CHAPTER 6

Philosophical issues in the process of social research

In the introduction we noted that research is frequently motivated by a curiosity about the social world. Furthermore, that although philosophy is concerned to know what kinds of things exist in the world and what is our warrant for knowing them, research focuses upon their knowable properties. From this it may be said that philosophical assumptions are the explicit, or implicit, starting point for research. As such, this chapter seeks to examine how philosophy might inform the process of social investigation. We will identify some of the ways in which a philosophical perspective informs research and through the use of two case studies, examine key assumptions and implications in its conduct. At this point we should stress that this discussion is illustrative and is not intended to be exhaustive; that would require, at least, a book in itself. However, in drawing such connections we hope that the importance of the relationship between philosophy and social research is further understood.

Philosophy and social research: a dynamic encounter

The temptation exists to talk of the philosophical "content" of research as if it were an ingredient in a cake whose proportions vary according to a recipe. This is a misunderstanding of the relationship between philosophy and social research. Philosophy might have the capacity to illuminate, but it hardly dictates. At the same time, although not all philosophy is research based, we can fruitfully examine research from a philosophical viewpoint.

135

There is a philosophical angle in all that we do that enables us to understand our actions, their assumptions and consequences. For instance, research issues will be informed by moral and ontological considerations about the social world, whereas the methods chosen will contain epistemological assumptions about the operationalization of the research question and the best means for obtaining the knowledge required. Indeed, the methods themselves may stand as a testimony to our views on how it is possible to obtain such knowledge in the first place. Finally, the process of conducting research and the completed research itself interacts with the world in which it takes place. In that sense, as we saw in the last chapter, we cannot simply claim to be detached from our work. Our considerations, therefore, are not just technical, but also moral, epistemological and ontological.

The question as to whether such considerations are explicit or implicit will largely depend on the nature of the research itself. In most cases, in order to achieve a philosophical perspective on research we are required to view it through different spectacles. Occasionally, however, the ways in which particular viewpoints inform research is more self-evident: for example, where the starting point for research is a "critical" perspective (Harvey 1990). "Critical" can be taken to mean criticism of the existing social order from, for instance, a class, race, ethnic, or feminist perspective. A critical perspective implies a standpoint that is both morally informed and politically engaged. In the case of critical theory, as we found in Chapter 5, this leads to an understanding of the relationship between knowledge and human interests (Habermas 1989). Likewise, research informed by feminist standpoint theory is overtly philosophical because it begins from a political viewpoint that has epistemological and ontological connotations. As Harvey points out, the very generation of knowledge itself might be seen as critique for it involves, "a process of moving toward an understanding of the world and of the knowledge that structures our perceptions of the world" (Harvey 1990:3–4).

In considering the relation between knowledge and human interests, consider the work of Goldthorpe et al. (1968). Their research was conceived during the time when the theory of "embourgeoisement" was influential in the social sciences. Broadly speaking, the theory held that, following the Second World War, a growing affluence brought about by structural changes in employment from manufacturing to service industries and unskilled to skilled labour, although not producing mobility between classes, had led to the adoption of bourgeoise values and life styles in manual classes. The

result was said to produce a growing middle class and hence a shrinking working class. This was said to be an era of affluence brought about by full employment through Keynesian demand management accompanied by a strong and effective Welfare State.

Collectively, these changes were said to lead to an erosion of the distinction between manual and non-manual labour, the reduction of class antagonisms and cultural homogenization. Their study set out empirically to test this idea that had mostly, up to that time, been supposition based upon popular ideology. The methods employed included surveys and observation studies. Central to its design was the idea that it should be favourable to the confirmation of the embourgeoisement thesis where detailed material on the upward mobility of workers, together with a collapse in life styles and values between the working and middles class, would be apparent. On the other hand, if the idea were disconfirmed, then it could be claimed that embourgeoisement was not taking place to any significant extent within British society (Harvey 1990:59).

This study is replete with philosophical implications. The thesis itself sparked differences both within Marxism and between Marxists and liberals. In the "cold war" climate of the early 1960s this had far reaching political implications. In that sense, this research took place against a background that was not "neutral" in its evaluation of studies concerning social mobility. In addition, the way in which the researchers designed their work appeared to be taking this climate into consideration (Platt 1984). A dynamic fusion of scientific notions accompanied by value considerations thus took place within a highly charged ideological climate.

The above noted, not all research is so controversial or high profile. Much of the work that social researchers conduct is very routine. However, it does not follow that these are without philosophical implications or assumptions. In order further to illustrate some of these issues, let us take the process of research itself and examine some of the ways in which a philosophical perspective might sharpen our insights into its assumptions, methods and consequences.

The process of social research from a philosophical perspective

Let us start with the motivation for doing social research. It is perhaps a truism to say all research begins from a problem that is either motivated by particular funding interests or, as is increasingly more rare, those posed

by virtue of curiosity within a scientific community. This difference is often characterized in terms of "strategic" and "basic" research. It is the former that often now appears to govern the idea of "scientific relevance". However, we must ask—"relevant to whom, for what reason and with what consequences?" Thus, what is often referred to as a "problem" is highly variable. Most obviously, there may be a perceived "social problem" that is seen to require a solution. Yet this problem-solution connection is not a straightforward matter. After all, as has been noted in this respect,

> social power is not evenly distributed between groups. The definition that there exists a problem will often depend on the relative power that the people who define the social problem have over those who are defined (May 1993:36).

Policy problems will frequently be predicated upon dominant political and social values that then determine whether research is funded in the first place. This, in turn, may affect its conduct, as well as its interpretation and dissemination. These values may also be translated into official definitions that, at a more subtle level, become categories upon which measurement is then based. To then uncritically use an operationalist approach for the purposes of secondary analysis of such data reproduces these assumptions. For instance, research on ethnicity using data from the British Census is inevitably confined to the ethnic groups as defined in the census. In 1991, the concept of "ethnic group" became defined according to the categories used in the census. However, in previous censuses ethnicity was derived in other ways: for example, country of birth (Dale & Marsh 1993:34). What "counts" as ethnicity and what may count as a research problem associated with ethnicity, will vary as a result of these definitional changes.

As we have said, not all problematics are simply governed by dominant interests. Some may begin from a theoretical problem. One such study involved an examination of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles (Stark et al., cited in Menzies 1982). The concern here was less with riots as a social or political problem, than with the testing of the symbolic interactionist view on how riots might be viewed as a process of reification involving a number of distinct incidents, events and behaviours (Menzies 1982:31–2). Symbolic interactionism, as we have noted earlier, is a theoretical position in sociology with origins in the pragmatist tradition. Therefore, what may

138

be considered agents' conceptions of a riot may, in turn, have philosophical foundations in a pragmatist theory of truth.

The above noted, the relationship between particular social science theories and research practice is not always so straightforward. It now becomes important to distinguish between three types of approach to this question: these are "grand", "middle" and "grounded" theoretical perspectives. The first of these is often found in Marxist or structural-functionalist approaches to the study of social relations; the second in what Robert Merton (1968) has termed "theories of the middle range" and the third has its origins in the work of Glaser & Strauss (1967).

Theoretical starting points in "grand theory" are easier to examine from a philosophical perspective because they are usually more explicit in their aims and formulations. That noted, a great deal of recent research pays only lip service to, or completely denies the possibility of, "grand theory". This has received something of a boost with the advent of the "post-critiques" as we shall see in the next chapter. Merton, on the other hand, viewed middle range theory as lying between everyday working hypotheses about social phenomena and attempts to describe social behaviour in inclusive unified theories. Within this type of relationship between theory and research an examination of its philosophical assumptions and implications becomes more difficult. Finally, the methodology of grounded theory tends to follow two criteria. First, that it should "fit" the data and not be forced onto it. Secondly, that it should be meaningfully relevant to the behaviour under study (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Therefore, it has been characterized not only as an interpretivist approach, but also an empiricist programme of social investigation.

Despite these differences all research implies a position on knowledge claims about the nature of social phenomena, as well as their constitution. Thus, a researcher may take an "action" or "structure" approach to a research problem. The unit of analysis may then be the individual, relations between individuals, or the social group as a whole. The decision to take the first approach may be implicitly grounded in an individualist view of society that then denies the validity of treating social groups as "entities" with identifiable attributes. On the other hand, the researcher may adopt a holist position whereby social institutions cannot be understood by simply studying the characteristics of its constituent members.

A theoretical starting point will also have implications for the explanations and/or understandings offered in the resulting data. Studies of poverty from an individualist perspective may be more inclined to

explain individual poverty in terms of individual attributes that either predispose, or determine, that people will act in particular ways. In contrast, researchers from a holist perspective would be predisposed to seek explanations of poverty that begin from the idea of social structures and proceed from there to examine their effects on individuals. In addition, explanations may invoke causes from a positivist or realist viewpoint, or they may simply draw conclusions from associations between variables thereby drawing upon a probabilistic research strategy. Alternatively, cause or association may be seen as irrelevant to interpretivist approaches that are concerned with human understanding and the interpretation of meaningful communication.

So far, philosophical implications and assumptions have been located in the identification of a research problem, the theoretical and ideological context of the research itself and the explanations that might result from implicitly or explicitly choosing from a number of strategies for knowing the social world. More specifically, philosophical commitments have a direct bearing on the manner in which research is conducted and the types of validity and reliability then obtained in its results. This, of course, relates to the generation of "truth".

A key goal for social research is to achieve validity. Because this means quite different things between approaches to research and may take different forms, the philosophical implications are complex. In particular, it is said that survey research may obtain greater external validity than qualitative approaches that concentrate on internal validity. Take an attitude scale measuring job satisfaction. This is said to have a validity beyond the setting in which it was administered. As such, it would make sense to a wider audience and would be easily replicable; a characteristic, it is sometimes said, that is at the heart of external validity. At a general level, it may therefore be subject to test within a community of scientists working on the same area of interest. It might then be argued to possess the potential to be valid, first, at the level of congruence within a scientific community and secondly, at the level of correspondence with a given set of social conditions.

This idea of validity noted, this method may fail to grasp what was really important to the workers surveyed. A bland choice of "level of satisfaction", where 1=very dissatisfied and 5=very satisfied, leaves the interpretation of "satisfied" open to the respondent. The irony here is an assumed congruence of meaning between what the designer intended and the ways in which it is interpreted by the respondents. From this point of view, one could say that all quantitative research assumes an

ethnographic dimension to its design where the latter is characterized as being concerned with meaning construction in everyday life. A focus group, or depth interview, therefore, is said to allow the respondent(s) to construct meanings that are valid to them within their social context. Likewise, a key advantage of participant observation is that it allows the observer to understand how agents in particular settings construct meanings: that is, what is situationally rational.

The whole point of using participant observation is to understand forms of action and modes of life that can only be understood from the "inside". It follows from this that the actions considered rational within the research setting will make little sense outside it. Moreover, because the researcher cannot know what are the important meanings *a priori* within a particular setting, then she cannot know the extent to which these meanings are valid in similar situations. Of course, the meanings that give validity in these circumstances may have a limited currency beyond the particular setting. Here, one may move beyond actions to consider those underlying structures with which they interact. It is these structures that are then generalizable. However, note that one has now gone beyond the confines of so-called action theories, or research programmes, that reflect a commitment to philosophical idealism, to a realist-based form of ethnography where the idea of "truth" changes (see Porter 1993).

It will be recalled from Chapter 2 that there is an important connection between validity and truth. We noted that a statement can be valid, but is not necessarily true and vice versa. Whereas a conclusion may be valid, because there is agreement with the premiss(es), the premiss(es) themselves could be "untrue". Consider, then, the truth status of claims in social research. A correspondence theory of truth requires that for something to be true there must be agreement with the facts. However, what should count as the "facts"? In survey research there is often an implicit commitment to the correspondence theory of truth, yet the status of truth claims can be very local. While questions about sex, age, marital status, etc., are relatively unproblematic—provided the respondent does not lie, is in possession of the knowledge required, understands the question and the responses are correctly coded—this cannot be the case for attitudes. When researchers ask respondents for their opinions, then they are asking respondents to reveal what they believe to be the truth. In one sense, truth is put to one side and validity is considered to be that which is important to the respondent.

Within qualitative research based upon idealism, the commitment to a

correspondence theory of truth, implicitly or explicitly, is not so frequent. Because emphasis is placed upon the meanings of those researched then what is often sought is coherence. In carrying out research on the Flat Earth Society, for example, it is the reasons that people offer for what they do and the ways in which the meanings they use make sense of their lives that are of interest, not whether the basis of their beliefs are true as such. This noted, it must be said that theories of truth are not a major preoccupation of researchers. Scan the index of most methods, or even methodology texts, and the word will be unlikely to appear. Yet a commitment to a view of "truth" is implicit in all research. A theory of truth may provide inspiration to a methodological programme, such as that of the pragmatist inspired Chicago School (Hammersley 1989), or it may underlie realist ontological claims about the reality of the social world (Sayer 1984).

Closely related to validity and truth are issues of generalization and reliability. The kind of generalizations one can make about a particular type of social situation using ethnographic approaches are often seen as limited in comparison to survey research. Whereas William Whyte's *Street corner society* (1943) is regarded as a classic piece of participant observation, his findings on street gangs may not be generalizable. As Whyte noted, "To some extent my approach must be unique to myself, to the particular situation, and to the state of knowledge when I began research" (quoted in Bryman 1988:90). Nevertheless, relativism does not simply follow for the notion of "reasonable extrapolation" is still available (Quinn-Patton 1986). Unlike the usual meaning of the term "generalization", an extrapolation clearly connotes that one has gone beyond the narrow confines of the data to think of other applications of the findings. Extrapolations are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions. Extrapolations are logical, thoughtful and problem-orientated rather than purely empirical, statistical and probabilistic (Quinn-Patton 1986).

We should also note that because there exists a level of intersubjective agreement between researchers, then some generalizations about commonly agreed or understood constructs can be made to similar situations. Although Whyte was cautious in terms of the applicability of his findings, it might be possible to say something about the general characteristics of gangs using, for example, Schutz's idea of typifications or Simmel's idea of formalism (Frisby 1981). Indeed, within the ethnomethodological tradition the methods that people use to categorize

individuals would appear to be generalizable through invoking the notion of the structure of practical action (Atkinson & Heritage 1984, Garfinkel & Sacks 1986). However, this is emergent from within everyday life, rather than being imposed, via theoretical models, on everyday actions and utterances. Finally, it is perfectly possible to compare the findings from study X to those of study Y and seek commonalities between them.

If the findings are valid, are they necessarily reliable? If we repeat a focus group interview in a different setting, will we reach the same conclusions? In these terms we might observe that validity is a focus on the meaning and the meaningfulness of the data whereas reliability is a focus on its consistency (Quinn-Patton 1986). There may be acceptance that qualitative research is capable of producing "valid" data, but there is often doubt as to whether it can be relied upon. While validity and reliability are closely related, it is quite possible to have one without the other. A repeated measure in survey research, or experiments, may be reliable in that the same results are obtained each time, even within a wide variety of circumstances. However, the measure itself may not be valid because it does not achieve what it set out to do.

Finally, we should note that the reason for the choice of methods will vary in the research process. The decision to opt for participant observation, rather than, say, survey methods, for example, may be the result of several factors. First, it may represent a prior commitment to an interpretivist approach to knowing the social world. Secondly, it may represent a technical decision whereby participant observation is a more appropriate method with which to tackle the research question and thirdly, it may be the only way in which one may gain access to certain groups, thus reflecting a practical necessity. Whatever the reason, however, the types of validity and reliability that may then be alluded to remain to be usefully examined under the philosophical microscope.

Research issues to do with validity and reliability might be said to be at the "sharp end" of the philosophical issues we discussed in Chapter 4. While the choice of method may be ostensibly made on methodological grounds, the methods themselves will have consequences for the claims we can make based upon our research. In order to illustrate these themes, we will now move on to consider two very different examples of recent social research. The first of these we have taken as typical of the type of policy related work many researchers are routinely engaged in. The second example is very different in terms of its methodology, methods and motivations.

Philosophy and social research: two case studies

Evaluating Neighbourhood Watch schemes in London

This case study is concerned with crime reduction and attitudes towards crime in two London suburbs (Bennett 1988). Neighbourhood Watch schemes had their origins in the US in the 1970s, but made an appearance in the UK, in London, in 1983. As a result of official encouragement from the police and government, they have spread throughout Britain. Defining exactly what a Neighbourhood Watch scheme is, is not a straightforward matter. Although their activities vary, a central feature seems to be, "the notion of the public becoming 'the eyes and ears of the police"'(Bennett 1988:242).

The research attempted to evaluate Neighbourhood Watch schemes in terms, primarily, of their ability to reduce crime and the extent to which they reduced fear of crime. In order to achieve this, a quasi experimental research design was adopted. This method involved data collection at a point before some treatment—in this case the implementation of a Neighbourhood Watch scheme—and at a point after the treatment had time to take effect. In addition, comparisons were made with an area where no Neighbourhood Watch schemes were implemented in order to serve as a "control group". Secondary socio-demographic data were used to match the sites to produce the best possible match based upon "social composition, general geographic structure and crime rate" (Bennett 1988:244).

The process of data collection itself took the form of a survey exploring incidences and perceptions of crime. The first round of surveys was conducted between one and two months before the launch of Neighbourhood Watch programmes and the second round of surveys took place following, approximately, one year of their implementation. Overall, the study found that "victimizations" (crimes) had increased in the experimental areas, but had fallen or remained constant in the areas where no Neighbourhood Watch scheme had been implemented. However, where such schemes had been implemented, there was a reduction in the fear in relation to household and personal crime and evidence of, "improvements in social cohesion…and involvement with others in home protection" (Bennett 1988:252).

At first glance, the research would appear to be straightforward and a world away from an illuminating examination from a philosophical perspective. The study is a piece of survey research, with a clearly stated

144

hypothesis about the potential reduction of crime that might come about as a result of the implementation of Neighbourhood Watch schemes. Indeed, it is typical of a great deal of "bread and butter" commissioned policy research. Yet, we find philosophical implications at a number of levels.

We might first observe that while some would question whether the research is "positivist" or not, it is without doubt in the positivist tradition and very firmly in the naturalist camp. There is both an implicit and explicit neutrality on the benefits, or otherwise, of Neighbourhood Watch schemes and a commitment to particular "scientific standards" in the design and conduct of the research itself. As a result, the work is strangely silent on the very general issue with which it is concerned. In Chapter 5, we noted a dichotomy in the practice of research around the pathological and the normal. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in definitions of crime or deviance (see Hester & Egline 1992). This is not to say that a society can avoid such classifications, simply that they are a social product and not a pre-given category. It follows that Neighbourhood Watch schemes require some working definition of what it is that their adherents should be watching out for. It is sometimes said that crime is that with which police forces are concerned. In other words, though there are thousands of laws on the statute book, the only ones that matter are those that are enforced, or those to which police direct their attention. These are matters of social and political values that relate to the allocation of resources.

Trevor Bennett discusses the variability in resource allocation for the Neighbourhood Watch schemes and argues that this may be a factor in their success or failure. It may be that police district A emphasizes the fight against burglary and vandalism, district B is more concerned with crimes against the person and district C is preoccupied with getting the paperwork right. Each district places different priorities on different crimes. Neighbourhood Watch schemes are not only social constructions of what counts as "criminal", but the construction itself may be subject to local variability. Nevertheless, the British Home Office, in commissioning the research, does so for particular reasons. As such, we need to be aware of the possibility that researchers who are funded by such means may well be complicit in establishing and maintaining particular values.

In Chapter 5 we called into question the notion of any investigation as a value free activity. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that in our example the research may be seen to begin from a value laden position. Yet the

scientific credibility of the enterprise may be seen to rest not only upon an implicit neutrality, but also on a method that is claimed to be objective. In the laboratory, the physical scientist wishes to isolate parts of the world when conducting an experiment and in doing so will hold certain things constant while manipulating other relevant factors. The effects of such intervention are often controlled for and there is a high degree of internal validity. In other words, there will be a high degree of confidence upon which conclusions may be based concerning the causal effects of one variable on another.

We should note that, relative to the above, the internal validity of the quasi-experimental method is poor. This is because the number of intervening variables, including, in this case, interviewer effects, changing perceptions of crime, changes in environmental factors, etc., can only be surmised. In some sophisticated studies what are termed "Violations of assumptions" about the circumstances assumed to exist, are controlled for in statistical models (Bishop et al. 1975). Nevertheless, we could not possibly control for all of the things that might change between two time points, or might be different between places. Here, Bennett points out that:

> In order to control for differences between the samples, it is necessary to use a statistical analysis which can simultaneously control for demographic and other differences between the samples (Bennett 1988:251).

However, we should remember that the demographic differences arise from census variables, themselves a product of social selection. Therefore, what is considered to be important is to some degree "inherited" by the research, whereas other important differences may be omitted, by default, from the evaluation.

These points noted, we should not be too harsh. The kind of problems faced here and the solutions adopted are commonplace and to some extent reflect what we have termed the "open nature" of the social world. It is thus not surprising that quantitative researchers are forced into adopting "associations" between variables in a probabilistic strategy, rather than specifying a more explicit causal chain. Furthermore, in the relation between the researcher and the sponsor of the research, it is often the case that the latter may prevent the former from fully publishing and disseminating their findings because they do not meet with their ideologically pre-given expectations. Therefore, in evaluating such work

from a philosophical perspective, we should be aware that there exists a complicated relationship between the ethics and politics of research at the stages of design, data collection and the publication of findings (see Homan 1991, Punch 1986).

Finally, in a summary discussion Bennett notes that, "the changes shown were less promising than might have been hoped" (Bennett 1988:253). He asks why an evaluation might fail to find the desired effects and cites the work of Rosenbaum (1986) in terms of it being attributable to "measurement failure", "theory failure", or "programme failure". In the first of these, "failure" is attributable to poor evaluation design or a method of statistical analysis that failed to detect a programme effect. In the second, although there is success in the implementation of a scheme and its evaluation, failure results from flaws in the theory underlying the scheme. Finally, although the theory underlying the programme might be sound, its implementation is flawed. Bennett's conclusion was that the latter was the case. As such, although the overall theory of the implementation of Neighbourhood Watches was sound, its implementation was poor and this was likely to be the result of local factors (in London) surrounding the discretion invested in senior divisional police officers to implement and resource schemes as they saw fit.

It is important to note that failure due to poor research design, or the underlying theory of Neighbourhood Watch schemes was rejected by Bennett; the first because "it is hard to believe" that the research design was so poor as to serve to conceal Neighbourhood Watch success and the second because other research shows the theory to be sound. This left him with a third possibility: that is, although the underlying theory of Neighbourhood Watch schemes was correct, the theory was poorly implemented—and in the examples used, this was the case: specifically, that the design of Neighbourhood Watch as expressed in the Metropolitan (London) police guidelines was not a good example of Neighbourhood Watch in general. From this point of view:

> There is a danger that Neighbourhood Watch throughout the country is being implemented on the basis of uncertain theoretical principles and on speculative programme design (Bennett 1988:254).

At this point there seems to be some "over-stretching" of the findings in order to rescue the implicit theory underlying the research; this being that Neighbourhood Watch schemes are a good thing. Such strategies, as

Lakatos noted, are far from unusual in science. Scientists will deflect theory failure by reference to a complex web of assumptions, which are often untestable in themselves. In this case, the theory is "saved" by reference to the manner of implementation as opposed to the rationale and effect of Neighbourhood Watch schemes themselves. This strategy carries the advantage that its assumptions cannot be falsified. If the same results are achieved in further research, then once more poor implementation of the theory can be blamed. If, on the other hand, further research showed a scheme, or schemes, to be successful, then clearly the theory had been implemented correctly!

At this last level we can say that this research is no more ideologically motivated, nor more "scientifically" flawed, than thousands of other similar projects. We offer it as an illustration of some of the philosophical implications that arise from the value base of the research, and the methodological strategies adopted, within its design and execution.

"Doing the business" of qualitative research

Our second example of research is not offered as a contrasting virtue, but rather as a piece of social research that has a very different starting point and methodological approach to that of Bennett. This allows a comparison of both philosophical assumptions and implications. In order to achieve this, we will first provide a description of the study in terms of its contents and methods and then move on to discuss it from a philosophical vantage point.

In 1988, Dick Hobbs published a book entitled, *Doing the business: entrepreneurship, the working class, and detectives in the East End of London.* Utilizing his own biography and the techniques of participant observation, interviews and documentary research, he examined a culture that survives on the margins between illegal activity and legitimate enterprise. This is the culture whose ethos is summarized by the phrase "doing the business" and it affects the actions and perspectives of the detectives who seek to police it, as well as those who are policed by them.

The early chapters in the book are devoted to an historical contextualization, which then serves to situate the descriptions of the contemporary cultures of the East End and its policing in the second half of the book. These early chapters contain a "natural history" of British policing, with particular reference to the Metropolitan police force and the social construction of criminality within London. This was manifested,

for example, by a concentration upon particular social groups who were seen to constitute a threat to the established social order. This account is also accompanied by the examination of an economy that thrived and in his study still does, on the processes of bargaining and exchange. Chapters then follow on East End gangsters, which include a discussion of the Kray twins and Richardson brothers.

The second half of the book then moves on to contemporary times with one chapter devoted to youth entrepreneurs and the ways in which they mediate the culture described earlier. The aim then changes to one of understanding adult entrepreneurship. One means by which this is achieved is to focus upon the activities taking place within a local pub where entrepreneurs and police detectives alike gather to "do their business". Through both direct experience and testimony we are given an insight into each of their worlds. For instance, there is the entrepreneur known as the "jump-up merchant" (Hobbs 1988:154). We are told not only of his ethos, but also his *modus operandi.* His attempts, for example, to burgle a business were "thwarted by security arrangements" and all he got away with was an old ladder! The next day he became a window-cleaner, but found he was afraid of heights and so sold the ladder. A true entrepreneur! The parallels between such activities and the rhetoric of the government of the time were not lost on the author.

As for the detectives, they also met their occupational demands by using the rhetoric and strategies of this culture: for example, by "turning a blind eye" to certain activities and by nominating certain individuals to "take their turn" in order to boost police clear-up rates. However, their understandings of the "market place" were never complete, as demonstrated by the time several detectives were drinking in a pub in the early hours of the morning while above them, as the majority in the neighbourhood knew, there was a large consignment of stolen whisky!

In the postscript, the effect of the unleashing of market forces on the area are charted, the result of which is an attack on the population, "unprecedented since the blitz of the Second World War in terms of its viciousness and irrevocable damage inflicted" (1988:218). In spending some time with those whom he researched at a holiday resort, he writes that such breaks are "crucial" in a culture "constantly besieged by bourgeois society and market trends" (1988:234). However, for the present, it seems, people will still be "doing their business". It is here that the cultural antecedents of the East End are readily apparent in their actions.

This case study represents a rich mixture of philosophical issues and

assumptions, as well as having a number of implications for the study of social life. If we consider the various strategies available to researchers for knowing the social world, as we have noted previously, they each carry with them various epistemological and ontological presuppositions. In this study we find an ontological and epistemological commitment to the research legacy of the Chicago School of sociology (Hobbs 1988:15). Here we find a pragmatist commitment to truth that is exemplified through the need to familiarize oneself with the context in which people interact and construct the meanings that they then attribute to their social worlds. At the same time, from an ontological vantage point, the construction of the social self is viewed as a dialectical process between subject and object where self-consciousness is seen to arise in the context of social action (Mead 1964) or, in this case, the process of "doing the business".

Methodological consequences follow from this initial commitment. Overall, this represents a clear adherence to the concept of "internal validity". In order to interpret accurately the situated understandings of those social actors who were the subject of his study, the author required the twin strategies of familiarity and empathy. Thus, we find him alluding to his cultural credibility, through the utilization of his own biography, in order to substantiate his findings and interpretations:

> my status as an insider meant that I was afforded a great deal of trust by my informants, and I was allowed access to settings, detailed conversations, and information that *might not otherwise have been available* (Hobbs 1988:15. Emphasis added).

The role of experience within the pragmatist tradition is thereby emphasized. Within this tradition the questions for science are considered to be obtained from experience itself, thus providing parallels with the empiricist tradition. In the process of social research, however, experience may be derived from a number of sources: for example, at the level of the personal; the professional in terms of exploratory research programmes; from previous research, or a theoretical sensitivity that is derived from familiarity with a body of technical literature (Strauss 1988:12).

In the case of this study, the credibility, as opposed to the validity, of its presentation to various audiences, often rested upon personal experience. This was a study of a male culture by a researcher with a high degree of cultural authenticity that became apparent in the presentation of his initial findings to academic audiences. Rarely were his findings disputed. This

occurred despite the fact that, from a quantitative point of view, the findings may not have appeared to be replicable. In addition, the earlier accounts of his research were, "naïve, loosely formulated, and theoretically vacuous" (Hobbs 1993:49). The point is that it was his personal experience that gave this study its credibility and from there, an assumption was made concerning its validity from an "internal" viewpoint. In an account of this process that is refreshingly honest, Hobbs noted of this phenomenon that:

> people believed me, they considered what I had to say about petty crime in East London was true, and I didn't know why. Other researchers, far more experienced and technically competent than myself, would be given a tough time, yet at this early stage what I had to say was accepted (Hobbs 1993:49).

Even so, a careful reading of the work reveals a utilization of all of the above sources of experience.

At this stage we should note the existence of a social dynamic that is illuminated more by sociology than philosophy. It is cultural authenticity that may provide the legitimacy for particular studies, but it is the culture to which one turns that is of importance in this process. Academia does consist of those whose backgrounds are not middle class. However, it is a middle-class occupation and this explains much of the success of the reception of this study of working-class culture. Therefore, when turning to some hardened community workers in the East End to disseminate the same accounts, the author's biography and accent were not enough to give the value of his findings, nor the novelty of his methods, sufficient cultural credibility (see Hobbs 1993).

Despite this observation, the overall methodological commitment in this study appears to be to "analytic induction". In *Doing the business* we find a fusion of pragmatism and induction exemplified by what has been termed "naturalistic inquiry". However, naturalism has a different sense to that which we have used before where there exists a belief in the applicability of the natural scientific model to the study of social phenomena. This sense simply exhibits, "a profound respect for the character of the empirical world" (Denzin 1979:39). In this respect, it reflects an empiricist commitment to the production of truth in terms of the accurate representation of the social world as it appears to those who are part of it. Overall, we might argue that the desire to represent the

intrinsic character of social phenomena, as opposed to the imposition of models of social reality that do not accurately represent those phenomena (the process of deduction), is reflected in the commitment to participant observation. From an ontological vantage point, the culture is seen as sufficiently open to a form of "negotiated order" analysis (Strauss 1978) whereby the individuals who are part of it construct the meanings and symbols that make sense of it. Methodologically, therefore, the researcher must become part of such a culture to understand this process.

At a socio-theoretical and philosophical level, this study appears to reflect a commitment to the fluidity of social life, as is consistent with the tradition known as symbolic interactionism (see Rock 1979). In addition, it seems to be committed to a form of philosophical idealism in terms of the idea of "free agents" who adopt different strategies in order to cope with, make sense of and survive in, their social worlds. Yet equally, particularly given the amount of the book that is devoted to historical contextualization, this could be read as a realist programme in terms of its assumptions and implications. After all, a philosophical idealist reading sits somewhat uneasily with the general tenor of the book as revealed in the quotes noted above: for example, the allusion to an "onslaught" by bourgeois culture and the damage caused by a "yuppie culture" of money and office development in the East End.

This now begins to look more like the critical realist programme of Roy Bhaskar (1975, 1989, 1993). As noted, the historical contextualization of East End culture provides a way of situating the accounts of the contemporary entrepreneurial culture. In other words, the resources that people drew upon were those given and transmitted from the past. This was action in the sense that it involved considerations and deliberations, but it was structure in the sense that it pre-existed those individuals and was reproduced by them in their daily actions. Furthermore, a dominant material culture is clearly posited in terms of its ability to affect the culture that is studied, despite the interpretations and actions of those who are a part of it. As he notes in the conclusion:

> The East End, as I have stressed throughout this book, has always had a rather peculiar relationship with capitalism, but now central government is exploiting that relationship to the full, and by direct intervention in municipal government and the manipulation of crucial funding by way of fantastic levels of subsidy to private

enterprise, the East End is now being used as a flagship for a "new"
Great Britain Ltd (Hobbs 1988:222).

To read this study as one of critical realism is not to suggest the
replacement of a social philosophical model of free agents with those who
are determined by circumstances beyond their control. That would be to
set up an ontological dualism between free-will and determinism that is
not recognized within this tradition. Aside from the comments we made
earlier in relation to this body of work, we might simply paraphrase Marx,
"people make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing"
(Marx 1980:96). These are the same words which Anthony Giddens, whose
work, some have argued, also falls within the realist tradition, uses to
characterize the ontological basis of his theory of structuration (Giddens
1984: xxi). However, he takes another ethnography, only this time by Paul
Willis (1977), to illustrate the methodological implications of his ideas (see
Giddens 1984:289–309).

Summary

We started this chapter by noting that our intention was to be illustrative.
In seeking to achieve this, the above two case studies offer us different
ways of looking at social phenomena. Clearly, these works may be read at
different levels. The point is, however, that a philosophical perspective on
the research process enables us to understand the basis of reasoning
employed in the practice of social research, as well as the implications of
the methodological commitments that social investigators bring to their
studies of social phenomena. Nevertheless, we should note that they, like
those whom they study, are often constrained in their choices. Consider
the methods they might employ for their studies. Constraints operate in
terms of the nature of the social phenomenon that is the object of their
curiosity and the values of the funding bodies who enable them to conduct
their research in the first instance. Research, therefore, is a mixture of both
strategies and methods affected by political and social considerations, as
well as informed by philosophical issues.

In relation to the work by Dick Hobbs, we noted how his own
background added to the credibility of his narratives. This, of course, is
not the same as the concept of validity as pursued within the
correspondence theory of reality that is seen to characterize scientific

153

endeavours. Yet there are those who see all research as narratives—even the idea of science itself. This represents a radical critique of all that has gone before us. As a result, it is deserving of our attention. It is to the post-critiques of science and social research that we now turn.

Questions for discussion

1. Compare the research of Bennett and Hobbs. What are the key differences in the philosophical assumptions held?
2. What makes us choose one methodological approach over another? To what extent do philosophical assumptions inform these choices?
3. Identify an example of recent empirical research. What kinds of philosophical assumptions and implications are entailed?
4. Dick Hobbs wrote, "Because of my background I found nothing immoral or even unusual in the dealing and trading that I encountered. However, I do not consider the study to be unethical, for the ethics that I adhered to were the ethics of the citizens of the East End" (1988:7–8). In your opinion, is this a necessary strategic device for the enhancement of internal validity, or is it just an excuse for moral relativism?

Suggested reading

Bryman, A. 1988. *Quantity and quality in social research,* London: Unwin Hyman.

Harvey, L. 1990. *Critical social research.* London: Unwin Hyman.

Hammersley, M. & P.Atkinson 1995. *Ethnography; principles in practice,* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

McKarl-Nielsen, J. (ed.) 1990. *Feminist research methods: exemplary readings in the social sciences.* London: Westview Press.

Marsh, C. 1982. *The survey method—the contribution of surveys to sociological explanation.* London: George Allen & Unwin.

Knorr-Cetina, K. & A.Cicourel (eds) 1981. *Advances in social theory and methodology: towards an integration of micro and macro theories.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.