towards similarities in the development of housing markets in European countries. The assumptions here are both inductive and deductive. It is assumed, from an inductive viewpoint, that certain economic conditions or trends will hold in the future. Given this, it can be deduced that particular consequences for housing will follow. A causal path is thereby implied. European economic and monetary union will lead to specific economic consequences that will lead to an effect on housing policies.

variations in what is considered to be “intelligent” behaviour. To this we must add an even greater variation in the psychological and physiological states that an individual can occupy at any given time. Even an Einstein can have a hangover, or be worried about his tax returns. There are an awful lot more variables to measure in social life even to produce the simplest of explanations, or predictions.

A second difficulty relates to a perceived need to use the concepts of physics, or mathematics, for the purposes of describing the social world. Notwithstanding the problems described above in relation to intelligence

testing, if we say that Garfield has a higher IQ than George, not only are we postulating the existence of an entity (IQ) that possesses certain characteristics, but we are implicitly or explicitly suggesting that they are measurable. In other words, to produce explanations that will count as “scientific” requires the use of scientific concepts; the very concepts over which there is disagreement as to their applicability for studying the social world.

Thirdly, in everyday explanation and prediction we tend to use “low level” laws, such as those related to birthday presents, that result from experience. The consequence is to “skim off the cream” from the subject. For instance, everyday life provides us with at least partial explanations that the social scientist, unlike her physical counterpart, must take into account in her formulations. There are no “everyday” explanations in spectrochemistry. The implication is that the social sciences must exhibit some congruence between everyday explanations and social scientific explanations in order that the latter are “valid”.

The first of these above differences has given rise to both optimistic and pessimistic views about the possibility of explaining the social world. The optimistic view is that the social world is very much more complex than the physical world, but this is a matter of degree, not fundamental difference. Essentially, this was the view of Mill and that of positivism in general. The claim here is that improved explanations will result from more accurate descriptions of the constituent variables and these, in turn, will lead to more accurate identifications and descriptions of the relevant variables themselves. Pessimists might agree that this is true, but it is not very helpful in practice. It would take so long to arrive at levels of explanation as good as those in the physical sciences that humans beings would probably no longer inhabit the planet!

There is another view on this topic. Not only is the social world more complex than the physical world, but it is of a completely different nature (Rosenberg 1988). The very use of the concepts of science is merely the use of a special language that actually blinds us to the need to develop a different language to describe the social world. In taking this view, the second and third of Scriven’s difficulties disappear because “folk psychological” concepts are the very topics that the social researcher should focus upon. The search for laws of social life is thus doomed to failure. Moreover, the use of the language of the physical sciences is singularly unproductive. Social researchers are not in the business of “predicting” or “explaining” and if the concept of “explanation” is to be

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used in the social sciences, then it will have a very different meaning. It is necessary that we investigate this view in more depth. However, we must first consider what makes the social world so distinct from the physical world according to this perspective.

### *Causality, meaning and reasons in the social world*

If the goals of science are explanation and prediction, then this rests upon the notion of identifying relations of cause and effect. Indeed, we might characterize science as the search for causes. In order to predict, we must first identify causes. Similarly, an explanation of X relies on identifying the cause of X. As we suggested in the previous chapter, this is not always a straightforward matter. For Hume, causes were actually observed constant conjunctions between events. We noted, however, that often we can specify more about a cause than the simple observation of two events and that we can even point to a distinct set of conditions that govern whether or not something will occur. Along these lines, can we identify the “necessary” and “sufficient” conditions that comprise a cause in the social world?

There exists a view in the social sciences that approximates the Humean notion of “constant conjunction”. Behaviourism takes the view that only observable and measurable concepts are appropriate foci for scientific study. The aim is to systematize observable behaviour. As such, underlying phenomena are regarded as unknowable and thus irrelevant to the study of social life. Systematization is achieved by “providing general statements that enable us to correlate observable environmental conditions with the behaviour they trigger” (Rosenberg 1988:52). The environmental conditions associated with Sid hitting George might be that Sid was observably angry with George. In causal language, we can say that Sid’s anger with George caused Sid to hit him.

The behaviourists’ argument, like that of Hume, is that we cannot know any more than we observe. A behaviourist may then wish to generalize and say something to the effect that person A hitting person B is a manifestation of the anger of A with B. The problem here is that A and B may be boxers and hit each other for either pleasure and/or profit. All the behaviourist aims to achieve is a specification of the environmental conditions with which certain behaviour may be associated. Like Hume, they seek to establish the presence of constant conjunction.

In our boxing example, the behaviourist would either have to abandon his generalization about the causes of anger, or specify some necessary and sufficient conditions associated with it. Let us say, for the moment, that the outcome of certain types of behaviour results in physical confrontation. The problem is to know whether general manifestations of physical violence may be explained by the same causal mechanisms, or whether different ones are required according to time and place. In causal language, there is a need to specify both sufficient and necessary conditions. In terms of sufficient conditions, from a behaviourist vantage point, there is less of a problem. Anger, in this case, appears to be a sufficient condition for one person to strike another. However, in order for this to be generalizable it would have to be held that anger is a sufficient cause for striking another person. Clearly this may not be the case in all instances in which such behaviour is manifestly observed.

Necessary conditions are more difficult to specify. Clearly, one necessary condition will not cover all instances of people hitting each other. For this reason, the necessary conditions will rest upon other observables in the environment: for example, whether A and B were wearing boxing gloves. The core issue here is that those phenomena that we might observe will not exhaust the possible necessary conditions that are associated with the causes of people striking one another. Quite simply, there may be a surplus of observed causes that are indistinguishable from one another. To distinguish one from the other, we would need to know the full range of reasons that people invoke for striking one another. Proffered reasons imply internal mental states that are anathema to behaviourism with its analysis of external environmental effects on human behaviour. A may hit B because A is angry, but A may actually exhibit symptoms of mental imbalance. Despite this possibility, the outward manifestations of their mental states appear similar. Behaviourism ceases explanation at the level of observable relations with an external environment, because any other level of explanation or mode of understanding is thought to require unjustified imputations regarding a person's mental state.

For many social scientists, the reasons that people give for their behaviour are taken as a beginning, not an end point, to explanation. In everyday life, we explain our actions by giving reasons for them. Therefore, if there is to be a congruence between social scientific and everyday explanations, then the reasons people have for what they do, or say, become a legitimate area for investigation (Davidson 1994). In social



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science reasons are used to explain not just micro level individual interactions, but large scale social phenomena: for example, the rise of capitalism (Weber 1985). However, what comprises a “reason” for behaviour? When we attribute a reason to someone for doing something we are implicitly suggesting that a person had a belief about certain things in the world and, from this, desired certain outcomes. An explanation of Tamsin drinking a beer would require an investigation of her desires and beliefs. It may well be that she was thirsty and desired to drink beer in the belief that it would satisfy her thirst. But why beer and not water? On the other hand, perhaps she desired the effect that she believed the beer would provide. Clearly, the number of beliefs and desires that might inform possible explanations for Tamsin’s action is as wide as her imagination.

Beliefs and desires appear dependent upon the attitude of a person toward his, or her, environment, as well as the actions of others in that environment. People attach meaning to things in the world, as well as the actions of others. From this point of view, social research is not just about behaviour, but about meaningful behaviour. Clearly, the action of gravity has no meaning in the sense that voting or drinking may have. Meaningful behaviour is the product of consciousness and experiences. It is this that is at the heart of the claim that human action is different to phenomena in the physical world.

As Popper (1966) has pointed out, the autonomous actions of conscious human beings produce open systems. From this point of view, we cannot logically anticipate outcomes for they are, it is claimed, indeterminate. Because the possibilities for individuals to take any number of different actions exist as an option, successful prediction in the social world will be limited. It is perhaps limited because of the difficulties we have in specifying causes. Our “causes”, in social science, are therefore more properly thought of as reasons. The question must now be: can reasons serve as causes?

There have been numerous attempts to produce a form of words that will incorporate the language of beliefs and desires into something that might be said to provide a universal formula upon which to base explanation and prediction in the social sciences (see, for example, Papineau 1978:78–84). They tend to take the following form: If agent X desires Y and believes that A is the best way to achieve it, then X will perform A. There are two possible classes of objection to this form of explanation. The first is that beliefs and desires are about future states and to specify them as being the same as causes leads to teleological explanation: that is,

RESEARCH EXAMPLE 2

*Changing attitudes to cohabitation  
in the British Household Panel Survey*

The BHPS is a longitudinal study based on a cross-sectional sample of households who are interviewed at regular intervals over a period of years:

[the BHPS]...shows how things follow from each other in the lives of real people. It allows us to see how our conditions and manner of life at one point in time turn us into the people (and kind of society) we subsequently become (Gershuny et al. 1994:11).

Since the 1960s there has been an increasing tendency for people to live together outside of marriage. The BHPS found that 30% of women and 25% of men aged 21–24 had cohabited before marriage, whereas only 4.6% of women and 7.4% of men 60 years and older had cohabited. This indicates a change in attitudes between generations leading to a change in behaviour. Indeed, this is borne out by parallel findings which show that of those born since 1960 only 6.8% of women and 7.5% of men thought cohabitation to be wrong. However, changing attitudes are not necessarily reasons for these may be more complex. Thus, the cause of cohabitation may lie in factors such as a desire to live together prior to marriage, or as the result of the break up of a first marriage. Therefore, while disapproval may have been a reason not to cohabit in the past, the absence of disapproval is not likely to be a reason to cohabit now. Even if reasons can serve as causes, an exact specification of those reasons may not be an easy task.

explanations that rest upon the specification of end states and thus attribute purposes to actions or social systems. This is considered illegitimate because to specify an end state (a desire) as an explanation for action actually reverses cause and effect. The future cannot *cause* the past. This is sometimes answered by saying that in specifying the desires and beliefs of an agent, we are not talking about actual end states at time t<sub>2</sub>, but what it is that makes the agent act at time t<sub>1</sub>. Even if we said the explanation for Tamsin

drinking beer was that she was thirsty and believed beer would quench her thirst, this would not imply any necessary outcome. Tamsin could have had precisely the same beliefs and desires, but have been thwarted by the fact that the bar was closed, or had run out of beer!

The second class of objections to this form of explanation, though more obvious, is also more serious. Agent X may desire more than one thing. Further, A may be one of two, or even more, equally good ways of achieving end state Y. There may be less of a desire to achieve Y than to avoid Z and so on. Now, although we can make numerous attempts to further specify what a universal formula should be by adding these possibilities, the difficulties never really go away. Thus, even if reasons (consisting of beliefs and desires) can be said to be the equivalent of causes in the physical world, there is still the need to attach many more caveats, or what are known as *ceteris paribus* clauses, to our universal formula. Eventually, we will have to attach so many that we end up saying that X will do A, all other things being equal. In scientific terms, this appears not to be anywhere near good enough and would seem to preclude successful explanation and prediction. If reasons are treated as causes we end up with *n* possible causes of a particular action. It would be as if we could identify plenty of sufficient conditions for combustion, but no necessary ones.

### Rules and rationality

The foregoing has charted some of the difficulties in the search for causes in individual human action. However, much of social science is concerned to explain events at a macro level. For example, Wall (1990) used census data to explain the differences in the structure of English and French households. Such explanations rely on, for example, being able to differentiate norms within particular societies. Thus France has a higher proportion of elderly people living as couples than in England, and in the South of France households tend to contain more related members than in the North (Wall 1990:18–19). A description of the differences between family and household structures in these societies therefore implies the existence of social norms, defined as shared expectations of behaviour that are deemed culturally appropriate.

Norms in society can be regarded as rule following. In social research the discovery of a social rule may count as a sufficient explanation of behaviour. If we wish to explain why it is that drivers drive on the right in

the United States, but on the left in Australia, it would be unusual to seek an explanation via individual reasons and more usual to cite a rule that is subject to sanctions. In this way, rules may come to stand in for laws. However, not only are rules broken, but different rules apply in different times and places. In this sense, they lack the robustness of laws in the physical world. Nevertheless if, as researchers, we want to explain social behaviour then rules appear indispensable. What do we mean by rule following, or indeed rule breaking behaviour?

Rules imply something else central to social explanation—rationality. To behave rationally is to follow explicable rules. To break a rule does not necessarily imply that a person is behaving irrationally. The difficulty lies in deciding what counts as rational and what counts as irrational. We have seen the difficulty in attempting a universal specification of reasons for individual actions. Perhaps the implicit assumption behind such attempts is that human beings act rationally. This is a reasonable assumption, for social life would be difficult if we continually misunderstood the meanings others attached to their and our actions, or utterances.

An important area of microeconomic theory is that of rational action theory. This begins from the assumption that agents behave rationally in that they will always attempt to calculate the most effective way to achieve their ends (Elster 1986). Quite apart from the unwarranted assumption often made that the ends an agent will wish to attain are motivated by pure self-interest, this approach treats rational behaviour as a straightforward relationship between ends and means in individual actions. Social life is not that simple for it depends on our ability to anticipate the actions of others that themselves may be the product of our own actions. Moreover, goals may be benevolent and/or consensual.

To consider the above, let us take the hypothetical case of firefighters who are confronted with a burning building in which people are trapped. In attempting a rescue, the likelihood of severe injury, or death, is often considered less important than the desire to rescue the people in the building. These goals may be viewed as benevolent and contrary to self-interest. The rational choice theorist may wish to say that it is the individual who will decide her ends and the best means for their attainment. Nevertheless, this leaves us with a very narrow definition of what it is to act rationally and one that is not particularly useful to describe a myriad of actions in varied social circumstances. After all, what is thought to be a rational way to act will be dependent upon a variation in circumstances along the dimensions of time and place.

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The difficulty in specifying what is a rational way to behave lies in the absence of ahistorical, or acultural standards that we might employ for the purpose of adjudication. It is not just that what is rational in Western Samoa may be different to that of the United States, but that within the US itself there may be difference. In other words, standards of rationality possess both exogenous and endogenous variations. Moreover, even within given societies what is rational changes over time. In Britain during the Second World War, the sound of church bells would have prompted the rational reaction that invasion was underway. Nowadays, it tends to signal that a religious ceremony is about to commence or has just finished.

In the English-speaking world, a very influential exponent of the view that rationality, and thus rule following, is a normative product of a given society is Peter Winch. Winch (1990) argued that an explanation of an action can only be accomplished by evaluating it against the standards current within that particular society. According to Winch, it follows that causal explanations of human behaviour are invalid. Unlike causal generalizations, rules admit of exception. In this way, rationality becomes the mode through which we understand the rules of the particular society in which we live. The statement that X was behaving irrationally is a product of local standards. Viewed from his vantage point, X was perhaps behaving perfectly rationally. For Winch, therefore, an investigation of a society requires an understanding of the normative behaviour of that society. We will return to Winch presently, but for the moment let us examine in a little more depth this alternative to “scientific” type explanations.

### Meaning, language and understanding

We now turn to the second “position” that, for the sake of convenience, we will label the “interpretivist”. The core of this position has informed many of the above critiques of causal explanations in social science. However, it is important to also note that the position itself has a distinct philosophical pedigree to positivism.

Interpretivism rests upon the philosophical doctrine of idealism. Although there are several variants of idealism, all hold the view that the world we see around us is the creation of mind:

Hunger, pain and anger in the human world cannot be described without investigating how individuals use language and symbols

to construct what such states *mean for them*. For it is only by understanding the individual experience of subjective interpretation that we will understand why human beings behave in the way they do; why, for instance, thresholds of pain, attitudes to death, and so on, differ so markedly from person to person, and from culture to culture (Johnson et al. 1984:75. Original italics).

It does not follow that the world is considered “unreal”, but simply that we do not have any kind of direct “one to one” relationship between us (subject) and the world (object). The world is interpreted through the mind. Indeed, our very observations of the social world depend upon a classificatory scheme that is filtered through our minds. Given this, we cannot know the “true” nature of the object world, separate from our perception of it.

Kant applied the term “transcendental idealism” to his view that the objects of our experience, those things that exist in space and time, are simply appearances and have no independent existence from our thoughts. This was a view that Weber took seriously in his analysis of the relationship between particular Protestant values and the ethos that underpinned the development of capitalism (Weber 1985). The Calvinist doctrine of “predestination” held that all were “saved or damned”, whatever their actions. Despite this, the early capitalists attempted to discern signs of their fate via their worldly success, or lack of it. This desire for salvation led to asceticism, thrift and good works, but particularly the desire to re-invest in enterprising schemes.

Prior to Weber’s work, Karl Marx had explained the rise of capitalism as a result of material economic circumstances. However, Weber viewed this explanation as incomplete, for it failed to tell us why society A developed capitalism and B did not, even when the antecedent material conditions appeared similar in both societies. The missing part of the explanation rested on the meanings that individuals placed upon events and actions. It is quite irrelevant whether the Calvinists were correct in their beliefs about predestination, what is important is that their beliefs made them act in a particular manner. Only by knowing the meanings that agents attach to their actions can we hope to explain them. The social world thus becomes the creation of the purposeful actions of conscious agents. For Weber, no social explanation was complete unless it could adequately describe the role of meanings in human actions.

Weber was not the first to emphasize meaning in the study of social life.

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 3

*Appearances and meanings in studies of national identity*

The contrast between appearance and intention is illustrated in studies of national identity. Kellas offers data from a survey of Scottish identity carried out in 1986 (Kellas 1992). Respondents were asked “how do you regard yourself in terms of nationality?” Possible responses included Scottish, British, equally both, more Scottish than British and vice versa. Clearly, no differentiation could be made on whether one asked “Scottish” or “non Scottish” people this question in the first place, because the aim was to find out how Scottish respondents felt. What of in-migrants? Even if they had begun to feel Scottish, we might still be justified in expecting quite different replies than from someone born and bred in the Highlands able to trace his, or her, ancestry back to the clans!

The problem in the above example lies in what the respondents themselves regard as “Scottishness”. It is fine for the researcher to define what she means by “Scottishness”, but unless this has some congruence with what the respondent means, the explanation will lack validity. In other words, social explanations must be derived from the meanings of the people we are investigating. For researchers, this is a problem of validity—can we be sure that the question asked is meaningful to the respondent and/or the reply we receive is meaningful in terms of the research question? In contrast, other more recent sociological and anthropological studies described by MacDonald (1993), place emphasis on learning about what counts as national identity via the way in which people construct those identities from the meanings they place on objects and relations in their social world. As she points out: “Identities [are] not merely relations which were present or absent, but actual phenomena which could be relatively strong, weak, confused disordered or in crisis” (MacDonald 1993:7).

The key here is a German word that is often associated with Weber’s methodology, *verstehen*, which means to “understand”. Vico (1668–1744) was one of the first to insist on an ontological distinction between nature and human consciousness; a distinction born of the desire to understand

the active processes of human history. Its practical significance in social science was the result of the work of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911).

Dilthey's work occurred at an important time in the history of philosophy. Enlightenment reason, which had underwritten the burgeoning sciences, found itself under attack from a movement known as romanticism; a reaction against the increasing rationalization of human life. This reaction, which emphasized the centrality of the individual spirit and imagination, was typified in the writings of Shelley and Goethe. Dilthey's work was thus carried out against a background of the opposites of the rational and the empirical versus the metaphysics of the romantics. The romantics were philosophical idealists who emphasized the unknowability of what Kant called the noumenal world: that is, a world beyond appearances, the "thing in itself".

Dilthey, although wishing to emphasize a different set of philosophical assumptions for social science, still wished to rule out metaphysics as its basis. He took the view that in the physical world we can only study the appearance of a thing—the thing in itself (the noumena) remains hidden. On the other hand, the subject matter of the social sciences is human consciousness, which can be known directly (Manicas 1987:121–2). Speculative metaphysics is unnecessary because in social science we are not dealing with "representations" of the unknowable, but with what Dilthey, following the German idealist philosopher Georg Hegel (1770–1831), called "objective mind":

Every single human expression represents something which is common to many and therefore part of the realm of objective mind ...the individual always experiences, thinks, acts, and also understands, in this common sphere (Dilthey quoted in Outhwaite 1975:26–7).

In the pursuit of a new epistemological basis for the social sciences, Dilthey's work was to take this historical path. To understand society, we must understand history not just as a series of events, but as the outcome of human creativity. To say, for example, that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, in Sarajevo, "caused" the First World War is erroneous and misappropriates the language of the physical sciences in the social sciences. The search for cause and effect, in history, is as mistaken as the alchemists' search for gold. To understand history we must recognize that



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it represents a meaningful reality for those who “create” it. For this reason, the physical sciences are seen to represent a search for causal explanations, whereas the social sciences seek understanding.

As a method, understanding must begin from the presupposition that there is at least some common ground between the researcher and the person whom they are studying:

Interpretation would be impossible if the expressions of life were totally alien. It would be unnecessary if there was nothing alien in them. [Hermeneutics] thus lies between these two extreme opposites (Dilthey quoted in Habermas 1972:164).

Understanding thus begins from commonality; in particular, from shared experience that requires empathy on the part of the investigator. If we are to understand why Al Capone turned to a life of crime, we have to understand the meanings his world held for him. We have to understand the context and to do this we have to introduce our own lived experiences. Of course, life in London now (or even Chicago) is very different to Capone’s day, so this process requires the exercise of imagination. Nevertheless, there would be enough in Capone’s biography for us to imagine ourselves in his situation. Obviously, the more we are able to culturally situate people the better will be our understanding.

Weber, drawing upon the work of Dilthey, distinguished between modes of understanding. Not all modes involve empathy. Indeed, in history and sociology the search must be for what motivated a person to act in the way that she or he did (Weber 1949:101–2). Here, Weber’s search is a candidate for the pursuit of the “truth” that involves understanding. His work thus begins to look less like hermeneutics and a little more like positivism. Thus, he defines sociology as, “a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects” (Weber 1949:88). Understanding becomes the starting point whose aim is the production of propositions that give rise to explanations that are adequate at the level of cause *and* meaning.

For Weber, the above was a necessary step to produce accounts of social, as opposed to individual, actions. For this reason, although an understanding of the social begins with an understanding of individual subjective meanings that are directed towards others, they are not the end of the story. Weber, though often thought to emphasize idealism, considered

## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 4

*Communist identity construction in Italy*

The ethnographic strategy of participant observation is an attempt to get close to what is being studied by becoming part of that social setting. As with Kellas in the previous example, Chris Shore (1993) was concerned with the construction of identity. In this case, it was that of Communist identity in Italy, but more specifically, “the dialogue between communism and Catholicism in a city wide context” (1993:33). Shore’s research was carried out in an inner city area of Perugia and was an “account of the processes and relations observed...in the ethnographic present” (1993:29). Though he was concerned to understand the lived experience of the people he studied this was inevitably from the point of view of a foreigner. Yet, as he notes, this was not always the most important factor in leading to acceptance or rejection in the community (the former being a prerequisite to obtain worthwhile data). Often the impression he gave about his political views was crucial. A rejection of capitalism and a particular view of the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was enough to win acceptance as a “comrade”. Conversely, among the non-Communist Catholics his religion, or lack of it, became important to some of those with whom he spoke. To understand meanings is to understand context and to do this it is often necessary to become an insider- or at least to stop being an outsider. A central issue here is, can an English non-Communist come to “know” the meanings of an Italian Communist?

the intentionality of conduct, alongside the pursuit of objectivity in terms of cause and effect. This was translated into an interest in both the meanings and the material conditions of action. In this sense, Weber’s methodology appears iconoclastic for he attempts to form a bridge between the traditions of positivism and interpretivism. The question for social science then becomes: what motivates people to act in particular ways and where do their meanings come from in the first place?

To return us to our discussion of rules, there are those within the interpretivist tradition who argue that our actions are not governed by cause and effect, but by the rules that we use to interpret the world. In the

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phenomenological tradition of philosophical thought, “outer” explanations for human action based on, for example, the class position of an individual in society, are substituted by two different questions. It is these questions that should be the focus of social research. They are, “how does reality come to be constituted by mental operations as a known object?”, and secondly, “how do we go about constructing our ideas of what reality is?” (Johnson, Dandeker & Ashworth 1984:78). In this sense, Weber’s use of *verstehen* towards the goals of social scientific explanation cannot be justified.

A number of responses to this issue have occurred, that either build on the work of people such as Dilthey, or the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who sought the basis of “true understanding”. Among these, the work of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) stands out. It is he who moved the focus of phenomenological inquiries from epistemology to ontology and in so doing posed a challenge to the ideas of Kant. For Heidegger, we are not simply observers of an external world that is mediated and sorted by our consciousness (Husserl), but are members of that world who exist as “beings-in-time”. This moves social science away from Dilthey’s neo-Kantian preoccupations with the question of appropriate methods for the study of social life, to an analysis of what Heidegger called *Dasein*. This is not an easy concept to grasp, but it may be considered as “pre-understanding”:

the *place* where the question of being arises, the place of manifestation; the centrality of *Dasein* is simply that of a being which understands being (Ricoeur 1982:54. Original italics).

Importantly, Heidegger does not try to “solve” the question of the relationship between a subject (person) and the world (object) that they inhabit through the formulation of an appropriate method, such as *verstehen*. Understanding does not simply require the prioritization of human consciousness in the study of the social world, as it had for Husserl and Dilthey, because understanding is part of a “mode of being”. Understanding actually emerges from a gap that exists between where people are located in history and the possibilities that are then made available to them in the future.

The point of this discussion is that ideas, such as *verstehen*, are not a method to be appropriated by the human sciences, but actually a fundamental part of human existence. Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) has been much influenced by the ideas of Heidegger. His concerns are ontological, rather than epistemological and in this focus three questions

become of importance: how is it possible to “understand”; what kinds of knowledge can “understanding” give us and what is the status of such knowledge? Gadamer uses the hermeneutic language of “text” for this purpose, maintaining that understanding is made possible by grasping not just what the text says, but its cultural location. The text becomes an involuntary expression of a particular historic reality. The investigator can then access the meaning of the text through its context and the social context is accessible through the interpretation of the text. As such,

Gadamer’s position would require us to look beyond what is said to what is being taken for granted while it is being said, to the everyday meaning of both the language used and the situation in which the conversation occurs (Blaikie 1993:64).

As with Heidegger and Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the ontological over the epistemological through his concern with the relationship between language and meaning. He agrees with Weber that meaning is the central concern of the social sciences. With Gadamer, however, he shares a concern with the interpretation of “texts”. For Ricoeur, a text is a discourse fixed in writing, but social action itself does share some of the general features of a text. Although both employ language, the important difference is that speech forms a dialogue, whereas (and here he disagrees with Dilthey) a text does not. A text does not necessarily carry the intentions of the author; intentions that are present in dialogue. Quite simply, if two people are having a conversation the intention of the other is apparent, whereas there can be any number of interpretations of a text, each of which is equally correct. Ricoeur’s aim here is to unite explanation and understanding. Language “has no subject” for it exists outside of time and it is this quality that allows for differing interpretations of texts. Two readings of texts are then possible. First, we can explain it in terms of its internal relations via the logical structure of languages or, secondly, we can treat it as speech and offer interpretations that lead to understanding.

The approaches of Gadamer and Ricoeur are essentially philosophical. In fairness to both, this is their intention. For this reason it is difficult to see how their prescriptions would “work through” in the world of research. However, their emphasis upon the centrality of language is important. Language offers us common horizons in which investigation becomes possible simply because meanings are shared and understood. As Gadamer argues, even the worlds of other languages can be grasped from our own,

## SUMMARY

because we have the capacity to broaden our insights to know other social realms. This optimism needs to be tempered with a logical point implicit in Ricoeur's work. If it is the case that we really cannot know the author's intention from the text, then how can we know we have achieved an understanding, or an explanation, consistent with the meanings that the author intended? On this basis, we cannot know whether we can know other social worlds!

This appears to be an overall problem when meaning is used as a "resource" in investigation. Dilthey believed hermeneutics could bridge the gap between the known and the alien. At a superficial level, this is clearly correct. However, the method ultimately relies on the philosophical assumption that we can know other minds. On the face of it, there seems little evidence to support this. After all, our best guesses as to what others are thinking are based on evaluation of their thoughts from our viewpoint. Maybe as a child you played a game whereby you had to guess what your friend was thinking and vice versa. The temptation is always to change your mind to thwart the person guessing! As social researchers who wish to *understand* social groups we are required to find meanings for action; a tall order in such circumstances. What we are actually constrained to do is to link actions and utterances to interpretations of meanings. We are back to Ricoeur and the inevitability of different interpretations.

### *Summary*

In this chapter we have contrasted two "traditional" views of how we can investigate the social world. Through behaviourism, we have demonstrated the limits of traditional, naturalistic, approaches to social life. The failure of behaviourism lies in its sole reliance on observation and not accounting for the same kind of behaviours being generated by quite different motivations. Further there is no one-to-one correspondence between reasons for action and the action itself. This, in turn, casts doubt upon whether causal explanations are valid in social science, simply because they offend the principal characteristic of causal explanation: that is, the same cause should produce the same effect.

Such problems open up possibilities for the position we have characterized as interpretivism. Interpretivism is not without its difficulties; not least those arising over the issue of "knowing other minds". Social investigations, in order to be more than introspective examinations of one's

consciousness, must rely on claims about knowing other minds. Moreover, if they are to produce findings that are anything other than trivially interesting, claims about their representativeness, validity and potential for generalization must hold.

Implicit in the debate between those who wish to find causal explanations for social life and those who argue this to be mistaken, is a fundamental dispute over the nature of knowledge itself. Philosophical naturalism, for the most part, depends on a correspondence theory of truth. Theories of causality, whether they are Humean or of the more complex kind we described, are also dependent in this way. Yet, if meanings are to be intersubjectively held, a coherence view of truth must operate whereby the agents sharing the meanings agree on the “truth” of the matter.

Difficulties exist in both naturalist and interpretivist explanations. Despite these, social research is still commissioned on a daily basis for the purposes of describing and explaining social phenomena. Therefore, if we are to render justice to this topic, we need to move beyond the arguments in this chapter, to examine the nature and practice of social science from other perspectives. In the next chapter, we examine a range of approaches that either regard the problems noted here as unimportant, or resolve them by starting from a quite different sets of assumptions.

### *Questions for discussion*

1. Can reasons be causes?
2. Must the findings of social science be generalizable? If so what (if any) are the limits of generalization?
3. Should explanations be adequate at the level of cause and the level of meaning?
4. What is it to be rational?

### *Suggested reading*

Hage, J. & B.Foley-Meecker 1988. *Social causality*. London: Unwin Hyman.  
Manicas, P. 1987. *A history and philosophy of social science*. Oxford: Blackwell.  
Papineau, D. 1978. *For science in the social sciences*. London: Macmillan.  
Rosenberg, A. 1988. *Philosophy of social science*. Oxford: Clarendon.  
Ryan, A. 1970. *The philosophy of the social sciences*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.  
Wilson, B. (ed.) 1970. *Rationality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

## CHAPTER 4

# *Knowing the social world*

In the previous chapter we described some of the difficulties associated with causal explanations and interpretations in social science. In this chapter, we focus upon various philosophical justifications and methodological strategies that inform the practice of social research. Though some of the approaches we discuss imply views on problems such as those associated with causality or meaning, it is not our intention to offer “solutions” to the problems we have raised, other than to say that for some philosophers or researchers these are not the right questions to ask in the first place. For this reason there exist views about the nature of the social world, and how we can know it, which circumvent the difficulties discussed so far. Sometimes, these lead to new kinds of problems and though we will illustrate some strategies and justifications, we will not shrink from pointing out some of their more obvious shortcomings.

The first half of this chapter is concerned with the nature of social reality through the examination of various perspectives on the social world. In the process we will be asking: what kinds of things are social phenomena? All philosophical positions and their attendant methodologies, explicitly or implicitly, hold a view about social reality. This view, in turn, will determine what can be regarded as legitimate knowledge. Thus, the ontological shapes the epistemological. The second part of the chapter deals with a number of characterizations of the ways in which we come to know the social world. Here, we wish to demonstrate how epistemological, and sometimes methodological, views actually shape ontological claims. As such, the division of this chapter into two parts is a heuristic device. If the reader is left thinking that this is an artificial divide, we would not disagree.

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### *Perspectives on the social world*

Broadly speaking, there are two principal and opposed views about the nature of the social world and the world in general. The first of these we touched upon in the last chapter. It is the claim that the external world consists simply of representations and is a creation of the mind. The existence of common objects, such as cars or ice creams, is a condition of their perception. This idealist doctrine does not deny that things have a real existence, but maintains that all we can ever know is the world of appearances, or that material objects are a product of mind, or that all there is one mind to which all phenomena belong. These latter two views are attributable to George Berkeley (1685–1753) and Hegel respectively. Although Berkeley's idealism is not quite so odd as it sounds, it will not detain us here. The first and last kinds of idealism, however, underlie some examples we will use in this chapter. For instance, a close relative of idealism is empiricism. Empiricist assumptions about the nature of the world enter social science explicitly via positivism, and implicitly through a collapse into phenomenism exhibited in some interpretivist approaches (Bryman 1988:119). The opposite view to that of representation is that the phenomena we see in the world consists of "real" things. Here, although it is accepted that reality is not always directly known it is, in principle, know able. So, first, let us consider representation in more detail and we can then move on to consider what is known as "realism".

### Social reality as representation: the idealist path

The philosophical justification for idealism can be illustrated by a simple experiment. Next time you are in a room containing a table, or a desk, look at it from above and note its descriptive characteristics. Now get down on your hands and knees and look at it from underneath, now look at it sideways on. Does it not look very different? Which was the "real" table? Each of the tables you perceived was the same one, but if the experiences had been separated you could not have known this. Can we ever know the real table? This argument can be extended into the social world. However much we "carve up" social interactions, or social structure, we can never claim to have found out what is "real" about it. It follows from this that the search for the authentic, or the "real" in the



social world, is a misguided venture. In contrast to this we have a series of representations that are equivalent to Kant's "phenomena". The representations of the "social world" are thus created by individual minds. Important consequences flow from these arguments.

Previously, we discussed the contention that all we can ever know are the meanings that individuals attribute to their social situations or the utterances of other people. This, you will recall, leads to the problem, how can we "know" the social, or to put it another way, what "is" the social world? If knowledge is a product of mind, then knowledge can only come via introspection. There are those philosophers who argue that this leads to solipsism: that is, the view that the world is only an object of personal consciousness and there is nothing outside of the individual mind. Berkeley's idealism led him to this view (see Emmett 1964:156-81). Introspection and the solipsism that follows, become a blind alley for any kind of investigation that requires a degree of intersubjective agreement about what is observed.

Weber was a neo-Kantian. Given this, he maintained that the only way we can hope to know the social world is through a refinement of our instruments for observing it, rather than being able to "know" reality itself. Therefore, the best that social scientists can achieve is to describe the social world by employing "ideal types". These are, "the sum total of concepts which the specialist in the human sciences constructs purely for the purposes of research" (Freund 1968:60). Ideal types are not averages, or even a summary description of phenomena found in the social world. Rather, they are a reflection of how an individual might come to know the world from their own viewpoint or value orientation. Crucially, it depends on a shared rational faculty, implying that ideally we can come to know the real world.

Ideal types may be characterized as a way of rescuing a programme for social investigation that rests on the philosophical assumption that "reality" is mind dependant. However, for Weber ideal types were not a rescue operation. Almost by definition, social life is rational. If we could not depend on others acting rationally, then there would be no social life, simply a collection of atomistic individuals. Quite simply, human actions are goal oriented and depend upon abilities to interpret the meanings of other goal oriented agents. Crucially and controversially, Weber's ideal types assume a congruence between the meanings of the investigated and the investigator. According to him, ideal types are "scientifically formulated pure type of phenomena" (1949:96). In effect, they are testable

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hypotheses formulated to account for the action being investigated. They can be verified, or following Popper, falsified (Rex 1974).

From this point of view, Weber's work may be characterized as bypassing the problem of how we can know the social by employing the methodological strategy of ideal types. He turns an ontological problem into a methodological solution. Other approaches have utilized the philosophical starting point as a justification for statements about the nature of the social world. In particular, those that begin from an Hegelian, rather than a Kantian, idealism.

Hegelian idealism shares with the Kantian variety the view that the world is a product of mind, but disagrees with the view that the "thing in itself", the Kantian "noumena", is unintelligible. As noted, the Kantian "solution" to this is to seek to refine the instruments through which we gain a knowledge of reality in the first instance. It is this idea that forms the basis of Hegel's critique of Kant's epistemology:

We ought, says Kant, to become acquainted with the instrument, before we undertake the work for which it is to be employed; for if the instrument be insufficient, all our trouble will be spent in vain ...But the examination of knowledge can only be carried out by an act of knowledge. To examine this so-called instrument is the same thing as to know it. But to seek to know before we know is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus, not to venture into the water until he had learned to swim (Hegel quoted in Singer 1983:51).

Therefore, the starting point for knowing reality is our ontological connection with reality. A close examination of our consciousness will thus enable the development of increased form of consciousness and so on... until "absolute knowledge" is reached. We do not need to be content with a Kantian "appearance of reality", for knowledge of reality itself may be gained in this manner.

Despite this revolution in philosophical thought, we are still left with a problem. If everything is just in the mind, then how can we distinguish the true from the false, the objective from the subjective? Hegel's solution was to take a "holistic" view of the world. The truth is the whole. Anything less than the whole is contradictory and only by knowing the whole truth can the contradictions be removed. This leads Hegel to a coherence theory of truth, whereby the progress of knowledge is seen as a journey towards one complete system. The process through which we move towards truth

consists of contradiction and resolution—dialectics. The latter, of course, has been extremely influential on many approaches to social science; in particular, Marxism. However, although influenced by Hegelian idealism, Marxism tends to exhibit materialist and realist tendencies. We shall return to these views shortly.

### Representation and the linguistic turn

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) has been highly influential in the development of a linguistically based approach to social investigation. Through the work of Peter Winch (1990) and from there to ethnomethodology, this linguistic turn sees meaning becoming a topic, rather than a resource, in social investigation.

Throughout his career, Wittgenstein had a preoccupation with the scope and limits of language (Monk 1990). Though he first emphasized a “picture theory” of reality along the lines of a correspondence theory, his latter work was given over to the view that language was a social instrument. This involved the replacement of a search for hidden meanings and explanations with a description of the “use” of concepts in everyday language. It is this connection between language and social life which makes Wittgenstein’s work of such importance. Language, he contends, actually makes us social. He compares it to a game for which there are set rules and criteria of success and failure. Activities employ different “language games” with different sets of rules. For example, in Western society if a stage compere says “let’s give a big hand to X”, we tend to clap. We do not throw large hands onto the stage where the person or group is performing. We know the rules of the game and how to play it. It follows that there are no external criteria of assessment that are capable of transcending all language games.

The idea that language is social gives rise to an argument that there cannot be any such thing as a “private language”. Language, far from being the expression of inner consciousness, is actually publicly available and exists by virtue of our ability to use it and even a tendency to make mistakes in its use. If language really were simply a reflection of inner thoughts, the notion of a mistake would be irrelevant. Now we are forced to re-consider the view that we cannot access other minds because there exist publicly available linguistic forms of expression.

Peter Winch employs the analogy of the language game in his approach

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to social investigation. The task of social investigations is to elaborate the “forms of life” of a particular society (Winch 1990:40–65). Thus, as we have seen, rule following behaviour is of central importance to Winch’s formulations. Language implies rules and the rules of societies are apparent through its language games. Different societies will exhibit different sets of games. It follows from this that no ahistorical, acultural framework can be used to adduce the meanings agents employ in different societies. The only method through which we can know society *S*, is via an examination of its forms of life. This view, however, was extremely controversial and is now of interest due to its influence on a tradition of social thought known as ethnomethodology. Before turning to this position, it is worth elaborating on some more common criticisms of Winch’s position, because these criticisms imply an alternative view of how we may come to know the social world.

In considering Winch’s work, Steven Lukes argues that no matter how culturally different a society is from that of the investigator’s, there has to be a mechanism from which we can begin to understand. Thus to understand the language of society *S* it:

must have our distinction between truth and falsity if we are to understand its language, for if *per impossible* it did not, we would be unable even to agree about what counts as the successful identification of public (spatio-temporally) located objects (Lukes 1994:293. Original italics).

It follows from this that any society that has a language must minimally possess concepts of agreement and negation and number: for example, there either is an *X* here or there is not, or there are *n* *X*s here. Lukes’s criticism seems to offer some support for Dilthey’s view that there is enough in common between people to allow for an understanding of what, at first, appears to be an unfamiliar social situation.

A second criticism of Winch’s ideas is that they are relativistic. His work echoes Feyerabend’s insofar as Winch is saying that investigators are not able to employ evaluative, transcultural, comparisons. Indeed, as we noted earlier, Winch takes the view that rationality is specific to different societies. However, this begs the question as to whether societies are easily defined entities. The societies of the Winch-Lukes debate were often referred to as “primitive”; whereas we would prefer to say different from our own. Such hermetically sealed societies, if they still exist in the

age of globalization (Spybey 1995), are hardly helpful illustrations in the evaluation of methodological procedures. Though we talk of “Western” society, there are no sharp demarcation points with non-Western societies. Within each, cultures blend and overlap.

In the “Global Village”, we would be hard pushed not to find cultures that shared at least some conceptual notions with our own. Therefore, if societies cannot be sharply distinguished, what are we to make of rationality? Quite simply, defining rationality in a given society requires, at minimum, an identification of that society. We are thus left with two choices. First, we can arbitrarily define the boundaries of rational behaviour or, secondly, leave it to the individual to decide whether she, or he, is behaving rationally. The first route would take us back to Weber and would be antipathetic to Winch’s project. The second route, on the other hand, renders the concept of the “rational” meaningless.

As noted, Winch’s views translate in social science through the ethnomethodological tradition. Ethnomethodology brings together an emphasis on the importance of language with a particularly “philosophical” view of social life derived from the phenomenological writings of Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). Phenomenology holds that consciousness is the only phenomenon that we can know with any degree of certainty. All of the things we perceive in the world are the objects of our consciousness. Within this school of thought Schutz’s overall aim was to take Husserl’s philosophical problematics and translate them into a phenomenology of the social world which rendered them amenable to sociological study.

In *The phenomenology of the social world* (1972), Schutz describes how undifferentiated experience is constructed into meaningful social objects through the creation of “models”. Repeated experiences become meaningful to us; they are “typical” to us and might be said to serve as markers to help us negotiate social life. These “models”, which Schutz calls “typifications”, are our stock of knowledge of the social world that we continually expand and modify. Typifications can be typical types of people, situations, objects, behaviour, etc. It is these meaningful typifications that must become the topic of sociology and a corollary of his argument is that typifications (and thus meaning) would then become the topic of all social science research.

The central doctrine of phenomenology is that of reduction. Here, we attempt to rid ourselves of prior understandings in order to grasp an experience in its unadulterated form. Thus, for example, to perceive the

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“essence” of triangularity we would need to examine the concepts of “triangular” that we hold in our mind. The aim of this strategy is to discover the “ideal” objects of consciousness. In this case, ideal refers to that which remains the same in repeated experiences. This introspective examination of the objects of our conscious mind is called “bracketing”. In the social world, ideal objects do not exist in the same sense and the nearest we can get to discovering their essence is to discover what are the meanings that agents attach to them via their actions and utterances. Meanings, unlike, for example, ideal geometrical shapes, change. Therefore, the process of reduction is context dependent and partial.

From the above derives the claim that agents’ meanings can be prioritized as the topics of social investigation. For example, in Egon Bittner’s (1967) study of the police on skid row, “peacekeeping” was identified as the area of interest. Concepts such as “police”, “skid row”, as well as other social typifications—“arrests”, “middle class morality”, along with the physical objects encountered such as houses, cars, streets, truncheons—were taken as given. Only pre-judgements on “peacekeeping” and “law enforcement” were bracketed as the concepts of interest. In general, Bittner was concerned to understand the distinction between these concepts as employed by the police themselves. This work, however, lies within the tradition of ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology is an example, *par excellence*, of “folk psychology”. Here, the common sense views and expressions of people in their everyday lives are taken as the subject matter of social science. The term ethnomethodology was coined by Harold Garfinkel in the 1950s and can be translated as “peoples’ methods”. If the imposed meanings of traditional sociology are to be rejected, then it follows that the “grand” explanations and generalizations that it produces are likewise inaccurate and irrelevant. The topic for sociology, Garfinkel argued, must be the everyday meanings people use to account for, or make sense of, theirs and other peoples’ activities (Garfinkel 1967). This necessitated taking a very different route from that of Weber as the following quote from Garfinkel’s earlier work illustrates:

At least two important theoretical developments stem from the researches of Max Weber. One development, already well worked, seeks to arrive at a generalized social system by uniting a theory that treats the structuring of experience with another theory designed to answer the question, “What is man?” Speaking loosely,

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a synthesis is attempted between the facts of social structure and the facts of personality. The other development, *not yet adequately exploited*, seeks a generalized social system built solely from the analysis of experience structures (Garfinkel quoted in Heritage 1984:9. Italics added).

In order to perfect this analysis of “experience structures”, ethnomethodology needed to move beyond phenomenology towards a linguistic focus upon social life. For this reason, Garfinkel maintained that social life is not just to be described through language, but is actually created by language. There are two ethnomethodological concepts that are of importance to this focus of social inquiry: reflexivity and indexicality. First, let us consider reflexivity.

Social life is created through talk. When we give an account of an event we usually consider that we are providing a description. However, Garfinkel argues that this process is creative in that it helps to make the social world. A friend describing a football game to another will be active in creating the culture of interest that surrounds the sport of “football”. The reflexive nature of conversation itself helps us to grasp agents’ meanings. To give an account of behaviour is to seek to make it intelligible to others. The sociologist can then take seriously the accounts given by those in whom she is interested, for those accounts will be an attempt to make behaviour meaningful not only to the person themselves, but also to others. It follows that the issues of rationality can no longer be considered a problem. If an agent can provide a situated account for his actions through an explanation of the context of those actions, then it follows that he is behaving rationally. Reflexivity thus becomes a routine part of social interactions that

Members know, require, count on, and make use of...to produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-practical purposes of their procedures and findings (Garfinkel 1967:8).

Secondly there is the notion of indexicality. Ethnomethodology embarks upon a refusal to differentiate between everyday theorizing in social life and professional social theory by invoking this idea. Indexicality, taken from Charles Peirce’s semiology, states that everyday language and actions cannot be understood without being situated within the social context in

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which they are performed or uttered. In social life, unlike in the physical sciences, there is no one fixed definition of an event or object, for meaning is seen in relation to social context.

The implications of this position are far reaching. First, there can be no privileging of agents' or investigators' accounts. The accounts that agents give of their actions are indexed to particular situations and though similarities may exist, they tend to conceal complex, situationally specific, meanings. The similarity is the product of "glossing", whereby in everyday life we employ a range of taken for granted rules which have the effect of "avoiding the issue"—talking around a topic without giving a true specification of its content (Cicourel 1973:109). Secondly, this leads to a complex relationship between meanings and rules in ethnomethodology. On the one hand, it is accepted that agents employ rules but, on the other, it is maintained that those rules are just the product of glossing. The application of social rules requires agents to make judgements about meanings. However, there can be no definitive or unambiguous means by which one can arrive at such judgements. Indexicality effectively rules out generalizations because there can be no privileged accounts and undermines explanation because rules cannot be said to have an objective existence. Rules do not place limits on action, or provide yardsticks against which actions may be judged. Instead, they are resources upon which people routinely draw in the situated nature of their activities.

The prioritization of agents' meanings as the topic of research takes interpretivism to its limits. There are many critiques of ethnomethodology. Here, we are concerned to examine briefly those that have implications for any investigative project in social science that seeks to prioritize individual meaning and in so doing deny the possibility of social explanation.

The first observation that may be made is that the insistence on the indexical nature of expressions leads to an epistemological and moral relativism. A principal property of indexical expressions is that they are considered to be unique events. Nevertheless, if they are unique events then it follows that the investigator should not generalize from one event, or set of events, to another. Each event will have a different meaning. Of course, it is permissible to report on the generalizations agents make themselves (their typifications), but the investigator should not attempt to produce her own typifications.

This injunction to investigate the "how" of social life, leads ethnomethodologists to adopt a stance of moral indifference toward those investigated:



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Ethnomethodological studies of formal structures are directed to the study of such phenomena, seeking to describe members' accounts of formal structures wherever and by whomever they are done, while abstaining from all judgements of their adequacy, value, importance, necessity, practicality, success, or consequentiality. We refer to this procedural policy as "ethnomethodological indifference" (Garfinkel & Sacks 1986:166).

If there can be no universal statements about the nature of rational action, then there can be no universal statements about the morality these actions represent. This appears to render social science pointless. If on reporting situation S, nothing is to be learnt about S-like situations, then why bother reporting on it at all? Also, a stance of indifference is not tenable. Ethnomethodologists, like all researchers, investigate those things that interest them (or others if they are commissioned to conduct research). As such, there is a process of selection whereby some things are considered worthy of attention and others are not. As we noted in the previous chapter, no investigation begins from a "theory neutral" vantage point. Indeed, as will be noted in the next chapter, arguments exist to the effect that social science must rest upon moral values.

What may be called "moderatem generalizations" about similar social events appear to be unavoidable. If researchers are unable to say that if X occurs in situation S, it is likely that in a situation resembling S, X may well occur again, then there seems little point to research. It seems impossible not to produce, as investigators, typifications about those we are investigating. The latter take the form of theories based upon the typifications of those investigated. To accept that we can be wrong about our theories is much the same as to accept that in everyday life we may be wrong in our typifications.

At this point, it might be helpful if we made some links with our prior discussions. For a long time, empiricism appeared synonymous with science. If science did not give us an insight into reality, then what could? In the social sciences empiricism has been associated (and sometimes confused with) positivism, yet it and idealism, as exemplified in the above formulations, share much of the same pedigree in the work of John Locke (see Russell 1984). Like Hume, Locke argued that our understanding of the world arises from our experiences. Unlike Hume, however, he emphasized that the way we classify objects in the world must be based on our view of the essential qualities of those objects. Therefore, with Kant,

RESEARCH EXAMPLE 5

*The phenomenon of the “radical lawyer”*

Max Travers was concerned to focus upon how “radicalism”, in the legal profession, is “displayed, recognised, accomplished and constructed as a publicly visible cultural object by ordinary members of society going about their everyday working lives inside the legal profession” (Travers 1994:245). The methods used by Travers in his research were ethnographic and consisted of the reporting of conversations with him and conversations between lawyers and others to which he was able to listen. He reports on the views of the lawyers themselves and those others, in order to build up a picture of what “radical” meant to those who viewed themselves as radical and those who saw the lawyers as being radical. Two distinct views thus emerged. For the lawyers, their radicalism was a conscious moral position, but for those opposed to their views (often non-radical lawyers), the lawyers were putting on an act to please the clients and to raise the profile of the firm. “Radicalism” thus became a contested phenomenon.

The research highlights the problematic nature of the term “radical lawyer” and how it is indexical upon the meanings of the different groups.

he is saying that we do not have any privileged access to things in themselves, but we do have access to their properties: for example, colour, shape, feel, etc. Indeed, such properties are perhaps more “real” in their actually being perceived (Emmett 1964:177–9). Hume, you will recall, was even more sceptical and believed that all we could talk about was appearances. Yet Hume’s views rested upon the assertion that we cannot base any knowledge of the external world on appearances, because we cannot know anything beyond them.

Given the above, empiricism may be viewed as a form of representation closely allied to idealism. If appearances are apprehended through sense experiences and we make sense of these experiences in our minds, or even via language games, then the question of separating out “truth” from “falsity” comes back to haunt us. For this reason, the empiricist emphasis shifts from statements about what the object world actually is, to statements regarding strategies for knowing the social world. However, there is another

route available to both the natural and social sciences in considering their philosophical foundations. It is to realism that we now turn.

### Beyond idealism: a realist theory of science

Realism, as a philosophical doctrine, has a long history. It is a complex body of ideas that, like idealism, takes many forms. Unlike idealism, however, it can be usefully summed up in one phrase: the world has an existence independent of our perception of it. It is then a "common sense" position. As Roy Bhaskar puts it:

Normally to be a realist in philosophy is to be committed to the existence of some disputed kind of being (e.g. material objects, universals, causal laws; propositions, numbers, probabilities; efficacious reasons, social structures, moral facts) (1993:308).

The kind of things that can be "real" present philosophers with problems. Although it is relatively unproblematic to discuss the reality, or otherwise, of everyday objects such as cats and aeroplanes, the difficulties begin when we want to say, for example, whether or not light is "real". Debates over the nature of light lead directly to the science of quantum physics and the attendant philosophical difficulties encountered in deciding whether or not elementary particles are "real" (for example, see Rae 1986). The reality, or otherwise, of light is far from unproblematic. Even if agreement about its existence can be reached, there is the problem of whether our ideas about these things are "real" or not.

It is possible to be a realist at a number of levels. The most moderate of realists, who are all but indistinguishable from idealists, maintain that there has to be a "reality" because if there was no "reality", then its negation would in itself be a reality! Furthermore, it is possible to be a realist about the "physical" world, but not about the social world. Here, the justification is that the social world consists of ideas that cannot be treated in the same way as physical objects. This view is, of course, held by many of those described above who view the social world in terms of representation. The difficulty with this subject-object dualism is that it entails the metaphysical belief that "mind" is somehow different from, and not reducible to, "matter" (Dennett 1991). If mind is not reducible to matter, then the difficulty arises in saying exactly what it is and where it

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divides itself from the physical world? Although such discussions are important, our focus on realism will be confined to those who argue that the social world is “real” and exists independently of the ideas that we have of it. How is this view sustained?

The first thing to say is that realists, like the empiricists and positivists, are philosophical naturalists. In other words, they take the view that the structure of explanation in the physical and social sciences are not fundamentally different, though each must elaborate its explanations in ways appropriate to its subject matter (Bohman 1991). This means that realists believe that concepts such as causality, explanation and prediction are just as appropriate in the social sciences as in the physical sciences. In the previous chapter, we noted Hempel’s idea of explanation and prediction as isomorphic: one implies the other. As Outhwaite notes, however, this is an unsatisfactory position taking the form of: X has happened because it has always happened!

If I ask why my train is late, I may be partially reassured to be told that the 8.55 is always late, but even British Rail would hardly dare offer this as an explanation (Outhwaite 1987:21).

Given this, realists want more from an explanation. Empiricist concepts of explanation ultimately rest on a Humean view of what you see is what you get. This, of course, is exemplified in the idea of causality as constant conjunction. Yet, as we have pointed out, constant conjunction really depends on the level of description: that is, what you look at and how you look at it. Roy Bhaskar sums this up with clarity:

Things exist and act independently of our descriptions, but we can only know them under particular descriptions. Descriptions belong to the world of society and of men; objects belong to the world of nature...Science, then, is the systematic attempt to express in thought the structures and ways of acting of things that exist and act independently of thought (Bhaskar 1975:250).

There is a problem here. Empiricist critics of realism maintain that we have no business to go around saying things are “real” when we have no way of demonstrating their existence. The empiricist can say if we claim our description of things, for example atoms, are real, how do we then change our descriptions? Surely, descriptions can only be derived from our experiences?

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There are two responses to this issue. First, we can admit that science changes its formulations, but they are simply hypotheses that have been refuted. These hypotheses are what Bhaskar calls the “transitive objects of science” (1989:18–21) that are created to represent reality. Secondly, it is possible for philosophers to deduce that the world is structured and differentiated, but the kinds of structures and the way they exist are the subject matter of science. In this sense, recall Russell’s argument about the existence of cats. The question of its existence is the province of the philosopher; the scientist focuses upon the properties of that existence.

Realists are saying that things have a real existence. Furthermore, this may be demonstrated by uncovering underlying causal mechanisms. However, the idea of causation employed here is different from that which we have come across before. For empiricists, causality amounts to a description of singular events, from which generalizations are built up via induction. Thus, if the 8.55 train has arrived late on a number of occasions, the explanation for it arriving late on a particular day is that it always does. Here, the explanation is built up of singular, but alike events. Yet the explanation is likely to be much more complex and dependent upon (perhaps) numerous causes that are dissimilar. For instance, on the first day the driver overslept. On the second day there were leaves on the line and on the third day, a signal failure at a station on a different line meant trains from that line were diverted, thus holding up normal traffic. In other words, things happen in open systems and causes are usually underdetermined. When the scientist in the laboratory carries out an experiment she is isolating a part of the world—or at least aims to. Observed regularities are the result of such isolation.

Add to the above discussion what we have noted in Chapter 3: that is, a core issue in the social sciences, and one for the physical sciences, lies in the difficulty of determining all of the conditions that comprise a cause. For realists, causes are regarded rather differently. If different sequences of events can produce the same outcome—for example, the train arriving late—then they are not, *contra* empiricism, dependent upon empirical regularities. Instead, causes must be understood as “tendencies”. These “tendencies” may, or may not, react with other “tendencies” to produce effects. This does not mean that causes cease to exist. Causes are seen as necessary, but that necessity is not easily identified. This means that realism requires a sophisticated methodology that allows the investigator to postulate “transitive” objects. These are postulated in such a way that their mechanisms can be revealed in order to refine the original

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postulation; the overall aim being to achieve a correspondence between the “transitive” objects of science and the “intransitive” objects of reality.

The above process has been described in a realist methodology for science (Harré & Secord 1972:125–47). This consists of empirical studies, whereby critical descriptions of non-random patterns are produced through observation and experiment, together with theoretical studies that aim to produce rational explanations of the non-random patterns in the data. On first glance this does not sound so very different to more traditional methodologies. Nevertheless, what is different are the underlying assumptions about the entities being studied. Some of these might be hypothetical entities and some of these may be candidates for real objects, or processes, in the world. Through a process of critical inquiry, the rest are eliminated.

In a similar fashion, Bhaskar’s view of scientific discovery is based upon the identification and description of effects, from which hypothetical mechanisms are postulated that, if they existed, would explain the effect. From this, attempts are then made to demonstrate the existence and the mode in which the mechanism operates via experimental activity and the elimination of alternative plausible explanations. It is important to remember at this point that ontological assumptions about the world drive the process of discovery. As such, while realists are naturalists, they are not reductionists. Therefore, they do not claim that human behaviour can be explained biologically for a mode of explanation that is suitable to social phenomena is required. Despite this, it still follows that social objects can be studied as scientifically as physical objects (Bhaskar 1979:26).

To admit that forms of explanation must be appropriate to the phenomena under consideration allows for an ontological differentiation between the social and physical sciences. Between these, Bhaskar notes three important differences. First, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities that they govern. Secondly, social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the agents’ conception of what they are doing in their activities and thirdly, social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring (1989:79). Therefore, social structures only exist by virtue of the activities they govern and cannot be identified independently of them (1989:78). People are “produced” by the structures and in turn they reproduce structures, or “transform” them. For example, national economies cannot exist independently of people who experience their effects and contribute to them.

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From this, we can say that if a substantial proportion of the US population refused to recognize credit cards, or dollar bills, the economy would cease to exist in any recognizable form. As such, social structures are social products that are less enduring than “natural” structures and social systems are more “open” than physical ones. Nevertheless, it is claimed that social objects do have an independent existence of subjects while having real effects on their lives. At the same time, agents are able to act upon (transform) them. That said, the question remains as to whether we can successfully generate the transitive objects that represent aspects of social structures. In other words, how realistic are the methodological maxims of realism? This question also has an epistemological dimension to it.

Marx certainly thought it was possible to generate the transitive objects of realism. For this reason, he is often cited as the first realist social thinker (Keat & Urry 1975:96). Marx’s aim can be said to analyze the dynamics of capitalism in order to expose its underlying mechanisms that, in turn, give rise to particular social relations. To talk of the causes and effects of political economy without identifying the underlying mechanisms is to elaborate a fiction. As Marx says:

[political economy] explains nothing; it merely pushes the question away into the grey nebulous distance. The economist assumes in the form of a fact, of an event, which he is supposed to deduce—namely the necessary relationship between two things—between, for example, the division of labour and exchange (Marx 1977:62).

The form of explanation of which Marx complains is the same kind as that offered for the late train in Outhwaite’s example; it is taken as fact without the need for further elaboration. Marx maintains that in order to understand the relationship between, say, exchange and the division of labour, it is necessary to understand the historical processes that have led to the current mode of production. Within capitalism, we can only account for the accumulation of capital when we understand the relationship that exists between constant and variable capital. These things are real because they have real effects on people. Capitalists and workers are the prisoners of these mechanisms. Capitalists must continue to accumulate if they are to remain in business. Workers, on the other hand, must sell their labour if they are to continue to live! The underlying mechanisms of political economy have real material consequence for people in their everyday

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lives. Yet not all of these things are visible. Just as the effects of sub-atomic processes are not visible but require particular procedures to make them known, alienation is a condition not visible to the proletariat and requires a particular class consciousness to make it visible. Despite this, alienation is seen to have real consequences (Marx 1977:61–74).

Of course, Marx has been declared a realist *post facto*. Though we briefly describe one of the few recent research projects that are self declared as realist, for those who wish to find insights into just how a realist programme can be operationalized in social research, there will be some disappointment. Bhaskar lays out some ground rules for what a realist social science might look like, while Giddens's theory of structuration might be seen as an example of a realist social theory and Willis's *Learning to labour* is sometimes cited as an example of critical realist ethnography (Willis 1977, see also the example from Porter 1993). For Bhaskar, reality consists not only of events that are experienced, but also of events that happen even when they are not experienced. This has implications for the nature of the social scientific endeavour. Methodologically, we are led to an interpretative social science, but one based on what Bhaskar terms "retroduction" (Bhaskar 1979:15). This is necessary because a full explanation requires us to separate the meaning of an act and its intention. Meaning is social, whereas intention is personal. Social scientists are in the business of discovering social reality and this will have antecedents in individual realities, themselves shaped by social meanings. Retroduction then requires the construction of a hypothetical model that:

if it were to exist and act in the postulated way would account for the phenomena in question (a movement of thought which may be styled "retroduction"). The reality of the postulated explanation must then, of course, be subjected to empirical scrutiny (Bhaskar 1979:15. Original italics).

This suggests that the strategy of a realist social science involves not only a description of social relations, but also accompanying explanations and re-descriptions; the overall aim is to uncover layers of social reality.

Giddens's structuration theory rests on the dynamic relationship of the agent with society. This he describes as a "duality of structure" (1976:121) in which social structures are constituted by human agency, but at the same time are the very medium of this constitution. Therefore, his views are similar to Bhaskar, but he would not accept the dualism of



## RESEARCH EXAMPLE 6

### *Racism and professionalism in a medical setting*

Sam Porter's research (1993) was directly informed by Bhaskar's critical realism. The focus of the study was on, "how racism affects occupational relationships between nurses and doctors, and how its effects are mediated by professional ideology" (Porter 1993:591).

The theoretical assumption of the study was that human action is both enabled and constrained by social structures, but in turn action will reproduce or transform those structures. Porter argues that racism involves enduring relationships between individuals, thus qualifying as a "structure". Two hypotheses were postulated. First, that the relationships between white health workers and members of racialized minorities would be informed by racism. Secondly, the way in which the racism was expressed would be affected by the occupational situation of the health workers. The study itself took place within a hospital and consisted of observations of interactions between nurses and doctors. It was intended not just to describe the events, but to explain their occurrence.

Six of the 21 doctors were from what Porter describes as racialized minorities. While there was little change in the nature of the balance of power between the "six" doctors and nurses, the latter expressing deference to the former, later "backstage" conversations between the nurses (out of earshot of the doctors) were found, on occasion, to be racist. Why, Porter asks, was this racism not more openly expressed in challenges to the doctors' authority? Citing Bhaskar (1989), he notes that, "the actual outcome of a tendency will generally be co-determined by the activity of other mechanisms" (Porter 1993:604). In this case, the other mechanism is professionalism. In other words, the structure of racism is being transformed by agents as a result of their being constrained by another structure—that of professionalism. Additionally, the doctors themselves used the strategy of occupational advantage to ensure that "the disempowering effects of racism were minimised" (Porter 1993:607). The complexity of the relationship between the structures described, and the actions of the nurses and doctors in transforming them, leads Porter to comment on the inadequacy of a causal model based upon constant conjunction. There is no straightforward one-to-one relationship between racism as a structural phenomena and its manifestation. Rather, it is a tendency that is realized under some circumstances, but not others.

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Bhaskar in which social structure is said to have an existence that is potentially independent of its daily reproduction in everyday social relations. In Giddens's particular ontological focus, society is intentionally produced by agents who draw upon the rules and resources of social structure and, in so doing, their actions have unintended consequences; one of which is to reproduce society. Therefore, with Marx, he agrees that human beings make their own history, but not in the circumstances of their choosing (Giddens 1984). As such, social structures clearly have real consequences for individuals. Moreover, though these consequences are real, the mechanisms that produce them are not necessarily recognized by those experiencing their effects.

### *Knowing the social world*

The emphasis in the first part of this chapter has been on the ontological suppositions underlying research strategies. So far, we have illustrated these through the strategies that ultimately rely upon such assumptions. However, the actual distinctions between the ontological, epistemological and methodological, are hard to sustain. The same is true when one shifts focus towards the epistemological. Here, we will find epistemological assumptions accompanied by existential implications and claims regarding social reality.

The approaches we examine in this section are not exhaustive, but serve as illustrations of philosophical and methodological views that place primary emphasis on the question of how we come to know the world—as opposed to starting from suppositions about what the world is actually like. All of the following belong to, or are informed by, the naturalistic tradition of philosophy. Implicit in all of these are the perennial questions we have found in philosophy: verification, falsification, induction and causality. For each approach it is a question of emphasis. For example, probabilists don't get too concerned about causality, for they would maintain it is not a soluble problem, whereas followers of Popper would claim that falsification renders the problem of induction harmless.