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Citation: Willig, C. (2016). Constructivism and 'The Real World': Can they co-exist?. QMiP Bulletin(21),

This is the accepted version of the paper.

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Constructivism and 'The Real World': Can they co-exist ?

As qualitative researchers we tend to be concerned with meaning. We are interested in how people construct meaning around their experiences, how they reflect on and talk about what has happened to them and others, and how they engage in social practices that are meaningful to them. Most qualitative research engages, in one way or another, with meaning-making, and most qualitative researchers acknowledge that when they carry out research they, too, construct meaning. The construction of meaning is at the heart of qualitative research and it comes as no surprise that most qualitative researchers embrace a constructivist perspective.

I spend quite a lot of my time supervising and examining professional doctorates in counselling psychology and I regularly review submissions to journals that publish qualitative psychology research. Within the context of these activities, I have been struck by how a commitment to constructivism is often taken to imply a simultaneous commitment to relativism. This happens as a result of collapsing ontological and epistemological concerns into one (ie. what Bhaskar (eg. 1978) called the 'epistemic fallacy'), thus constructing a realism-relativism dualism which leaves us with only two, apparently contrasting views of the nature of 'reality': one that proposes that there is a singular external reality which can be accurately and objectively captured by the researcher ('realism'), and another which proposes that what is experienced as 'real' depends upon the mindset of the person who is experiencing it and that there is no 'reality' beyond such subjective realities ('relativism').

In their recent text 'The Constructivist Credo' Guba and Lincoln (2013) represent this perspective by arguing that constructivist research is based upon a relativist ontology which subscribes to the view that there are "multiple realities because reality is constructed subjectively in the mind of each person depending on context" (see Khalil, 2014: 42).

But is it really the case that conducting research into the diverse ways in which people give meaning to their experiences presupposes that "reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an externally singular entity" (Ponterotto, 2005:7) ? And is it really ontological relativism that underpins a researcher's commitment to honour participants' subjective experience ?

In the remainder of this paper I want to suggest that most (if not all) constructivist qualitative research invokes a realist ontology because the research questions asked and the claims made on the basis of such research contain realist assumptions and have realist aspirations. I want to suggest that most qualitative research is actually based upon a position of ontological realism together with epistemological relativism. It seems to me that epistemological relativism constitutes a form of intellectual self-awareness and

concomitant humility, and ought to characterise all research endeavours whilst ontological relativism is probably not actually compatible with doing research in the first place¹.

The researcher's views about what exists (ontology) and how we can come to know about it (epistemology) are two distinct concerns. A realist ontology (ie. the assumption that material as well as social structures and processes have an existence which is independent of what might be known about them) does not automatically imply a commitment to a correspondence theory of truth (ie. the idea that there is a direct, one-to-one correspondence between aspects of objective reality and our knowledge of it). And an acknowledgment that people interpret the world differently does not necessarily imply that what is being interpreted (eg. a bodily sensation, a visual stimulus, an appearance or a disappearance) is not itself generated by something that has independent ontological status (eg. a biochemical process, a social system). In addition, people's interpretations and social practices themselves can be seen to constitute a 'reality' that exists independently of what the researcher may have to say about it. It follows that focusing on internal subjective realities and/or negotiated social realities does not necessarily make the research non-realist. In addition, asking research questions about what people think, feel, experience or say to each other attributes a certain 'out-there-ness' to those processes especially if the researcher believes that his or her research can access and represent those lived realities in some form, at least partially.

Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory constitutes a good example of a qualitative approach that combines realist premises and aspirations with epistemological humility without explicitly embracing a realist perspective. As a result, constructivist grounded theory is often described as 'relativist' (but note that Charmaz herself does not use this label). However, looking closely at Charmaz's (2000; 2006) account of what constructivist grounded theory seeks to accomplish reveals an ambition to gain an understanding of the nature of the social world. The aim of constructivist grounded theory is "to learn how people make sense of their situations and act on them" (Charmaz, 2000:11). Charmaz (2000:517) suggests that memo writing provides an aid for "linking analytic interpretations with empirical reality". She argues that "interpretive theorising can move beyond individual situations and immediate interactions" and invokes the possibility that interactions identified at local levels can involve "larger social structures" (Charmaz , 2006: 129).

Here, the analysis "(...) moves beyond lay persons' conceptions" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 128) and seeks to formulate explanatory accounts of how and even why particular social processes unfold in just the way that they do within wider social conditions. This is entirely compatible with realist aspirations as the goal here seems to be to develop an understanding of how participants' ideas, assumptions and readings of one another's

¹ A number of very clear and helpful accounts of philosophy of science concepts and their relevance to qualitative psychology have been published recently in this Bulletin (eg. Robinson, 2014; Matthews, 2014) and elsewhere (Michell, 2003; Mackay, 2003; Hansen, 2004; see also Shadish, 1995)

actions (ie. their interpretations) interact with one another and with wider social conditions to give rise to the social phenomena that we as researchers seek to understand. Charmaz's explicit references to the role of larger social structures as part of the context within which meanings are negotiated speaks to a critical realist perspective.

Constructivist grounded theory draws attention to the role people's constructions of meaning play in shaping the very nature of the social world that they inhabit. As such, the constructions the researcher is interested in are 'real' in as far as they have consequences for those who are positioned within them. They inform the social practices and institutions that shape people's lives including the formation and development of 'larger social structures' which presumably affect the lives even of those who do not recognise or reflect on them.

Constructivist grounded theory's realist aspirations are combined with an awareness of the role of interpretation in any attempt to understand something and a consequent modesty about what research can achieve and what kinds of claims can be made. Charmaz (2006:30) emphasizes that her approach "explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it". This position acknowledges that interpretation always comes into data analysis and theorising and that, therefore, all data analysis involves the construction of meaning. This is why Charmaz (2006: 132) "see[s] grounded theorists as offering plausible accounts" rather than "verified knowledge". This implies a critical realist perspective, especially as she also suggests that grounded theorists,

"(...) benefit from looking at many cases because they can strengthen their grasp of their empirical worlds and discern variation in their categories. Surely we can learn as we proceed, particularly when we strive to find out what our research participants say and do and what their worlds are like" (p. 132).

The ambition to develop 'plausible accounts', to 'strengthen our grasp of empirical worlds', and to 'find out' what our participants' worlds 'are like' presupposes that there is something 'out there', beyond ourselves and our own constructions of meaning, which we can aspire to grasp and understand, even though it is acknowledged that we can never have direct, unmediated access to it.

This combination of realist aspiration (informed by ontological realism) and epistemological modesty (informed by epistemological relativism) is also apparent in other qualitative approaches. For example, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009: 110) advise the reader that when writing up IPA research "(...) your task is to represent a clear and full narrative account of what you have learnt about the participant". They argue that this account needs to be supported "with plenty of quotes from the data" and that "each time you introduce a new

theme or aspect of the data, you need to give evidence for it, from the participant's transcript". At the same time it is acknowledged that "IPA is a joint product of researcher and researched. You are attempting to capture something of the lived experience of your participant but that inevitably invokes interpretations on your own part" (ibid.).

The kinds of research questions which inform IPA-research also reveal IPA's realist aspirations. For example,

"How do people who have chosen to live in a co-housing community make sense of their experience of 'belonging'?" (in Larkin, 2015)

"How do people experience chronic fatigue syndrome?" or "What does it mean to be a kidney donor?" or "How do HIV-positive women experience partner relationships?" (in Shinebourne, 2011)

These questions are realist in that they are pointing to a phenomenon (a shared experience, a meaning) that has ontological status (ie. it exists as a mental, emotional and/or experiential structure which would be there even if the participant did not give an account of it to the researcher).

It seems to me that confusion arises because we do not always acknowledge that as researchers we can be concerned with understanding different dimensions (or layers, as they are referred to in critical realist writings) of reality. The undifferentiated use of the term 'world' does not help matters as it obscures the differences between these layers. For example, when Charmaz (2006:132) writes,

"The constructivist view assumes an obdurate, yet ever-changing world but recognises diverse local worlds and multiple realities, and addresses how people's actions affect their local and larger worlds"

the reader is left uncertain about the status of the various 'worlds' that are invoked here, and their relationship with 'reality'. Being more specific about which aspect of 'the world' we are concerned with seems important as it helps to contextualise our research questions. What we might call the social world is produced by human beings in social interactions within a context of what we might call a material world which constrains what human beings can think, feel and do. Individuals' internal subjective experiences may be referred to as their personal or phenomenal 'worlds'. Rom Harré's (1979;1983; 1994) differentiation between Social Being, Personal Being and Physical Being offers a helpful clarification of these different aspects of 'the world'. Once we acknowledge that reality (or 'the world') has various dimensions, we can be more specific about which of these our research is concerned with. For example, it may be that our research is primarily concerned with understanding the ways in which a particular individual experiences a particular situation or predicament, and that it is their personal construction of meaning that we seek to engage with through our research. This does not mean that we, therefore, claim that such subjective experience

is not also located within and informed by socially available discourses or that it is not also embodied and constrained by material structures. If as researchers we are interested in what makes a particular subjective experience possible, we might need to look beyond our participant's experiential account and examine the context and conditions within which it has been produced. However, just because a research project focuses on subjective experience does not mean it is based on ontological relativism.

It seems to me that realism and relativism are much more closely intertwined than we tend to acknowledge. They are wrapped around each other in a way that suggests that it is hard to exclude one or the other entirely from a research project. People's constructions of meaning and their interpretations of situations inform their actions and these, in turn, have consequences and effects which change the social and material context within which the next round of interpretation and action takes place.

The social construction of AIDS is a good example of how an acknowledgement of the importance of the diversity of meanings constructed around AIDS does not detract from the fact that there is something going on that destroys the human immune system and that the virus that causes AIDS is passed on through the exchange of bodily fluids. In addition, people's constructions of AIDS have consequences for how health promotion is carried out and how care is organised and these social practices, in turn, have material consequences in terms of the number and types of bodies that become infected and potentially die from the disease. The social construction of AIDS is entangled with materiality and researching the social construction of AIDS does not entail a relativist ontological position.

The question then arises of what research informed by a fully relativist perspective would look like and whether such a perspective is ever really adopted. Certainly, it is most relevant to the study of socially constructed entities that do not have any material reference point at all (eg. such as psychological constructs such as personality, attitudes etc) as well as to the study of the contextual shifts in meaning construction during conversations and social interactions. However, even here the researcher does accept some reference points that are external to the construction of meaning within the conversation and that positions him/her as seeking understanding of a social process that takes place in a 'real social world' that exists independently of the researcher and which can be understood (at least to some extent) by systematically examining its discursive features. These assumptions are implicit in research questions such as "What are the discursive strategies people use to end a telephone conversation?" or "How is 'borderline personality disorder' constructed in the media?"

The acknowledgement that all 'knowledge' is fallible and that it is always mediated by the researcher's own perspective and meaning-making resources (including language itself) does not mean the research is relativist.

Ontological relativism is probably not actually compatible with doing research as any account produced on the basis of a genuine commitment to ontological relativism could tell us only about the researcher's personal world and would, therefore, not be able to contribute to wider insights about anything at all. I would, therefore, argue that ontological realism is a precondition for conducting research.

It seems to me that, like Charmaz, in practice most of us are actually adopting a critical realist approach even though we may not acknowledge this explicitly. We do not actually subscribe to the view that 'an independent reality does not exist'; rather, we simply want to acknowledge that it is impossible to produce an objective or neutral account of anything and that knowledge is always situated².

Pickering (1997:11) writing about relativism and the 'science wars' captures this very well when he says: "(...) there are many different ways for us to grab on to the world and for it to grab on to us". This is to say that there is a "constitutive and reciprocal connection between scientific knowledge and its object" (p.11) but the form that this takes and how this is expressed is shaped by available cultural resources including discursive and technological ones and reality can never be exhausted by any description we can make of its properties (Graeber, 2014). However, this is not to say that reality does not exist outside of the mind of the individual and that 'the world' can be reduced to the phenomenal worlds of our research participants.

² Matthews (2014) presents a compelling argument in support of the adoption of a critical realist epistemology within a realist ontology for qualitative psychology research.

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