

I'm not dancing, I'm zigzagging

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A methodological investigation considering the metaphors we use to describe qualitative researching and the metaphors participants use to describe the social mechanisms and structures we investigate. My intention is to move from a commonly used metaphor of dance to a metaphor of zigzagging to more precisely explain the methodologies of *realist* (qualitative) research of complexity.

The metaphor of dance

Valerie J. Janesick (1994) The dance of qualitative research design: metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning. In Denzin, Norman K. (Ed); Lincoln, Yvonna S. (Ed), (1994). Handbook of qualitative research. , (pp. 209-219). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications

Cited 1695 times (Google Scholar, 2nd November, 2014)

For Janesick 'dance is about lived experience, the perfect metaphor for qualitative research design' (210)



Janesick contends that 'the qualitative researcher is very much like an artist at various stages in the design process, in terms of situating and re-contextualising the research project within the shared experience of the researcher and the participant in the study' (210)

Dance is an interpretative art form, qualitative research design is interpretative as well.

The key features of Janesick's methodology of qualitative research

Questions are the point of departure, they guide the study.

Trust, rapport, and a willingness to 'share everything', an authentic communication with participants is essential.

Methods are selected to get at accounts of events.

Janesick suggests an agnostic attitude to theory.

Yet, given more prominence in Janesick's account, is recognition of researchers 'ideological position', 'conceptual frame', and 'biases' in the research.

Janesick's purpose is to distance herself from quantitative researching (this is 1994)

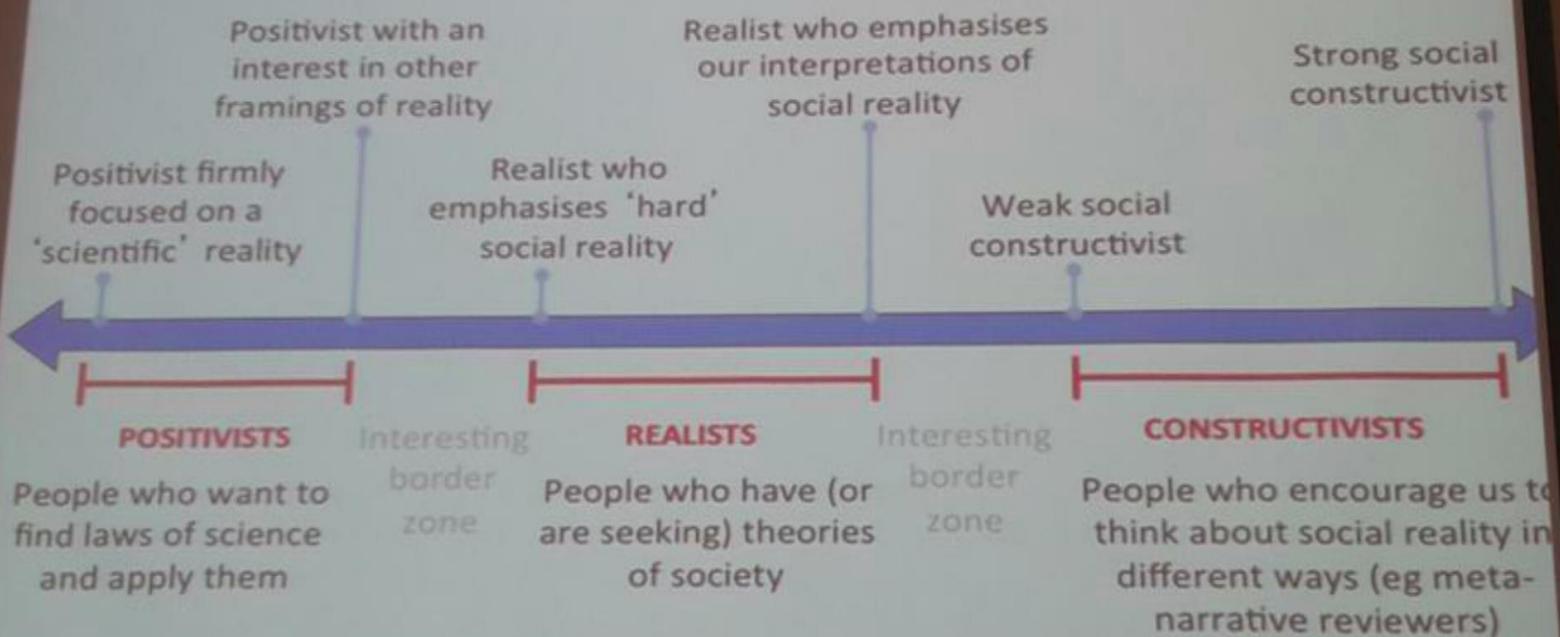
Despite her tentative reflexivity and flexibility, the tools suggested go no deeper than investigating events at a fixed point in time.

Triangulation in its various guises and member checking are given prominence, for instance.

She is trying to break away, but remains, in one sense, a dear old positivist.



Philosophical differences (schematic)



There is probably greater difference of perspective within the community of 'realists' than between some forms of realism and the sympathetic margins of other philosophical positions

What connects a strong scientific reality and strong constructivism is a flat (empiricist) ontology.

Realist methodologies do not sit on this continuum because they must account for:

- A stratified ontology,
- the emergent properties of social structures and mechanisms in open systems,
- and, therefore, the dynamic complexity of social systems

Realist research does not start with questions, it starts with theories.

Theories are partial and fragile accounts of how something or other works in some particular context, at a particular time, and why.

We relate these theories—a bundle of hypotheses—in some way to segregated observations.

While feeble, these theories carry enough weight to tell us how we will do the research, and with whom or what.

We bring these theories into some relation with evidence to refine theories, which in turn allows us to decide on the next engagement with evidence.





Thirtysomething grandparents need social services to adapt, says study

Research has led to calls for changes in government policy and a remodelling of provision to help this vulnerable group

[Amelia Hill](#)

[The Guardian](#), Sunday 12 June 2011 18.33 BST



Causal claims cannot be read-off the empirical world

Participants narrate accounts of events, often these are very well rehearsed and always authentic.

The underlying powers, liabilities and dispositions that shape these events are occasionally woven into these narratives.

But explanation, the causal relations between mechanisms and structures that explain social processes, is the (social) scientists' responsibility.

In any programme of (interdisciplinary) research we don't return to the research questions (like the dancer's spine), but continuously extend the descriptive baseline of the sample and the extent of explanation.

In short, we don't dance with our participants, we zigzag between theory and evidence.

Sources

Sebastian Luczywo at

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2014/jul/03/photography-family-poland-sebastian-luczywo-in-pictures>

Nick Hedges at <http://stories.shelter.org.uk/make-life-worth-living/>