



**AUTHOR(S):**

**TITLE:**

**YEAR:**

**Publisher citation:**

**OpenAIR citation:**

**Publisher copyright statement:**

This is the \_\_\_\_\_ version of an article originally published by \_\_\_\_\_  
in \_\_\_\_\_  
(ISSN \_\_\_\_\_; eISSN \_\_\_\_\_).

**OpenAIR takedown statement:**

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies>) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact [openair-help@rgu.ac.uk](mailto:openair-help@rgu.ac.uk) with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC \_\_\_\_\_ license.

\_\_\_\_\_

Word count 3058

Compare and contrast two different ontological perspectives that might apply to qualitative research in psychology evaluating the impact on epistemology and choice of data collection method in studying straight men who sleep with men (MSM)

## Abstract

When embarking on a piece of research it is important to decide on which ontological basis the researcher stands. Do they see the world in absolute terms thereby having a positivist view or do they believe in observing through the constructions of the mind like the constructionists (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2014). Because it is from the ontological position that informs the

epistemology,

i.e. the empiricist who believes that knowledge can be gained via the senses would therefore take on an experimental methodology. Therefore the epistemological stance of how to approach the study and interpret knowledge is key and when this is decided, then the researcher will know which method of data collection to use; is essential for a logical and correct process to be followed and adhered to in order for research into MSM and to stand up to the rigour of peer review (Maxwell 2012). Qualitatively Interpersonal Phenomenological Analysis is chosen for investigating the straight men who have sex occasionally with men (MSM) as it fits with the epistemology stance of the researcher and with the focus on trying to obtain ideas, values and beliefs of the MSM population in order to curb the spread of HIV among straight women

**Compare and contrast two different ontological perspectives that might apply to qualitative research in psychology evaluating the impact on epistemology and choice of data collection method in studying straight men who sleep with men (MSM)**

HIV is rapidly spreading through the category of men having sex with men (MSM). The term MSM however is problematic as in research it includes all gay and bisexual men and not just straight men who occasionally have sex with men. When investigating this phenomenon it is important to take on the language and understanding of the person in order to transfer knowledge for dissemination (Flowers et al 1997). For the purposes of this discussion MSM is a term to highlight straight men who occasionally have sex with other men. This population is extremely private and are often time married with children but with HIV rising and spreading to ageing heterosexual women, the population needs to have its own area of expertise and research in understanding this phenomenon (Young and Meyer 2005)

According to Guba and Lincoln (1996) a paradigm is a world view or set of valued beliefs based upon ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions and that by answering one question limits us in how we may answer others. Terminology will change according to whom is speaking in the literature, with many of these terms overlapping to some extent and still others will disagree with explanations given (Guba and Lincoln 1996). And in qualitative research there are two main ontological viewpoints to consider in the researcher's mind; realist and idealist viewpoints when investigating straight men who occasionally have sex with other men.

Realism sits within the positivist paradigm and is based on the idea that the world operates within absolute terms and that reality exists independently to be studied objectively (Maxwell 2012). Idealists sit within the constructionist paradigm and believe that the world is the construction of the mind and can only be interpreted through individuals (Haig and Evers 2016). However Boyd

(2010), Devitt (2005) and Salmon (2005) along with many other theorists believe that some realists have developed into another significant school of thought within social sciences for the past thirty years and according to Guba and Lincoln (1996) is referred to as critical realism (Robson 2002).

### ***Critical Realism***

Critical realism sits in-between positivism and social constructionism but shares its ontological view with positivism (Bhaskar 1975). Critical realists have several distinctive differences with Positivists but one to focus upon here is that they believe that attributes, perception and ideas even though not observable are part of the real world and can be accessed through the interpretations of others constructionists (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2014). Ultimately both arguably open to subjective interpretation according to constructionists Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston (2014), Flick (2014) and Haig and Evers (2016) which has long been the contention with some researchers who have the fundamental belief that realism is of the positivist paradigm following an objectivism epistemology and should stay there (Putnam 1987).

Quantitative researchers view that the social world should join with the natural world in that there is 'universal laws' that govern phenomenon and can only be understood through empiricism (Smith 2008). However Campbell (2002) and Haig and Evers (2016) argues that all scientists are constructionists operating within realism paradigm because they search for mental events like intentions, behaviour, attitudes, perceptions and sensations which is part of the real world, in the building of scientific knowledge. It is the construction of the straight mens mind is what is under investigation and Flowers et al (1997) discusses in his research using IPA with gay men, that the reason for unprotected sex is that trust, commitment and love are more important values to have than one's health. Indeed commitment and trust appeared to be over arching themes in the analysis of self identified gay men. In Broadway-Horner (2017) case study, in his interview with a gay

man who marries a woman, the over arching themes are about acceptance and cultural identity. But very little research is dedicated to straight men and their motivations for sexual encounters. However Oakley (2000) believes that Qualitative researchers misuse the term 'positivism' but Hughes and Sharrock (2016) would argue that the two are very different and social enquiry cannot be restricted by absolute law as there is no shared reality but multiple realities. Smith (2008) believes that the latter is what researchers currently subscribed to in the planning and delivery of qualitative research. Barad (2007) believes that it is necessary in qualitative research to have critical realism and indeed Huberman and miles (1985) believe it has been seen through the lens of Positivism ( Denzin and Lincoln 2007), and has been commonplace in philosophy and social science research for decades.

### ***Which stance to take?***

Beyrer et al (2012) states that there is a substantial risk with MSM as it becomes a global epidemic. But his research has a broader term of MSM to include gay, and bisexual men. So the research is not clear from where the growth is taking place, only to state that HIV spreads faster because of anal receptive sex. Indeed Baral et al (2007) says that due to cultural sensitivities that the MSM term has been used to include a wider population. But how are we to know where the growth is taking place specifically? This leads onto the first ontological paradigm for discussion being critical realism. Critical realism posits that mental events such as meanings and attitudes are part of the real world, which is a departure from traditional positivism. Positivism and critical realism have long been considered friends according to Baert (1998) who would ask us to reconsider this position and that critical realism has a place within qualitative research. This is also backed up by critical realisms' compatibility to post modernism which assumes that difference is key not in a multi realities sense but that individuals will hold valid different

perspectives of the same events which William James would have certainly identified according to Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Lisa (2007) in his debut published work as the first psychologist to develop the idea of 'self esteem'.

So on this note the logical epistemological stance for gathering knowledge would be that of a modified dualist and objective stance to gain knowledge of the participants view and ideas of phenomena rather than a passive experience (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2014). From this stance the researcher can take a Quantitative or Qualitative methodology (Maxwell 2012). Focusing on lived experience of people providing a qualitative researcher a slightly more holistic approach to gathering data in studying the language used. This then would logically lead to the Qualitative methodological positions preferred method of data collection to be discourse analysis (Discursive Psychology) (Haig and Evers 2016).

As this shows a purposefulness in gaining knowledge but then the researcher has the power base in determining the interpretation of that knowledge through a set procedure which is believed to be objective and so the stance of the researcher is to be slightly removed and creates some distance from the participant (Maxwell 2012). There are two types namely Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and Discursive Psychology, the latter was labelled by Edwards and Potter (1992) and is chosen because data is derived from the naturally occurring conversation and does not involve a 'discursive object' like for example 'power' in FDA, Willig (2008) states that the researcher has to be actively involve in the conversation with the participant.

The idea of 'the constructor' is useful here and was created by George Kelly (1905 -1967). He believed that aspects are in themselves constructs like 'self' and 'others' but that the constructs within the personal change in the interacting with others and the environment Smith (2008).

According to Adams (2009) discourse analysis (Discursive Psychology) can be used in quantitative as well as Qualitative research and is the method of gathering meaning from conversations by measuring the intonation of language used, pauses in speech including errors in the interview like that of studies by Beyrer et al (2005), Young RM, Meyer IH (2005) and Pathela (2006) who investigate constructs like power and how this plays out within the people interviewed. However it cannot be used to determine what is going on in the mind, which is different to my second methodological choice in that the assumption based on its epistemology is that the researcher can achieve a holistic goal of studying consciousness which would satisfy Husserl (1913-1983) for the study of Phenomenology according to Flick (2014). Afterwards it is the researcher's aim to gather information under headings or 'constructs' with little input from the participant.

The task of transcribing and encoding is a long and intensive process, one which has the emphasis of highlighting headings for the qualitative research to explore and develop ideas about has just taken place (Adams 2009). It would appear to satisfy George Reid's (1853 to 1936) idea of psychology being a discipline to study the mind and self; being a consequence of social interaction (Smith 2008). Discourse analysis (DA) would appear to fit perfectly within this as a way to understand meaning in the context of culture, social background, family and society which the person is saturated thereby working on the assumption that prior knowledge exists. But it does not record non-verbal communication like facial expressions, gestures and posture (Adams 2009), which would be important when meeting MSM participants (Young and Meyer 2005).



### *The Constructionist*

The second epistemological stance following on from the idealist paradigm of the constructionist; the position of the researcher has to be interactional, transactional, subjective and co-created with the participant. And the methodology to satisfy this would be

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) created by Jonathan Smith and is relatively new inductive idiographic design (Flick 2014). Smith (2008) argues that researchers cannot access participants interpretations fully and so will need them to share fully their views. This to enable the researcher and participant to fully understand and translate them.

It is Smith's (2008) belief that the researcher needs the transactional and subjective experience of the participant, which forms a collaboration where both participant and researcher share equal status in the data gathering in understanding the phenomenon as seen by the participant thus intrinsically hermeneutic in nature (Scotland 2012). IPA is generally used in identity groups like e.g. LGBTiQ to new mothers with the first child, which are carried out in semi-structured interviews like DA but unlike DA would focus on using mainly experiential questions to gain knowledge about the lived experience (Smith and Osborn 2008).

This would be different to the first methodology in that the participant is encouraged to be self reflective and self interpretive; thus following a dynamic process in which the researcher is involved (Flick 2014). Also different is the focus upon trying to know what internal events are currently active and according to Smith and Osborn (2008) believe that IPA is synonymous with cognitive paradigm with approaches like cognitive psychology and clinical psychology (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Which is opposite for DA in that language is not a root to cognition as Willig (2008) points out along with other points of criticism to outline that DA takes an

anticognitivism stance in that language and cognition are more complicated than cognitivism makes out.

There is similarity between DA and IPA in the use of purposeful sampling but IPA researcher would want to strike rapport immediately with participant with the use of a semi-structured interview and to grasp hold of the novelty situations occurring within the interview (Smith and Osborn 2008). Also to try and tap into the psychological wellbeing of the participant so as to dig deeper by asking open ended or ‘funneling’ questions and gather rich data in MSM participants. As opposed to DA which would just focus on the content of the discourse (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston 2014). ‘Funneling’ is a process of eliciting the general view from the participant and then continue gradually to become more specific information, gaining the personal view (Smith and Osborn 2008).

### ***Conclusion***

Qualitative researchers differ in the ontological paradigm but there is a shared agreement that the social world can be understood by many methodological designs providing they stay true to ontology, epistemology and methodology then the research will be shown to have followed a logical process. If these get mixed up then the research will be messy and confusing. Throughout the author has learned that it is important to have the ontological and epistemological stance right as it informs the use of the correct methodology in data collection and analysis. It would appear that IPA would be best suited to MSM participants as it will be a collaborative process between the researcher and the MSM participant to agree on important themes and ideas discussed. Through use of the ‘funneling’ technique this will aid the participant to develop a comfort to be able to talk freely about their own attitudes, ideas and beliefs about life and sexuality.

## References

- Adams, B (2009) *The psychology companion*. Hampshire, England. Palgrave Macmillan
- Baert, P (1998). *Social theory in the twentieth century*. New York: New York University Press
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway*. California, USA. Dukes Press
- Baral, S., Sifakis, F., Cleghorn, F. and Beyrer, C., 2007. Elevated risk for HIV infection among men who have sex with men in low-and middle-income countries 2000–2006: a systematic review. *PLoS Med*, 4(12), p.e339.
- Beyrer C, Sripaipan T, Tovanabutra S, Jittiwutikarn J, Suriyanon V, et al. (2005) High HIV, hepatitis C and sexual risks among drug-using men who have sex with men in northern Thailand. *AIDS* 19: 1535–1540.
- Beyrer, C., Baral, S.D., Van Griensven, F., Goodreau, S.M., Chariyalertsak, S., Wirtz, A.L. and Brookmeyer, R., 2012. Global epidemiology of HIV infection in men who have sex with men. *The Lancet*, 380(9839), pp.367-377.
- Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A realist theory of science*. Leeds: University of Leeds Press.
- Boyd, R. (2010). Scientific realism. In: Zalta, E.N. (Ed) *The Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy*. Boston. Stanford Press
- Broadway-Horner, M. (2017) A Case Study about a gay man who wants to follow his Sri Lankan culture and dedicate his life to a person - a man. *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*. Vol 12 no 3
- Conrad, P (1987) The experience of illness: recent and new directions. *Research in the sociology of health care*, 6: p1-31
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2007). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Devitt, M.(2005). Scientific realism. In Jackson, F., Smith, M. (Eds). *The oxford handbook of contemporary philosophy*. Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press
- Edwards, D., Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive Psychology*. London, UK. Sage

Fiske, S., Taylor, S. (1991). *Social cognition* (2nd Edn). New York: McGraw-Hill

Flowers, P., Smith, J.A., Sheeran, P. and Beail, N., 1997. Health and romance: Understanding unprotected sex in relationships between gay men. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 2(1), pp.73-86.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1996). Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In Denzin & Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. USA. Sage Publishers.

Haig, B., Evers C. (2016). *Realist inquiry in social sciences*. London, UK. Sage

Huberman, A. and M. Miles (1985). *Assessing local causality in qualitative research: Exploring Clinical Methods for Social Research*, Sage, Beverly Hills.

Hughes, J.A., Sharrock, W.W. (2016). *The philosophy of social research*. London, UK. Routledge

Johnson, R.B., Onwuegbuzie, A.J, and Lisa, A. (2007). Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. 1: 112

Maxwell, J.A. (2012) *A realist approach for qualitative research*. London, UK: Sage

Oakley, A. (2000). *Experiments in knowing: Gender and method in the social sciences*.

Cambridge, Polity Press

Pathela P, Blank S, Sell RL, Schillinger JA (2006) The importance of both sexual behavior and identity. *Am J Public Health* 96: 765.

Putman, H. (2006). *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C.M., Ormston, R. (2014). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London, UK. Sage

Robson, F. (2002). "Yes! - a chance to tell my side of the story": a case study of a male partner of a woman undergoing termination of pregnancy for foetal abnormality. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 7: p183 - 94

Salmon, W.C. (2005). *Reality and rationality* (Dowe, P and Salmon, M Eds) New York: Oxford University Press

Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, 5 (9)

Smith, J., Osborn, M (2008) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In: Smith, J (Ed) *Qualitative Psychology, A practical guide to research methods*. London: Sage

Smith, J (Ed)(2008) *Qualitative Psychology, A practical guide to research methods*. London: Sage

Willig, C (2008) Discourse Analysis. In: Smith, J (Ed) *Qualitative Psychology, A practical guide to research methods*. London: Sage

Young RM, Meyer IH (2005) The trouble with ‘‘MSM’’ and ‘‘WSW’’ : Erasure of the sexual-minority person in public health discourse. *Am J Public Health* 95: 1144–1149.