

ONE

Creative Tensions in Social Research

Questions of Method

Jennifer Mason and Angela Dale

Introduction

There are many different approaches to social science research, and a sometimes bewildering array of methods and techniques, each apparently with its own set of advantages, disadvantages and rules. Although there are increasing levels of resources available to help researchers learn about all of these, for the researcher wishing to research *something in particular*, it can be difficult to work out the implications of using one method over another, or of combining different methods and approaches. This is partly because some methods or combinations may be better suited to particular research questions than others. We are familiar with the idea that the methods we use influence the *quality* of the knowledge we can generate in response to specific questions, but importantly they also influence its nature and scope – that is, which parts of the phenomena under investigation it throws light upon. So, one challenge is that the researcher needs to know what kinds of data and knowledge in relation to *specific social phenomena* a method can potentially produce *before* being able to make a good judgement about which methods they should choose.

This is further complicated, though, by a second challenge, which is to understand how a researcher's conceptual or theoretical stance on the empirical social world leads them to choose a particular method and thus to understand the nature or essence of phenomena in a different way from researchers with different orientations. This means, for example, that two researchers may both be interested in researching the concepts of relationships, or place, or social change – the domains we cover in this book – but they might see the very fabric of *what those things are* in completely different ways. Thus not only do our substantive interests shape the methods we might choose to use, but our methods shape the thing that is the substance of our enquiry too. To borrow a

phrase from two of our contributors, methods and substance ‘generate implications for each other’ (Frosh and Saville Young). This creates a bit of a conundrum for researchers; one that cannot entirely be resolved by reference to texts and resources that focus on method abstracted from substance.

The aim of this book is to help researchers to deal with these kinds of challenges. So instead of writing a textbook covering, in the abstract, the main methodological approaches, we have asked experts who are doing exciting and important social science research to give some insights into the methods they use, and how their methods and substantive foci generate implications for each other. We have picked three broad substantive domains – relationships, places and social change – and asked researchers with very different research orientations to describe their approaches, their logic and the kinds of knowledge their methods can yield. Yet our aim has not been to produce a book that speaks only to these substantive interests, but instead to use them as a focus to help readers to think about the interrelationship between methods and substance in a way which they can then apply more generally to their own research.

We would like the book to be useful to researchers who want to learn about, and be open to, the exciting breadth of research being practised in the social sciences. This means thinking creatively about methods (and substance), and being prepared to take on board other ways of thinking and researching, and possibly to combine methods. Sometimes this means moving outside ones comfort zone. But in order to do that, one needs not only to see the point of doing so, but also to understand the implications in terms of what kinds of knowledge might be produced, and more generally what might be involved in crossing boundaries between approaches.

The chapters that follow inform the reader about different kinds of approach, and they cover a wide range of methods including ethnography, cartography, survey methods, psychosocial methods, biographical methods, historical methods, narrative methods, visual/sensory methods and social network analysis. Each chapter will give the reader a good sense of ‘the point’ of using a particular method in relation to a grounded set of issues, and the kinds of knowledge that are produced. And by reading across all the chapters in each section, the reader will gain a good sense of some of the different ways in which methodological approaches can define or influence phenomena under investigation.

However, to fully grasp the implications of using a particular set of methods, or crossing boundaries between approaches, it is important to discuss some core or cross-cutting issues here in the introduction. This chapter is written primarily as a guide for the reader to key points of tension, difference and, sometimes unexpected, connection between approaches. These are often more implicit than explicit. In this chapter we provide a guide to ‘what to look out for’, or be alert to, in understanding the implications that a particular approach has for the relationship between methods and substance that we have argued is so crucial to social science research. It is a guide that can be

used not only when reading the chapters in this book, but more generally in deciphering social science approaches: when making judgements about which are best suited to one's own purposes and what might be involved in using and combining them. Hence it is structured around issues that all researchers have to think through and make decisions about when choosing and using methods in real life research.

As you read through the chapters therefore, you may find it helpful to keep a critical eye on how the following kinds of questions and issues – about how the social world is envisaged – figure in the arguments of the authors, both implicitly and explicitly. We are not using conventional distinctions and 'labels' that are often applied to perspectives on social science research – such as 'relativist', 'positivist', 'realist', 'interpretivist', 'post-structuralist' and so on – for several reasons. In part we think that they are sometimes so 'broad brush' as to be quite unhelpful in practical terms, for the researcher who is trying to work out how to go about a particular project. Additionally, we are not sure that such labels are always honestly applied or attributed, and often more telling signs of a researcher's ontological or epistemological positions can be picked up in the way they write about their methods or the accounts they give of their research. Perhaps most importantly though, we think that applying labels can be a little stultifying, since it helps to construct the idea that these are discrete and clearly defined world views, or positions, with little fluidity in them. We want the reader of this book to feel a little more liberated than that, and to embrace the possibility of using approaches with which they may not be very familiar.

What kind of social world is envisaged?

Sometimes authors will spell out explicitly the kind of social world they envisage when they describe the phenomena they are investigating, but at other times this is more implicit or taken-for-granted and, in these instances, the language and vocabulary used can be a telling sign of the kind of ontology being drawn upon, as we shall show.

We set out below some different possibilities for envisaging the social world, all of which appear in some shape or form in this book. As we have suggested, however, that these are not meant to depict discrete world views or research strategies. Instead, they are more like 'ontological dimensions'. Many researchers would want to adopt a mobile view that traverses or even transcends these, arguing perhaps that the social world is made up of multiple elements or dimensions, which come more or less into view depending upon our perspectives or the methods we use. The point, however, for the reader of this book, is to be able to spot the connections between the kinds of ontology that are expressed or implied by authors (in this book and elsewhere) and the methods and approaches that have been devised to generate knowledge of them. That will enable you both to judge how good the fit is between these

(ontology and methods) and also to decide on the value of particular approaches for producing knowledge about the kinds of phenomena that you personally are interested in.

A world of stories and interpretations

Stories and narratives figure in a wide range of research approaches as methods of data generation or analysis; many researchers see stories as good ways of eliciting perspectives *on* the social world, or of narrating experiences *of* it. However, here we want to draw attention to approaches where stories have a more fundamental and ontological role – where the social world is itself seen as a ‘storied’ entity, in the sense that stories, involving some kind of sentient composition – where people ‘make’ and ‘tell’ stories, rather than just acting a part in them – are part of its very fabric. This idea can take many different forms, and perspectives that encompass some sense of a world that is storied do not necessarily share other basic premises.

One example comes from Harvey and Knox’s chapter on the ethnography of place which uses the example of road construction projects in Peru. Storytelling figures quite centrally in their chapter. Here is an extract:

Our travels on the roads of Peru taught us a great deal about the specific materiality of roads and, as importantly, about how the layering of materials through which a road appears in the environment as a specific and relatively stable structure also carried with it histories of skills, of trade, of hopes and of struggle. These histories leave their traces in the stories people tell, in the physical make up of a place, and in the daily practices of those we encountered along the way. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, pp xx)

From this perspective we can see that stories (and histories) are more than just tales about the road – they are part of what the road *is*, or what a place is.

Thomson’s chapter on researching motherhood provides a different kind of example. She explains that she ‘wanted to capture the “zeitgeist” of contemporary motherhood. A *Zeitgeist* is the spirit of a particular age or period of history. It seems to us to be a concept very closely connected with stories and storytelling, and certainly Thomson’s chapter is redolent with these. For example, she explains that the research ‘sought to capture the ways in which women might be storying their pregnancies’, and she goes on to argue that:

women draw on publicly available narrative resources in order to ‘story’ their lives and make them intelligible to others (Butler, 2004; Thomson et al., 2009). New stories emerge in the confluence of developing identities and available resources that facilitate both the story telling and its reception (Plummer, 1995). The transition from private story to the generation of a public problem involves struggle and recognition of subjecthood, and the privilege to narrate oneself (rather than to be narrated by others) reflects wider dimensions of social, cultural and economic status (Adkins, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). (Thomson, Chapter 4, this volume, pp xx)

In this example, then, the aim is to investigate a zeitgeist, that involves and is implicated in processes of storying and storytelling. It is not simply that stories *yield data* about pregnancy and mothering, or about a zeitgeist, but instead that they are fundamentally bound up in what those concepts are.

A third example comes from Weeks' chapter on understanding change in sexual and intimate life. The object of Weeks' investigation is history itself, or more particularly historical narratives of sexuality. He says:

Historians (also) tell each other stories, which they easily assume tell the ultimate truth about the way things were, and are. But we need to learn to understand these narratives better, and especially how they structure meanings into a more or less coherent account of what is happening to us. Narratives or stories are examples of the ways in which 'reality' is constituted through sets of beliefs, assumptions and the appropriate selection of evidence. They are powerful because they carry the unconscious assumption that what is being elaborated for the reader is a 'true history'. But I want to argue that the very act of selection can occlude a complex and more contested history. (Weeks, Chapter 12, this volume, pp xx)

Weeks wants to explore the shaping and dominating role of certain historical narratives and the hidden assumptions that can be traced within them, and to connect these with the ways in which people both live sexuality and campaign for transformation. The very essence of the social world he envisages is one where stories and histories are not simply told about the world, but are woven tightly back into the fabric of both everyday existence and societies and cultures.

We have discussed three different examples of how it is possible to have an ontological view of the social world that is storied, and there are more examples in this book as well as, of course, in the wider world of social research (see the chapters by Mason and Davies [Chapter 2], Elliott [Chapter 14], Frosh and Saville Young [Chapter 3]). We think the examples have in common the idea that the sentient composition of a story, at some level, is a core part of the reality that research seeks to investigate. But there are also many differences between them.

Vocabulary that can sometimes be indicative of this kind of perspective includes: stories, narratives, histories, accounts, perspectives, experiences, traces, interpretations.

A world of socio-architectural structures

Another way of envisaging the social world involves perspectives that operate with some sort of 'socio-architectural' view. What we have in mind here are perspectives that see the social landscape in terms of 'structures', 'levels' or 'networks', for example. These are 'architectural' characteristics in the sense that they are seen to have a kind of social solidity, with definable and

potentially identifiable properties, characteristics or effects. For some researchers who use this kind of perspective, the 'architectural' features (or the solidity) are themselves made up of dynamic elements, agency, social relations and interactions that cohere or form constellations in certain 'structural' ways, where for others the emphasis is upon more fixed and infrastructural qualities of the social world. Despite many differences between approaches, what is always present is the desire to say something about the *properties* of these architectural features, for example, a network's density, or the effect of structural or 'family level' factors, or the cohesiveness or permeability of social class structures. Here are some examples from the book:

Crossley argues that the social world:

is a network and the pattern of connections constituting that network is an important aspect of what we mean by 'social structure' ... Different network patterns, involving different types of relations and different populations, constitute the multiple overlapping social structures that comprise a social world. (Crossley, Chapter 5, this volume, pp xx)

Here, networks have identifiable characteristics including density, and social network analysis (SNA) draws on graph theory for its concepts and terminology so that, for example, "distances" are measured in terms of "degrees", a degree being a connection'.

A different version can be found in Dale's chapter, where she refers to work by Jenkins et al:

The authors use multilevel modelling (where the family is one level in the analysis and the child is a different level) to attempt to establish the relationship between shared family-level effects and differential treatment of children by parents. (Dale, Chapter 6, this volume, pp xx)

The levels in Jenkins et al.'s work, and the networks in Crossley's, are certainly not the same – indeed there are some fundamental differences between them – but we think there is a common sense of socio-architecture behind both of them. Another example can be found in Dorling and Ballas's chapter, in which they describe 'human area population cartograms' (Chapter 10). These are cartograms based on 'the spatial distribution of variables pertaining to human societies', using data drawn from surveys of individuals and households, including the British Household Panel Survey. Such cartograms can be used to map data about *populations* against different geographical 'levels' (e.g. national, sub-national). Here populations are conceptualized in terms of their aggregated characteristics at a defined level of geography.

A final example comes from Salway, Harriss and Chowbey's chapter on 'putting long-term illness in context'. They express a socio-architectural view when they explain that they wanted to push beyond a focus on individual narratives of ill health in their project.

We suggest that the dominant reliance on narrative interviews [in research on chronic ill health] has meant limited attention to the social structural and cultural conditions that articulate with individual responses to chronic illness ... While we recognized the importance of listening to the personal testimonies of individuals living with long-term illness, we also aimed to understand wider contexts and processes that are commonly taken-for-granted and less open to investigation through interviews. (Salway, Harriss and Chowbey, Chapter 9, this volume, pp xx)

Other chapters in this book that contain elements of a socio-architectural view include: Elliott (Chapter 14), Guy and Karvonen (Chapter 8), Nazroo (Chapter 15) and Thomson (Chapter 4).

Vocabulary to look out for: structures, underlying structures, levels, layers, networks, institutions.

A world of individuals or humans

It seems obvious that social scientists would be exploring social worlds that are made up of individuals, and groups of individuals, and certainly this basic idea permeates very many social science perspectives. Indeed, structures and levels are often conceptualized as comprising linked or aggregated individuals or patterns of behaviour. This underlying logic is particularly pronounced in social survey methodology, as the following examples help to illustrate.

Our first example comes from Dale's chapter, where she explains how surveys can build pictures of households by establishing links and connections between the individuals within them. Talking specifically of the British General Household Survey she says:

Each household has a unique serial number and, within households, each family unit and person is uniquely identified. This provides the basic building blocks for linking information between partners, or between mother and child, or aggregating information about all household members. (Dale, Chapter 6, this volume, pp xx)

Nazroo's chapter discusses the logic of 'panel surveys' (a longitudinal survey in which variables are measured on the same people [units] over time), such as the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA), for understanding social change. ELSA collects detailed structured data from approximately 11,000 individuals in consecutive sweeps, and the rhythm of data collection, as well as the coverage of the surveys, is very intensive:

This intensity reflects the desire to collect a range of data – the causal processes we are typically interested in involve connections between different domains of people's lives (economic, social, psychological, health etc) – and the desire to observe changes as closely as possible to when they occur, so that time order can be established. (Nazroo, Chapter 15, this volume, pp xx)

Here we can see that the logic of sampling, and the topics covered (different domains of people's lives), or the 'units of investigation' and the variables used in data analysis, all work on the basic premise that the individual is the salient unit in the social world; although context – in the form of partner, family or household – are often central to any analysis. That same perspective can be traced in Dorling and Ballas's cartograms, which are often derived from standardized survey questions asking about subjective experiences or about personal and demographic characteristics, of individuals. With all of these perspectives individuals, at some point, are placed into categories for analytical purposes.

A very different example comes from Frosh and Saville Young in their chapter on researching 'brothering'. They use the concept of 'human subjects', as distinct from the notion of 'individuals', to construct a view of the social world. It is clear that the human subject is not the same as the individual, and Frosh and Saville Young's in depth psychosocial approach is very different from the survey methodology that Dale and Nazroo discuss, both in terms of their ways of generating data, and also in analysis. Frosh and Saville Young do not engage in the kind of categorical analysis that is characteristic of survey methodology. However, we nevertheless think that both share elements of an ontological perspective that sees the individual, or the human subject, as the salient unit, or receptacle perhaps – the place where we find it – of social life (and psychic life too for Frosh and Saville Young). At the very least this means that talking to or eliciting reports or accounts from individuals/human subjects is, in both perspectives, an obvious way to proceed, even though their ways of doing this, and of 'reading' the accounts produced, are markedly different.

Other chapters in this book that contain some elements of this individual/human view include: Rogers (Chapter 13), Thomson (Chapter 4), Mason and Davies (Chapter 2) and Savage (Chapter 11).

Vocabulary to look out for: individual, respondent, cohort, household, population, variables, attitudes, or human, subject, subjectivity.

A world of behaviours, actions and events

Where Frosh and Saville Young, for example, are interested in constructions of masculinity and the ways in which subjectivities can be reflexively read from narratives and texts, an alternative world view is one that focuses on behaviours, actions and events as objective and observable or reportable things. Here the emphasis is on 'happenings' and occurrences that can be charted and mapped from the 'outside' so to speak, and that (to a greater or lesser degree depending on the perspective of the researcher) exist independently of the interpretations of the people involved in them.

Probably the classic version of this is the randomized controlled trial (RCT), discussed by Rogers in her chapter on understanding change in the self-management of health. Although Rogers' own research focuses on the use of qualitative methods to understand how patients experience a complex health intervention, she explains the conventional RCT thus:

In an RCT patients will be invited to take part in the trial and are told that they may receive the standard treatment or a new form of treatment. It will be explained that the allocation to one or other form of treatment will be made at random – and thus the patient's characteristics will not influence which treatment they receive. In some trials neither the patient nor the person administering the trial will know which group the patient is in – in other words they are both 'blind' to the treatment that is given. The reason for this is to ensure that knowledge of the treatment does not influence the outcome. It is then assumed that, by comparing the outcomes of the two treatments, it will be possible to assess which treatment was more effective or whether there was no difference. (Rogers, Chapter 13, this volume, ppxx)

In this classic version of an RCT drugs trial, the researcher is only interested in what happens in terms of the effects of drugs. To do so they control the conditions between comparison groups, and filter out any 'subjective' influences through the double blind procedure.

Probably only a minority of social scientists would adopt an extreme behaviourist position of this kind, and the experimental or 'trials' logic of introducing a stimulus and observing the result is not particularly common either. However, the chapters by Rogers, and Mason and Davies, both in different ways deploy a 'what happens if we do *x*' logic in different parts of their research, indicating an ontology that suggests it is possible to stimulate and observe a reaction in research – to give the social world a poke and see what happens.

A different version of an ontology that sees the world in terms of behaviours, events, and actions, can be found in the chapters by Elliott in particular, and also Nazroo. Although neither use an experimental logic, both are interested in charting events and behaviours over time, to understand social change and causality. Elliott explains that:

Event history analysis ... focuses on the timing and sequencing of events within individuals' lives ... The dependent variable ... is derived from the occurrence or non-occurrence of an event and the timing of that event ... Examples of data amenable to event history modelling include the duration from redundancy to becoming re-employed, the duration from release from prison to re-arrest, the duration until the birth of a first child and the duration from cohabitation to marriage. (Elliott, Chapter 14, this volume, pp xx)

Elliott points out that the collection of event history data needs to be standardized to allow for quantitative analysis. The ontological view she expresses is one where phenomena like the duration of redundancy to becoming

re-employed, do *happen as* or *can be conceptualized as, events*. Both Elliott and Nazroo make clear that events are not somehow devoid of meaning and interpretation for those involved in them. Nazroo for example says that ‘Those we study both react to and anticipate events’ (Nazroo, Chapter 15, this volume, pp xx). And both chapters include interesting suggestions for working experiential or anticipated elements of events into their analyses. However, the ontological conception of a social world constituted in events remains at the heart of these approaches, and makes them distinctive.

Other chapters in this book that contain elements of this view include: Crossley (Chapter 5), Dorling and Ballas (Chapter 10) and Dale (Chapter 6).

Vocabulary to look out for: behaviour, reactions, effects, events, risk, variables.

An environmental, non-human or sensory world

By contrast, some approaches envisage a social world where various environmental, material or non-human elements dimensions are seen as central. These may be elements, such as the visual, the auditory, the olfactory and the haptic, that are perceived through the senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch), and the role of human *perception* may be more or less prominent and implicated in this kind of ontological view. Some approaches emphasize the centrality of the natural or built environment, some the physical or biogenetic embodiment of human and non-human life, and some the cultural expression of things envisaged to be somewhere between natural, material and social. Often, such approaches encompass the idea that such things can have effects, impacts, agency or life, outside of human intention or reaction, as well as being connected with them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this view is strongly present in three of the chapters on ‘Researching Place’ – those of Guy and Karvonen on ‘messy urbanism’ (Chapter 8), Salway, Harriss and Chowbey on ‘putting long term illness in context’ (Chapter 9) and Harvey and Knox on the ethnography of a road (Chapter 7).

Guy and Karvonen, for example, talk of the ‘indelible link’ between humans and technologies, pointing out that in everyday life:

we only recognize our reliance on technologies when they break down or act in unexpected ways – when a bridge collapses under too much weight, a heat wave causes a citywide blackout, an antiquated water main finally exceeds its service life, or a hacker successfully disrupts the Internet. (Guy and Karvonen, Chapter 8, this volume, ppxx)

The social world that they want to research is a nexus between humans, technology, and their material and non-human surroundings. Harvey and

Knox's ethnography of a road similarly has place as something that involves human, non-human, material and cultural elements, and also more intangible things such as design, imagination, memory and spirits. This is what they say:

Designed as generic networks, built to connect pre-existing places, they are material forms that produce relational dynamics that were never planned.

and then later ...

We found it crucial to consider key non-human agents – particularly the materials (stone, earth/mud/dust, water), the inscriptions (numbers, images and written documents), the instruments and machines, the 'environment' (imagined and implicated in diverse registers), and an animate spirit world. (Harvey and Knox, this volume, pp xx)

Instead of seeing material surroundings as part of a nexus, Salway, Harriss and Chowbey conceptualize them more as *context* (for the long-term illness that was the focus of their study). They are interested in the physical and material dimensions of places, as well as people's sensory experience of them (what they looked like, felt like, sounded like).

These three chapters on place and space provide an interesting contrast with the fourth in that section, by Dorling and Ballas, who actually want to work against the grain of the cartographic conventions that focus too much, in their view, on aspects of physical topography and not enough on human variables. In explaining their approach they argue that:

Human cartograms have been developed on the basis that we should focus on people, not on land and sea, when we are studying the geography of people. (Dorling and Ballas, Chapter 10, this volume, ppxx)

As a consequence, Dorling and Ballas deliberately distort conventional map projections, changing the shapes and sizes of land masses in line with human variables, to create a visually arresting human geography. This represents an almost ironic play on an environmental/non-human/sensory world view; on the one hand it strongly rejects it in favour of a focus on humans, yet on the other it requires that we are familiar with and understand the meaning of conventional cartographic projections so that we get the point when these are distorted.

Finally, Mason and Davies' chapter on researching family resemblances does not focus on place or space in particular, but does rest on a world view that sees sensory and physical dimensions as salient:

To answer our questions about resemblances and their role in relatedness, we found we were interested in physical, visual and other sensory dimensions of existence, not all of which are accessible or exist within talk or reported behaviour and interpretation ... These dimensions cut across or move beyond conventionally understood divides in much

social research and epistemology – for example between the social, the bio-genetic, the sensory and the cultural – yet it seemed to us that ‘family resemblances’ are indeed played out across these domains. (Mason and Davies, Chapter 2, this volume, ppxx)

Vocabulary to look out for: places, things, nature, environment, bodies, physicality, materiality, sensory, ecology, traces, inscriptions.

A world of relationalities, connections and situations

Where environments, and non-human materialities, are part the ontology, then often the focus is more upon the situations, connections and relations where these are brought into play with human and social concerns, than it is upon the notion of the individual at the ontological centre. There are several different kinds of example of this in the book. Harvey and Knox’s ontological view of the road has connections and dynamics at the centre:

The histories of roads are the histories of the places they connect, the places they bring into being, and the places that disappear in their wake. They are also the material outcome of diverse knowledges, skills and labour practices that went into their construction, and of the markets and the conflicts that moved populations and investments around the planet in particular directions at particular times. And just as they are somewhat invisible, once attention is directed to them they are self-evidently there, constructed, open-ended, in process, and integral to modern economies. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, ppxx)

Harvey and Knox’s suggestion that these things are almost invisible, until we notice them and they become obvious, is somewhat of a theme in a relational/connected/situated world view. There is sometimes a sense of an ontological struggle for recognition against an alternative and dominant way of seeing. For example, Crossley’s chapter on social networks does not emphasize strongly the material or non-human dimensions of the social world, but it does give a very clear view of an ontological relationality that is often overlooked. Crossley counterposes this directly to the dominance of a more individualistic world view:

Sociological research methods betray an individualistic bias not only in data gathering (which is understandable to a degree) but also in data analysis and reporting. The vast majority of sociological research focuses on the beliefs, experiences, dispositions, attitudes, resources etc of individuals. At the most these individual accounts are aggregated and contrasted (for example, in surveys and statistical analyses). Furthermore, where structural/relational concepts such as social class are operationalized they are generally reduced to individual attributes. Each individual has a class and the relational aspect of ‘class relations’ is absent’... As its name suggests, SNA focuses on patterns of connection, allowing us to explore the various ways in which they generate opportunities and constraints for both individual and collective action, advantaging some and disadvantaging others’. (Crossley, Chapter 5, this volume, ppxx)

So, just as we suggested that Crossley's ontology was a socio-architectural one, we can see that it also relational in that it sees the social world as made up of connections and relationalities, rather than individuals (or aggregates of individuals) possessing sets of characteristics or even experiences.

Mason and Davies also express a relational world view, although this is somewhat different from Crossley's (Chapter 2). Their focus – family resemblance – not only resides in physical, sensory, social and ethereal dimensions, but also in the experience of interactions, performances, relationality and phenomena that exist somehow *outside and between* individuals. Although in Crossley's SNA approach interactions are assumed they are not directly focused on because the aim is to bring structures to the analytical foreground. For Mason and Davies, resemblances are inherently relational; they emerge, take shape and come to life for example, in gestures and mannerisms performed over generations, in different times, as well as in interactions. They are not possessed or expressed by individuals alone.

Other chapters in this book that contain elements of this relational view include: Thomson (Chapter 4), Weeks (Chapter 12) and Frosh and Saville Young (Chapter 3).

Vocabulary to look out for: relations, connections, links, places, contexts, intersubjectivity.

The world as a singular and coherent entity, or as multiple and non-cohering?

There is a rather fundamental difference in the ontological perspectives that feature in this book, which can be expressed in two opposing poles thus:

a world that is approached as if it is a *singular coherent entity* that can in principle be categorized and measured and fully known (while acknowledging that complete measurement can in practice never be achieved).

a world that is considered to be *multiple*, such that it could not be brought into singular focus and measured completely, either because it is always dynamic, never fixed, and always contingent, or because it *exists in different planes that do not cohere* and cannot be contained within one world view.

Some examples will help to illustrate this. We think the singular/coherent view is expressed clearly in the following excerpt from Dale's chapter:

In purely descriptive terms, nationally representative surveys that record information on all members of the household can provide authoritative answers to questions such as ... The answers to these kinds of questions provide the essential information needed to understand our society and, even more importantly to understand differences between groups – whether based on age, gender, ethnicity or geography'. (Dale, Chapter 6, this volume, pp xx)

Nazroo also expresses something of this view in his chapter on using longitudinal data to understand change:

Which factors lead to good health at older ages, and which explain socioeconomic inequalities in health at older ages, are important causal questions. The answers to them have the potential to influence social, health and economic policy in positive ways. To answer such questions the use of longitudinal, or panel, survey data comes into its own, because it enables the identification of time order – whether the proposed cause was present before the proposed effect’.

Nazroo’s chapter contains a fascinating discussion about the value of longitudinal data for unravelling the effects of age, period and cohort in understanding poor health in old age. The logic of such a process suggests, we think, a singular/coherent ontology where causes and effects are seen to exist in (potentially) measurable form, if we can hone our methods and analyses appropriately. This same logic appears in Elliott’s chapter:

A quantitative life history or ‘event history’ is a systematic record of *when* particular events have occurred for an individual. In this context an event corresponds to any qualitative change occurring at a specific point in time. The birth of a child, the date of starting a job and the date of getting married could all therefore be described as events within an individual’s biography. (Elliott, Chapter 14, this volume, pp xx)

This contrasts with the view of the world as multiple, in flux and not cohering in a way that permits conclusive measurement, that can be seen in Harvey and Knox’s discussion of ‘the road’, and with Frosh and Saville Young’s argument that knowledge of the ‘otherness’ and ‘alienness’ of life must be contingent and open:

Throughout, we try to resist anchoring interpretation of text in certainty and narrative closure so as to hold onto the alienness of our psychic life; to allow our participants to remain ‘other’ might even be considered an ethical imperative. (Frosh and Saville Young, Chapter 3, this volume pp xx)

On the face of it the distinction between a singular/coherent and multiple/non-cohering view can be made broadly to equate to well known differences between relativist and positivist or realist positions, although in keeping with our approach in this chapter, we do not think that labelling them in this way does justice to the nuances and subtleties in the different perspectives, nor does it help to move the would-be researcher forward very far in practical terms. Partly that is because we suspect that many researchers never fully decide where they stand on the question of singularity/multiplicity, coherence/incoherence and that most – in a kind of pluralistic ambivalence – use research practices that might be read as suggesting allegiance with both views, at different points in their careers or indeed at the same time and in the same

project. We do not want to suggest that such ambivalence is a bad thing though. We think that this is probably more productive of good research and insight, than nailing one's allegiance to a fixed and all embracing position. We think it is also possible, and sometimes positively beneficial, to approach the world *as if* it were measurable and singular for some purposes, and *as if* it were multiple and incoherent for others. The chapters by Salway, Chowbey and Harriss, and by Mason and Davies, do this explicitly, but we think if you read between the lines of the others, you may find that several of them do it to some extent.

What counts as data?

The data or evidence used by different authors vary enormously, and are influenced by the different ontological dimensions that they propose. For the reader, the methods a researcher uses to produce relevant data can be a useful signal to the kinds of social world they envisage, as we have already begun to see.

So, for example, where Harvey and Knox say that 'histories leave their traces in the stories people tell' or Thomson talks of how people 'narrate themselves', we can see how the logic of their choices of method tie in with their 'storied' ontology – both of them want to elicit narratives from the research subjects they encounter, although they do this in different ways and to different ends. Harvey and Knox's research narrative is strongly derived also from the practices and processes of material transformation that they observe. Using a different example, we saw how Salway, Harriss and Chowbey, on the one hand, and Mason and Davies, on the other, felt it was important to move beyond individual interviews, or the analysis of talk and reported behaviour, to find methods that could generate data about physical and cultural environments, contexts, interactions or performances and relationality. As Mason and Davies put it:

We found that not all of (our) questions could be answered with conventional survey or interview methods. One reason for that is that these methods give primacy to – or sometimes totally rely upon – individual's reports of their experience of family life, or their accounts of the behaviour of themselves or others, or their own interpretations. ... These things, of course, are vital to understanding family relationships. ... (but) ... We were also interested in interactions, relationality and phenomena that exist somehow between individual people (Hardy's 'family face' for example), not all of which can be recounted by individuals. And we were interested in the ways in which resemblances are 'performed', culturally expressed, or how they take shape in expert knowledge and theorizing – all modes which are in some senses or at some times beyond the personal interpretation of interview or survey subjects. (Mason and Davies, Chapter 2, this volume, pp xx)

Researchers who see situations and connections as having an ontological role, such as Guy and Karvonen, or who see sensory, material and non-human elements as salient, elaborate in their chapters how they try to generate data about those elements, using methods designed to elicit them or to read their 'traces' in various ways.

Conversely, we have already seen that those authors who see individuals as having an ontological role use methods to generate data *from and about* individuals – whether that be surveys using structured questionnaires to elicit data about individuals and their households or families (Dale, Nazroo, Elliott), or interviews with people taking part in randomized health interventions (Rogers); or in-depth verbatim conversations with an individual (Frosh and Saville Young), or indeed individually narrated stories and qualitative interviews, which feature in several other chapters in this book.

The point is that researchers do need to find ways of connecting the ontological dimensions that their approach emphasizes with the kinds of data they use and produce and the methods they use to do it. If you are primarily interested in the dynamics of situations and interactions, it may not be very useful only to generate reports from or about individuals. Or if you think that elements of people's social identities, or cultural constructions of meaning, are revealed in the nuances of conversation, narratives or 'naturally occurring' talk, then it will not be so useful only to use observations of behaviour, nor indeed data from standardized surveys. Or if you think that social structures or networks or social geographies are revealed in aggregated data about many individuals and their behaviours or contacts with each other, then it will not be useful to gain unstructured (non-standardized) in depth data in only a few cases.

There can also be a significant distinction between whether researchers use data that they find – data that already exist – or whether they generate data themselves, although in practice, many researchers will use both of these strategies. Approaches that have an historical orientation, like those of Weeks and Savage, put considerable emphasis on 'found' and archived data. As Savage puts it, historians 'get their hands dirty and work with whatever material is available' (Savage, Chapter 11, this volume, ppxx). Weeks, for example, describes the breadth of materials he used to uncover the 'fateful moments' that led to dramatic changes in the regulation of sexuality in the UK in the last 50 years. He writes:

I used a wide range of sources: personal and institutional archives, sexological texts, medical journals and newspapers, police and court records, and oral history interviews. (Weeks, Chapter 12, this volume, pp xx)

Both Savage's chapter and also that of Guy and Karvonen strongly make the point that it is not appropriate to think of the data a researcher can 'get hold of' as necessarily inferior. Guy and Karvonen explain that the 'historical

record' pieced together from archival reports, books, maps, can be particularly illuminating where a retrospective or 'narrated' account might sanitize or gloss over important detail:

When studying a particular technology, there is a tendency for the researcher to assume that the existing technology was the 'correct choice'. However, the historical record frequently reveals a palette of options that were weighed and contested by various social actors and material conditions, resulting in the success of one particular technology over others. Exploring these processes of contestation can help the researcher uncover particular influences of culture and materiality embedded in the topic of study. (Guy and Karvonen, Chapter 8, this volume, pp xx)

Crossley's chapter also gives a sense of 'piecing together' data from a range of sources, including archives, to flesh out knowledge about social networks.

I have gathered network data by means of participant observation (health clubs project), archival analysis (suffragette and punk projects), secondary sources (suffragette and punk projects), questionnaire survey (student activism) and interviews (student activism). What I was looking for in each of these cases was guided by the requirements of SNA (in addition to the wider rationale and goals of the projects) but how I looked, the method employed, was determined by the population in question and my relationship and means of access to its members. (Crossley, Chapter 5, this volume, pp xx)

These chapters demonstrate the merits of 'taking what data you can get' (although not uncritically), and show that there is scope for considerable investigative creativity in engaging with different kinds of 'found' materials in pursuit of the answers to particular types of research question.

To an extent, researchers who use survey data (for example, Elliott, Nazroo, Dorling and Ballas, Dale) are also using 'found' materials, in the sense that the surveys are often designed by others, or for more generalist purposes than any one specific research project, and the data are then made available for secondary analysis. Dale's chapter, for example, identifies some of the datasets that contain information about family relationships in the UK, and discusses the opportunities that these offer, as well as some of the constraints that working with such materials can impose. Again, some considerable creativity is involved in how the researcher seeks out and engages with the data in relation to their particular research questions.

This emphasis on found materials contrasts with, for example, Frosh and Saville Young's approach which involves generating data through an intensive narrative interview, and Thomson's 'life narratives' too:

By inviting uninterrupted life narratives at the start of the interview we attempted to capture something of the narrative form that is the basis of the biographical narrative interpretive method (Wengraf, 2001) and the idea that in constructing a story of their lives research subjects will provide insight into both the social and psychic conditions of their lives (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). (Thomson, Chapter 4, this volume, pp xx)

This sense that data are *constructed* or *generated* through the research process is a theme in other chapters too, including Harvey and Knox's ethnography of the road, Guy and Karvonen's socio-technical approach to researching 'messy urbanism', Mason and Davies's 'creative interview encounters' and use of experimental methods in their study of family resemblances, Salway, Harriss and Chowbey's 'rapid appraisal fieldwork' and Rogers's use of qualitative interviews in a complex health intervention.

Whether one is judging the 'ontological appropriateness' of data produced in a research study, or making decisions about the kinds of data to generate oneself, these issues in how ontologies, data and knowledge connect are of crucial importance. So too are questions about how data are read as, or turned into, knowledge – how they are taken to represent or mean something of significance, or something authoritative, for the analysis being conducted. The authors in this book each try to reflect on these questions and make them explicit for the reader, in a process that is not generally part of the usual practice of research reporting.

What makes it knowledge?

However, data do not, by themselves, produce research results or knowledge.

Again, as we might expect, the processes through which different researchers build knowledge vary, and these variations connect with the different ontological positions although they do not always directly reflect them. We cannot describe them all here, but instead are picking out two key themes and selected examples to illustrate them.

How analysis and theorizing are done

The chapters in this book do not deal in depth with data analysis, but it is clear in all of them that the way analysis is done is quite crucial for turning data or observations into knowledge.

For example, Elliott's, Nazroo's and Dale's analytical approach emphasizes systematic and rigorous procedures for handling and manipulating standardized data. Great importance is placed on the quality of the sample in terms of how representative it is of the wider population. If, for example, those who cannot be contacted or who refuse to take part in the survey are different from those who do respond, the results will be biased and thus inaccurate. If conclusions are drawn on the basis of very small numbers then there is a good chance they could have arisen simply by chance and will not be a 'true' representation. Thus the aim is always to maximize the accuracy of the data and then to analyse these data in appropriate ways. Analyses may provide descriptive accounts – for example, of household composition (Dale) or the aim may

be to identify causal processes which, as Nazroo explains, call for complex methods of analysis.

The emphasis on accuracy and standardization in data sets, and rigour and quantification in analysis, combines in a practice where analysis is carried out on complete data sets, once all data have been collected and made ready. In this sense, data collection and data analysis are separate and distinct processes (or stages in a procedure). Statistical procedures are applied to intact data sets and there is no blurring of boundaries between data collection and analysis.

This formal separation is mirrored in the process of theorizing too. Theorizing comes across as very important in the chapters by Nazroo, Elliott, and Dale for example, as an activity that takes place prior to and after data collection. Theory is important, therefore, in establishing what the puzzle or set of questions are (hypotheses in some accounts), and then in building analytical models and interpreting the results. Nazroo explains this, in the context of a discussion about the 'promise of instrumental variables' for overcoming some of the difficulties of measurement error and establishing causal direction in longitudinal analysis:

Careful design of data collection – ensuring as far as possible that relevant variables are collected, concepts are well measured and the timing of events is accurately identified – together with theoretically informed analytical models, helps to minimize these problems, often to a convincing level. But where uncertainties remain, the classic, but difficult to implement, strategy of using instrumental variables might help. The technique is fundamental to econometrics and has been well described elsewhere (McFadden, 1999; Bascle, 2008). In brief, when attempting to model a causal relationship this technique involves substituting the independent variable with an estimate of its value, separately modelled using instrumental variables that are theorized to have no causal relationship with the dependent variable. (Nazroo, Chapter 15, this volume, pp xx)

This approach contrasts sharply with Harvey and Knox's discussion of ethnographic fieldwork. Although fieldwork is a stage in a bigger process, it is one that lasts a long time – usually many months or years – and significantly there is no separation of fieldwork, analysis and theorizing:

Ethnographers try to allow the experiences of the fieldwork period to shape their research agendas, for what really matters to us are the things we know we cannot know in advance. Ethnography is a slow practice and requires patience. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, ppxx)

The fieldwork experiences of the researcher, and their understandings of what is going on around them, are central in the analytic endeavour, and this takes shape for ethnographers in the writing of fieldnotes, as Harvey and Knox explain:

Writing is a key aspect of ethnographic research. Every day we each wrote extensive field notes, describing what we had done and the people we had met, detailing the conversations we had been party to, and noting down anything and everything that seemed relevant to our project. If we recorded interviews the field notes would detail the context of the conversation, who else was there, the atmosphere, the hints and suggestions of things that might not have been said and the reactions of others. Field notes are the basis from which subsequent accounts are distilled and elaborated, they shape and supplement memory, and they direct attention in the on-going process of research. As you write you become aware of things you feel unsure about, questions you forgot to ask, details you failed to notice. They are thus not simply a record of what happened, for a reflexive anthropologist will always assume that they are only aware of some of what is going on. As narratives they shape the trajectory of the research, and they also constitute an initial analysis of the mass of small encounters and events that constitute daily life in the field. Field notes are analytical from the start, and we do not draw a strong distinction between data collection and analysis. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, pp xx)

Reflexive fieldnotes and are an important part of analysis and theorizing in other chapters, including Thomson's:

Our approach recognizes the subjective feelings of the researcher as data in their own right, and these are documented within the field notes in order to enhance meaning (Lucey, 2003). Field notes constituted an important source of data in their own right and were shared and interrogated at research team meetings and group analysis events alongside transcripts and visual data (see Thomson, 2009, forthcoming for overview). (Thomson, Chapter 4, this volume, pp xx)

The idea of long and *slow* ethnographic engagement and of knowledge building contrasts with Salway, Harriss and Chowbey's 'rapid appraisal' approach for getting to know a neighbourhood, yet some of the techniques are similar – seeking out and getting to know key people, trying to elicit local knowledge, observing the environment, observing situated social relations, asking people for their stories. Although their form of ethnography is fast, not slow, it also has in common with Harvey and Knox the idea that analysis and theorizing takes place in local and situated ways, and that they begin during, and inform, the process of data generation.

These approaches put a premium on the reflexivity of the researcher, and argue that knowledge comes from their engagement and interpretation throughout the process. In the case of Salway, Harriss and Chowbey there is an interesting layer on top of that idea, in their use of community researchers not only to gather data, but also to include their interpretations and analyses.

This idea of the reflexive engagement of an agentic researcher, blurring the boundary between data generation, analysis and theorizing, is present in a number of the chapters in the book. Guy and Karvonen put it thus:

the socio-technical researcher is often faced with the challenge of tracing networks and jumping scales to connect the micro and macro implications of technological development. The city serves as a meso-scale and the socio-technical scholar scales up and down to make connections between the global and the local. Critically, this requires the researcher to decide which connections to trace, how far to trace them spatially and temporally, and when to stop, thereby becoming another 'actor' in the network of assembly that surrounds the technical object. (Chapter 8, this volume, ppxx)

This portrayal of an energetic (acrobatic!) researcher engaged in data generation, analysis and theorizing all at the same time, is striking.

Other authors in the book emphasize the ways in which data might be 'read' to produce knowledge and understanding; *reading*, here, is seen as a highly involved, critical and analytical process of theorizing and interpretation. Whether or not this form of reading is done concurrently with data generation, the point we want to draw out is that it is seen as a particular form of reflexive theoretical engagement with the data.

Frosh and Saville Young, for example, talk about reading data (in their case, texts of interview transcripts) with a critical 'analytic attitude'. They see this as a crucial way for the psychosocial approaches that they are interested in to counter a tendency they identify for some researchers using psychoanalysis as an interpretive technique to claim 'mastery' and make 'over-blown claims to possess privileged understanding of the unconscious' on the basis of an uncritical and unreflexive theoretical dogma. They suggest that in these approaches, 'psychoanalysis proves itself because it always finds what it is looking for'. Instead they say:

We suggest that psychoanalysis has a critical edge that it needs to retain; that this involves openness and engagement with, or 'implication' in, social research to actively block claims of expertise and 'mastery'; and that this can be operationalized (at least to a degree) by analytic procedures that are reflexive and deconstructive.

They describe their way of doing this as a 'concentric reflexivity' that:

offers a series of analytic takes on interview text, beginning with discursive positions resisted and taken up in talk and moving 'outwards' through an examination of subjectivity as embodied and 'invested' discourse, and then to social 'context' and the knowledge-producing or research relationship (Saville Young and Frosh, forthcoming).

And later ...

Continued openness and autocritique is what is required, whether one is working as an analyst or drawing on psychoanalysis in the arena of social research. What we seek,

therefore, is an approach which asks what can be made of a social text (an interview, a set of observations, a piece of ethnography) that impacts upon both researchers and research participants. (Frosh and Saville Young, Chapter 3, this volume, ppxx)

Weeks, although using a different kind of approach, talks of his conceptualization of theory as 'a box of tools' rather than an overall framework. For him, the process of reading data involves 'reading against the grain' and, again, this is a process that involves analysis and the making of theory as you go along:

But whatever my new theoretical assumptions, the decisive evidence came from the archive, once I began to read it in a different way: not as confirmation of the traditional assumptions, but against the grain, as the product of new processes of categorization, regulation and resistance, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, a struggle between social definition and self-definition (Weeks, 1977).

But Weeks also develops an argument that analysis, and theorization, should and do involve drawing one's personal experience into the frame, in ways with which we think Harvey and Knox, albeit from a different kind of research perspective, would want to agree:

My own experience is not local and irrelevant because personal life and macro-historical trends are inextricably combined ... The changes in our own private lives are part of wider, collective transformations. The challenge lies in teasing out the hidden connections, making sense of what seems incomprehensible, or merely idiosyncratic. (Weeks, Chapter 12, this volume, ppxx)

To conclude this section, a question that we might ask of all of the chapters is 'do you need to be an expert' to use a particular set of methods, to analyse and theorize with them, and to produce meaningful knowledge? We have encouraged all the authors in this book to engage with the question of whether readers could 'have a go' at their approach. We think the more general answer is something like 'you need to know what you are doing', but 'beware overblown claims of mastery' and 'remember always to engage in a critical way with your own methods/methodology and look for alternative possibilities for theorizing. So, for example, Frosh and Saville Young in some ways are telling us how to subvert a particular and dominant version of psychoanalysis, while retaining a critical edge (that psychoanalysis also helps to provide) in research. Other chapters, such as those by Rogers (Chapter 13), and by Mason and Davies (Chapter 2), give a flavour of how it can be possible to modify or work against the grain of conventional methods (RCTs in the case of Rogers, experimental methods in the case of Mason and Davies) in productive ways. The chapters by Crossley and Dorling and Ballas, using different examples, show how it can be possible to adapt or borrow ways of

theorizing from other domains (Crossley shows that social network analysts borrowed from graph theory [Chapter 5] and Dorling and Ballas show that the techniques developed for human cartograms originated in the physics of heat transfer and molecular mixing [Chapter 10]). And Elliott shows how it might be possible to weave analytical narratives out of data that do not on the face of it take a narrative form or originate in narrations and stories. Our point really is that we think researchers should not only take a critical approach to their own methods and perspectives, but also sometimes engage imaginatively with ways of researching, analysing and theorizing, which are outside of their own sphere of expertise. We think this might be good not only for researchers, but for methods themselves, which otherwise can tend to become inward facing and self satisfied.

The approach to wider resonance and generalization

The chapter authors in this book have quite widely differing 'knowledge aims' and would take different positions on the question of whether or not the knowledge they produce in their research can be considered 'truth', or indeed have a wider resonance or generalizability. Clearly, different knowledge aims connect to different ontologies, and you will see traces of this as you read the chapters. So for example, there are differences of emphasis in whether the knowledge sought is deemed to be total (or potentially total), accurate, factual or evidential. Alternatively there are examples in the book where the aim is to enlighten, to inspire imaginations, to raise questions, to disrupt conventional wisdom or ways of knowing, to unsettle existing assumptions, to encourage people to see things in new ways. For some, knowledge can only ever be provisional and particular, and instead of aiming for total census-style generalized knowledge, we should recognize the extraordinary richness of partiality and the particularity of accounts.

Savage makes an argument along these lines, in an interesting discussion of the differences between ideographic (particularizing) and nomothetic (generalizing) strategies for understanding social change. He argues that nomothetic strategies, where they rest on using standardized instruments to 'measure' change, can involve 'stripping away detail, possibly telling detail' and that while survey methods may appear more rigorous, for example, in their approach to sampling, in fact the rather 'messy' and unrepresentative data available from mass observation correspondents in the 1940s provide very rich detail which can generate new accounts of social change which cannot be obtained from the surveys conducted at that time.

In contrast, Dale, Elliott, Nazroo, Ballas and Dorling all use survey data that is based on a defined sample – either of the entire population or of a specific age-cohort or age-group. In these cases sampling allows generalizations to be

made to a wider population and, based on sampling theory, the level of accuracy of the survey estimate can be calculated. In these cases, a sample can proxy for an entire population.

However, in stating these differences, we do not want to simplify what is actually more complex, or characterise the debate simply as one between perspectives that seek to generalize on the basis of sampling theory and rigorous statistical analyses, and those that seek to generalize perhaps more theoretically or interpretively. We think there are other elements in the ways in which researchers (including those who have written chapters in this book) seek to generalize, or to claim a wider resonance for their insights, that it is usefully to identify before we draw this chapter to a close. We are thinking of these more as *generalizing 'motifs'*, than clear cut strategies or practices. We think that sometimes some of them are used almost unconsciously, but they do have certain 'generalizing' effects that it is useful for the reader of this book to have in mind as you read the chapters that follow.

Visualization

Some of the chapters use visualizations – for example, Crossley's has social network diagrams, Dorling and Ballas's has 'distorted' maps in the form of human cartograms. Chapters by Mason and Davies, and Harvey and Knox contain photographs, and many more of the authors writing here use photographs and visualizations when reporting their research (rather than writing about methods as we have asked them to do here). We think it is important to appreciate the impact that visual representations like this can have. Indeed both sets of authors discuss the importance of this form of representation for establishing the wider significance or properties of their method and analysis.

Robust and systematic analysis

In some chapters, for example, Nazroo's, the carefully thought-out steps that take the reader through the logic of the analysis and confront all the conceivable ways in which errors may occur, provide a sense of robustness and authority. Similarly, in Elliott's chapter, the detailed reporting of sample characteristics, for example, is likely to give the reader confidence that great care and attention has been given to obtaining a high quality survey.

A world evoked through beautiful language and metaphor

We think that language is central not only to the analytical process (in the writing of fieldnotes for example, or the naming of variables or elements in statistical model), but also in the argument that is made on the basis of the research, and the ways in which claims to a wider resonance are made.

Language does not simply have a 'rhetorical or illustrative function', as is sometimes assumed, but also a 'logical function' in both conveying the argument and convincing the reader of its authority. Sometimes this can be done with beautiful or poetic language that is compelling and that evokes a story in a vivid and gripping or authentic and authoritative way. Sometimes it can be done through the use of metaphors that appeal to familiar or resonant ideas.

'Thick description' or deep understanding

Ethnographers are familiar with Geertz's concept of 'thick description'. Harvey and Knox use the concept of 'adequate description' to convey something more contingent and relational, although actually, in our view, this somewhat underplays the powerful anthropological style through which they evoke the road and its socio-cultural and environmental relations. They want these descriptions to reach beyond the particular and, indeed, to draw on and through the particular to do this in a 'relational principle of orientation'. They explain it thus:

By putting our descriptions out into the world we become accountable for them in ways that differ from fictional writing, as we make claims that others can judge on the basis of their experience. The descriptions are specific to the relations through which they were formed, but they are orientated to a world beyond us. (Harvey and Knox, Chapter 7, this volume, pp xx)

This idea that there is something about descriptions or interpretations that can resonate more widely, and that the relations surrounding that resonance form part of the 'adequacy' of the description, is a theme that runs through a number of the chapters, although not always explicitly.

There are, undoubtedly, more generalizing motifs than we have identified here, but our aim has been to open up the idea that generalization is done in a variety of ways for you, the reader, to engage with and think about.

Conclusion – making use of creative tensions

Overall, our aim in this introductory chapter has been to identify some of the points of connection, and perhaps more importantly of creative tension, between the different kinds of approach to social researching that feature in this book. We have touched on some core ontological and epistemological issues, and have attempted to highlight these in new and, we hope, helpful, ways.

There is, of course, a politics and ethics of research and method, with which any real life creative tensions have to engage. This is raised more

explicitly in some chapters (especially Savage, Frosh and Saville Young, Rogers, and Weeks) than others, but it is a theme that is present in the background throughout.

We hope that as you read the chapters that follow, some will inspire you to have a go at using a different approach or different method in your research, or at least to think about the issues in new ways. We also hope that some chapters, and the contrasts, connections and tensions between them, will stir you to engage in a creative debate or argument with colleagues who use similar methods to you.