Qualitative Methods: Theory & Practice

3. Research Philosophies

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Reflect: Philosophies

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Interpretivism	Critical Realism	Positivism

- Ontology
- Epistemology
- Axiology
- Methodology
- Appropriate methods

Reflect: Readings

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Schwartz-Shea (2021) Feminist use of qualitative-interpretive methods

- Strong qualitative-quantitative binary but both positivists and interpretivists (can) use qualitative evidence.
- Methods can be mixed – philosophy and methodology choices must be coherent!
- Need to conceptualise methodology as it clarifies that a method can be used to enact different philosophies

Morgen (2016) Critical realism as a social ontology for economics

- Social reality is stratified, emergent, dynamic and open → social outcomes are context-dependent
- Ontology must be explicit and coherent with methodology
- Human agency and structure are interdependent and historically situated: agents are reflexive and capable of transforming social structures, while also being shaped by them.

Positivism & Interpretivism

Table 14.1

Philosophy, methodology, method: Revealing the options on the qualitative side of the binary

Philosophy of Science	*Positivism*	*Interpretivism*
Epistemology	Objectivist • Identity as a contaminant	Interpretivist • Identity as a resource
Ontology	Realist • Language a mirror	Constructivist • Language constructs
Methodology as applied philosophy	Interview: Reduce bias of researcher identity (objectivity) Observation: isolate variables and reassemble as model(s) Existing text: Transform into numerical evidence *if* possible	Interview: Theorize researcher identity (reflexivity) Observation: In situ to preserve meaning-in-context; holism Existing text: Preserve the genre of the evidence
Methods		
Data generation	Similar to interpretivist but enacted in different ways Self-report data: Surveys (open-ended and close-ended for quantitative evidence), interviews, focus groups, life histories, etc.	Similar to positivist but enacted in different ways Self-report data: Interviews, group interviews, life histories, etc.; surveys not used because they strip away context; focus groups eschewed as not in situ

Schwartz-Shea (p. 143, 2021)

Positivism & Interpretivism

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Methods		
Data generation	Similar to interpretivist but enacted in different ways	Similar to positivist but enacted in different ways
	Self-report data:	Self-report data:
	Surveys (open-ended and close-ended for quantitative evidence), interviews, focus groups, life histories, etc.	Interviews, group interviews, life histories, etc.; surveys not used because they strip away context; focus groups eschewed as not in situ
	Observation of conduct in field notes, without reflexivity; guided by a priori variables thinking	Observation of conduct in situ, with degrees of participation; recorded in field notes, with reflexivity and thick description of context for holistic account
	Existing text/records:	Existing text/records:
	Documents, pamphlets, legislation, etc.	Documents, pamphlets, legislation, etc.
Data analysis		
• Numerical	Counts, percentages	Counts, percentages
	Statistical when possible, whether frequentist or Bayesian	
• Word	Case analysis, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), process tracing	Many techniques, e.g., metaphor analysis, deconstruction; case study
		Fit to genre of textual data

Schwartz-Shea (p. 143, 2021)

Critical Realism

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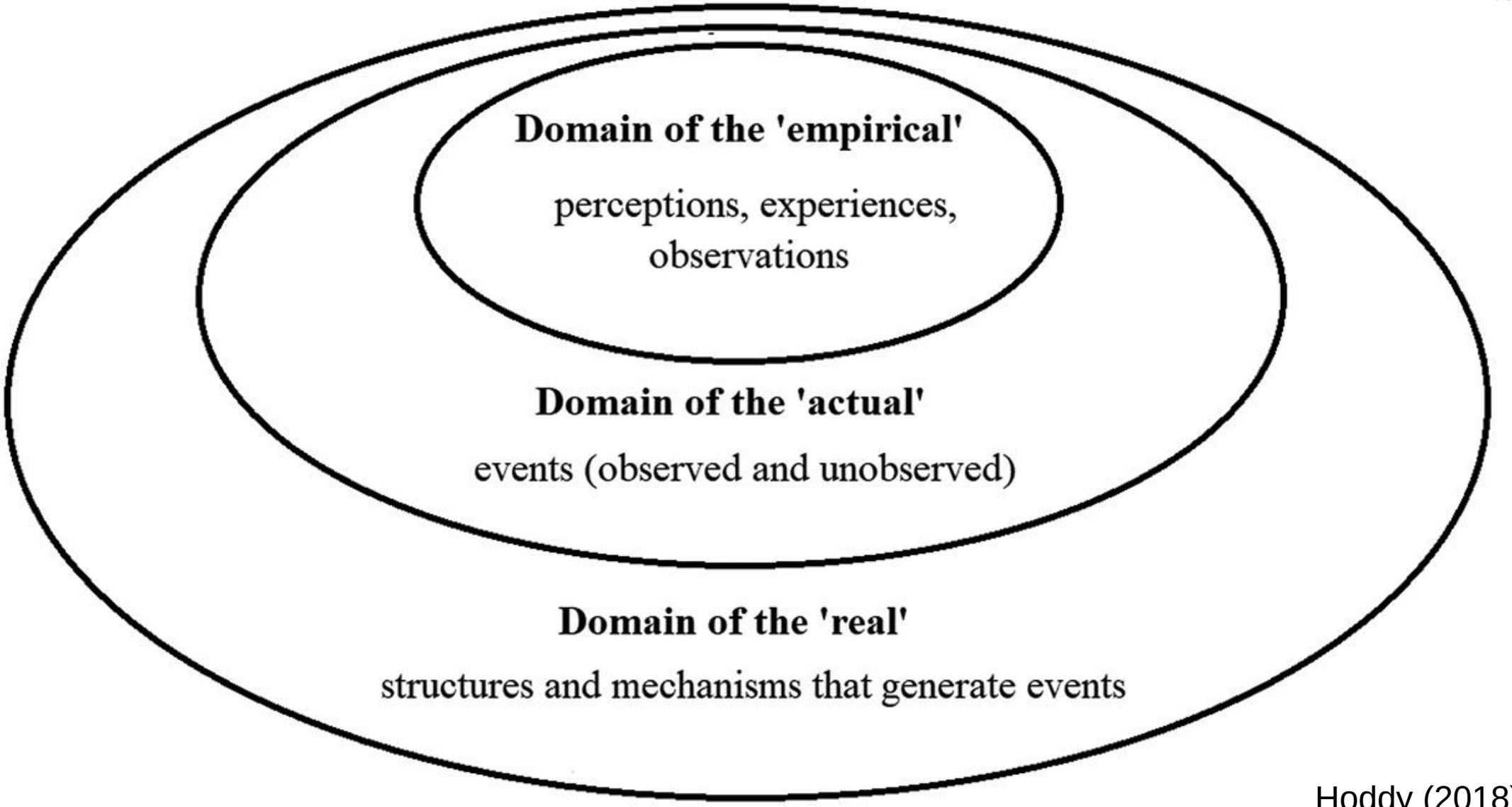
Critical Realism (CR)
A philosophy of science that recognises a layered, structured reality, where underlying mechanisms cause events, even if they are not directly observable

Social Ontology
The study of what must exist in the social world for our theories and methods to make sense (e.g. structures, agents, mechanisms).

Epistemic Fallacy
Mistake of reducing questions about what exists (ontology) to questions about how we know (epistemology).

Stratification
- Empirical: What we directly experience.
- Actual: What happens, regardless of whether it's observed.
- Real: The underlying mechanisms and powers that cause events.

Critical Realism



Hoddy (2018)

Critical Realism

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Closed System (positivism)
A simplified, controlled system where events follow regular patterns, allowing prediction and testing (e.g. lab conditions).

Open System
- A system where many mechanisms interact, outcomes are context-dependent, and events vary across time and space.
- An open system is **dynamic**, has emergent properties and can be a source of further **emergence**.

Dynamic
Social systems are always in motion, historically-shaped and transformable through the ongoing interactions between agents and structures.

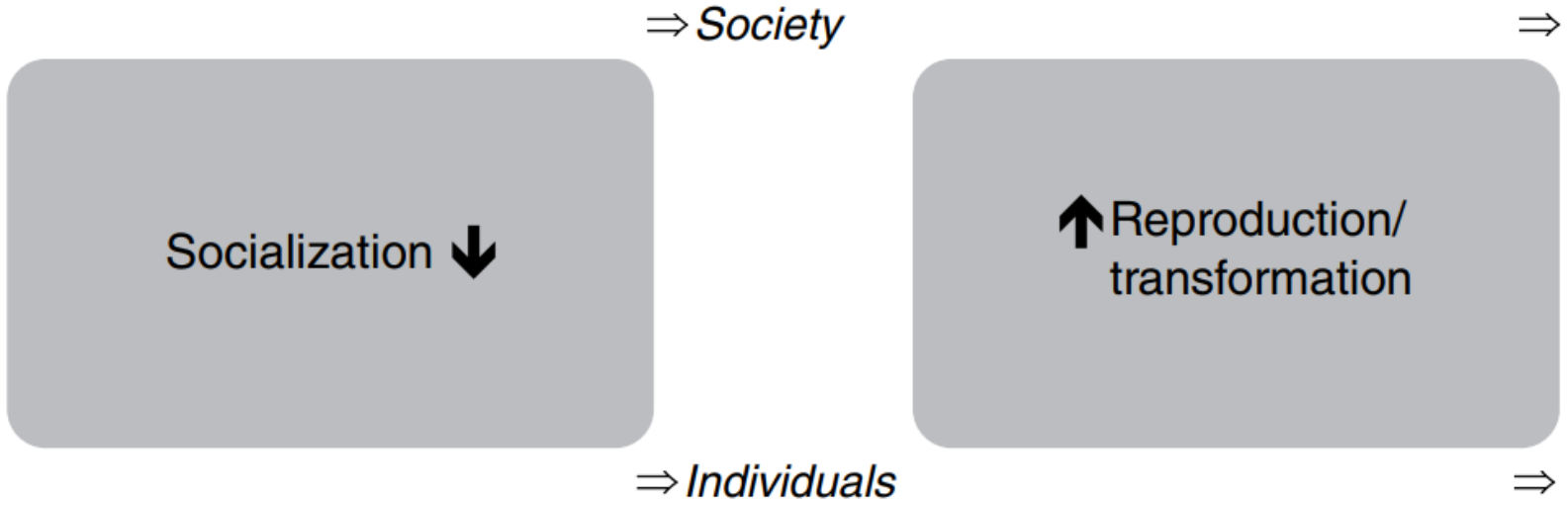
Emergent
The appearance of new properties or behaviours from the interaction of parts, which cannot be reduced to those parts alone.

Critical Realism

Agency
Capacity of individuals to act intentionally, influenced by context, history and internal motivations.

Structure
Enduring social forms (e.g. norms, institutions) that shape and constrain individual action, but are also created and maintained by it.

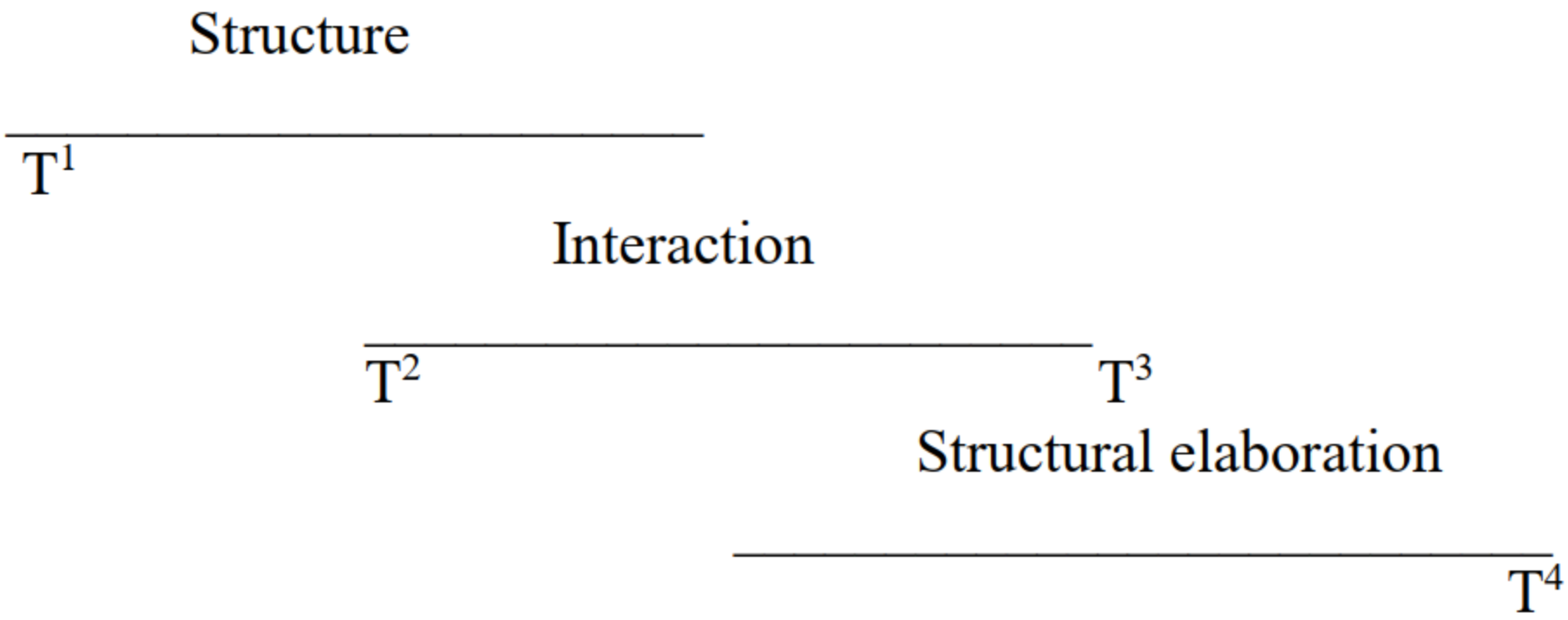
Contextual Analysis
Social change and stability result from this interaction. Must be analysed in historical and geographical context rather than through static, closed-system models.



Transformational model of social activity Morgen (2016)

Critical Realism

Figure1 The Morphogenetic Sequence (Archer 1995, 76)



←←←(also historical)

Class Activity

Germany's new coalition agreement proposes **tax-free overtime hours** to increase labour supply and support essential sectors.

Explore how different research philosophies would approach this policy.

1. **Ontology:** *What kind of reality do we assume about work and economic behaviour?*
2. **Epistemology:** *How can we know what effects the policy will have?*
3. **Axiology:** *What values or biases influence the research?*
4. **Methodology:** *What is our overall approach to studying this topic?*
5. **Methods:** *What specific tools or techniques will we use to collect and analyse data?*
6. **RQ:** *What question could we ask to study this policy?*

Final Assessment: Research Proposals

Students must submit a **research proposal** (maximum 15 pages, excluding references and appendices) that demonstrates a coherent and critically reflective research design.

The proposal must connect a research interest and question to philosophical assumptions (ontology, epistemology, axiology) and to methodological and methodical choices

- Consistency and logical connection between ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods.
- Methods appropriately reflect ontological and epistemological assumptions.
- Awareness and discussion of the researcher's own values, assumptions and positionality *where relevant to research design choices.*
- Ethical considerations integrated into the research design, not added superficially.

Sources

Archer, M. S. (1995): Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoddy, E. T. (2018). Critical realism in empirical research: employing techniques from grounded theory methodology. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *22*(1), 111–124.

Morgan, J. (2016). Critical realism as a social ontology for economics. In F. S. Lee, & B. Cronin (Eds.), Handbook of research methods and applications in heterodox economics (pp. 15–34). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Schwartz-Shea, P. (2021). Feminist use of qualitative/interpretive methods. In The Routledge Handbook of Feminist Economics. Routledge.