

Professor Liz Atkins

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# Epistemology for Dummies: An Introduction to the Theory of Research



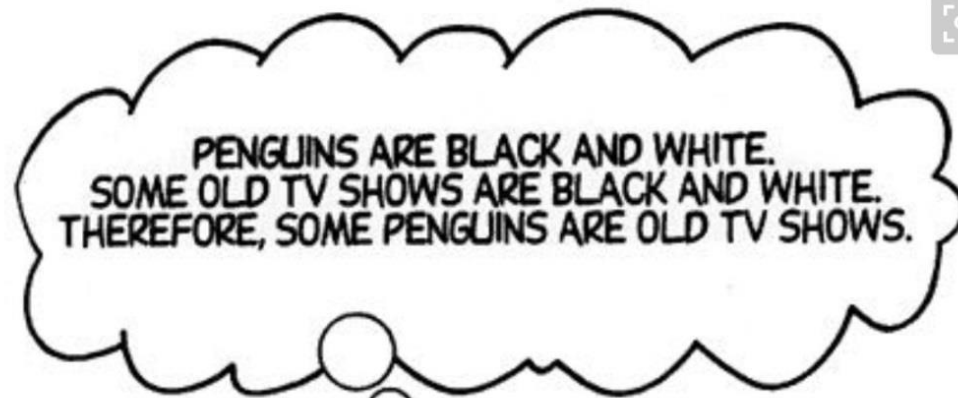
# Introduction

- Research is a journey, beginning with a question or concern and (hopefully) ending with some answers or illumination. This seminar takes you on a whistle-stop tour of that journey, and introduces and explains some of the ideas, concepts and practices commonly used in *rigorous* qualitative research. This will involve thinking about knowledge, what it is and how we generate it (*epistemology*), our values, *positionality* and *ethics*, as well as the ways in which these influence methodology and the interpretation of data.



# Qualitative Research

- Messy
- Stories
- Shining a light
- Lived lives
- Realities
- Patterns
- Connections

A cartoon penguin is shown from the chest up, sitting on a small patch of ground. It has a large, long beak and a single large eye. Above its head is a large, cloud-like thought bubble. Inside the thought bubble, there is text. To the right of the top of the thought bubble, there is a small square icon with a magnifying glass symbol.

PENGUINS ARE BLACK AND WHITE.  
SOME OLD TV SHOWS ARE BLACK AND WHITE.  
THEREFORE, SOME PENGUINS ARE OLD TV SHOWS.



**Logic: another thing that  
penguins aren't very good at.**

# Philosophy

1. The study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence
4. The study of the theoretical basis of a branch of knowledge or experience

(Oxford English Dictionary)

Or

**Big Questions**

*All qualitative researchers are philosophers*

# Epistemology

- How is ...?
- What is ...?
- How do we know?
- Theory of knowledge ("How do we understand the world?")

“The study of the nature and validity of human knowledge, e.g. the difference between knowledge and belief. The two traditional camps have been *rationalism*, which stresses the role of human reason in knowing; and *empiricism* which stresses the importance of sensory perception. Immanuel Kant argued that most knowledge is a synthesis or combination of the two approaches”

(Wellington, 2000/2015)

# Ontology

“The study or theory of ‘what is’, i.e. the characteristics of reality”

(Wellington, 2000/2015)

- ‘The branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being’

(Oxford English Dictionary)

- What is ... ?
- nature of being/reality ("What is the nature of the world?")

# More definitions...



Ontology and epistemology are both branches of philosophy that try to explain the existence of an entity or something



Ontology, which indicates the study of how something existed, its nature, or being, usually answers the question 'what'.



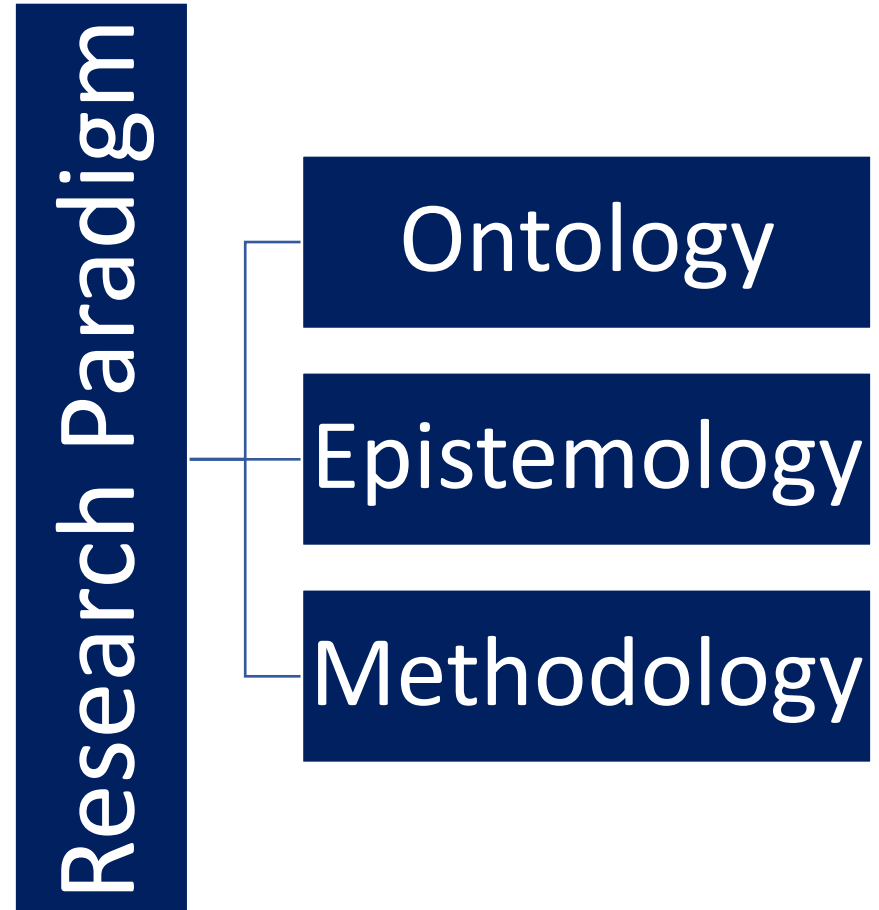
Epistemology is often considered as the theory of knowledge, in which we know something exists, and it answers the questions 'how' and 'what'



# Paradigm

- four major interpretive paradigms structure qualitative research: positivist and post-positivist; constructivist-interpretive; critical (Marxist, emancipatory) and feminist-post structural.

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2011)



# Theoretical Framework

- Particular theories or **sets of ideas** within a paradigm. For example:
- ‘Feminist, ethnic, Marxist, cultural studies, queer theory, Asian and disability models privilege a materialist-realist ontology: that is, the real world makes a material difference in terms of race, class and gender. Naturalistic methodologies (e.g. ethnographies) are employed. Empirical materials and theoretical arguments are evaluated in terms of their emancipatory implications’.

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2011)

# Positionality

- 'research practice is immoral if [we] do not own [our] involvement in the process and if [we] claim value neutrality' (Sikes and Goodson, 2003: 48).
- 'one should have feelings but not passionate and well-entrenched commitments. It's one thing for a non-customer to study massage parlours. It's another for a nun to study them' (Douglas, 1976:99)

# Reflexivity

- present honest and self-searching accounts of the research process
- demonstrate to their audiences their historical situatedness, their personal investments in the research, acknowledging various biases they may bring
- reveal *“their surprises and ‘undoings’ in the process of the research endeavour.”* (Gergen and Gergen, 2000)
- ‘unless [we] can critically engage in examining [our] own practice, [we] cannot critically examine others’ claims to knowledge’ (Duckworth, 2013)

# Ethical Principles (Hammersley, M. and Traianou, A. (2007))

Commonly recognised principles include:

- **Harm.** Is a research strategy likely to cause harm, and is there any way in which such harm could be justified or excused? Note that harm here could include not just consequences for the people being studied but for others too, and even for any researchers investigating the same setting or people in the future.
- **Autonomy.** Does the research process display respect for people in the sense of allowing them to make decisions for themselves, notably about whether or not to participate? This principle is often seen as ruling out any kind of deception, though deception is also sometimes rejected on the grounds that it causes harm.
- **Privacy.** A central feature of research is to make matters public, to provide descriptions and explanations that are publicly available. But what should and should not be made public?
- **Reciprocity.** Researchers depend upon being allowed access to data, and this may involve people cooperating in various ways; for example, giving up time in order to be interviewed or to fill in a questionnaire. The research process can also disrupt people's lives in various ways. Given this, what, if anything, should participants reasonably expect in return from researchers; and what should researchers offer them? Should experimental subjects or people being interviewed be paid?
- **Equity.** It may be argued that the various individuals and groups that a researcher comes into contact with in the course of research should be treated equally, in the sense that no-one is unjustly favoured or discriminated against.

# Ethics

- all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom.
- Trust is a further essential element within the relationship between researcher and researched, as is the expectation that researchers will accept responsibility for their actions.
- Applying an ethic of respect may reveal tensions or challenges.

(BERA, 2018:5)

# Tensions amongst the principles

- Sometimes the different principles will come into tension with one another. For example, if a person is deemed to be vulnerable, asking another to consent on their behalf may be an infringement of their personal autonomy and right to make decisions. These conflicts illustrate that it is not possible to take a mechanistic and instrumental approach to ethical issues – e.g. *I have applied the BERA guidance and anonymised my data, so that's ok.*

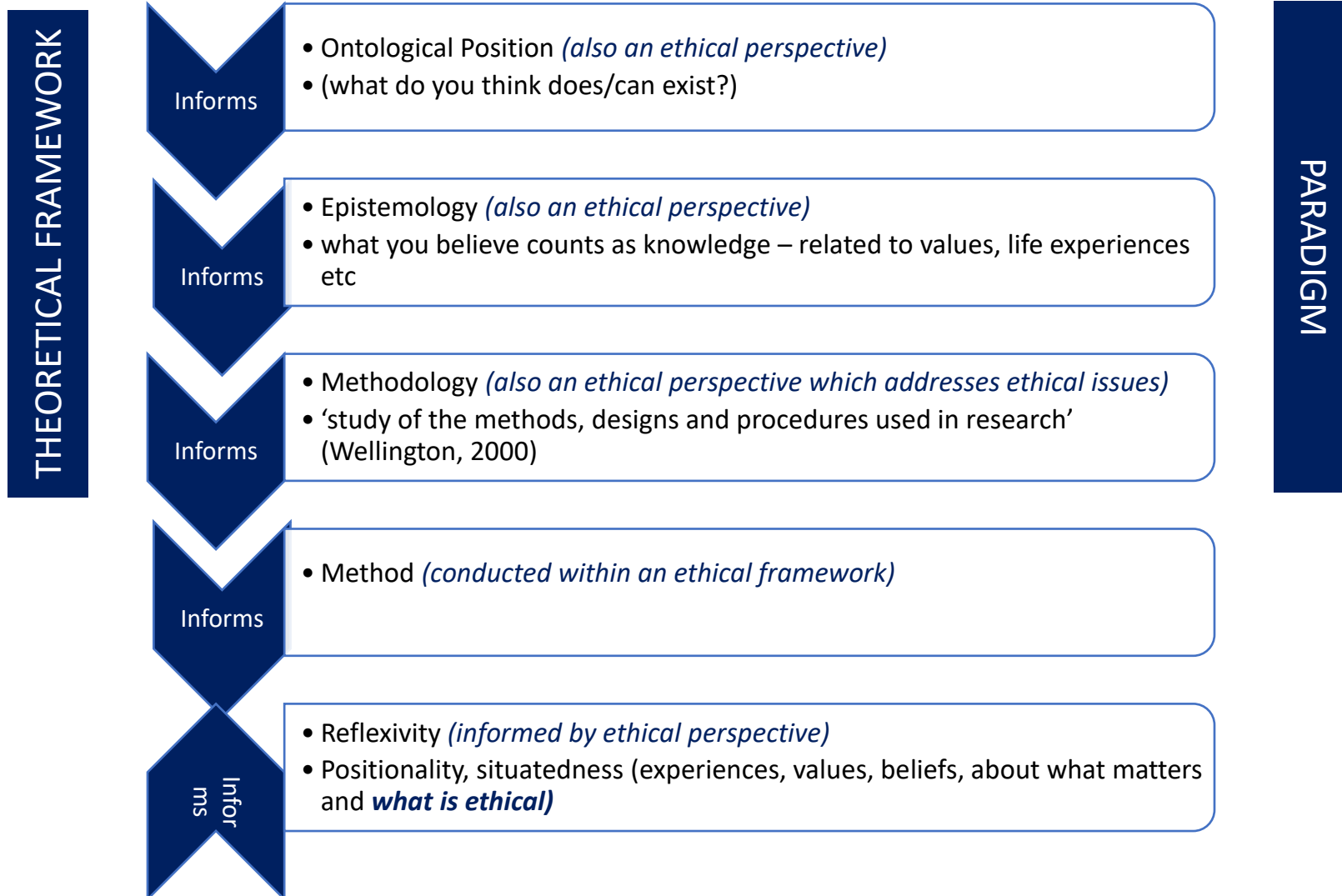


# Situated Ethics

- Involves dealing with ethical issues in a *situated* and *reflexive* manner.
- For example, an unanticipated ethical issue arises so you respond to it in a thoughtful, reflective and reflexive way, and try to ensure that your response is moral and in the best interests of all concerned.
- Greenbank (2002, citing Glen, 2000) considers that:  
'simple adherence to ethical codes or rules discourages researchers from reflecting upon the morality of their actions and working out for themselves what they need to do in particular circumstances'



# How it all works



Resources on ethics are available at:

- <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/anticipating-the-application-unintended-consequences-of-practitioner-research>
- <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/twitter-data-collection-informed-consent>
- <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/resources-for-researchers>

Comments or  
Questions?



# Contact

- I am happy to talk about any of the issues which have come up in this session. You can find me at:
- [L.atkins@derby.ac.uk](mailto:L.atkins@derby.ac.uk)
- @drlizatkins

