

Research Terminology

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There are terms used in research that can be intimidating to a novice to the field. I would like to define a few of them so you have a sense of the research paradigms and philosophical viewpoints and how you might choose to approach research and assessment. This area explores what is real and how we know what we know. These beliefs and assumptions guide the methods you use, as well the conclusions you might draw from your results. You can learn more about these terms in many introductory research texts or even in internet searches. For this podcast, I have referenced *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* by Shawn Wilson, as well as internet resources.

Let's start with *ontology*. Ontology is about our existence and what is reality. What is real? Is there one reality that we can seek to find and agree upon, or are there multiple realities depending on a person's point of view? Research, then, will guide you to learn more about what is real, however you are defining reality.

Epistemology is the philosophical view of knowledge. It explores questions such as "What is knowledge?" "How is knowledge acquired?" "How do I know what is real?" It is related to ontology because how you think about reality will impact what you know about knowledge.

Axiology is concerned with what is of value and also explores our ethics and morals about what knowledge is worth seeking to explain our reality. Wilson gave examples of philosophical questions to answer: "What part of this reality is worth finding more about?" "What is ethical to do in order to gain this knowledge?" and "What will this knowledge be used for?"

These perspectives impact *methodology*, in other words, how you gain knowledge and find out more about reality. It guides your choices and processes as a framework. If there is one reality, then there should be one way of examining it to understand it best. If there are multiple realities, then you can choose ways of examining one of the realities that will recognize your point of view as a researcher to achieve a better understanding. Your methodological perspective leads to your choice of method or methods.

Your *method* could be very quantitative in nature, maybe you are sending out an electronic survey instrument with items that use scale responses, for example, strongly agree to strongly disagree. You have no interaction with your participants, and you use a deductive approach to analyze data to make generalizations about a population. In this case your philosophical approach may lean toward one reality that is knowable, and your intent might be to use this information to change a policy.

Alternatively, your method could be very qualitative, which could be doing individual interviews or focus groups with a relatively small number of participants, so that you can ask in-depth, open-ended questions about their experiences and perspectives. You, as the researcher, are the instrument, and you are not concerned with making generalizations, rather you want to understand individual's realities. The information you gather may help you determine future programs and services for a very specific population.

This is a very high level overview and explanation of research paradigms. There are entire books and courses devoted to this area. The more you gain experience in assessment and research, the more you grapple with the philosophical approaches and then the methods you use.

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