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What Is Realism, and Why Should Qualitative Researchers Care?

Realism

Philosophic realism in general is defined by Phillips (1987, p. 205) as "the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them." Schwandt adds that "scientific realism is the view that theories refer to real features of the world. 'Reality' here refers to whatever it is in the universe (i.e., forces, structures, and so on) that causes the phenomena we perceive with our senses" (1997, p. 133).

Such views were ignored or disparaged during much of the twentieth century, both by positivists and by constructivists and other antipositivists. However, they have emerged as a serious position in current philosophical discussion (Boyd, 2010; Devitt, 2005; Niiniluoto, 2002; Putnam, 1987, 1990, 1999; Salmon, 2005). In the philosophy of science, including the philosophy of the social sciences, realism has been an important, and arguably the dominant, approach for over 30 years (Baert, 1998, pp. 189–190; Hammersley, 1998, p. 3; Suppe, 1977, p. 618); realism has been prominent in other areas of philosophy as well (Miller, 2010).

There are ongoing philosophical debates over realism that remain unresolved, and realist philosophers themselves disagree about many of these issues; one advocate of realist views claimed that "scientific realism is a majority position whose advocates are so divided as to appear a minority" (Leplin, 1984, p. 1). However, equally serious issues confront alternative positions, and the idea that there is a real world with which we interact, and to which our concepts and

theories refer, has proved to be a resilient and powerful one that has attracted increased philosophical attention following the demise of positivism.

In the social sciences, the most prominent manifestation of realism is the "critical realist" tradition usually associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1978, 1989, 2011; Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson, & Norrie, 1998; Manicas, 2006; Sayer, 1992, 2000). However, Bhaskar's work, particularly his more recent development of critical realism as an emancipatory perspective, which he called "dialectical critical realism," departed in significant ways from the position I take here, and has been criticized by others in the "critical realist" tradition (e.g., Pawson, 2006[1]; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Bhaskar, accessed 11/2/2009). I have therefore not adopted Bhaskar's views in general, although I find his basic positions (particularly on the importance of distinguishing ontology from epistemology) compatible with the stance that I present here.

My position draws substantially from other versions of realism that I see as compatible with the key ideas of the critical realist tradition, and that provide additional insights and alternative perspectives for using realism in qualitative research. These include the work of the social scientist Donald Campbell (1988) and the philosophers Cartwright (1999, 2007), Davidson (1980, 1993, 1997), Haack (1998, 2003), Little (1991, 1995/1998, 2010), McGinn (1999), Putnam (1990, 1999), Salmon (1984, 1989, 1998, 2005), and Wimsatt (2007); the physicist Barad (2007); the linguist Lakoff (1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999); the evaluation researchers Pawson and Tilley (1997; Pawson, 2006) and Henry, Julnes, and Mark (1998; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000); and the qualitative researchers Huberman and Miles (1985; Miles & Huberman 1994) and Hammersley (1992a, 1998, 2002, 2009).

A wide range of terms have been used for such versions of realism, including "critical" realism (Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 1989; Campbell, 1974, 1988; Cook & Campbell, 1979), "experiential" realism (Lakoff, 1987), "constructive" (and, later, "perspectival") realism (Giere, 1999), "subtle" realism (Hammersley, 1992a), "emergent" realism (Henry, Julnes, & Mark, 1998; Mark, Henry, & Julnes, 2000), "natural" realism (Putnam, 1999), "innocent" realism (Haack, 1998, 2003), and "agential" realism (Barad, 2007); Wimsatt (2007) didn't give his approach to realism a formal name, but used the phrase

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[1] Pawson (2006) aligned himself with Campbell's rather than Bhaskar's version of critical realism:

> It is the "critical" element that causes the confusion. . . . Campbell is a critical realist in a quite, quite different sense from Bhaskar and his emancipatory colleagues. For Bhaskarians criticism is warranted on the basis of the analyst's privileged understanding of the oppressive aspects of the social condition and those responsible for it. For Campbell, criticism is something that scientists apply to each other. (p. 20)

"multi-perspectival realism" (p. 12) to describe this. I will use the term "critical realism" in a broad sense to include all of these versions of realism.[2]

A distinctive feature of all of these forms of realism is that they deny that we can have any "objective" or certain knowledge of the world, and accept the possibility of alternative valid accounts of any phenomenon. All theories about the world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and worldview, and all knowledge is partial, incomplete, and fallible. Lakoff states this distinction between "objectivist" and "realist" views as follows:

> Scientific objectivism claims that there is only one fully correct way in which reality can be divided up into objects, properties, and relations. . . . Scientific realism, on the other hand, assumes that "the world is the way it is," while acknowledging that there can be more than one scientifically correct way of understanding reality in terms of conceptual schemes with different objects and categories of objects. (1987, p. 265)

As Frazer and Lacey put it, "Even if one is a realist at the ontological level, one *could* be an epistemological interpretivist . . . our knowledge of the real world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than straightforwardly representational" (1993, p. 182).

Critical realists thus retain an ontological realism (there is a real world that exists independently of our perceptions, theories, and constructions) while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism (our *understanding* of this world is inevitably a construction from our own perspectives and standpoint). The different forms of realism referenced here agree that there is no possibility of attaining a single, "correct" understanding of the world, what Putnam (1999) describes as a "God's eye view" that is independent of any particular viewpoint.

This position has achieved widespread, if often implicit, acceptance as an alternative both to naïve realism and to radical constructivist views that deny the existence of any reality apart from our constructions. Shadish, Cook, and

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[2] Bhaskar did not initially use the term "critical realism" for his position, calling his philosophical views "transcendental realism" and his extension of these to the social sciences "critical naturalism." The phrase "critical realism," used previously by other philosophers with different meanings (Groff, 2007, p. 4), was first suggested by others in the Bhaskarian tradition, and then adopted by Bhaskar (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Bhaskar). It isn't clear whether this suggestion was influenced by Donald Campbell's earlier use, in presenting his theory of what he called "evolutionary epistemology," of the phrase "critical realism" (e.g., 1974/1988, p. 432; Cook & Campbell, 1979, pp. 28–30) to refer to the linking of ontological realism and epistemological relativism (1988, pp. 440–450), a position that is central to Bhaskar's views. Since Campbell's use has historical priority, I will use the term "critical realism" in a broad sense to include a range of positions incorporating this view, including Bhaskar's.

Campbell (2002) argued that "all scientists are epistemological constructivists and relativists" in the sense that they believe that *both* the ontological world and the worlds of ideology, values, etc. play a role in the construction of scientific knowledge (p. 29). Conversely, Schwandt, in his *SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry* (2007), stated that

> on a daily basis, most of us probably behave as garden-variety empirical realists—that is, we act as if the objects in the world (things, events, structures, people, meanings, etc.) exist as independent in some way from our experience with them. We also regard society, institutions, feelings, intelligence, poverty, disability, and so on as being just as real as the toes on our feet and the sun in the sky. (p. 256)

Such views have frequently been presented as a commonsense basis for social research. For example, the anthropologist Karl Barth, in a classic work on the rituals and cosmologies of several indigenous New Guinea communities (1987), stated that

> Like most of us, I assume that there is a real world out there—but that our representations of that world are constructions. People create and apply these constructions in a struggle to grasp the world, relate to it, and manipulate it through concepts, knowledge, and acts. In the process, reality impinges; and the events that occur consequently are not predicated on the cultural system of representations employed by the people, although they may largely be interpretable within it. A people's way of life is thus not a closed system, contained within their own cultural constructions. That part of the real world on which we as anthropologists need to focus is composed of this widest compass: a natural world, a human population with all its collective and statistical social features, and a set of cultural ideas in terms of which these people try to understand and cope with themselves and their habitat. (p. 87)

The integration of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism or interpretivism has also been given explicit philosophical defenses, for the physical as well as social sciences (Barad, 2007; Keller, 1992; Lenk, 2003).

Given the wide acceptance of realist views in philosophy, including the philosophy of the social sciences, and the presence of a commonsense realist ontology in much qualitative research, it is puzzling that realism has not had a more direct influence on qualitative research. Despite the early advocacy of an explicitly realist approach to qualitative research by Huberman and Miles (1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and others (Hammersley, 1992a; Maxwell, 1990a, 1990b, 1992), critical realism has been largely unnoticed by most qualitative researchers. When it *has* been noticed, it has generally been seen as simply positivism or foundationalism in another guise (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Mark et al., 2000, p. 166).

Example 1.1

A particularly detailed and sophisticated statement of the sort of realism I adopt here (although focused specifically on the physical sciences) was presented by the physicist and historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller (1992), with the assumption that this viewpoint is so widely shared that it needs no explicit defense. She stated,

> I begin with a few philosophical platitudes about the nature of scientific knowledge upon which I *think* we can agree, but which, in any case, will serve to define my own point of departure. First,
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> - Scientific theories neither mirror nor correspond to reality.
> - Like all theories, they are models, in Geertz's (1973) terms, both models of and models for, but especially, they are models *for*; scientific theories represent in order to intervene, if only in search of confirmation. And the world in which they aim to intervene is, first and foremost, the world of material (that is, physical) reality. For this reason, I prefer to call them tools. From the first experiment to the latest technology, they facilitate our actions in and on that world, enabling us not to mirror, but to bump against, to perturb, to transform that material reality. In this sense scientific theories are tools for changing the world.
> - Such theories, or stories, are invented, crafted, or constructed by human subjects, interacting both with other human subjects and with nonhuman subjects/objects.
> - But even granted that they are constructed, and even abandoning the hope for a one-to-one correspondence with the real, the effectiveness of these tools in changing the world has something to do with the relation between theory and reality. To the extent that scientific theories do in fact "work"—that is, lead to action on things and people that, in extreme cases (for example, nuclear weaponry), appear to be independent of any belief system—they must be said to possess a kind of "adequacy" in relation to a world that is not itself constituted symbolically—a world we might designate as "residual reality."
> - I take this world of "residual reality" to be vastly larger than any possible representation we might construct. Accordingly, different perspectives, different languages will lead to theories that not only attach to the real in different ways (that is, carve the world at different joints), but they will attach to different parts of the real—and perhaps even differently to the same parts. (pp. 73–74)

However, critical realism is strikingly different from positivism in many of its premises and implications (Baert, 1998, pp. 192–193; Maxwell, 1990a, 1990b). There are several features, besides its joining of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism, that distinguish most contemporary realist approaches from positivism and empiricism. The most important of these is that realists reject the view of theoretical concepts that was one of the defining characteristics of positivism (Feyerabend, 1981, pp. 176–202; Norris, 1983; Phillips, 1987, p. 40). Positivists argued that theoretical terms and concepts were simply logical constructions based on, and defined by, observational data, "fictions" that were useful in making predictions but which had no claim to any "reality." This view, generally termed "instrumentalism," although largely discredited in philosophy, is still influential in psychology and the social sciences (Salmon, 1984, pp. 5–7). Realists, in contrast, see theoretical terms as referring to (although, as the Keller quote given earlier makes clear, not "reflecting") actual features and properties of a real world (Devitt, 2005).

Two aspects of this rejection of theoretical instrumentalism are particularly important for qualitative research. First, most critical realists hold that mental states and attributes (including meanings and intentions), although not directly observable, are part of the real world, a position denied by both logical positivism and constructivism. For realists, mental and physical entities are equally real, although they are conceptualized by means of different concepts and frameworks (Putnam, 1999). I discuss this aspect of realism in more detail in Chapter 2.

Second, critical realists endorse the concept of "cause" in both the natural and social sciences, a concept that was one of the main targets of both positivism and its antipositivist critics. While many positivists, from Bertrand Russell (1912/1913) to Fred Kerlinger (1979), argued that causality was a metaphysical notion that should have no role in science, and others simply "operationalized" the concept to the observed association between variables (as described in Chapter 3), most realists see causality as a real phenomenon, an *explanatory* concept that is intrinsic to either the nature of the world (Strawson, 1989) or to our understanding of it (Putnam, 1990; Salmon, 1984). As Putnam put it,

> whether causation "really exists" or not, it certainly exists in our "life world." . . . The world of ordinary language (the world in which we actually live) is full of causes and effects. It is only when we insist that the world of ordinary language (or the Lebenswelt) is defective . . . and look for a "true" world . . . that we end up feeling forced to choose between the picture of "a physical universe with a built-in structure" and "a physical universe with a structure imposed by the mind." (1990, p. 89)

For this reason, critical realists reject the theory of causality that is characteristic of contemporary empiricist successors to positivism and is dominant in

quantitative research (e.g., Mulaik, 2009, pp. 63–87; Murnane & Willett, 2010, pp. 26–38). This view, usually referred to as the "regularity" theory of causation, holds that causality consists simply of regular associations between events or variables, patterns in our data, and denies that we can know anything about supposed "hidden" mechanisms that produce these regularities. For critical realists, in contrast, the concept of "mechanism" (in the social sciences, "process" is the usual term) is central to explanation, and these mechanisms and processes are seen as real phenomena, rather than simply as abstract models. I discuss the realist understanding of causality in detail in Chapter 3.

A major concern of constructivists has been that invoking the term "reality" implies that there is one ultimately correct description of that reality. Putnam argued that this assumption ignores William James's insight

> that "description" is never a mere copying and that we constantly add to the ways in which language can be responsible to reality. And this is the insight that we must not throw away in our haste to recoil from James's unwise talk of our (partly) "making up" the world. . . . The notion that our words and life are constrained by a reality not of our own invention plays a deep role in our lives and is to be respected. The source of the puzzlement lies in the common philosophical error of supposing that the term "reality" must refer to a single superthing instead of looking at the ways in which we endlessly renegotiate— and are *forced* to renegotiate—our notion of reality as our language and our life develop. (1999, p. 9; cf. Johnson, 2007, p. 40)

Thus, while critical realism rejects the idea of "multiple realities," in the sense of independent and incommensurable worlds that are socially constructed by different individuals or societies, it is quite compatible with the idea that there are different valid *perspectives* on reality. In this, it is also compatible with the classic statement by the anthropological linguist Edward Sapir, that "the worlds that different societies live in are different worlds, not simply the same world with different labels attached" (1929/1958, p. 69). Language doesn't simply put labels on a cross-culturally uniform reality that we all share. The world as we perceive it and therefore live in it is structured by our concepts, which are to a substantial extent expressed in language. Critical realism also holds that these concepts and perspectives, as held by the people we study as well as by ourselves, are *part of* the world that we want to understand, and that our understanding of these perspectives can be more or less correct.

Critical realism is also compatible with some of the assumptions and implications of postmodernism, including the idea that difference is fundamental rather than superficial (discussed in Chapter 4), a skepticism toward "general laws" (e.g., Giere, 1999; Little, 1995/1998, 2010), an antifoundationalist stance, and a relativist epistemology (Maxwell, 1995, 1999). It differs from

postmodernism (at least from radical postmodernism) primarily in its realist ontology—a commitment to the existence of a real, though not an "objectively" knowable, world. I present some of the ways in which realism and postmodernism are mutually supporting, particularly with respect to diversity, in Chapter 4.

Such an ecumenical approach is so characteristic of realism that Baert (1998, p. 194) accuses realists of ruling out almost nothing but extreme positivism. It is true that realism is pragmatic in that it does not discard *a priori* those approaches that have shown some ability to increase our understanding of the world. However, the value of realism does not derive simply from its compatibility with different approaches to research, or from its pragmatic orientation to methods; it can perform useful work in social research (Carter & New, 2004; Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2001). My argument in this book is that critical realism has important implications for the conceptualization and conduct of qualitative research.

Although a substantial amount of qualitative research is implicitly realist in its assumptions and methods, there have been relatively few explicit statements of realist approaches to qualitative research. A particularly clear example of the latter is the work of one of the major contributors to the development of qualitative research, Herbert Blumer, the leading figure in the symbolic interactionist approach to social research (see Hammersley, 1992a). In a classic paper, "The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism" (1969), Blumer asserted that symbolic interactionism is a perspective in empirical social science—"an approach designed to yield verifiable knowledge of human group life and human conduct" (p. 21). He stated,

> I shall begin with the redundant assertion that an empirical science presupposes the existence of an empirical world. Such an empirical world exists as something available for observation, study, and analysis. It *stands over against* the scientific observer, with a character that has to be dug out and established through observation, study, and analysis. . . . "Reality" for empirical science exists only in the empirical world. (pp. 21–22)

However, Blumer combined this ontological realism with an epistemological constructivism (although, since this term was not available to him, he referred to this position as "idealism"). He asserted that

> the empirical necessarily exists always in the form of human pictures and conceptions of it. However, this does not shift "reality," as so many conclude, from the empirical world to the realm of imagery and conception. . . . [This] position is untenable because the empirical world can "talk back" to our pictures of it or assertions about it—talk back in the sense of challenging and resisting, or not bending to, our images or conceptions of it. (p. 22)

Blumer summarized this argument by stating that "fundamentally, empirical science is an enterprise that seeks to develop images and conceptions that can successfully handle and accommodate the resistance offered by the empirical world under study" (pp. 22–23). This view is strikingly similar to the position stated by Keller, cited earlier, and clearly fits my definition of critical realism: ontological realism plus epistemological constructivism.

Another explicit presentation of realism in qualitative research is a paper by Huberman and Miles, "Assessing Local Causality in Qualitative Research" (1985). (This paper was in many ways a philosophical complement to their book *Qualitative Data Analysis* (Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994), a detailed presentation of qualitative analysis strategies that was implicitly grounded in a realist perspective.) In this paper, they sought to justify the use of qualitative research to discover and validate causal explanations, and discussed the analytic strategies that qualitative researchers can use to accomplish this. However, despite its clear presentation of a realist conception of causality, the paper actually advocated a "middle ground" between realism (which they equated with "neo-positivism") and idealism, and their focus was almost entirely on realism's implications for causal analysis. In their book *Qualitative Data Analysis*, in contrast, the specific discussions of analysis were not explicitly connected to realist issues, and it was only in the second edition of the book that the word "realism" appeared at all.

Some of the work in the British critical realist tradition associated with Bhaskar (particularly Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Sayer, 1992, 2000) focused on methodological issues that have important implications for qualitative research, but these authors did not address qualitative methods specifically. Until recently, the explicit application of realism to qualitative research subsequent to Huberman and Miles's paper consisted mainly of my work (1990a, 1990b, 1992, 1999, 2002, 2004a, 2004c, 2008, 2009) and that of Martyn Hammersley (1992a, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2009); Seale (1999) applied Hammersley's concept of "subtle realism" to issues of quality in qualitative research. More recent discussions of realism and qualitative research are a paper by Manicas (2009) on critical realism and qualitative methods, Porter (2007) on realism and validity, and the entries on Realism (Medill, 2008) and Critical Realism (Clark, 2008) in the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Given, 2008).

Some qualitative researchers (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) have dismissed such versions of realism as "quasi-foundationalist" in maintaining an ontological realism while accepting a constructivist epistemology. They assume that such realists still hold a correspondence theory of truth—that statements are true insofar as they reflect or correspond to the actual state of affairs. This ignores not only arguments such as those of Keller and Putnam, quoted earlier, but also the fact that there is disagreement about just what

the "correspondence theory of truth" actually involves. The historian Alex Callinicos stated that

> the correspondence theory doesn't require that we pick out particular seg-
> ments [of the world] to which true sentences correspond, nor that we postu-
> late some kind of isomorphism between language and the world . . . It is the
> nature of the world which makes sentences true or false. This does not mean
> that the world and sentences resemble one another. (1995, p. 82)

I see Callinicos's position as very similar to that stated by Keller, and to the views of critical realists in general. The disagreement is only over whether the term "correspondence" is an appropriate way of describing the relationship between language (or theories) and reality.

A few constructivist qualitative researchers have given more explicit atten-
tion to critical realism. Denzin and Lincoln (2005a), in their introduction to the third edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, discussed critical realism as a possible "third stance" distinct from both naïve positivism and poststructuralism. However, they ended up rejecting most of what critical real-
ists advocate, and stated that "we do not think that critical realism will keep the social science ship afloat" (p. 13).

Similarly, Smith and Deemer (2000), in their chapter in the second edi-
tion of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, devoted considerable space to specifically challenging Hammersley's and my arguments for realism. Noting that the epistemology of critical realism is relativist rather than realist, in that it rejects the possibility of objective knowledge of the world and accepts the existence of multiple legitimate accounts and interpretations, they asserted that combining ontological realism and epistemological relativism is logically contradictory, and (as noted in my Preface) that we cannot employ an onto-
logical concept of a reality that is independent of our theories in a way that can avoid the constraints of a relativist epistemology (cf. Smith, 2004, 2008b; Smith & Hodkinson, 2005).

Smith and Deemer's argument is one application of what Lincoln and Guba called the "ontological/epistemological collapse," folding the two into one another so that they become simply reflections of each other (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp. 175–176). Lincoln argued that "the naturalistic/constructivist paradigm effectively brought about the irrelevance of the distinction between ontology and epistemology" (1995, p. 286). Smith and Deemer likewise treated ontology as necessarily a reflection of epistemology, so that it has no indepen-
dent contribution to make to qualitative research.

Critical realists, in contrast, explicitly reject this collapse of the distinction between ontology and epistemology (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 185; Campbell, 1988, p. 447); Scott (2000, p. 3) referred to this conflation of ontology with episte-
mology as the "epistemic fallacy." As Norris stated, "where the anti-realist goes

wrong, the realist will claim, is in confusing ontological with epistemological issues" (2002, pp. 3–4). Not only is ontological realism compatible with epistemological constructivism, but ontology has important implications for research that are independent of those of epistemology. However, similarly to Abbott (2001, 2004) and Seale (1999), I see epistemological and ontological perspectives, not as a set of "foundational" premises that govern or justify qualitative research, but as *resources* for doing qualitative research (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010).[3]

Thus, one of the major implications of realism for qualitative research, and for the social sciences generally, is that it relegitimates *ontological* questions about the phenomena we study (Lawson, 2003; Tilly, 2008). If our concepts refer to real phenomena, rather than being abstractions from sense data or purely our own constructions, it is important to ask, to what phenomena or domains of phenomena do particular concepts refer, and what is the nature of these phenomena? For example, Tilly (2008) placed primary emphasis on ontology, rather than epistemology, in his discussion of social processes, and stated that "social analysts frequently arrive at false conclusions by assuming the existence of fundamental entities such as social systems without doing the work required to establish the presence of those entities" (pp. 5–6).

In the remainder of this book, therefore, I want to present some of the most important implications of a realist ontology for qualitative research. I argue that realism *can* do useful work for qualitative methodology and practice if it is taken seriously and its implications systematically developed. I do so mainly by describing some specific applications of critical realism to qualitative research, showing how a realist perspective can provide new and useful ways of approaching problems and can generate important insights into social phenomena. As stated earlier, I am not arguing that realism is the "correct" philosophical stance for qualitative research, only that it brings a valuable perspective to the discussion of what kinds of claims and understandings qualitative research can produce.

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[3] Similarly, the sociologist of science Karin Knorr-Cetina, in her book *Epistemic Cultures* (1999), stated that

> For me, ontology . . . refers to a potentially empirical investigation into the kinds of entities, the forms of being, or the structure of existence in an area. It is an interest that prompts one to look at the way the empirical universe happens to be configured into entities and properties. By not fixing an ontology from the start—by not committing oneself to the thought that the modern world is populated by rational actors, as in rational choice approaches, or by liberal actors, as in political theory, or by systems, as in systems theory—one can see the configuration of several ontologies side by side and investigate their relationship. (p. 253)