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The authors argue that ethnography is best understood as a reflexive process. What this means is that we must recognise that social research is part of the world that it studies. From an outline of the principle of reflexivity in Chapter One, the authors go on to discuss and exemplify the main features of ethnographic work:

- the selection and sampling of cases
- the problems of access
- observation and interviewing
- recording and filing data
- the process of data analysis and writing research reports

There is also consideration of the ethical issues surrounding ethnographic research. Throughout, the discussion draws on a wide range of illustrative material from classic and more recent studies within a global context. The new edition of this popular textbook will be an indispensable resource for undergraduate and postgraduate students and researchers utilising social research methods in the social sciences and cultural studies.

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1 What is ethnography?

Ethnography is one of many approaches that can be found within soc
today. Furthermore, the label is not used in an entirely standard fashion;
can vary. A consequence of this is that there is considerable overlap with
such as 'qualitative inquiry', 'fieldwork', 'interpretive method', and 'case s
also having fuzzy semantic boundaries. In fact, there is no sharp disti
between ethnography and the study of individual life histories, as the exam
ethnography' shows; this referring to an individual researcher's study of hi
life and its context (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2001; Holman Jones 2005). Ther
challenging case of 'virtual ethnography', whose data may be restricted enti
can be downloaded from the internet (Markham 1998, 2005; Hine 2000
Stewart 2000). While, for the purposes of this opening chapter, we will
some indication of what we are taking the term 'ethnography' to mean, its
sometimes contested character must be remembered; and the account we
inevitably be shaped by our own views about what form ethnographic
to take.

The origins of the term lie in nineteenth-century Western anthropolog
ethnography was a descriptive account of a community or culture, usually
outside the West. At that time 'ethnography' was contrasted with, and
seen as complementary to, 'ethnology', which referred to the historical and
analysis of non-Western societies and cultures. Ethnology was treated as
anthropological work, and drew on individual ethnographic accounts which
produced by travellers and missionaries. Over time, the term 'ethnology
favour because anthropologists began to do their own fieldwork, with 'e
coming to refer to an integration of both first-hand empirical investigat
theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and cult

As a result of this change, since the early twentieth century, ethnograph
has been central to anthropology. Indeed, carrying out such work, usually
very different from one's own, became a rite of passage required for entry
of anthropologists. Fieldwork usually required living with a group of people
periods, often over the course of a year or more, in order to document a
their distinctive way of life, and the beliefs and values integral to it.

Moreover, during the twentieth century, anthropological ethnography
one of the models for some strands of research within Western sociology.
was the community study movement. This involved studies of villages a
the United States and Western Europe, often concerned with the impact of

In a parallel development, many sociologists working at the University of Chicago from the 1920s to the 1950s developed an approach to studying human social life that was similar to anthropological research in some key respects, though they often labelled it 'case study'. The 'Chicago School' was concerned with documenting the range of different patterns of life to be found in the city, and how these were shaped by the developing urban ecology.

From the 1960s onwards, forms of sociological work influenced by these developments, especially by Chicago sociology, spread across many sub-fields of the discipline, and into other disciplines and areas of inquiry as well; and they also migrated from the United States to Europe and to other parts of the world. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, an increasing number of anthropologists began to do research within Western societies, at first in rural areas but later in urban locales too.[1] Another relevant development in the latter half of the twentieth century was the rise of cultural studies as an area of investigation distinct from, but overlapping with, anthropology and sociology. Work in this field moved from broadly historical and textual approaches to include the use of ethnographic method, notably in studying audiences and the whole issue of cultural consumption. Furthermore, in the later decades of the twentieth century, ethnography spread even further, for example into psychology and human geography. Indeed, it tended to get swallowed up in a general, multidisciplinary, movement promoting qualitative approaches; though the term 'ethnography' still retains some distinctive connotations.[2]

This complex history is one of the reasons why 'ethnography' does not have a standard, well-defined meaning. Over the course of time, and in each of the various disciplinary contexts mentioned, its sense has been reinterpreted and recontextualized in various ways, in order to deal with particular circumstances. Part of this remoulding has arisen from the fact that ethnography has been associated with, and also put in opposition to, various other methodological approaches. Furthermore, it has been influenced by a range of theoretical ideas: anthropological and sociological functionalism, philosophical pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, Marxism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, feminism, constructionism, post-structuralism and post-modernism. Increasingly, it has been compared and contrasted not just with experimental and survey research but also with interview-based studies, macro-historical analysis, political economy, conversation and discourse analysis, and psycho-social approaches.

In short, 'ethnography' plays a complex and shifting role in the dynamic tapestry that the social sciences have become in the twenty-first century. However, this term is by no means unusual in lacking a single, standard meaning. Nor does the uncertainty of sense undermine its value as a label. And we can outline a core definition, while recognizing that this does not capture all of its meaning in all contexts. In doing this we will focus, initially, at a fairly practical level: on what ethnographers actually do, on the sorts of data that they usually collect, and what kind of analysis they deploy to handle those data. Later we will broaden the discussion to cover some of the ideas that have informed, and continue to inform, ethnographic practice.

1 For an account of the development and reconfiguration of ethnographic work within British anthropology, see Macdonald (2001).

2 Diverse strands and trends of the qualitative research movement are exemplified in the various editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*: Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005).

What ethnographers do

In terms of data collection, ethnography usually involves the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts – in fact, gathering whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry. Generally speaking ethnographers draw on a *range* of sources of data, though they may sometimes rely primarily on one.[3]

In more detailed terms, ethnographic work usually has most of the following features:

1 People's actions and accounts are studied in everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher – such as in experimental setups or in highly structured interview situations. In other words, research takes place 'in the field'.
2 Data are gathered from a range of sources, including documentary evidence of various kinds, but participant observation and/or relatively informal conversations are usually the main ones.
3 Data collection is, for the most part, relatively 'unstructured', in two senses. First, it does not involve following through a fixed and detailed research design specified at the start. Second, the categories that are used for interpreting what people say or do are not built into the data collection process through the use of observation schedules or questionnaires. Instead, they are generated out of the process of data analysis.
4 The focus is usually on a few cases, generally fairly small-scale, perhaps a single setting or group of people. This is to facilitate in-depth study.
5 The analysis of data involves interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts. What are produced, for the most part, are verbal descriptions, explanations, and theories; quantification and statistical analysis play a subordinate role at most.

As this list of features makes clear, as regards what is referred to in methodological texts as 'research design', ethnographers typically employ a relatively open-ended approach (see Maxwell 2004b). They begin with an interest in some particular area of social life. While they will usually have in mind what the anthropologist Malinowski – often regarded as the inventor of modern anthropological fieldwork – called 'foreshadowed problems', their orientation is an exploratory one. The task is to investigate some aspect of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves. It is expected that the initial interests and questions that motivated the research will be refined, and perhaps even transformed, over the course of the research; and that this may take a considerable amount of time. Eventually, through this process, the inquiry will become progressively more clearly focused on a specific set of research questions, and this will then allow the strategic

3 These methods can include those that are 'unobtrusive': Lee (2000). There has been some dispute about whether ethnographic studies can rely entirely on interview or documentary data, without complementary participant observation. See Atkinson and Coffey (2002).

collection of data to pursue answers to those questions more effectively, and to test these against evidence.

Collecting data in 'natural' settings, in other words in those that have not been specifically set up for research purposes (such as experiments or formal interviews) also gives a distinctive character to ethnographic work. Where participant observation is involved, the researcher must find some role in the field being studied, and this will usually have to be done at least through implicit, and probably also through explicit, negotiation with people in that field. Access may need to be secured through gatekeepers, but it will also have to be negotiated and renegotiated with the people being studied; and this is true even where ethnographers are studying settings in which they are already participants. In the case of interviewing, too, access cannot be assumed to be available automatically, relations will have to be established, and identities co-constructed.

The initially exploratory character of ethnographic research means that it will often not be clear where, within a setting, observation should be begin, which actors need to be shadowed, and so on. Sampling strategies will have to be worked out, and changed, as the research progresses. Much the same is true of the use of interviews. Here, decisions about whom to interview, when, and where, will have to be developed over time, and the interviewing will normally take a relatively unstructured form, though more structured or strategic questioning may be used towards the end of the fieldwork. Furthermore, as already noted, the data will usually be collected in an unstructured form, by means of fieldnotes written in concretely descriptive terms and also through audio- or video-recordings, plus the collection of documents. Given the nature of these data, a considerable amount of effort, and time, will need to go into processing and analysing them. In all these respects, ethnography is a demanding activity, requiring diverse skills, including the ability to make decisions in conditions of considerable uncertainty.

This is true despite the fact that, as a set of methods, ethnography is not far removed from the means that we all use in everyday life to make sense of our surroundings, of other people's actions, and perhaps even of what we do ourselves. What is distinctive is that it involves a more deliberate and systematic approach than is common for most of us most of the time, one in which data are specifically sought to illuminate research questions, and are carefully recorded; and where the process of analysis draws on previous studies and involves intense reflection, including the critical assessment of competing interpretations. What is involved here, then, is a significant *development* of the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world that we all use in our mundane lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge.

In the remainder of this chapter we will explore and assess a number of methodological ideas that have shaped ethnography. We shall begin by looking at the conflict between quantitative and qualitative method as competing models of social research, which raged across many fields in the past and still continues in some even today. This was often seen as a clash between competing philosophical positions. Following some precedent we shall call these 'positivism' and 'naturalism': the former privileging quantitative methods, the latter promoting ethnography as the central, if not the only legitimate, social research method.[4] After this we will look at more recent

4 'Naturalism' is a term which is used in a variety of different, even contradictory, ways in the literature: see Matza (1969). Here we have simply adopted the conventional meaning within the ethnographic literature.

ideas that have shaped the thinking and practice of ethnographers, some interpretations of which are at odds with the earlier commitment to naturalism.

Positivism versus naturalism

Positivism has a long history in philosophy, but it reached its high point in the 'logical positivism' of the 1930s and 1940s (Kolakowski 1972; Halfpenny 1982; Friedman 1991; Hammersley 1995: ch. 1). This movement had a considerable influence upon social scientists, notably in promoting the status of experimental and survey research and the quantitative forms of analysis associated with them. Before this, in both sociology and social psychology, qualitative and quantitative techniques had generally been used side by side, often by the same researchers. Nineteenth-century investigators, such as Mayhew (1861), LePlay (1879) and Booth (1902–3), treated quantitative and qualitative data as complementary. Even the sociologists of the Chicago School, often portrayed as exponents of participant observation, employed both 'case-study' and 'statistical' methods. While there were recurrent debates among them regarding the relative advantages and uses of the two approaches, there was general agreement on the value of both (Bulmer, 1984; Harvey 1985; Hammersley 1989a; Deegan 2001). It was only later, with the rapid development of statistical methods and the growing influence of positivist philosophy, that survey research came to be regarded by some of its practitioners as a self-sufficient methodological tradition.[5]

Today, the term 'positivism' has become little more than a term of abuse among social scientists, and as a result its meaning has become obscured. For present purposes, the major tenets of positivism can be outlined as follows:

1 *The methodological model for social research is physical science, conceived in terms of the logic of the experiment.* While positivists do not claim that the methods of all the physical sciences are the same, they do argue that these share a common logic. This is that of the experiment, where quantitatively measured variables are manipulated in order to identify the relationships among them. This logic is taken to be the defining feature of science.
2 *Universal or statistical laws as the goal for science.* Positivists adopt a characteristic conception of explanation, usually termed the 'covering law' model. Here events are explained in deductive fashion by appeal to universal laws that state regular relationships between variables, holding across all relevant circumstances. However, it is the statistical version of this model, whereby the relationships have only a high probability of applying across relevant circumstances, that has generally been adopted by social scientists; and this has encouraged great concern with sampling procedures and statistical analysis, especially in survey research. Here, a premium is placed on the generalizability of findings.
3 *The foundation for science is observation.* Finally, positivists give priority to phenomena that are directly observable, or that can be logically inferred from what is observable; any appeal to intangibles runs the risk of being dismissed as metaphysical speculation. It is argued that scientific theories must be founded upon, or tested by appeal to, descriptions that simply correspond to the state of

5 In social psychology this process started rather earlier, and it was the experiment which became the dominant method.

> the world, involving no theoretical assumptions and thus being beyond doubt. This foundation could be sense data, as in traditional empiricism, or it may be the realm of the 'publicly observable': for example, the movement of physical objects, such as mercury in a thermometer, which can be easily agreed upon by all observers. Great emphasis is therefore given to the standardization of procedures of data collection, which is intended to facilitate the achievement of measurements that are stable across observers. If measurement is reliable in this sense, it is argued, it provides a sound, theoretically neutral base upon which to build. This is sometimes referred to as procedural objectivity.

Central to positivism, then, is a certain conception of scientific method, modelled on the natural sciences, and in particular on physics (Toulmin 1972). Method here is concerned with the testing of theories or hypotheses. A sharp distinction is drawn between the context of discovery and the context of justification (Reichenbach 1938, 1951). The question of how theoretical ideas are generated belongs to the former and is outside the realm of scientific method. It is the procedures employed in the context of justification that are held to mark science off from common sense, since they involve the rigorous assessment of alternative theories from an objective point of view.

Thus, for positivists, the most important feature of scientific theories is that they are open to, and are actually subjected to, test: that they can be confirmed, or at least falsified, with certainty. This requires the exercise of control over variables, which can be achieved through physical control, as in experiments, or through statistical control, as in survey research. Without any control over variables, it is argued, one can do no more than speculate about causal relationships, since no basis for testing hypotheses is available. So, the process of testing involves comparing what the theory says should occur under certain circumstances with what actually does occur – in short, comparing it with 'the facts'.

These facts are collected by means of methods that, like the facts they collect, are regarded as theory-neutral; otherwise, it is assumed, they could not provide a conclusive test of the theory. In particular, every attempt is made to eliminate the effect of the observer by developing an explicit, standardized set of data elicitation procedures. This also allows replication by others so that an assessment of the reliability of the findings can be made. In survey research, for example, the behaviour of interviewers is typically specified down to the wording of questions and the order in which they are asked. In experiments the conduct of the experimenter is closely defined. It is argued that if it can be ensured that each survey respondent or experimental subject in a study and its replications is faced with the same set of stimuli, then their responses will be comparable. Where such explicit and standardized procedures are not employed, as in participant observation, so the argument goes, it is impossible to know how to interpret the responses since one has no idea what they are responses *to*. In short, positivists argue that it is only through the exercise of physical or statistical control of variables, and their rigorous measurement, that science is able to produce a body of knowledge whose validity is conclusive; and thus can justifiably replace the myths and dogma of traditional views or common sense.

Ethnography, and many kinds of qualitative research, do not match these positivist canons.[6] As a result, especially in the middle part of the twentieth century, they came

6 At the same time it is worth noting that the anthropological work of Malinowski was influenced by early positivist ideas: see Leach (1957) and Strenski (1982).

under criticism as lacking scientific rigour. Ethnography was sometimes dismissed as quite inappropriate to social science, on the grounds that the data and findings it produces are 'subjective', mere idiosyncratic impressions of one or two cases that cannot provide a solid foundation for rigorous scientific analysis. In reaction, ethnographers developed an alternative view of the proper nature of social research, which they often termed 'naturalism' (Lofland 1967; Blumer 1969; Matza 1969; Denzin 1971; Schatzman and Strauss 1973; Guba 1978). Like positivism, this appealed to natural science as a model, but the latter's method was conceptualized differently, and the exemplar was usually nineteenth-century biology rather than twentieth-century physics.

Naturalism proposes that, as far as possible, the social world should be studied in its 'natural' state, undisturbed by the researcher. Hence, 'natural' not 'artificial' settings, like experiments or formal interviews, should be the primary source of data. Furthermore, the research must be carried out in ways that are sensitive to the nature of the setting and that of the phenomena being investigated. The primary aim should be to describe what happens, how the people involved see and talk about their own actions and those of others, the contexts in which the action takes place, and what follows from it.

A key element of naturalism is the demand that the social researcher should adopt an attitude of 'respect' or 'appreciation' towards the social world. In Matza's (1969: 5) words, naturalism is 'the philosophical view that remains true to the nature of the phenomenon under study'. This is contrasted with the positivists' primary and prior commitment to a conception of scientific method reconstructed from the experience of natural scientists:

> Reality exists in the empirical world and not in the methods used to study that world; it is to be discovered in the examination of that world . . . . Methods are mere instruments designed to identify and analyze the obdurate character of the empirical world, and as such their value exists only in their suitability in enabling this task to be done. In this fundamental sense the procedures employed in each part of the act of scientific enquiry should and must be assessed in terms of whether they respect the nature of the empirical world under study – whether what they signify or imply to be the nature of the empirical world is actually the case.
>
> (Blumer 1969: 27–8)

A first requirement of social research according to naturalism, then, is fidelity to the phenomena under study, not to any particular set of methodological principles, however strongly supported by philosophical arguments or by the practice of natural scientists.

Moreover, naturalists regard social phenomena as quite distinct in character from physical phenomena. In this respect, naturalism drew on a wide range of philosophical and sociological ideas, but especially on symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (these sometimes being collectively labelled 'interpretivism'). From different starting points, these traditions all argue that the social world cannot be understood in terms of simple causal relationships or by the subsumption of social events under universal laws. This is because human actions are based upon, or infused by, social or cultural meanings: that is, by intentions, motives, beliefs, rules, discourses, and values.

For example, at the heart of symbolic interactionism is a rejection of the stimulus-response model of human behaviour, which is built into the methodological arguments

of positivism. In the view of interactionists, people *interpret* stimuli, and these interpretations, continually under revision as events unfold, shape their actions. As a result, the 'same' physical stimulus can mean different things to different people – and, indeed, to the same person at different times.[7] Many years ago, Mehan (1974) provided a striking example that relates directly to the sort of data collection method supported by positivism:

> A question from [a] language development test instructs the child to choose 'the animal that can fly' from a bird, an elephant, and a dog. The correct answer (obviously) is the bird. Many first grade children, though, chose the elephant along with the bird as a response to that question. When I later asked them why they chose that answer they replied: 'That's Dumbo'. Dumbo (of course) is Walt Disney's flying elephant, well known to children who watch television and read children's books as an animal that flies.
>
> (Mehan 1974: 249)

Such indeterminacy of interpretation undermines attempts to develop standard measures of human behaviour. Interpretations of the same set of experimental instructions or interview questions will undoubtedly vary among people and across occasions; and, it is argued, this undermines the value of standardized research methods.[8]

Equally important, naturalists argue that because people's behaviour is not caused in a mechanical way, it is not amenable to the sort of causal analysis and manipulation of variables that are characteristic of the quantitative research inspired by positivism. Any hope of discovering *laws* of human behaviour is misplaced, it is suggested, since human behaviour is continually constructed, and reconstructed, on the basis of people's interpretations of the situations they are in.

According to naturalism, in order to understand people's behaviour we must use an approach that gives us access to the meanings that guide their behaviour. Fortunately, the capacities we have developed as social actors can give us such access. As participant observers we can learn the culture or subculture of the people we are studying. We can come to interpret the world more or less in the same way that they do. In short, we not only can but also *must* learn to understand people's behaviour in a different way from that in which natural scientists set about understanding the behaviour of physical phenomena.[9]

The need to learn the culture of those we are studying is most obvious in the case of societies other than our own. Here, not only may we not know why people do what they do, but often we may not be able to recognize even *what* they are doing. We are in much the same position as Schutz's (1964) stranger: Schutz notes how, in the weeks and months following an immigrant's arrival in a host society, what he or she previously took for granted as knowledge about that society turns out to be unreliable, if not obviously false. In addition, areas of ignorance previously of no importance come to

7 For useful accounts of interactionism, see Maines (2001), Atkinson and Housley (2003) and Reynolds and Herman-Kinney (2003).

8 Cooper and Dunne (2000) provide a similar and more developed analysis of the processes of interpretation involved in mathematical tests.

9 This form of understanding social phenomena is often referred to as *Verstehen*. See Truzzi (1974) for a discussion and illustrations of the history of this concept, and O'Hear (1996) for a more recent discussion of its role across the social sciences and humanities.

take on great significance; and overcoming them is necessary for the pursuit of important goals, perhaps even for the stranger's very survival in the new environment. In the process of learning how to participate in the host society, the stranger gradually acquires an inside knowledge of it, which supplants his or her previous 'external' knowledge. But Schutz argues that by virtue of being forced to come to understand a culture in this way, the stranger acquires a certain objectivity not normally available to culture members. The latter live inside the culture, and tend to see it as simply a reflection of 'how the world is'. They are often not conscious of the fundamental presuppositions that shape their vision, many of which are distinctive to their own culture.

Schutz's (1964) account of the experience of the stranger matches most obviously the work of anthropologists, who typically study societies very different from their own. However, the experience of the stranger is not restricted to those moving to live in another society. Movement among groups within a single society can produce the same effects; generally, though not always, in a milder form. There are many different layers or circles of cultural knowledge within any society. Indeed, this is particularly true of modern industrial societies with their complex divisions of labour, multifarious lifestyles, ethnic diversity, and deviant communities; and the subcultures and perspectives that maintain, and are generated by, these social divisions. This was, of course, one of the major rationales for the research of the Chicago School sociologists. Drawing on the analogy of plant and animal ecology, they set out to document the very different patterns of life to be found in different parts of the city of Chicago, from the 'high society' of the so-called 'gold coast' to slum ghettos such as Little Sicily. Later, the same kind of approach came to be applied to the cultures of occupations, organizations, and social groups of various kinds.

According to the naturalist account, the value of ethnography as a social research method is founded upon the existence of such variations in cultural patterns across and within societies, and their significance for understanding social processes. Ethnography exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures, and the objectivity to which this process gives rise. Even where he or she is researching a familiar group or setting, the participant observer is required to treat this as 'anthropologically strange', in an effort to make explicit the presuppositions he or she takes for granted as a culture member. In this way, the culture can be turned into an object available for study. Naturalism proposes that through marginality, in social position and in perspective, it is possible to construct an account of the culture under investigation that both understands it from within and captures it as external to, and independent of, the researcher: in other words, as a natural phenomenon. Thus, the description of cultures becomes the primary goal. The search for universal laws is downplayed in favour of detailed accounts of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture and of the beliefs and social rules that are used as resources within it. Indeed, attempts to go beyond this, for instance to *explain* particular cultural forms, are sometimes discouraged. Certainly, as Denzin (1971: 168) noted, 'the naturalist resists schemes or models which over-simplify the complexity of everyday life'; though some forms of theory, especially those which are believed to be capable of capturing social complexity, are often recommended, most notably the kind of grounded theory proposed by Glaser and Strauss.[10]

10 See Glaser and Strauss (1968); Strauss and Corbin (1998); Pidgeon and Henwood (2004); for critical commentaries, see Williams (1976) and Dey (1999).

Over the last decades of the twentieth century, the influence of positivism waned and with it, in many areas, the dominance of quantitative method; though there are currently some signs of a revival.[11] At the same time, various aspects of naturalism came under attack from within the ranks of qualitative researchers. In the next section we shall explore the ideas that stimulated this.

Anti-realist and political critiques of naturalism

The field of social research methodology nowadays is a complex one. There has been considerable diversification in qualitative research, including the rise of discourse and narrative analysis, of various kinds of action research, of autoethnography and performance studies, and so on. At the same time, there have been growing calls to combine qualitative methods with quantitative techniques.[12] These have often been met with charges that this neglects the conflicting philosophical and political presuppositions built into qualitative and quantitative approaches (Smith and Heshusius 1986; Smith 1989; Guba 1990; Hodkinson 2004). Along with this, there has been criticism of older forms of ethnographic work on the grounds that these still betray the influence of positivism and scientism. What is pointed to here is that, despite their differences, positivism and naturalism share much in common. They each appeal to the model of natural science, albeit interpreting it in different ways. As a result, both are committed to trying to understand social phenomena as objects existing independently of the researcher. And they therefore claim that research can provide knowledge of the social world that is superior in validity to that of the people being studied. Equally important, they both regard practical and political commitments on the part of the researcher as, for the most part, extraneous to the research process – indeed, as a source of potential distortion whose effects have to be guarded against to preserve objectivity.

Many ethnographers have begun to question the commitment to naturalism, challenging these assumptions. Doubts have been raised about the capacity of ethnography to portray the social world in the way that naturalism claims it does. Equally, the commitment of the older kinds of ethnography to some sort of value neutrality has been questioned, and politically interventionist forms of ethnography have been recommended. We shall look at these two aspects of the critique of naturalism separately, though they are sometimes closely related.

Questioning realism

Many critics of naturalism today reject it on the grounds that, like positivism, it assumes that the task of social research is to represent social phenomena in some literal fashion: to document their features and explain their occurrence. What is being questioned here is sometimes referred to as realism. In part, criticism of realism stems from a tension within ethnography between the naturalism characteristic of ethnographers' methodological thinking and the constructionism and cultural relativism that shape their understanding of the perspectives and behaviour of the people they study (Hammersley 1992: ch. 3). As we saw, ethnographers portray people as constructing

11 See Smith and Hodkinson (2006); Denzin and Giardina (2006).

12 Some have argued that mixed methods research can be a new paradigm that transcends the distinction between the other two: see, for example, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003).

the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through actions based on those interpretations. Furthermore, those interpretations sometimes reflect different cultures, so that there is a sense in which through their actions people create distinct social worlds (Blumer 1969: 11). But this constructionism and relativism is compatible with naturalism only so long as it is not applied to ethnographic research itself. Once we come to see ethnographers as themselves constructing the social world through their interpretations of it, thereby producing incommensurable accounts that reflect differences in their background cultures, there is a conflict with the naturalistic realism built into older ethnographic approaches.

This internal source of doubts about realism was reinforced by the impact of various external developments. One was changes in the field of the philosophy of science. Whereas until the early 1950s positivism had dominated this field, at that time its dominance began to be undermined, eventually producing a range of alternative positions, some of which rejected realism. A sign of this change was the enormous influence of Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1996; first published in 1962). Kuhn argued against views of the history of science that portray it as a process of cumulative development towards the truth, achieved by rational investigation logically founded on evidence. He, and others, showed that the work of those involved in the major developments of scientific knowledge in the past was shaped by theoretical presuppositions about the world that were not themselves based on empirical research, and many of which are judged by scientists today as false. Kuhn further claimed that the history of science, rather than displaying the gradual build-up of knowledge, is punctuated by periods of revolution when the theoretical presuppositions forming the 'paradigm' in terms of which scientists in a particular field have previously operated are challenged and replaced. An example is the shift from Newtonian physics to relativity theory and quantum mechanics in the early part of the twentieth century. The replacement of one paradigm by another, according to Kuhn, does not, because it cannot, occur on the basis simply of the rational assessment of evidence. Paradigms are incommensurable, they picture the world in incompatible ways, so that the data themselves are interpreted differently by those working within different paradigms. This implies that judgements of the validity of scientific claims is always relative to the paradigm within which they operate are judged; they are never simply a reflection of some independent domain of reality.[13]

Kuhn's work embodied most of the arguments against positivism that had become influential: that there is no theory-neutral observational foundation against which theories can be tested, and that judgements about the validity of theories are never fully determined by any evidence. He also proposed an alternative conception of science that contrasted sharply with the positivist model. However, his critique counted as much against naturalism, against the idea of the researcher getting into direct contact with reality, as it did against positivism. On his account, all knowledge of the world is mediated by paradigmatic presuppositions. Furthermore, the alternative view he offered made natural scientists look very similar to the people that ethnographers had long portrayed in their accounts as constructing diverse social worlds. And sociologists of science have subsequently produced ethnographies of the work of natural scientists and technological innovators along these lines (see Hess 2001). In this way, natural

13 There is some ambiguity in Kuhn's work, and this has led to disputes about its interpretation. For a detailed discussion see Sharrock and Read (2002).

science moved from being primarily a methodological model for social research to being an object of sociological investigation; and in many ways this brought the conflict between naturalism and constructionism to a head.

As important as developments within the philosophy of science for the generation of doubts about realism was the influence of various continental European philosophical trends. Naturalism had been influenced by nineteenth-century ideas about hermeneutics, about the interpretation of historical texts, notably the work of Dilthey (see Makkreel 1975). This was the source of the idea, mentioned earlier, that socio-cultural understanding takes a different form from how natural scientists go about understanding physical phenomena. In the twentieth century, however, this earlier hermeneutic tradition came to be challenged by a new form of 'philosophical hermeneutics', developed by Gadamer (see Howard 1982; Warnke 1987; Dostal 2002). Where, previously, understanding human texts had been presented as a rigorous task of recovering the meaning intended by the author and locating it within relevant cultural settings, philosophical hermeneutics viewed the process of understanding as inevitably reflecting the 'prejudices', the pre-understandings, of the interpreter. Interpretation of texts, and by extension understanding of the social world too, could no longer be seen as a matter of capturing social meanings in their own terms; the accounts produced were regarded as constructions that inevitably reflected the socio-historical position and background assumptions of the researcher.

Another powerful influence on ethnography has been post-structuralism and postmodernism. These labels refer to a diverse set of ideas and work, but we shall mention just two of the most influential figures: Derrida's 'deconstruction' and the work of Foucault.[14] Like philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction has also led to a questioning of the idea that ethnographers can capture the meanings on the basis of which people act. It does this because it argues that meanings are not stable; nor are they properties of individuals. Rather, they reflect the shifting constitutive role of language. Also important has been deconstruction's undermining of the distinctions between different genres of writing: its advocates have sought to erase the differentiation between fiction and non-fiction, indeed between literary and technical writing generally. This has led to recognition of the fact that the language used by ethnographers in their writing is not a transparent medium allowing us to see reality through it, but rather a construction that draws on many of the rhetorical strategies used by journalists, travel writers, novelists, and others. Some commentators have drawn the conclusion from this that the phenomena described in ethnographic accounts are created in and through the rhetorical strategies employed, rather than being external to the text; in short, this concern with rhetoric has often been associated with forms of anti-realism.[15]

Foucault's work is also based on a rejection of realism: he is not concerned with the truth or falsity of the ideas that he studies – for example about madness or sex – but rather with the 'regimes of truth' by which they are constituted and how they have structured institutional practices during the development of Western society.[16]

14 For an excellent account of the rise of these ideas in the context of French philosophy, see Gutting (2001).

15 See, for example, Tyler (1986), Ashmore (1989); Piper and Stronach (2004).

16 The statement that Foucault rejects realism, while not fundamentally misleading, does obscure both the, probably witting, ambiguities in his work in this respect, and its emergence out of the tradition of rationalist epistemology: see Gutting (1989). On Foucault more generally, see Gutting (1994).

He stresses the fact that the psychological and social sciences are socio-historical in character, and claims that they function as part of the process of surveillance and control, which he sees as the central feature of modern society. Their products reflect this social character, rather than representing some world that is independent of them. Foucault argues that different regimes of truth are established in different contexts, reflecting the play of diverse sources of power and resistance. Thus, what is treated as true and false, in social science as elsewhere, is constituted through the exercise of power.[17]

The reception of post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas in the context of Anglo-American qualitative research has involved diverse readings and responses to what was, of course, by no means a coherent set of texts; these extending well beyond those of Derrida and Foucault. Typically, these readings and responses have reinforced tendencies towards anti-realism of some kind, encouraged the adoption of non-Marxist Leftist political orientations, and involved the idea that some discourses/voices are suppressed and that the function of research should be to liberate them. Much less commonly, this influence has also led to the subversion of conventional ethnographic textual strategies.

While realism has not been completely abandoned by most ethnographers, the idea that ethnographic accounts can represent social reality in a relatively straightforward way (for example, through the ethnographer getting close to it) has been widely rejected; and doubt has been thrown on the claims to scientific authority associated with realism. Moreover, in the work of Foucault especially, we have a direct link with the second criticism of naturalism: its neglect of the politics of social research.

The politics of ethnography

Naturalists shared with positivists a commitment to producing accounts of factual matters that reflect the nature of the phenomena studied rather than the values or political commitments of the researcher. Of course, both recognized that, in practice, research is affected by the researcher's values, but the aim was to limit the influence of those values as far as possible, so as to produce findings that were true independently of any particular value stance. Since the mid-1980s, any such striving after value neutrality and objectivity has been questioned, sometimes being replaced by advocacy of 'openly ideological' research (Lather 1986), 'militant anthropology' (Scheper-Hughes 1995), or research that is explicitly carried out from the standpoint of a particular group, for example women, those suffering racism, indigenous peoples, or people with disabilities (see Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

In part this has resulted from the continuing influence of Marxism and 'critical' theory, but equally important has been the impact of feminism and of post-structuralism. From a traditional Marxist point of view the very distinction between facts and values is a historical product, and one that can be overcome through the future development of society. Values refer to the human potential that is built into the unfolding of history. In this sense values are facts, even though they may not yet have been realized in the social world. Moreover, they provide the key to any understanding of the nature of current social conditions, their past, and their future. From this point of view, a science

17 For discussions of the implications of Foucault's work for ethnography, see Gubrium and Silverman (1989); Kendall and Wickham (2004).

of society should provide not only abstract knowledge but also the basis for action to transform the world so as to bring about human self-realization. On this argument, ethnography, like other forms of social research, cannot but be concerned simultaneously with factual and value matters, and its role inevitably involves political intervention (whether researchers are aware of this or not).

A similar conclusion about the political character of social research has been reached in other ways, for example by those who argue that because research is always affected by values, and always has political consequences, researchers must take responsibility for their value commitments and for the effects of their work. It has been suggested that ethnography and other forms of social research have had too little impact, that their products simply lie on library shelves gathering dust, and that as a result they are worthless. To be of value, it is suggested, ethnographic research should be concerned not simply with understanding the world but with applying its findings to bring about change (see, for example, Gewirtz and Cribb 2006).

There are differences in view about the nature of the change that should be aimed at. Sometimes the concern is with rendering research more relevant to national policy-making or to one or another form of professional practice (see, for example, Hustler *et al.* 1986; Hart and Bond 1995; Healy 2001; Taylor *et al.* 2006). Alternatively, or as part of this, it may be argued that research should be emancipatory. This has been proposed by feminists, where the goal is the emancipation of women (and men) from patriarchy (Fonow and Cook 1991; Lather 1991; Olesen 2005); but it is also to be found in the writings of critical ethnographers and advocates of emancipatory action research, where the goal of research is taken to be the transformation of Western societies so as to realize the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice (Gitlin *et al.* 1989; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Similar developments have occurred in the field of disability studies (Barnes 2003) and in the context of queer theory (Plummer 2005).

Of course, to the extent that the very possibility of producing knowledge is undermined by the sort of anti-realist arguments we outlined earlier, a concern with the practical or political effects of research may come to seem an essential alternative goal to the traditional concern with truth. This too has led to the growth of more interventionist conceptions of ethnography. In this way post-structuralism and postmodernism have contributed to the politicization of social research, though in a far from unambiguous way because they seem simultaneously to undermine all political ideals (Dews 1987). For example, they threaten any appeal to the interests or rights of Humanity; and in the context of feminist research they challenge the concept of woman.

Reflexivity

The criticisms of naturalism we have outlined are sometimes seen as arising from what has been called the reflexive character of social research.[18] It is argued that what both positivism and naturalism fail to take into account is the fact that social researchers are part of the social world they study. A sharp distinction between science and common

18 'Reflexivity' is a term that has come to be used in a variety of different ways, and the meaning we are giving to it here is by no means uncontested, see Lynch (2000). For discussions of some of the problems with reflexivity, see Troyna (1994); Paechter (1996); Adkins (2002); Finlay (2002); Haney (2002).

sense, between the activities and knowledge of the researcher and those of the researched, lies at the heart of both these positions. It is this that leads to their joint concern with eliminating the effects of the researcher on the data. For positivism, the solution is the standardization of research procedures; for naturalism, it is getting into direct contact with the social world, and in extreme form the requirement that ethnographers 'surrender' themselves to the cultures they wish to study (Wolff 1964; Jules-Rosette 1978a, 1978b). Both positions assume that it is possible, in principle at least, to isolate a body of data uncontaminated by the researcher, by turning him or her either, in one case, into an automaton or, in the other, into a neutral vessel of cultural experience. However, searches for empirical bedrock of this kind are futile; all data involve presuppositions (Hanson 1958).

The concept of reflexivity acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics. Also, it is emphasized that the production of knowledge by researchers has consequences. At the very least, the publication of research findings can shape the climate in which political and practical decisions are made, and it may even directly stimulate particular sorts of action. In fact, it may change the character of the situations that were studied. Moreover, the consequences of research are not neutral in relation to what are widely felt to be important values, nor are they necessarily desirable. Indeed, some commentators see social research as playing an undesirable role in supporting one or another aspect of the political status quo in Western societies. As we saw, for Foucault, the social sciences were part of a modern apparatus of surveillance.

There is no doubt that reflexivity, in the sense just outlined, is a significant feature of social research. Indeed, there is a sense in which all social research takes the form of participant observation: it involves participating in the social world, in whatever role, and reflecting on the products of that participation. However, it is not necessary to draw conclusions from the reflexivity of social research of the kind that critics of naturalism have done. In our view, recognition of reflexivity implies that there are elements of positivism and naturalism which must be abandoned; but it does not require rejection of all the ideas associated with those two lines of thinking. Thus, we do not see reflexivity as undermining researchers' commitment to realism. In our view it only undermines naive forms of realism which assume that knowledge must be based on some absolutely secure foundation.[19] Similarly, we do not believe that reflexivity implies that research is necessarily political, or that it should be political, in the sense of serving particular political causes or practical ends. For us, the exclusive, immediate goal of all research is, and must remain, the production of knowledge.

Reflexivity and realism

It is true that we cannot avoid relying on 'common-sense' knowledge nor, often, can we avoid having an effect on the social phenomena we study. In other words, there

19 For an influential epistemological analysis that recognizes the fallible character of any evidence but retains a commitment to realism, see Haack (1993). See also Hammersley (2004).

is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it. Fortunately, though, this is not necessary from a realist point of view. There is as little justification for rejecting all common-sense knowledge out of hand as there is for treating it as all 'valid in its own terms': we have no external, absolutely conclusive standard by which to judge it. But we can work with what we currently take to be knowledge, while recognizing that it may be erroneous; and engaging in systematic inquiry where doubt seems justified. And in doing this we can still make the reasonable assumption that we are able to describe phenomena as they are, and not merely how we perceive them or how we would like them to be (Hammersley 1992: ch. 3). All of us, in our everyday activities, rely on presuppositions about the world, few of which we have subjected to test ourselves, and none of which we could fully and independently test. Most of the time this does not and should not trouble us, and social research is no different from other activities in this respect. We need to reflect only on what seems – or can be shown to be – problematic, while leaving open the possibility that what currently is not problematic may in the future become so.

It is also important to recognize that research is an active process, in which accounts of the world are produced through selective observation and theoretical interpretation of what is seen, through asking particular questions and interpreting what is said in reply, through writing fieldnotes and transcribing audio- and video-recordings, as well as through writing research reports. And it is true that some aspects of this process have not been given the attention they deserve until recently. However, to say that our findings, and even our data, are *constructed* does not automatically imply that they do not or cannot represent social phenomena. To believe that this is implied is to assume that the only true form of representation would involve the world imprinting its characteristics on our senses without any activity on our part, a highly implausible account even of the process of perception (Gregory 1970).

Similarly, the fact that as researchers we are likely to have an effect on the people we study does not mean that the validity of our findings is restricted to the data elicitation situations on which we relied. We can minimize reactivity and/or monitor it. But we can also exploit it: how people respond to the presence of the researcher may be as informative as how they react to other situations. Indeed, rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely, we should set about understanding them, a point that Schuman (1982) made in relation to social surveys:

> The basic position I will take is simple: artifacts are in the mind of the beholder. Barring one or two exceptions, the problems that occur in surveys are opportunities for understanding once we take them seriously as facts of life. Let us distinguish here between the simple survey and the scientific survey. . . . The simple approach to survey research takes responses literally, ignores interviewers as sources of influence, and treats sampling as unproblematic. A person who proceeds in this way is quite likely to trip and fall right on his artifact. The scientific survey, on the other hand, treats survey research as a search for meaning, and ambiguities of language and of interviewing, discrepancies between attitude and behaviour, even problems of non-response, provide an important part of the data, rather than being ignored or simply regarded as obstacles to efficient research.
>
> (Schuman 1982: 23)

In short, 'what is an artifact if treated naively reflects a fact of life if taken seriously' (Schuman 1982: 24). In order to understand the effects of the research and of research procedures, we need to compare data in which the level and direction of reactivity vary. Once we abandon the idea that the social character of research can be standardized out or avoided by becoming a 'fly on the wall' or a 'full participant', the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear. As has long been recognized by ethnographers, he or she is the research instrument par excellence. The fact that behaviour and attitudes are often not stable across contexts and that the researcher may influence the context becomes central to the analysis. Indeed, it can be exploited for all it is worth. Data should not be taken at face value, but treated as a field of inferences in which hypothetical patterns can be identified and their validity tested. Different research strategies can be explored and their effects compared with a view to drawing theoretical conclusions. Interpretations need to be made explicit and full advantage should be taken of any opportunities to test their limits and to assess alternatives. Such a view contrasts sharply with the image of social research projected by naturalism, though it is closer to some other models of ethnographic research such as 'grounded theorizing', 'analytic induction', and the strategy model to be found alongside naturalism in the work of Schatzman and Strauss (1973). And in this way the image of the researcher is brought into parallel with that of the people studied, as actively making sense of the world, yet without undermining the commitment of research to realism.

Reflexivity and the political character of research

Positivism and naturalism, in the forms we have discussed them, tend to present research as an activity that is done for its own sake and in its own terms. By contrast, as we have seen, some critics insist that research has a social function, for instance serving to legitimize and preserve the status quo. And on this basis they argue that researchers must try to make their research serve a different function, such as *challenging* the status quo, in some respect. Often, this point of view is organized around the question: whose side is the researcher on? (Becker 1967b; Troyna and Carrington 1989; but see Hammersley 2000: ch. 3).

As we saw earlier, others argue that what is wrong with ethnography is its lack of impact on policy-making and practice, its limited payoff in the everyday worlds of politics and work. Here it is dismissed as an idle pastime, a case of fiddling while the world burns; one that is engaged in by intellectual dilettantes who live off the taxes paid by hard-working citizens.

These criticisms of naturalist ethnography seem to us to involve an overestimation of the actual and potential contribution of research to policy and practice, and an associated failure to value the more modest contributions it offers (Rule 1978; Hammersley 2002). It is also worth pointing out that one may believe that the only justification for research is its contribution to policy and practice, and recognize that it inevitably has effects on these, without concluding that it should be directed towards the achievement of particular political or practical goals. Indeed, there are good reasons for research not being directed towards such goals. The most important one is that this would increase the chances of the findings being distorted by ideas about how the world *ought to be*, or by what it would be politic for others to believe. When we are

engaged in political or practical action, the truth of what we say is not always our principal concern, even though we may prefer to be honest. We are more interested in the practical effects of our actions, and sometimes this may lead us to be 'economical' with the truth, at the very least; perhaps even in relation to ourselves (Benson and Stangroom 2006: ch. 1). Moreover, even where the truth of our beliefs is the main issue, in practical activities judgement of factual and value claims as more or less reliable will be based on somewhat different considerations than in research directed towards producing knowledge: we will probably be concerned above all with whether the information is sufficiently reliable for our current purposes. Of course, if one believes, as Marx and others did and do, that (ultimately at least) the true and the good are identical, one might deny the significance of this difference in orientation between research and other practical activities. But this view relies on an elaborate and unconvincing philosophical infrastructure (Hammersley 1992: ch. 6, 1993).

It is worth emphasizing that to deny that research should be directed towards political goals is not to suggest that researchers could, or should, abandon their political convictions. It is to insist that as researchers their primary goal must always be to produce knowledge, and that they should try to minimize any distortion of their findings by their political convictions or practical interests. Nor are we suggesting that researchers should be unconcerned about the effects of their work on the world. The point is that acknowledging the reflexivity of research does not imply that it must be primarily directed towards changing (or for that matter preserving) the world in some way or other. And, as we have indicated, there are good reasons why it should not be so directed.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by examining two contrasting accounts of the logic of social research and their implications for ethnography. Neither positivism nor naturalism provides an adequate framework. Both neglect its fundamental reflexivity: the fact that we are part of the social world we study, and that there is no escape from reliance on common-sense knowledge and methods of investigation. All social research is founded on the human capacity for participant observation. We act in the social world and yet are able to reflect upon ourselves and our actions as objects in that world. However, rather than leading to doubts about whether social research can produce knowledge, or to the desire to transform it into a political enterprise, for us this reflexivity provides the basis for a reconstructed logic of inquiry that shares much with positivism and naturalism but goes beyond them in important respects. By including our own role within the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties.

Reconstructing our understanding of social research in line with the implications of its reflexivity also throws light on the relationship between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Certainly there is little justification for the view, associated with naturalism, that ethnography represents a superior, alternative paradigm to quantitative research. On the other hand, it has a much more powerful contribution to make to social science than positivism allows. And, while combining different methods, for particular purposes,

may often be of value, this should not be done at the expense of forgetting the important methodological ideas associated with ethnography, and with qualitative research more generally.

Reflexivity is an aspect of all social research. It is one that has been given increasing attention by ethnographers and others in recent years, notably in the production of 'natural histories' of particular studies.[20] The remainder of this book is devoted to spelling out what we take to be the implications of reflexivity for ethnographic practice.

20 For a listing of examples of natural histories of social research, see Hammersley (2003b).