

Pekka Kuusela
 Department of Social Sciences
 Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies
 University of Eastern Finland

Book Review

Maxwell, Joseph A. 2011. *Realist Approach for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage

In *Realist Approach for Qualitative Research*, Joseph A. Maxwell considers the general value of realist philosophy of science for qualitative research methodology and the understanding of some fundamental concepts essential to social scientific research. Maxwell's approach to realism is based on various philosophical and methodological discussions represented by philosophers, social theorists and social scientists both in Europe and North America. As Maxwell notes in the beginning of his analysis, scientific realism or realist philosophy of science contains many directions and orientations. In this sense, realism or realist philosophy is just an umbrella concept for a rather wide variety of theoretical views. Typical for this discussion is that realists defend the fact that the role of scientific research is to study objective reality, which exists independent of the human mind. This general orientation is also central for Maxwell's analysis of the fundamental issues of qualitative research, and he refers in particular to the works of a group of philosophers and sociologists known as critical realists.

Although Maxwell's study deals with difficult philosophical issues that have been disputed in the history of the social sciences for a long time, the general idea of his book is to introduce the basic ideas of realist thinking and to show that these concepts can help us in understanding the nature of culture, causality, diversity and, for example, meaning as an ontological thing (that is, real). The analysis is divided into three long parts, which consist of eleven chapters. In the first part of his study, Maxwell starts with the basic assumptions of realist philosophy and social theory by paying attention to the general features of realism from an ontological and epistemological orientation. In this part, he defines his relation to realism as a philosophical tradition. In the second part of the study, some more practical questions in conducting qualitative research are dealt with to show that realism helps in understanding the nature of theory, research design, data analysis and validity in qualitative research. In the third part of the book, some examples of the use of realist methodology in qualitative research in anthropology are introduced. By analyzing these examples in detail, based on his

own research, Maxwell's intention is to show, in a concrete way, how realist orientation differs from positivism or a constructionist approach to qualitative research.

What does a realist stance on qualitative research mean according to Maxwell's study? In order to show the meaning of realism as an approach, Maxwell considers some fundamental problems of the social sciences related to the understanding of culture, meaning, causality and diversity. It is the goal of his book to point out that critical realist understanding of these questions helps us to clarify the nature of qualitative research as a particular approach to the study of social phenomena. Maxwell is quite critical, for example, of a traditional definition of culture as a system of shared beliefs or values, and develops his own solution for the definition of culture by referring to the realist ontology. In this respect, his approach differs from the critical realism represented by Bhaskar, Archer or Sayer, as he underlines the meaning of epistemological interpretivism developed by Putnam and Keller. According to this view, scientific theories do not mirror or correspond to reality but are models to describe the social world, which is in itself real and not just constituted by language, as constructionists tend to claim. In the same way, Maxwell's description of problems related to the study of causality underlines the point that causal processes are real and that there is a need for a realist view of causality in qualitative research.

The second part of Maxwell's book deals with themes that are closely related to the general nature of qualitative research, research process and the use of specific methods. Maxwell introduces an interactive model of research design, which is based on the idea that the goals of the study, the

conceptual framework, the research questions, and the methods and questions related to validity are seen as components of an interactive system. Maxwell has developed this systemic or interactive model to research design in his previous studies. The purpose of this model is to underline the point that there are no rigid rules or fixed implications for the qualitative research process, and it is essential to be sensitive to the components of research design and see the connections between all these elements. He also underlines three central features of a realist approach for qualitative research. Firstly, it is important to see the research design as dealing with real entities, which describe what is actually taking place. In this sense, research designs are not just formal or abstract models or plans without a connection to reality. Secondly, Maxwell stresses that a researcher must reflect the choices she or he has made in order to become aware of these choices and how they possibly shape the research design. Thirdly, an essential part of qualitative research is to consider the descriptive, interpretive, theoretical and evaluative validity of the research. According to Maxwell, this analytical distinction clarifies the nature of the validity concepts that many qualitative researchers are using in their studies, explicitly or implicitly.

As stated earlier, in the third part of the study titled "Applications of Realism in Qualitative Research," Maxwell introduces two examples of the use of realist research strategy in qualitative research based on his own research projects. The first deals with a Plains Indian social organization and the second with an Inuit community in Canada. Maxwell does not consider his examples as ideal cases of using a realist approach, but he argues that both cases illustrate well the problems related to the use of

qualitative methods and the philosophical issues that are essential when considering the fundamental questions of critical realist methodology. The study of the Plains Indian social organization and its historical change in America shows how a critical realist approach is able to explain causal processes by integrating meaning, behavior and social structures in qualitative research. The other example, based on the study of Inuit culture and its kinship system, illuminates the nature of culture as a distributed rather than a shared system of beliefs. According to Maxwell, he was able to show the cultural diversity in Inuit culture and connect it to the analysis of meaning, social action and the physical world.

Maxwell's book is a well-written analysis of the central questions of a realist approach to qualitative research. It discusses the philosophical and methodological debates in the social sciences in general and qualitative research in particular. In

this sense, Maxwell critically analyzes both the various approaches of realist philosophy and social science, and the current forms of qualitative research. In this way, he defines the fundamental concepts of qualitative research, which differ from the mainstream orientation. Maxwell's analysis of causality, for instance, stresses the point that qualitative research is a valid way of generating causal explanations for social phenomena – if the role of qualitative research is seen as process analysis. This differs essentially from the nature of quantitative research. Although Maxwell's book is a rather short analysis of the difficult general questions of scientific research, he is able to introduce important conceptual distinctions and analytical differences in the existing methodological debate over the nature of qualitative research. The book helps in understanding the underlying conceptual differences between various approaches and defines more clearly the general scientific status of qualitative research.

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● Kuusela, Pekka. 2012. "Book Review: Maxwell, Joseph A. 2011. *Realist Approach for Qualitative Research*.
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