Research Article

What Do We Do When We Do Social Science?: Approaching, Contacting, and Grasping

Qualitative Inquiry
1–8

DOI: 10.1177/10778004251347509
journals.sagepub.com/home/qix


Christopher R. Matthews[1]

Abstract

It is important to understand what we do when we do social science. While this might sound obvious, it is quite challenging to produce relatively detached knowledge of our research. One way that I have supported people in doing just that is via three overlapping, interrelated but intellectually distinct ideas—approaching, contacting, and grasping. In this essay, and its twin which is to be published elsewhere in *Qualiative Inquiry*, I outline how all social science must involve elements of each. I will argue that when we consider our work in such ways, we are likely to become well placed to objectify and therefore better understand what was done, how, and why. Such understanding can then inform the ways we think about, do and write up our methodological strategies. So, rather than detailing a novel approach to qualitative research, or pushing at the vanguard of methodological debates, I provide a relatively concise, accessible and useful foundational understanding upon which robust and refined social science can be built.

Keywords

research philosophy, foundations of social science, epistemology, social science, methodolog

I have advised on some considered, detailed, and robust scholarly work. One of my main contributions to these projects was a reasonably good understanding of research philosophy and my experience developing qualitative methodologies. In particular, I have helped PhD students and colleagues write about how we have developed, designed, and done good social science together. Underpinning these pedagogical processes is a simple idea: *it's really important to know what we do when we do science.*[1]

Elsewhere, in a long-form text, I outline various elements of social science as a means of helping developing scholars do just that (Matthews, 2025a). Toward the end of a discussion about how theory/concepts, or as I prefer, academic ideas, should be related to our research, I quote Herbert Blumer, who tells us that:

> As I see it, *the concept* more specifically considered serves three functions: (1) it introduces a new orientation or point of view; (2) it serves as a tool, or as a means of transacting business with one's environment; (3) it makes possible deductive reasoning and so the anticipation of new experience. (Blumer, 1969, 163, my emphasis)

I make this quote more useful for readers who might be new to social scientific thinking by reinterpreting these three points as speaking to the ways that one might approach, contact, and grasp something of social life.[2]

These are physical metaphors that I frequently use as a means of thinking about and helping others consider important features that underpin the doing of social science. Most people who I have taught find such physical ways of thinking useful. For example, I can, during a lecture, literally move toward (approach), reach out and touch (contact) and then firmly but carefully pick up (grasp) a bag, book, or ball (an object of study), and, in so doing, help listeners start to get a sense for what we do when we do social science. Of course, as with all metaphorical ways of thinking, we must be careful of the heuristic's potential to send our understandings off kilter in various ways.[3] But when that does happen, such missteps can provide teachable moments where the symbolic and interpretive features of our attempts to understand social phenomena can be explored.

So, my experience advising and leading research tells me that developing and doing good social science builds from a transparent and ethical process of personally, morally, and

[1]Nottingham Trent University, UK

Corresponding Author:
Christopher R. Matthews, Nottingham NG1 4FQ, UK.
Email: dr.christopher.r.matthews@gmail.com

philosophically *approaching*, empirically *contacting*, and epistemologically *grasping* something of the worlds we share with our participants.[4] As such, I use this statement, with its three overlapping, interrelated but intellectually distinct components, to help others begin to interrogate and objectify their own work.

There are various benefits to this. One is in the potential it holds for rethinking and writing about methodology. You see, I have found that in decentering some of the specific stuff that is often expected in a method section—for example, a note on one's "paradigm," a positionality statement, a (usually all too brief) discussion of ethics, and some form of method and analysis usually accompanied with a (piecemeal) reference to a taken-for-granted classic or "go to" text—and instead framing what was done, using these three underpinning ideas, a more abstract and relatively detached understanding can be developed. And, most importantly, by turning our analytical gaze back upon our work in such an abstract way, it is likely that a more grounded, complete, and precise discussion *can* follow.

Given that I consider these ideas to be foundationally useful, in this essay, I provide an accessible way into them. Perhaps this feels like an oddly basic focus? I accept that it is more usual for publications in leading academic journals to focus on pushing the vanguard of their chosen topics and specialist areas. And, while this is generally right and proper, academic publications also provide space for the (re)consideration of underpinning and foundational ideas. It is in that direction that this essay, and its accompanying twin which is also to be published in this journal, contributes to qualitative inquiry. And as I will insist later on, such ways of advancing methodological thinking and doing, and with it social science more broadly, can have a positive and wide-ranging, if diffuse, effect on scholarship.

In what follow, I will decode what I mean by approaching, contacting, and grasping. This will include aligning those terms with (philosophical) ways of thinking about doing research, which cut through the delivery of *all social science*. I will work to avoid most of the esoteric and jargonistic ways such topics can be discussed, although I might not always be successful. From this foundation I will add complexity and a necessary level of complication before outlining what I think are some logical next steps.

Approaching

All scholarship, and robust ways of knowing stuff (about social life), should build from an acknowledgment and consideration of the ways we approached that (epistemological) work. This is because, when we humans seek to understand something, we build our attempts upon various known and unknown, constraining and enabling, features of our quite unique propensity to construct abstract meaning. In this regard, we use ideas that can be traced to historical, social, political, and cultural processes wherein those who preceded us formed various stocks of knowledge. And, these ways of interpreting the world—of which science, but also religion, ideology, mysticism, and mythology are examples—provide the foundations from which we can seek to develop "our own" ways of knowing and thinking.

We are historical beings. Attuned to the worlds we share with others, via the worlds we share with others. That is, we make our way through life by drawing on narratives we pull together from an only partly knowable, hotch-potch of ideas connected to the place/time we were born, the pre-existing (historical) stocks of knowledge we have access to, and our ongoing interactions with those around us.[5] And that process—of becoming someone who thinks and does in certain ways—shapes what we understand as correct, wrong, good, or bad. That is, our (often) unthinking ways of morally interpreting social life are not some simple "internal" nor individual act, but can be better understood as inherently tied to our previous and ongoing interactions in that same social life.

The very premise of a scientific way of thinking is a product of such (epistemological) processes. To seek to understand social life with an appropriate level of doubt while also looking for evidence of, and statements about, truthful things, based on empirical observations is precisely an "approach."[6] We, as scholars, may put more credence into it than most, but that does not change the reality of it being a socially constructed way of understanding, to which we assign value—for example, we might think science is usually "less wrong" than other ways of understanding, and that by developing such knowledge we are capable of bringing about a more healthy and just world (that is certainly my understanding of what I and those I advise try to do).

There is, then, no Cartesian blank slate, nor untouched intellectual canvas, from which people can attempt to understand their worlds.[7] This is because all knowledge, and especially that which can fairly claim the tag of "scientific," builds, in dialogue and/or disagreement, on that which preceded it. In that regard, the epistemological journeys academic disciplines are founded in, and emerge from, share historical, social, political, and cultural components. Indeed, even the very medium by which we communicate and think about our science, that is, language,[8] is best understood as a complex of ongoing political and personal processes that enable and constrain the ideas we think with, the structures that thought takes and, as such, the very essence of how human beings can claim to (scientifically) understand stuff.[9]

Contacting

All social science, at least that which purports to go beyond abstract theoretical discussions, features some form of data. That is, an observation, measurement, reflection about an

experience, or description of some phenomena. And once we have tried to account for the way we approach this process—as we move toward it following some relatively clear avenue—we are then "reaching out"; contacting something empirically of which we wish to know more.

That is, we are, as scientists, academics, or scholars, whichever you prefer, doing something when we do research that goes beyond logically interrogating abstractions aka thinking about thinking.[10] We are also examining some experience of stuff, using whatever tools are available to us. When we do qualitative research this often involves us seeking out people and other social things of which we aim to "qualify" something—as in the Latin *quails* "of what kind" and the middle English "describe in a particular way."

It is in our contacting that we are united with other people—from disparate disciplines who do radically different work—who claim to be (social) scientists. Even those colleagues who specialize in theorizing develop their work based on logical inferences about, and from others attempts to contact, something of our social worlds. And such theoretical discussions, if they are to have any utility at all, must enable others to test how they "map" over some version(s) of empirical reality. This contacting—our moments of reaching out and "touching" something of the worlds we share with others—are, then, the things we do when we listen to someone in an interview, watch someone going about daily life during ethnographic observations, or run psychometric tests. They are us, as scientists, doing what scientists do, attempting, as best we can, to contact the world "out there"[11] beyond the confines of our offices, books, and conferences.

In our efforts to make some contact with social phenomena, we must hold onto our essential place within social life. That is, as above, our attempts to know something of the worlds we share with others happens via the worlds we share with others. We are never fully set *apart*—we can never be separated from what Heidegger calls our "thrownness"—that is, we, just like our participants, and our (social) objects of study, are *a part* of ongoing human social relations and group life. Scholars, that is, you, I, and our colleagues and students, are, then, an essential feature of our work and even the most "detached" forms of data collection—a nationwide census, lab-based psychological tests, or online surveys, and the like—cannot proceed outside of that reality.

Grasping

All good social science, at its core, must have moments of intellectually grasping something about something. That is, after reaching out and making empirical contact, we must go further by attempting to firmly and tentatively "hold on" to what we think we have found. And by considering, reflecting on, and rationalizing such ideas, we are then attempting to understand something of importance about the worlds we share with our participants. We are "sensitizing" our ideas, our conceptualizations, to data, to some observation, feeling, account, or artifact.[12]

The word "feeling" in the previous sentence might stand out as distinctly unscientific. But as we are human beings, and not thinking machines, we do not make sense of the worlds we share with others using only rational thought. As above, there is no "blank slate" from which detached thoughts can be thought. It is, then, in our essence as what MacIntyre (2009) calls *Dependent Rational Animals*, that we can seek to produce a *relatively* detached, but never complete abstraction, in our attempts to intellectually grasp something of social life. This means our feelings, intuitions, emotional responses, and non-rational, if not irrational, thoughts, can, do and must, feature in our work. To deny that such things happen is to mis-understand or mis-represent a central feature of the human condition—we are by our nature beings who understand the worlds we share with others in *relatively* rational *and* emotional ways.[13]

When we do the intellectual work of trying to rationalize the empirical contact we have made with the worlds we share with others, whatever method of analysis we use, we must employ the fantastic, but fundamentally flawed, epistemological device we call "human consciousness." Even colleagues who use statistical models to find probable significance rely on some level of comprehension and interpretation there in. And for those of us who specialize in qualitative and interpretative social science, the reliance on our brains doings should be readily clear. This means that no matter the reading we have done, the theory we have digested and understood, nor the rich logics and criticality that underpin our work, we must also acknowledge that it is our interpretations, our hermeneutic processes, and something of our all too human ways of understanding, that are central and essential features of epistemologically grasping, and then presenting, a scientific understanding.

There will, then, always be unknown and unknowable parts of how we have made sense of our data. This is because even the most reflective of critical thinkers must still use their own mind with which to reflect. And trying to think about why we have thought a thought requires us to do so using our own thoughts. If we think back to my comments above about approaching, our ways of understanding are constrained and enabled by the ways we have learned to think. The emphasis here, if we seek to do the most rigorous interrogation and tracing of how we came to intellectually grasp something, must be on those constraints—that is, we must seek to do the impossible and "see" the ways our thoughts are limited and shaped by the ideas to which we have had access. And, no matter what system or method of analysis you use, exploring, tracing, and considering elements of how you came to know what you think you know is a foundation from which good social science *can* flow.

Intellectually, But Not Actually, Distinct

The preceding paragraphs do a reasonable job at capturing "my approach"[14] to advising and writing about what we do when we do social science. I have outlined these potentially complex ideas in a brief (ish) fashion as a means of highlighting how at the core of what we do when we do research is a relatively simple and understandable process—we must approach, contact, and grasp. But as I frequently say when teaching this stuff "it might be easy to say, but it ain't so easy to do." That is, while these ideas give us a "way in"—a reasonably solid foundation from which to build—we must do what all good scholars do to various degrees and complicate that which can be deceivingly simple. The devil is very much in the (theoretical, methodological, and practical) detail.

Earlier I said these three features of social science are "intellectually distinct"—the inference is that while we can separate them analytically, "in our minds" and on paper, so as to describe, discuss, and debate them, they are fundamentally indistinct when considered at a lesser level of abstraction. That is, when actually doing the science which is built on these underpinning foundations, we will find a "fuzziness" between them. For example, our "approaching" can never proceed without some prior moments of already having "contacted" and "grasped" something of the social worlds we are trying to understand. Of course, our process of "contacting" is shaped by the symbolic and material avenues, angles, and directions from which we have "approached." And, therefore, our empirical data, that which we are seeking to understand and build our knowledge around, will have been influenced (but hopefully not determined) by this process and thusly so must our "grasping."

Yet, there is utility in the intellectual distinctions I am making because (a) most projects have discernible moments when we are *mainly* doing different things. For example, planning/designing then data collecting, followed by analysis, is a pretty common way things play out, and this, superficially at least, resonates with the underpinning foundations I have described. (b) Parsing things in this way—reducing them into "bitesize chunks"—helps us to point our analytic and critical gaze upon key parts of our research process. (c) We then have a clear, if somewhat reductive, structure from which to commence the act of writing about and communicating three of the central features of our work to colleagues, students, and the public. And, (d) when we acknowledge the interlinking and overlapping features of this (epistemological) process, it can help us manage, mitigate, and explicate the specifics of our work that constrain and enabled the design, development, and doing of our social science and therefore the knowledge claims we are able to confidently make.

As Jack Hardwicke told me of my way of explaining all this, "there's a deceit at its core." That is, the simplicity, clarity, and apparent ease with which I describe these three components conceals an important truth—the actual doing of social science is anything but straightforward and is instead, complex, complicated, and often convoluted. This means writing, thinking, and delivering it can and should be difficult. But the efforts such work requires should not also blind us to the abstract simplicity that *underpins* our attempts to understand social life in scholarly ways.

So, what I have provided above is a distilling of three foundations of *all social science*. Some might think this is a grand claim but it is one I will happily defend and point to in my work, that of my PhD students and in various examples of good social science across disciplines. And, what is more, I am also very confident a version of what I have described sits at the core of your scholarly work. That is because, if you are claiming to be doing social science, the sort that regularly gets published in this and other reputable journals, you must have approached, contacted, and grasped something of the lives, experiences, and social worlds of various people.

So, despite, or perhaps because of, the simplicity of the framing here, it is precisely these three overlapping components that make up something that is central to the process of doing social science, writing it up and perhaps getting it published, being awarded a PhD, or changing the world for the better via the knowledge we produce. And, if this point is accepted, I expect you will understand why I proposed them as a coherent underpinning frame which can serve scholars well as we seek to develop, do and write about our work.

So What? And, What Is to be Done?

It is important that readers see that there is nothing groundbreaking or new in what has preceded. This should then lead logically to the question: why is this essay featured within a leading journal that was founded to *advance* qualitative inquiry? And my equally logical answer is that the development of (social) science, of which qualitative methods are a central feature, happens at various levels. My focus here, and in much of my recent work, pulls away from the vanguard and focuses instead on re-establishing a robust (philosophical) foundation in a relatively short, useful, and accessible format.

So, to regular readers of *Qualitative Inquiry* that have nodded along with the above but have also been left frustratedly thinking to themselves "so what?," I point to the need to sometimes revisit and rearticulate foundational positions that some scholars might need to (re)consider. When "rank and file" scholars—not those "academic rockstars" writing various game changing treatises on what-have-you, but the

rest of us who just want to get on with doing our best in a limited but robust fashion—work from a solid foundation this has a wide-ranging, positive, if diffuse and difficult to trace, effect on the overall level of our research across the academy.

You see, while the pressures on scholars to produce outputs and generate funding might mean that many do not feel they have the time needed to think about the foundations from which their work builds, it is in part from such understandings that the most coherent research and scholarly advancements come forth. And, of course, I accept that there are many text books that do cover such issues,[15] but I have also seen a trend of developing scholars focusing, and sometimes fixating, on journals as *the* place to develop their understandings. If, as is often the case, academic publications are detailing novel methods and theory, exploring niche debates and the like, it might well be the case that such advances are employed without due attention to the philosophical building blocks upon which they have been developed and should be deployed.

Scientific disciplines are multifarious and complex, but *there are philosophical features that sit at the foundation of all social science*. Knowing and describing something of these enhances one's ability to be a free-thinking and free-wheeling but still rigorous researcher.[16] Being ignorant to them reduces and vitiates our scholarly ability. In this essay, I have tried to capture three of those foundations—approaching, contacting, and grasping—that can help us better know something of the worlds we share in various ways with others. Understanding these, and using them as a platform for thinking and writing about research will, I expect, help scholars think at an abstract level about central features of what we do when we do social science. If you broadly agree, here are some quite specific things I think should logically follow.

If you are a scholar:

1. Figure out the central features of how you approach your science and scholarly doings. Of course, this might change from project to project, but there will be underpinning features that are tied to your background, academic journey, personal ethics and morals—your epistemological standpoint(s). Aspire to objectify the basic assumptions that are likely to foreshadow your work. You can attempt this by exploring questions such as—what do I think is important/what matters in scientific work? How do I tend to understand social life? What key academic tools do I (sometimes unthinkingly) carry into my work? Once you have intellectually grasped something of this, write about them in the opening section of your methodology—this will help us readers understand something important of *your* approach.
2. Tell us how you tried to make some form of empirical contact with the worlds you share with your participants. What did you do, how did you do it, and why? Try to capture the most important features of your work, as you understand them, using some logical assessment points. This might be the importance of a rich discussion of ethics as a practical engagement across the research process. Or you might have a detailed and nuanced methodological "trick" that must be outlined? I dunno, it is your work, and you did it, after all. And really, this should be a place where, unless you followed someone else's method or "how-to guide," you should be providing substantiation to *your* own ways of working not a series of references to the work of others. Of course, there is balance to be found here, perhaps a scholar or a paper inspired your work, or you did something "akin" to what they suggest? If so, explain, add detail, and ensure you still tell us what you actually did alongside your citation to them.
3. Provide a transparent discussion, as best you can, of the intellectual journey you have been on as you came to grasp something from the contact you made with the social worlds you shared with your participants. If you followed someone else's system of analysis great, please cite it, but still explain how your specific process played out. And if you didn't follow someone else's method then, err, obviously, don't say you did—instead, *provide an honest and detailed tracing of how you think you came to think what you think*. If you had a feeling that something was important, tell us and then spend some time rationalizing these understandings into the scientific analysis you are proposing. If you and your advisor, colleagues, and friends chatted over ideas for months, and the analysis grew from this, then say so (see Matthews, 2025b for a discussion around these point). If your process adds up and is built on a refined and clear interpretation of evidence, then this legitimates it, even if it does not easily match the often quite sanitized processes outlined in papers that some academics are quick to cite.

If you are a journal editor, reviewer, or research leader:

1. Try to be open to different approaches to academic writing and the delivery of methodology sections. Styles and approaches do not need to be "traditional" to be valid, scholars do not need to be obedient to your wants and mores in order to be doing good social science. Beyond different approaches are relatively objective measures that you should be using to assess such work. Is it clear what was done and why? Are the broad approaches the scholars

use well explained and justified? Can you tell how ethics been engaged in throughout the work? Do you get a feel for how the scholars came to their interpretations and do they have an internal logic in relation to their evidence? Seeing and highlighting these features of science, and not fixating on style and rule following, is essential if you want to be good at your job and avoid becoming a guardian of some outdated and misplaced sense of academic probity.

2. Please resist the fetishism of references. I remember Jo Reger, in her then job as the editor of *Gender and Society*, telling me that I needed to cut my citations and simply state in clear terms how I was theorizing. Jo's confidence in my knowledge always stuck with me, she seemed to know what I couldn't yet grasp of my own ability—that I had a clear understanding of social life and I was hiding this behind some silly assumption that scholars must cite, cite and then cite some more. So please encourage authors to tell you and your journal's readers about how *they* approached the work, what *they* made empirical contact, and how *they* grasped it. Please urge them to own how they felt about their process of collecting data, to explore the emotions it produced, and about how they managed, and in some cases, sort to rationalize such sensations. Scholars are not "thinking machines." They are just like you and I—fallible, caring, excitable, fearing, silly, brave, loving, and partially rational beings. As such, their humanity is an essential feature of their science. And you should encourage them to tell parts of this when appropriate.

I want to encourage a (re)thinking about the foundation from which colleagues design, develop, do, and write about their social science. That is, by focusing on our approaching, contacting, and grasping, I think we can better describe our attempts to do good work in a transparent fashion. There is then a fourth element we can add to these underpinning features—communicating. All social science must be communicated. And I would argue that we should be presenting our work in ways that embrace accessibility and usability. Rather than discussing this explicitly in this essay, I have tried with my style and tone to do just that (of course, I will have missed the target more than once). A more detailed discussion extending my thesis in this direction will come in a follow-up piece.

The ideas in this essay will resonate with some, provide only moments of acceptance in others, and might feel like they are of no consequence to those who are wedded to some other approach. In that regard, they should at least provide fuel for conversations between scholars, advisory teams, research groups, and editorial boards. I also expect they will be of utility when teaching and advising the next generation of scholars.

I would like to think that out of this contribution, especially when teamed up with its twin paper which will also be published in *Qualiative Inquiry*, some future researchers will feel they are able to develop a relatively idiosyncratic style of writing about methodology and use it to describe their scholarship while still holding onto the foundations and hallmarks of robust social science. And I would like my colleagues to feel comfortable writing themselves into their work in more than a bland positionality statement, I would really like to read your research and get a sense for you, the funny, caring, diligent, frustrated, confused academic who is simply doing their best to present something of what they did when they did their social science—as they approached, contacted, and grasped something of the worlds they share with others on the way to doing meaningful, powerful, and important work. So go on, think in foundational ways, turn your work into an object of which you can try to gain relatively rational knowledge, then write in *your* way, about the things *you* know matter, and tell me and other readers all about *what you did when you did science.*

Acknowledgments In recent years I've found myself increasingly surrounded by people that I'm at odds with in terms of what it means to deliver meaningful and scholarly work. Because of this I had becoming disillusioned and began questioning the point of academia. There seems to be two ways forward when someone faces such a situation – capitulate or rebel. I've plumbed for the latter. Doing so has resulted in me finding happiness, a raison d'être and producing my best efforts at advancing science in some small ways. But more importantly I've found a style of working, thinking, writing and advising which I can genuinely call my own. As I've pointed out in this essay, I'm not claiming that to be novel or groundbreaking, rather, I feel it is 'authentic' (whatever that means) and allows greater space for idiosyncratic ways of doing things to come to the fore. This acknowledgement is thus three fold. To my detractors, thanks for pushing me to more clearly and forcefully outline what I know to be important ways of working. To my supporters, thanks for sticking in there, I know I can be hard work. And to those who also find themselves to be academic 'black sheep', trust your convictions, and don't let people in senior positions dampen your ambition nor stop you from pursuing 'the good'. Cheers, CRM.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This

work springs from a project funded by the Foundation of The Sociolgy of Health and Illness and Nottingham Trent University's strategic reserach fund.

ORCID iD

Christopher R. Matthews https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8561-2863

Notes

1. I am indebted to Sherran Clarence who, some years ago, spoke to the postgraduate researchers that I was advising at the time. I put her on the spot and asked something like "what's the most important thing PhD students need to develop?" And, without missing a beat, she responded "an understanding of what they've done." At the core of Sherran's pith response was years of experience in supporting doctoral students and helping them get ready for their viva, by helping them objectify their project and thus gain some *relatively* detached knowledge of it. This advice stuck in my mind and I have used it ever since.
2. Here's the section which follows from Blumer, "To briefly add some detail here, the three jobs that our ideas can do for us include (1) helping frame our initial thoughts about a proposed project or study, i.e. foreshadowing problems or a way of approaching the work; (2) framing and structuring our collection of empirical data while in the field conducting research, i.e. how we go about contacting the social worlds 'out there' beyond our offices, libraries, conferences and lecture theatres; and (3) enabling us do some analysis to understand how our work might align and resonate with, or challenge, other works in similar but also different fields of research, and so provide reasoned recommendations and logical suggestions for areas for further study, i.e. to aid us in the process of grasping something of the worlds we share with others" (Matthews, 2025a, 120). A connected point, I appreicate this essay is lightly referenced, but all the ideas I present are discussed in more detail in the book quoted here. So if you would like to dig a little deeper, that would be a good place to start.
3. As Lakoff and Johnson show in *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh*, there are particularly pervasive ways of unthinkingly seeing and thus understanding the world which are tied to such physical metaphors. I would always suggest such ways of helping others understand the world must be used cautiously and readily followed by a considered critique that brings forth the sort of reflective thought and doubt that is expected of scholarly ways of understanding.
4. While my expertise means I focus specifically on social science and qualitative methods, I am confident that all science proceeds in such ways. In that regard, the central feature of this essay could be read as underpinning all scientific ways of knowing. This is a claim I considered making more vociferously; however, the broader focus diluted some of the utility that I think is embedded in taking a more focused, but clearly still very broad, aim at social science.
5. Some readers might notice here that one of my ways in understanding our approaching is informed by, among other things, a reading of symbolic interactionist theory. While I certainly do not understand my work, nor this essay, solely in that theoretical light, it is worth acknowledging Herbert Blumer's text *Symbolic Interaction—Perspective and Method* and others working in that tradition as central to the ways of understanding social life, and thus elements of science, that I am describing.
6. As Ludwik Fleck tells us in his classic analysis, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, "a fact always occurs in the context of the history of thought" (Fleck, 1935/1979, 95).
7. Please see Matthews and Pocock (forthcoming) for a discussion around "knowing stuff" which broadens out the start point I offer here.
8. Of course, that language is most usually English with all its historic ties to imperialism and continuing power dynamics and the associated privileges that it confers on native speakers such as me.
9. No one has done more to highlight the ways in which, especially Western, thought has a historical particularity than Martin Heidegger. Indeed, much of his arguments in *Being and Time* and *Poetry, Language, Thought* could be taken as undercutting some of my focus on developing scientific thought with its over focus on rationality (see Timothy Clarke, 2002, for a discussion). My own take on this is explored in Matthews (2025a, Ch.13) where I consider the ways in which our "grammar of thought" can act to perniciously shape our work in unthinking ways. And I hope to balance the festishism of rationality by considering the irrational, embodied, and emotional ways of knowing that underpin apparently scientific claims.
10. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed ground theory in part as a respond to what they understood to be *a priori* theorizing which existed primarily in dialogue with other theory, and was, in largely part, disconnected from substantive areas of study—that is, not empirically "grounded." At times, some of their language does slip in a way that enables certain readers to argue they are offering a call to "pure empiricism" (which would not align with the argument I have developed above about our "approaching"), when that book is taken as a whole this is a misunderstanding and/or an unfair critique. Despite Glaser and Strauss framing their work as a contribution to sociology, I think it has most utility as a foundational way of understanding how we might go about doing good social science.
11. Of course, "out there" would denote a separation from the social life which does not exist in reality, hence the scare quote. But what I am capturing here is some important difference from the world of ivory towers academia and the various interlinked and overlapping human worlds of which we try to get rich and detailed knowledge when we go and do our research. Elsewhere in this essay, I denote our essential embeddedness in social life with the phrase "the worlds we share with others."
12. I draw the "sensitising nature" of how we should use concepts from Blumer's (1969) work.
13. The emotions are often understood in terms of types—love, fear, hate, longingness, melancholy, joy. While examples of what Norman Denzin outlined as the "strong emotions"

(Denzin, 1984), that which can sweep us up and dominate our experiences, are important to understanding "the emotions" and this might draw some to think in terms of "types," a more foundational starting point is offered by Barbalet when he tells us that the experience of emotion is "that [something] matters, that a person cares about [it]" and this "registers in their physical and dispositional being" (Barbalet, 2002, 1). For more on this, please see Hiemstra and Matthews (2024) and Matthews (2025a, Ch.16).

14. Of course, this is not "mine" in any simple sense, for as Dingwall and Staniland (2021) describe, Zeno of Citium was teaching in such ways in 300 BC. Rather, it is a product of my learning, reading, doing, and leading of research over the years. It is connection to the training Joe Maguire provided me during my PhD, and the training that was provided to him by his advisor, and so and so forth. It comes from an understanding and partial rejection of post-structural theorizing and it draws on various contributions from feminist scholarship, especially Joey Sprague's excellent text *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers*. I have dwelled on discussions with senior colleagues such as Kath Woodward who have encouraged me to embrace theoretical eclecticism while also working to find a way of framing such various approaches within a coherent science. It springs from my ongoing discussions with Robert Dingwall who has guided me to the various works of Howard S. Becker such as *Evidence, Tricks of the Trade*, and *Writing About Social Science.* It is development from my work on *Doing Good Social Science* in which I detail this argument in a long form. It builds on my reading of philosophy of science in various books by Andrew Sayer, Alan Chalmers, Anthony Giddens, and many more. It was molded over the years while helping Reem AlHashmi, Debra Forbes, Molly Pocock, James Shepherd, Marit Hiemstra, Mateusz Rzepka and Charlotte Jackson in their academic apprenticeships. And refined during my research and writing partnerships with friends such as Alex Channon and Jack Hardwicke. This long-term personal development, and my specific approach to putting all those ideas together, means that providing citations to the works above, as is common in normal academic practice, simply does not work, but this learning process, and these texts, and many more, are foundational to what I am present here and, as such, I certainly recommend all those books and scholars mentioned above to you.
15. There is too many to list. But I often recommend *Beginning Qualitative Research—A Philosophical and Practical Guide* by Pamela Maykutt and Richard Morehouse (1994). You will see that some of the ways I work go against how they present their ideas, but it is a great book.
16. Let me out myself here: I am one of those "old school" scholars who, perhaps naively, still thinks that a PhD—a doctorate in philosophy—should contain robust training in, err, *philosophy.*

References

Barbalet, J. (2002). Introduction: Why emotions are crucial. In J. Barbalet (Ed.), *Emotions and sociology* (pp. 1–9). Blackwell.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interaction: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.

Clarke, T. (2002). *Martin Heidegger*. Routledge.

Denzin, N. (1984). *On understanding emotion*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Dingwall, R., & Staniland, K. (2021). *Qualitative research methods for nurses*. Sage.

Fleck, L. (1979). *Genesis and development of a scientific fact*. The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1935)

Glaser, B. D., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine Transaction.

Hiemstra, M., & Matthews, C. R. (2024) Feeling or funding? Critical co-production, rationality, emotionality and axiological reflections. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241265990.

MacIntyre, A. (2009). *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues* (2nd ed.). Duckworth.

Matthews, C. R. (2025a) *Doing good social science: Lessons from Immersion and exploring the in-between*. Routledge.

Matthews, C. R. (2025b). A Relatively Rational Analysis of Interpretative Analysis. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/19408447251334603

Matthews, C. R., & Pocock, M. G. (forthcoming) Knowing stuff about things that matter: A practical journey towards abstract ideas. In C. Mackintosh (Ed.), *Doing qualitative research in sport studies*. Routledge.

Maykutt, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994) *Beginning qualitative research—A philosophical and practical guide*. Routledge.

Author Biography

Christopher R. Matthews is a social scientist and epistemologist with years of experience advising doctoral candidates. His latest sole-authored book, "Doing Good Social Science," was published by Routledge in April 2025. He co-edited "Teaching with Sociological Imagination in Higher Education" (Springer) and "Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports" (Palgrave Macmillan). He is currently leading the editorial team for "The Routledge Handbook of Sport, Concussion, and Brain Injuries," while also preparing the manuscript for his next book, "The Act of Social Theory." More information about his various contributions to academia is available here: https://www.immersiveresearch.co.uk/