

An Analysis of Epistemological Considerations in Educational Research

by

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Abstract

This paper provides illustrative analyses of three central epistemological standpoints that are possible in education related research. The authors used these analyses to show how epistemological persuasions shape the content, approach and foci of educational research. The positivist and post-positivist paradigm is exemplified in the first part of the paper. A focused analysis of the constructivist and interpretivist paradigm then follows. Here again, authors tried to isolate and illuminate the characteristics of the conversation that illustrate its epistemological leaning. Finally, an analysis of the poststructuralist, postmodernist and critical theory paradigms. The overall aim of the paper was to exemplify these various epistemologies.

Keywords: Paradigm, Epistemology, Research, Analysis.

Introduction

In this paper, authors engage with how diverse inquiry traditions frame the viewpoints of various authors in educational research. Authors seek to shine some spotlight on how different epistemological standpoints are inaugurated, exemplified and deployed in the literature. Authors focus on three inquiry traditions. The first tradition in our analysis is the positivist and post-positivist paradigm. The second is the interpretivist/constructivist inquiry tradition. The third epistemological standpoint revolves around the studies that utilise critical/poststructuralist inquiry traditions. Authors pay attention to what sort of questions each of the three epistemologies pursues. Authors also attempt to analyse how their choice of diction typically portrays their epistemic system. In so doing, authors hoped to illuminate the central premises of the three epistemologies by showcasing the examples that help to mark them from other inquiry traditions. Authors equally hoped that this paper can contribute to an increased understanding of the theory and practice of ways of knowing in research. Authors begun by looking at how positivist or post-positivist writers frame the content and approach of their writing. The paper then after, proceeded to look at how

constructivist/interpretivists typically conduct their conversations. The paper concluded by looking at how poststructuralists construct the conversations they carry out in education. Examples were provided to these standpoints to illuminate their internal operations.

Post-Positivist Epistemology

The first tradition authors discuss is the epistemology of post-positivism. This epistemological persuasion is widely regarded as an offshoot of positivism which rests on the belief that truth exists out there and is to be discovered by objective and verifiable ways. Positivism offers a guarantee of precise and accurate knowledge of the world (Crotty, 2013). Positivists view science as the only way to get at the truth, “to understand the world well enough so that authors might predict and control it” (Trochim, 2018). In the broadest sense, positivists assert that the goal of knowledge is to describe the phenomena that authors experience. The purpose of science is to stick to what authors can observe and measure. Post-positivism is a moderate variant of the more radical positivist tradition. The post-positivist tends to water down the idea of precise and accurate knowledge of the world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

The study by Levatino (2015) offers the first example of a post-positivist standpoint. At the centre of the article is the question: What is the association between enrolment in Australian Transnational Education and immigration of skilled individuals into Australia? In advertising the thesis of the paper, the author emphasises the centrality of empirical evidence that surrounds Trans-National Education and skilled migration. This line of reasoning additionally typifies the notion of causality. Empirical evidence is given some additional prominence by the author’s use of the term in the first sentence of the article. Unlike Constructivist or Interpretivist writers, Positivist and Post-Positivist writers are typically concerned with establishing and examining cause and effect relationships between variables. “Inspired by previous research...skilled migration from one country of origin (i) to Australia in a year (t) is modelled here as a function of several variables...” (Levatino, p 109). The choice of diction here indicates a typical obsession with figures and variables, which is not often associated with other epistemologies outside the Positivist and Post-Positivist Realms. The use of equations (country of origin and year) exemplifies the author’s pursuit of objectivity: “the main variable of interest is ...which measures the stock of students from the country I enrolled in Australian offshore higher education at a period sufficiently far from t in the past...”

The paper is steeped in sufficiently statistical upholstery to constitute a uniquely positivistic addition to the body of knowledge. The use of figures to represent reality is demonstrative of the sort of objectivity, which is considered *prima facie* evidence in scientific inquiry. The paper's limitations might stem from its use of one country as a case while at the same time allowing data from unrelated countries to be included in certain aspects of the analysis: "I further test for the robustness of the results concerning the inclusion of an additional variable which controls for the rate of unemployment in the country of origin." This might affect the replicability of the study.

Lee (2015) wrote the second post-positivist article that utilises post-positivist lenses. Lee examines the question of the employment rate of high school graduates is interactively affected by educational expenditure per student as well as the student-faculty ratio. The evidence Post-Positivist Orientation of Author is illustrated by the following statements found on the pages indicated: "The policy implication is that financial assistance programs for higher educational institutions should accord much greater weight to these key variables when selecting and assessing institutional recipients." (p. 19). The author also postulates thus: "therefore, it is critical to define the causal relationship between the educational management indicators as inputs and the employment rate as an output." (p. 19). In addition, Lee states that "the independent variables used in this study are selected from the list of educational management indicators considered to affect the employment rate in the design and study of the fiscal assistance programs." (p. 23). The article also touches on the issue of statistical significance, which constitutes additional evidence of its post-positivist orientation: "Also, as in Eq. (1), the number of students per industry-university cooperative professor is statistically insignificant." (p. 25). Final evidence is expressed in terms of the statement that the study "empirically analyses the determinants of the employment rate at higher educational institutions based on 2010–2011 data." (p. 26)

This is a noteworthy study that utilises a complex combination of conventional quantitative procedures in the form of statistics and scientific inquiry. The study has set manifest, definitive variables. It has also identified the methods for the investigation of these variables. Lastly, the study has persistently mentioned the controls that are employed to safeguard the purity of the data and the integrity of the findings. Although many variables are enacted and utilised in this study, it is still impossible to establish whether the combinations of variables might be uniformly acceptable to all positivist-oriented writers investigating similar matters.

The third post-positivist author reviewed here is Carnoy (2013). Carnoy's article "Using TIMSS and PISA results to inform educational policy: a study of Russia and its neighbours" examines the research question: Why do Russian Students perform poorly in TIMSS and PISA Tests as compared to students from other countries? Evidence of Positivist and Post-Positivist orientation in this article is amply captured in the following lines: "Our methodology combines descriptive cross-country empirical data on test results for students categorised by family academic resources, with qualitative analysis based on interviews with education policymakers and school officials" (p. 249); "The comparison 'corrects' for possible differences in the family resource composition of the PISA student samples in each country" (p. 249); "Although none of the possible indicators of family resource differences is entirely satisfactory, authors use the number of books in the home (B.H.) for our analysis" (p. 251); "However, a much larger difference of, say, four standard errors (about 15–25 points, or 0.15–0.25 standard deviations) may be considered 'substantially better,' enough to warrant a policy intervention" (p. 252); and "Policy analysts generally consider intervention effects of 0.2 standard deviations or more to be 'effective'" (p. 268). All these examples are typical expressions of studies steeped in this inquiry tradition. This use of quantitative scores from credible international assessment mechanisms such as TIMSS and PISA constitutes a valid basis for the making of robust conclusions and generalisations across various participant countries. One might argue that smaller sample sizes, and therefore a more randomised and controlled study population, would have yielded a distinctly more valid dataset, with more precise claims for objectivity and replicability.

Authors may posit several criticisms against the positivist and post-positivist writers. Scholars who do not write from this epistemological standpoint might not find the findings of these studies and the conclusions drawn to be uniformly palatable. Conflict might occur around issues of research process and procedure as well as methods. Constructivist-oriented scholars, who have different ontological conceptions of what represents knowledge or truth, will contest any characterisation of facts as described in figures, statistics, and test scores, equations, variables, and claims of control. Writers of the positivist and post-positivist persuasion, as authors have seen, variously invoke such numerical and statistical notions of truth and reality in the questions they ask, the responses they get, and the interpretations they attach to these responses. But Constructivists are not given to these sorts of the numeric representation of reality. Besides, the claim of objectivity that typifies positivist and post-positivist literature has been staged repeatedly

as not being absolute and objective, as claimed. This might be compounded by the fact that all three authors presented here have utilised an interview of some sorts in their investigations, which method the constructivists might argue, admits of the least amount of objectivity.

Lavino's (2015) use of equations in explaining the relationship between students' enrolment and migration may be criticised as being too simplistic and aggregated, failing to take account of the differential circumstances (or contexts) of the students and immigrants that may not be objectively quantified. Lee's (2015) perceived causal link between graduates' employability and the amount of money spent on their education might be denounced as failing to capture the voices behind the statistics. Constructivists might argue that employability is a subjective construct that results only from constant negotiation and contestation by non-numeric subjects. Thus, its analysis cannot be reduced to statistics and equations. One can criticise Carnoy (2013) as failing to recognise the important social factors that might affect students' performance in the TIMSS and PISA tests. It might also be argued that the scores themselves may not constitute a valid basis for the assessment of performance and that additional insights should be sought into the variations of students' understanding of the tests themselves before the inferences can be applied to inform policy change. It is to the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm that authors now turn.

Constructivist/Interpretivists Paradigm

The scholars in the constructivist or interpretivist epistemological persuasion dispute the positivist notion of discovered reality. Instead, constructivists and interpretivist assert that to understand reality (or the truth), authors must interpret it: "The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors" (Schwadnt, 1998, p. 222). The scholars in this inquiry tradition, tend to emphasize contexts and experience in arriving at what counts as truth. Thus, in this paradigm, meaning is not discovered but constructed. Crotty (2013), opines that constructivists claim that meanings that are constructed by human beings as they engage in the world they are interpreting.

The first article in this category is that done by Rizvi, F. (2000). In this article, Rizvi addresses the question of how international education may contribute to the reconfiguration of cultural identities. Rizvi argues that participation in international education leads students to cultivate global imagination by which the author implies an individual or socially constructed visual imaginary of some equally imaginary future. This line of thinking typifies what Crotty

(1998), describes as the tendency among interpretivist researchers to investigate constructions of meanings about broad concepts. Rizvi's global imagination refers to the attempts by international students in Australia to provide coherence between ideas and action and to understanding the world around us (Rizvi, 2000, p. 222-223). This is an articulation and exemplification of the individual and social construction of meaning

In crafting this argument, Rizvi utilises the constructs of reality that Sylvia, a respondent in the study, provides. The author contends that globalisation can best be understood by 'analysing the experiences of diasporic communities that can interrogate the global through the local with their lived experiences and insights into cultural production' (Rizvi, 2000, p. 223). This synthesis typifies what LeCompte & Schensul (2010) underscore as the negotiation that characterises interpretivist researchers' interactions with their respondents. This can be read as an attempt by the author to show that reality can and is socially and individually constructed. This, too, is typical of interpretivist thinking.

Within the interpretivist camp, one criticism that can be levelled against Rizvi is that, while in this inquiry tradition, it is standard practice to draw on respondent experiences to construct our representation of reality, the use of the singular experience of one student, Sylvia, to broadcast a beaming headline with the robustness implicit in the title 'global imagination' cannot be said with certainty to represent a professionally honest interpretation of the facts. Authors could certainly have heard more about such imagination from other respondents for us to concur with its characterisation as global.

The second article is co-authored by Smith III, disessa, & Roschelle (1994). This article represents an attempt to articulate a constructivist view of learning in which the conceptions that students bring to the learning activity can play a crucial role in the acquisition of expertise. Although the title itself captions the authors' constructivist orientation, authors delve deep into the article to decipher the characteristics that make this a constructivist piece. The authors argue that students' construction of reality is a combination of different social, cultural, and situational factors that conspire to shape their understanding of science. The authors urge an examination of how students form their identities about self and how such constructs might impact their knowledge acquisition pursuits. This demonstrates that the authors subscribe to the ontological primacy of the reality constructed by the students themselves (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). They also advance the proposition that students' acquisition of expertise in mathematics and science is made difficult

because educators often overlook the critical issue of how what the students believe and know is socially constructed, created, reinforced and supported as students interact in social settings including outside the classroom. The latter argument is, in fact, the basic premise of constructivism: that students build more advanced knowledge from prior understandings. This accords with what LeCompte & Schensul (2010) describe as the gist of constructivism: that reality is in our heads.

The strength of the article might be its initial sketch of a constructivist theory of learning. This theory perceives the prior conceptions of the students as useful elements for the acquisition of knowledge ‘within a complex system view of knowledge’ (Nkhata et al., 2019; & Smith et al., 1994, p. 123). The authors characterise the interrelationship among diverse knowledge elements rather than identify flawed conceptions; it emphasises knowledge refinement and reorganisation, rather than replacement, as primary metaphors for learning. Within the constructivist paradigm, this article may be criticised as overlooking the limitations of constructivist inquiry techniques in pursuing certain kinds of questions. Although the arguments presented are plausible, one cannot help invoking the advice given by Williamson (2006), who cautions that the constructivist research paradigm may not be suited to the investigation of all research questions, including those that depend on eliciting statistical data from large samples.

A final article in the constructivist/interpretivist tradition is authored by Tryggvason, M.T. (2012). It is about a study aimed at exploring how Finnish university-based subject teacher educators perceived their professional identity. The research was underpinned by the faculty’s notion of perceptions in a particular social setting at a specific time. The focus on the social constructions of faculty in Finland about notions of identity constitutes *prima facie* evidence of its writer’s constructivist orientation. The use of semi-structured, less than formal in-depth interviews in the study demonstrates a desire to elicit and refine authentic and valid constructs of academic identity among Finnish faculty in a particular institution. According to LeCompte & Schensul (2010), this approach is typical of interpretive, constructivist, and phenomenological approaches, which are inherently participatory. Tryggvason opines that like socialisation, identity is formed continuously through social relations and processes. This indicates that the author has a belief in the idea that the reality at the centre of the investigation is arrived at through the process of social or individual construction. This is in line with what Crotty says about constructivist thinking: ‘in

the constructionist view, as the word suggests, the meaning is not discovered but constructed (Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

Tryggvason also underscores the role of close social interplay between subject teacher educators within the faculty and how it seems to contribute to a confident collective identity. This means that besides the individual conceptualisations of self among Finish faculty, the author uses the notion of the social construction of meaning that LeCompte & Schensul (2010) say is not only negotiated but also multi-voiced. Tryggvason additionally notes that the constructs of self-identity of the Finnish faculty are not congruent with the other-ascribed identities, which vary depending on the other party's institutional context. This again accords with LeCompte & Schensul (2010) arguments, who view social and individual constructions of reality as neither fixed nor immutable and who, accordingly, argue that people will define situations differently depending on the meanings generated in the past experiences. One weakness of this study might stem from the researcher's excessive reliance on focus group interviews. Two or three faculty members were gathered in a room and asked to bring their thoughts to bear on various subject matters regarding identity. This might be seen to subtract from the personalised nature of the conversations that are associated with constructivist or interpretivist interviews. One might opine that a more personalised one-on-one interaction could have been pursued to yield a social and individual construction of reality more befitting of the constructivist paradigm.

Authors now highlight some criticisms of interpretivism and constructivism (Crotty, 1998; Tikly, 2015; Williamson, 2006). For her part, Williamson has pointed out that interpretivist and constructivist inquiry traditions may not be uniformly suited to the investigation of all research questions, 'especially those that depend on eliciting statistical data from large samples' (Williamson, 2006, p. 98). The samples in the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms need to be small as the primary techniques are time-consuming and costly to use. Generalisations beyond the sample are inadvisable without strong evidence from other studies, and some would see this as another disadvantage (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010).

Other criticisms of this paradigm have emanated from the critical realists who posit that interpretivist inquiry traditions are fundamentally flawed in their ontological outlook on what constitutes reality. Tikly (2015) has argued that the major limitation of the interpretivist paradigm is that an attempt is too often (erroneously) made to reduce reality to what can be interpreted by the respondents. Thus, the interpretivists might miss critical causal elements that might underlie

the observable social constructions of reality. By ‘emphasising the social and cultural dimensions of learning, interpretivists often fail to adequately account for the cognitive and biological structures and mechanisms that also shape learning’ (Tikly, 2015, p. 242).

The Critical Poststructuralist and Postmodernist Paradigms

Having looked at the positivist/ post-positivist and constructivist/interpretivist inquiry traditions, I now turn to the last of the authors who situate their work with the of poststructuralist/critical theory epistemologies. The first article in this persuasion was written by Baxter (2002). Baxter seeks to offer an alternative account of spoken interactions to those of discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis and to show “how fluctuating power relations between speakers are continuously reconstructed through competing discourses” (Baxter, 2002, p. 826). The focus on discourse and language use is typically associated with the poststructuralist belief that “the meaning of words derives from their relationship with one another and not to any...non-linguistic reality” (Crotty, 1998, p. 203).

The author contends that Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis is underutilised, and this violates the Derridean spirit of “supplementarity” according to which no single voice should be suppressed, displaced, or privileged over another in any conversation (Agger, 1991). Several authorities identify Derrida as one of the pioneers of poststructuralism and postmodernism (Agger, 1991; Crotty, 1998; and Somekh & Lewin, 2005). The author proceeds to set her perspective alongside those of other analysts by demonstrating the particular insights a poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis “brings to bear” (Baxter, 2002, p. 828). This article invokes the poststructuralist lens in contending that girls are disadvantaged in classroom interactions because they “experience a series of interruptions and distractions from other speakers, most noticeably from several of the boys” (Baxter, 2002, p. 834). Her deployment of this lens exemplifies Feminist Poststructuralism whose primary interest in the “insights into the processes gendered subjectivities within particular discourses” (Davies, B. & Gannon, 2005, p. 313)

Failure to articulate a clear separation of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA) counts as this article’s major weakness. It seems that the merits of CDA and PDA are so evenly matched as to make the advocacy for one, a mere academic exercise steeped in the semantic duplicity of the keywords of a paradigm which does not lend itself to a concise definition (Agger, 1991; Crotty, 1998; Davies, B. & Gannon, 2005). The

case for breaking with the tradition of discourse analysis comfortably located within the poststructuralist paradigm is not very strong in this article.

The second poststructuralist article is authored by Naseem (2006). Naseem examines how discursive inclusion and exclusion in and by texts affect inclusive education, especially concerning the representation of gendered, ethnic, class-based, racial, and other minorities. This thesis is typical of deconstruction, a variant of poststructuralism associated with Derrida, “the leading poststructural writer” (Agger, 1991, p. 112). According to this school of thought, every text appears to deconstruct itself when one examines its underlying assumptions. In exploring gendered citizenship through exclusion and exclusion, Naseem testifies to what Agger (citing Derrida again) describes as a text engaging in specific exclusions that imperil its claims to fixed or final meaning. One of the tenets of poststructuralism is that the language found in texts may be deconstructed to capture its underlying assumptions. The author’s poststructuralist persuasion is also advertised in the title “a poststructuralist analysis of inclusion and exclusion.” Besides, the article implicates curricula as sites where educational discourses, drawing on economic, political, and religious discourses, constitute gendered subjects and subjectivities. Such foci typify the post-structural notion that “there is no royal road to meaning except through the meaning-constitutive practices of language that, in turn, provoke new contradictions, confusions, and conflicts” (Agger, 1991, p. 114).

Meaning fixation, which involves, among other things, ascribing specific values to specific signs and creating the other through binaries, is also challenged in this paper. This fixation typifies poststructuralist philosophy, which does not subscribe to such binaries: “if authors are looking through poststructuralist eyes, the once clear-cut lines of demarcation appear blurred” (Crotty, 1998, p. 209). Post-structuralism has, thus, been seen as pioneering the intertextuality of language (Crotty, 1998) which is then viewed as a little more than just “a device for establishing singular, stable meanings instead of the deeply constitutional act that it is” (Agger, 1991, p. 114).

One weakness inherent in this article is its deep-rooted pursuit of notions of meaning behind the words and its failure to take account of certain aspects of curricula that do not admit of such penetrating analysis in conveying a specific meaning. Instances are not absent language is deployed in a manner that justifies it as a single source of meaning (Clough, 1992).

The final poststructuralist article is authored by Zembylas, M. (2005b). This paper invokes a poststructuralist lens—and, in particular, Foucauldian ideas—to conceptualise teacher emotions

as discursive practices. Poststructuralism is implied in the title of the paper, in its primary premise and the hypothesis, that forms the centre of the study: teacher identity is theorised as steadily becoming in a context embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture, another exemplar of poststructuralism (Clough, 1992; Crotty, 1998; Davies, B. & Gannon, 2005).

In terms of the methodology, the author utilises Foucault's term genealogy to situate the conceptions of emotions in teaching. As already noted, adherence to Foucauldian discourse is likely to be manifestation poststructuralism (Crotty, 1998) and postmodernism; both paradigms "claim Foucault as their member" (Agger, 1991, p. 113). The contribution of a poststructuralist perspective can also be inferred in the author's conception of emotion: "teacher emotions are not private, nor merely the effects of outside structures, nor simply language-laden, but are performative" (Zembylas, 2005, p. 937). This exemplifies what Foucault describes as the centrality of power relations and the active appropriation of such by the teacher (cited in Agger, 1991)

One criticism of this article would be its extensive utilisation of Foucauldian perspectives to explain the emotional aspects of teacher identity. This coupled with the repeated reference to one subject (a teacher named Sylvia) to craft an explanation of how teacher emotions and resistances are implicated in the in-class articulations of identity and the power relations surrounding the teaching enterprise would, in my view, be its significant weaknesses. The utilisation of varied theoretical perspectives within the poststructuralist realm could have strengthened the author's thesis. Indeed, authors would have witnessed more teachers other than Sylvia gain more in-depth insight into poststructuralist views on emotion and identity in teaching. There are several criticisms of the poststructuralist epistemological standpoints as follows: Firstly, the paradigm could be being overly concerned with playful academic exercises that play around with words (Clough, 1992), and the analytical focus on language that dominates this inquiry tradition has also been seen as "extravagantly convoluted- to the point of absurdity" (Agger, 1991, p. 106). The complexity implied in the latter characterisation can be pinpointed in Naseem's (2006) article critiqued above, whose pursuit of meaning is deployed in a manner that relies mechanically on the use of language in the curricula. As an inquiry tradition, poststructuralism almost uniformly problematises and rejects commonly accepted theories, a state of affairs which Kirk (1994) finds particularly problematic because it, for instance, upsets "the sacred categories of so much social history, especially those with which historians have aimed to police their version of the real, categories such as 'experience' (Kirk, 1994, p. 225). This weakness manifests itself in Zembylas'

(2005) article. The illusiveness of meaning, which results from the philosophy that significance is never fixed or fully knowable, constitutes an additional critique of this paradigm (Clough, 1992), as does the notion that since there is no absolute meaning, interpretation is always clear (Agger, 1991).

Conclusion

It is clear from the above analysis that there are several ways in which the epistemological traditions of various researchers are inaugurated and invoked within education-related research. This paper has attempted to shine some light on the internal workings used by multiple authors in three inquiry traditions. Authors began by analysing a conglomerate of studies that could be said to have used the positivist and post-positivist epistemological standpoint. Authors showed that the discovery of objective reality was the primary focus of this paradigm. The studies by Levatino, Lee and Carnoy, were presented as examples of post-positivist-oriented standpoints. Authors then analysed the studies that invoke the constructivist and interpretivist lenses. Authors demonstrated that these studies tended to be focussed, not on the discovery of objective reality, but instead on its construction by the actors themselves. The studies in this pool helped us to illuminate the internal workings of the constructivist and interpretivist research paradigms. The final part of our analyses focused on the more critical paradigms of research. With an analytical focus on some highly poststructuralist and postmodernist articles, authors showcased how these standpoints might shape the research issues pursued in this arena. The sort of questions followed by each of these epistemologies and their choice of diction typically portray their epistemic system. In so doing, I also hope that this paper can contribute to an increased understanding of the theory and practice of ways of knowing in research.

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