

## Living the Life of the Social Inquirer: Beginning Educational Research

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**Abstract:** I contend that too much educational research has focused on method rather than methodology. This has led to uncritical research that accepts as a given the objective reality of the social constructs being investigated and is not concerned with an examination of the relationship between research and practice. In this paper I aim to show why an examination of the underlying "philosophical plumbing" is necessary before embarking on educational research. I then follow my own advice, examining my beliefs about epistemology, ontology and axiology in order to create the research space I am going to inhabit as I set out on my doctoral studies. In doing this I try to arrive at a synthesis of constructivism, postmodernism and participation, examining the tensions and possibilities that this synthesis gives rise to.

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### 1. Encounter

*"Thunderers are supernatural beings that fly through the sky hidden by dark clouds. Thunderers are extremely powerful. Thunder booms from their flapping wings and when they blink lightning shoots from their eyes."*

(Exhibit caption, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts)

This caption appears beneath a deerskin pouch embroidered with Thunderers by a Chippewa-Ojibwa Native American artist working in the 18th or 19th century. Looking at this object was a strangely moving experience which prompted many questions. How were Thunderers understood by these people, what meaning did the notion actually have? Did the artist believe in the literal truth of these powerful beings? If so, what conceptualisation of the cosmos could enable such creatures to exist? How did the people come to know of the existence of Thunderers? The questions were puzzling because, as much as I might have wanted to enter this

world and experience it as the Chippewa did I could not. In my world thunder is caused by something entirely different, which I do not fully understand but which I accept as a truthful account of a "natural phenomenon". [1]

This serendipitous encounter, at the start of my doctoral studies, proved significant because from it I determined that my first task was to try to unravel some of these ideas about knowledge, culture, society, the nature of reality and so on, at least to my own satisfaction, in order to create my research space—a clearing I could inhabit with integrity and credibility. [2]

## 2. Is Philosophy Like Plumbing?

*"Plumbing and philosophy are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures like ours have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed but which can sometimes go wrong. In both cases, this can have serious consequences."*

(MIDGELY, 1996, p.1)

SCHEURICH (1977, p.34) argues that "the choices for our beliefs are constrained by the knowledge or cultural context in which we live", but we are living at a time when debate over such concepts as "knowledge", "truth", "reality" etc. is challenging the privileged position that scientific knowledge has enjoyed since the (so-called) Enlightenment. Our historical "episteme" (FOUCAULT, 1989), a configuration that circumscribes what is permissible to think in any historical period, is defined by a fracturing of ideas surrounding scientific discourse. It is as if we are partaking in, to borrow KUHN's (1970) metaphor, a revolutionary paradigm shift in our thinking with all the turmoil this invokes. Beginning researchers have, almost, too many choices and must therefore examine their own beliefs in order to lay the foundations for their research. That this is necessary is nowhere more evident than in the field of education where much research is carried out in an apparently uncritical way that takes for granted a naively realist view of the world and/or assumes that the arguments surrounding qualitative research have been settled in a way that makes interpretation unproblematic (SCHWANDT, 2000). To this extent it seems that something has gone wrong with the plumbing. [3]

There are two related issues here. The first concerns the lack of attention to the underlying epistemology: the thinking that surrounds the conduct of much educational research focuses on method rather than methodology, accepting as a given the objective reality of the social constructs being investigated. The second stems from this and concerns the relationship of research to practice and what should count as knowledge for practitioners. Currently, much debate centres on the need for "evidence-based" practice (see, for example, HARGREAVES, 1996). Such calls are located in a technical-rationalist view of teaching which assumes that there is a right way to teach and belongs to an approach to research which is thoroughly positivist and mechanistic in its conceptualisation. [4]

My argument is that researchers need to have some understanding of the plumbing (at least an awareness that plumbing is necessary), and to conduct research in a way that strives to be consistent with a clearly articulated methodological framework encompassing notions of epistemology, ontology and axiology (what is intrinsically worthwhile). Moreover that this involves commitment and belief on the part of the researcher. Judging by the response to the FQS' call for papers on subjectivity and reflexivity in research I am not alone, as a beginning researcher, in having this desire to "wrestle with the issues" (BREUER et al. 2002 [6]). But what is the justification for this? [5]

SEALE (1999, p.25) takes a rather different view. He regards research as a "craft skill",

"relatively autonomous from the requirement that some people want to impose that it reflect some thoroughly consistent relationship with a philosophical or methodological position ... Philosophical positions can be understood by social researchers as resources for thinking, rather than taken as problems to be resolved before research can proceed." [6]

Although SEALE believes this craft skill view can be applied to a variety of qualitative methodologies he also believes that it can be, "applied productively to realist, objectivist and positivist positions ... as long as they do not overdetermine method". For SEALE then it is legitimate to select from a range of tools the right one for the job, to match method to the problem at hand. While RORTY (1999, n.p.) maintains that people do the same research regardless of the philosophical beliefs they hold, "[i]n the short term, philosophical differences just do not matter that much. In neither science nor politics is philosophical correctness, any more than theological correctness, a requirement for useful work". [7]

Perhaps this is because, as SCHEURICH (1997) suggests, the notion of a real world to which we can have access and which we can faithfully represent, is so ingrained that even among those researchers who have rejected positivism research is "infected" with realism, "even though we think we have moved into an era of multiple paradigms, we shuffle the paradigmatic furniture in the structure called research while largely leaving the underlying realist architecture intact" (SCHEURICH, 1997, p.159). [8]

These arguments centre on the conduct and aims of research and hence both are related to ethical processes. It seems clear that research questions are shaped by underlying philosophical beliefs (whether these are explicitly acknowledged or not). A narrow focus on method is likely to detract from a reflexive engagement with these issues (RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002 [30]). What you "find out" is already defined or contained within the framework in which you set out to inquire: HANSON (1969, cited in TUCKEY, 1992, p.3) asks, "[d]o Kepler and Tycho see the same thing in the east at dawn?" and answers "Tycho sees a mobile sun, Kepler a static sun". Taking as an example the evidence-based, technical-rationalist project: if commitment is to the existence of a "holy grail" of teaching then the research question is framed accordingly and indeed, as

SEALE suggests, a match exists between the problem framed in these terms and a realist-positivist approach to its solution. In this case the aim is the uncovering of causal relationships and regularities in behaviour such that prediction can be made and control exercised. The commitment to this seems to go beyond the selection of a tool or resource for the conduct of research. Or at least, if not a personal commitment as such, by selecting the tool in response to the research question the researcher buys into the whole conceptual and ethical framework. Moreover, this buying into seems fundamentally to affect the potential usefulness of the research carried out. Indeed, the whole notion of "usefulness" is itself defined by philosophical underpinnings. Is the aim of educational research to control the curriculum and its delivery or is it to be used for "illuminating the complexities of human learning for the purpose of enriching teachers' own thinking about their practice and empowering them to see teaching and learning through many lenses?" (DARLING-HAMMOND [1993] cited in JALONGO & ISENBERG, 1995, p.13) [9]

A commitment to this conceptualisation of the learning/teaching process points to a different methodology underpinned necessarily by different views of epistemology, ontology and axiology. This has relevance for both the product and the processes of research. Not only what counts as "useful" knowledge for teachers i.e. the relationship between research and practice, but also the relationship between researchers and teachers. Ethical commitments seem intuitively to be more than "resources" to be drawn on, involving personal beliefs about right conduct and virtue. [10]

Moreover, the notion of research as a "craft skill" which does not need to be underpinned by commitment to a consistent philosophical position implies that we can research "as if" the social structures we create are objectively real and unproblematic. While it may be true that in our everyday lives we can behave as if there is objective knowledge of social structures in a straightforward sense this does not mean that research can be treated in the same manner. Indeed, the apparent necessity of unproblematic acceptance of the ontological veridicality of everyday knowledge is perhaps what blinds us to deeper insights of social constructions. HEIDEGGER (1962, p.42), in setting out the terms for his analysis of being suggests

"not only that Dasein [the kind of being that humans are] is inclined to fall back upon its world by its reflected light, but also that Dasein simultaneously falls prey to the tradition of which it has more or less explicitly taken hold. This tradition keeps it from providing its own guidance." [11]

If you behave "as if" then you get caught up in the world of appearances, and appearance, HEIDEGGER argues, is "not showing". [12]

This facility to create social structures that then become institutionalised producing "a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967, p.76) is readily apparent in educational research itself. Research has become objectivised within academic institutions, taking on

the appearance of objective reality, defying us to examine the substance of its structures more closely. The discourse within many departments of education centres on the need for more "research training" for staff in order to allow them to compete within the framework of the Research Assessment Exercise (by which UK University Departments are rated). A cursory analysis of this discourse reveals both the objective nature of institutionalised research and a lack of interest in conducting research that questions assumptions—staff need to be trained in methods, not educated to see the problems with the plumbing (even if this does end up creating a nasty smell). [13]

### 3. Making Choices

The foregoing is an attempt to justify the need for commitment to a clearly articulated methodological framework encompassing epistemology, ontology and axiology. The epistemological/ontological argument is about the necessity of questioning received truths about the nature of reality and how we can know about it—in particular, the nature of social construction which is the principal concern for educational researchers. The axiological question asks what is worthwhile in research and has implications for both processes and products of research. For, as SCHWANDT (2000, p.205; my italics) suggests, when we try to think about the philosophical ideas that underpin our research "what we face is not a choice of which label—interpretivist, constructivist, hermeneuticist or something else best suits us. *Rather we are confronted with choices about how each of us wants to live the life of the social inquirer.*" [14]

So what are my beliefs concerning the nature of knowledge and reality? What is the purpose of my research? How should I be towards those I need to persuade to become involved (and what might be in it for them)? [15]

Samuel JOHNSON (noted 18th Century English lexicographer, writer and conversationalist) famously rejected Bishop BERKELEY's "ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter" by "striking his foot against a large stone" and saying "I refute it thus" (BOSWELL, 1980, p.333). As usual JOHNSON's response is remarkably apposite. It would literally be non-sensical to deny a physical world, but what is our relationship to that world? The social constructivist view claims that how we come to know about the world is a matter for each social culture—a view that accounts for the existence of Thunderers. "Every society is a world building enterprise" says BERGER (1970, p.375), and SKOLIMOWSKI (1994, p.176) remarks that, "[t]he physical world has been made and remade many times". In this view the world is our construction, but it doesn't feel that way to us—we seem to be surrounded by solid, irrefutable facts and objective truths. How could it be so insubstantial as to be the creation of our collective minds? Others have however, contested this view. GOLDMAN (1999) argues that, for example, the double helical structure of DNA would exist independently of our having discovered it. But it seems clear that at a fundamental level this cannot be the case. The "discovery" of DNA is part of a complex story we have invented about ourselves. The act of naming is part of an entire conceptual framework and

"truth" only resides within this context. For our culture and our time this truth becomes part of our creation myth. [16]

If what we can know is our culture's take on reality then it makes little sense to separate epistemology and ontology. Since it becomes not a question of how we can know what is out there, since it is not out there at all—in the sense of being objectively knowable—but within us, and within the interpretations we put upon our encounters with the world. The question then is not "why is knowledge possible" but "how fields of knowledge can be generated" (MAJOR-POETZL, 1983, p.21). This was the fundamental insight FOUCAULT brought to bear in his "archaeological" approach to the analysis of knowledge. [17]

In *The Order of Things* FOUCAULT (1989, p.172) refers to an "historical *a priori*" that enables the development of fields of knowledge and which

"delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in the field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognised to be true". [18]

FOUCAULT puts forward an account of the development of knowledge as a successive layering. He rejects a linear view of developments within disciplines, instead uncovering the forces operating across and within a culture. He analyses the way in which new conceptual frameworks have arisen and as part of this process he reveals both assimilation and discontinuity. FOUCAULT examines the discourses that are possible at a given time and analyses how these discourses change. [19]

Taking again KUHN's (1970) metaphor of paradigm shifts, the development of knowledge can be viewed as a succession of ways of being in the world; a process in which periods of orthodoxy are followed by revolutionary development as new conceptualisations, at first radical, ridiculous even, become embedded within a consensual cultural view. Once this new view is assimilated it becomes literally unthinkable, in an everyday sense, to un-know the world in its new guise. [20]

Drawing on FOUCAULT's ideas SCHEURICH (1997) presents a conceptualisation of a culture as a complex and interconnected three dimensional array of ideas or categories connected by linkages of meaning that constitute the collective knowledge of the culture. What this consists of is subject to "social and historical constraints" but SCHEURICH argues that this does not mean that the array cannot be questioned or is not subject to examination or change. (Apparent discontinuities or revolutionary shifts in knowledge can then be viewed as the result of historical movements reconfiguring, extending and deforming the array in novel ways.) [21]

The position of the ideas or categories within the array indicates the centrality of its importance to the culture and

"in addition, at the lowest level, typically outside the reflective consciousness of its members ... are the deepest rules, the deepest foundational assumptions for a particular culture ... rules or assumptions that *constitute* the nature of reality, the ways to know reality, the nature of the subjectivity of the knower etc." (SCHEURICH, 1997, p.163). [22]

The structure of the array is not politically neutral. Societies are made up of different cultural components and their occupation of the array is determined by their relative dominance. Thus the array has a power dimension, closely linked to the knowledge function. [23]

Visualising ourselves enmeshed within this cultural nexus of power and knowledge diminishes the concept of the autonomous subjective individual. Rather the individual can be seen as being constituted through their occupation of the array. The notion of the self becomes a questionable assumption, part of the myth of our culture, as NIETZSCHE put it, in which "peoples' contingent, beliefs, attitudes and values are formed in ways of which they are usually unaware" (ROBINSON, 1999, p.69). This view is echoed by HEIDEGGER (1962, p.167), though from a different perspective, when he refers to Dasein's everyday being as the "they-self":

"The self of everyday knowing is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic* Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As the they-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the 'they' and must first find itself." [24]

Elsewhere HEIDEGGER (1962, p.165) says that "[e]veryone is the other, and no one is himself". These cultural critiques point to the way in which cultural structures of shared knowledge undermine the notion of the autonomous self and tend to deter critical examination of the underlying structures and assumptions on which cultures are built. [25]

SCHEURICH (1997, p.168) dismantles the notion of the autonomous self—or selves (since in his view the individual is multiply constituted)—by describing the self/selves as an "event or enactment of an interactive intersection of multiple formations" occupying a particular cultural array. Different individuals are different "enactments" within the array, yet all are connected within this cultural matrix and it is this interconnectivity that endows cultural knowledge with shared understanding. While we may feel a little uncomfortable in being described as an "event" this analysis does highlight the possibilities as well as the constraints we have for our individual responses to encounters in the world. Individuality, then, can be seen as arising from the way in which culturally available knowledge is reflected upon, linked to previous experience, and restructured in uniquely understood ways. [26]

Culturally shared knowledge is fundamentally arbitrated by language. As BRUNER (1986, p.62) remarks, "most of our approaches to the world are mediated through negotiation with others". Yet there is a sense in which language

obscures as much as it reveals. Far from being a transparent medium, language hides things from us. Our apparently shared understanding leads us to use language in innocent and superficial ways in which we ignore the "mobile army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms that subsequently gel into knowledge" (ECO, 1997, p.45). This has implications for practice—what do we actually mean, for example, when we use an apparently unproblematic term such as "behaviour management"—a term concealing underlying beliefs, attitudes and perspectives? [27]

The opacity, secretiveness even, inherent in language is what deconstruction aims to challenge. "The language turn invites us to consider what kind of first person critical-subjectivity can help each of us become aware of, 'deconstruct' and 'transgress' beyond our taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies and habits" (REASON & TORBERT, 2001, p.5). [28]

Cultural discourses pervade our thinking. An analysis of the language that constitutes these discourses, it is argued, enables exploration of the deepest, foundational components of the cultural array. Yet language is not the only way in which we can "know"—or at least in which "knowing" can be conceptualised. If educational research is concerned with analysis of practice (and I would argue that fundamentally this is what educational research is about—even if indirectly) then it must be acknowledged that there is a gap between language and practice—practice incorporates forms of knowing that can be thought of as exterior to language, but that together with language makes practice meaningful. Questions arise then in terms of practice as to how such extra-linguistic knowledge is developed, understood and shared, and in research terms as to how it can be conceptualised and represented. [29]

HERON (1981) and REASON (1998a) regard pre-linguistic forms of knowledge as fundamental to an understanding of our relationship with the world and propose an "extended" epistemology, underpinning a commitment to participatory research, presented as a pyramidal structure incorporating four ways of knowing. At the base is experiential knowing—pre-linguistic knowing resulting from encounters with the world. "It is knowing a person or thing through sustained acquaintance" (HERON, 1981, p.27) and this experiential knowledge "transcends any set of propositions about it" (HERON, 1981, p.28). Building on this initial encounter is presentational knowing in which expression is given to experiential knowing through imagery or other aesthetic means—again this is language-independent. This then gives rise to propositional knowing in which the experience is expressed in linguistic terms and finally, at the apex of the pyramid is practical knowing, a skill presupposing "a conceptual grasp of principle and standards of practice, presentational elegance and experiential grounding in the situation in which the action occurs" (REASON, 1998a, n.p.). [30]

This practical knowing draws on and transcends the other forms of knowledge. REASON argues that this view is distanced from both relativist and positivist positions since it rests on an encounter with a real physical world, with which the

individual enters into a "co-creational" relationship, and it posits skill, rather than propositional knowledge as the "consummation of other forms of knowing". [31]

PARK (2001) too, working within a participatory orientation, presents an epistemological framework that acknowledges the centrality of practical knowing. He proposes a tripartite epistemological structure encompassing relational knowledge (affective knowledge of action in social situations), representational knowledge ("knowing that" in the terminology of RYLE, 1949) and reflective knowledge (derived from critical theory) by which other forms of knowledge are transformed into action. [32]

REASON and BRADBURY (2001, p.8) state that, "[a]ll ways of knowing serve to support our skilful being-in-the-world from moment-to-moment-to-moment, our ability to act intelligently in pursuit of worthwhile causes". This language echoes HEIDEGGER (1962). In his treatise *Being and Time*, HEIDEGGER sets out an ontological analysis of what it is to be. Fundamentally, he argues, we are not standing apart from the world looking on. We are not like water in a glass whose wateriness would remain the same if it were not in the glass (MULHALL, 1996), we are part of the world we inhabit—"knowing is a form of Dasein founded upon Being-in-the world" (HEIDEGGER, 1962, p.90). HEIDEGGER argues that the difficulty we have in understanding this stems from the deeply ingrained notion of Cartesian dualism that we inherit (and which, in SCHEURICH's terms can be understood as occupying a very deep level of our cultural array). [33]

HEIDEGGER distinguishes between our relationship with objects which are "ready-to-hand", and which we understand through our use of them and the conceptual frameworks of which these usable objects form a part, and objects which are "present-at-hand" which we conceptualise theoretically and to which we are merely juxtaposed, rather than knowing through use. The understanding that is what constitutes "readiness-to-hand" is not reducible to "presence-at-hand" though HEIDEGGER shows how both can be accommodated within the framework of Dasein understood as "Being-in-the-world". In this way HEIDEGGER shows how we are intimately connected to our world, partaking in it and concerned with it. An understanding of *being* that has deep implications for practice. [34]

#### **4. My Epistemological/Ontological Stance**

At this stage I will try to summarise the epistemological/ontological position I start from before going on to consider what might be worthwhile in research terms and the ethical issues that this raises, although I recognise that this distinction is rather artificial. [35]

The account I have set out proposes that what we know and understand as reality is both historically and culturally situated. Knowledge is relative, incomplete, shifting and partial since we have no way to step outside of the world we are in to check whether what we know is really real. Moreover, as BREUER and ROTH (2003, [1]) remark, "Any bit of knowledge, however purified in the

process of reporting it to a wider audience, bears the mark of its epistemic subject." However, that does not mean that there are no constraints or that "anything goes". On the contrary, the shared knowledge of which we partake tends to be rather conservative. We occupy a cultural array that, though it can be challenged and changed, for everyday purposes tends not to have the deeply held assumptions and concepts which underpin its shared knowledge challenged. An understanding of the cultural array necessarily involves an exploration of the distribution of power within it since what counts as knowledge and power are closely linked. [36]

The notion of the self as an "event" within the cultural array tends to diminish the idea of the self as an autonomous subjective individual and this has a number of outcomes. It provides a rationale for knowing other minds, since we are connected within the array and this supposes some degree of mutual understanding, but it can also result in us acting upon assumed knowledge and critical examination of these is often overlooked. This examination of assumptions is a necessary function of social research. It also highlights the fragmentary nature of ourself/selves where, for different purposes and at different times we may occupy different positions within the array. [37]

Cultural knowledge is mediated via language and dialogue and so an analysis of language is necessary in order to uncover the shared assumptions and meanings within the array. But other forms of knowing also enter into our understanding of the world and are prior or exterior to linguistic understanding. These encounters and our subsequent interpretation of them are important in understanding our relationship to the world. Ways of knowing that are concerned with our understanding and connection to objects and other people have considerable implications for practice. An area of concern for social research may be to explore ways in which such knowledge contributes to the development of practice. [38]

My stance falls essentially within a social constructivist and/or postmodern framework. However, I am also attracted to participatory epistemology with its emphasis on the role of experiential knowledge and the primacy of practical knowing. Can these approaches be reconciled or are the tensions between them too great? [39]

LINCOLN (2001) does not regard the epistemology underpinning participatory and social constructivist paradigms as incommensurable since both rest on the idea of constructed realities and this would certainly accord with postmodern treatments. However, HUMPHRIES et al. (2000) regard participation as being underpinned by "Enlightenment roots" derived from KANTian notions of the subjective autonomy of the self and the ability to act through reflection and rational action. This certainly conflicts with postmodern views of the dispersed and multiply constituted self. As I have already indicated, there is considerable sympathy between participation as conceived by REASON and BRADBURY (2001) and HEIDEGGER's notion of Dasein, coping in a skilful way in the world. DREYFUS (2004a, n.p.) argues that this Dasein is "a non-autonomous, culturally bound (or thrown) way of being, that can yet change the field of possibilities in

which it acts". Dasein has "freedom to change itself by modifying its background practices" and in this way can "live a life worth living, even though it can never be a self-sufficient, lucid, autonomous subject". [40]

Interpreted in this light the epistemology of participation and postmodernism seem more commensurable. Indeed, DREYFUS (2004b) suggests that the "being" of HEIDEGGER and "power" of FOUCAULT deal with roughly parallel things in that "[t]he history of being gives Heidegger a perspective from which to understand how in our modern world things have been turned into objects. Foucault transforms Heidegger's focus on things to a focus on selves and how they became subjects" (DREYFUS, 2004b, n.p.). Or, we might say "subjected". [41]

REASON (1998b, p.281) discusses areas of incommensurability between the participatory and postmodern paradigms. He argues that experiential knowledge, of fundamental importance to the participatory paradigm, is accorded no place in postmodernist treatments in which "experience is only accessed through discourse or text". This is an important point, however, McLURE (2003) argues that discourse involves more than language, rather it is a system by which what is said becomes "sayable". Discourse, she argues, is a practice. The challenge for my methodological approach will be to show how practice can become a discourse. However, while recognising that knowledge derived from non-linguistic experiences is important to practice it must be acknowledged that our means for accessing and interpreting this knowledge are limited. [42]

## 5. Axiology and the Ethics of Research

Axiology "worthwhileness" relates to the purpose and values of research and encompasses issues such as the relationship between researcher and researched and the ways in which the lives of those researched can be represented. This necessarily involves moral judgements on the part of the educational researcher. As LATHER (1991, p.105) states, no research is neutral.

"Facts are not given but constructed by the questions we ask of events. All researchers construct their objects of inquiry out of the materials their culture provides and values play a central role in this linguistically, ideologically and historically embedded project we call science." [43]

A major criticism of research paradigms including constructivism and various forms of postmodern/post-structuralist ideas (I regard the term postmodern as being a more inclusive concept than post-structuralism) is the uncomfortable relativism—both epistemological and moral—that lies at their heart: "A basic problem with the relativist mind, in its postmodern extreme, is that it dismisses any ground as valid simply because there is another ground or context beyond it. It confuses relative truth with nihilistic scepticism" (REASON 1998a, n.p.). [44]

If there is no way to judge then there can be no truth, no absolute moral content. Research based on such an ethic, or lack of ethic, would be incapable of guiding

or informing action. This is the basis of HABERMAS' criticism of FOUCAULT for what he argues is his adherence to relativism which leads inexorably to unfettered power. (This evokes THRASYMACHUS' argument in PLATO's Republic that justice is the interest of the stronger.) FOUCAULT, however, avoids such a charge with his appeal to contextualism in which foundationalism and relativism are both rejected in favour of "situational ethics" (BENT 2000). It is not the case that "anything goes", but neither is a universal foundational morality possible (or even desirable). Thus relativity only becomes problematic within an oppositional relationship with foundationalism. If foundationalism is rejected, then relativism ceases to be an issue. [45]

LATHER (1991, p.116) presents a discussion of relativism that she concludes by saying "fears of relativism and its seeming attendant, nihilism or Nietzschean anger, seem to me an implosion of Western, white male, class-privileged arrogance—if we cannot know everything then we can know nothing". Recognising that "absolute knowledge was never possible anyway" shifts the focus to the "local and context-specific". Morality then is located in the struggle between different beliefs existing within a culture at any given time. [46]

Does this quell the unease (and not just among Western white males) surrounding the lack of a secure and absolute foundation and so dismiss the charge of nihilism levelled at forms of research carried out within a relativist idiom? HERON (1996, p.12) rejects what he describes as "the post-structuralist anti-paradigm paradigm" or "PAP" in which all "truth" is exposed as "a hidden bid for power". This, he argues, has rendered meaningless "perfectly serviceable" terms such as "truth" and "validity" that "provide the preconditions of intelligent inquiry into any domain". The participatory paradigm that he espouses advocates "human flourishing" as the purpose of research which is centred on practical knowing, knowing how to choose to act in a given situation, driven essentially by moral principles, and this, HERON argues is at odds with paradigms that rest on relativist assumptions. [47]

LAWS and DAVIES (2000), however, counter strongly the notion that post-structuralist research cannot be linked to action. The authors argue that analysis of discourses within educational research "enables a radical disruption of the taken-for-granted readings of educational practices, so opening up moments in which the participants can go beyond the conditions of their subjection" (LAWS & DAVIES, 2000, p.220). Likewise, LATHER (1991, p.48) argues that postmodern research "has much to offer those of us who do our work in the name of emancipatory education as we construct the material for struggle present in the stuff of our daily lives". And she contrasts this perspective with adherence to "master narratives" such as Marxism in which research imposes, rather than negotiates, the meaning of social situations. Such approaches can, then, provide powerful tools for individuals to reconceptualise their world. [48]

## 6. Participation and Representation—"The Elimination of the Difference"

*"Much ink has been spilled over how researchers should relate to and represent those 'others' who are the subjects of research."*

(McLURE, 2003, p.170)

McLURE encapsulates the problem neatly, referring to the way in which we want, as qualitative researchers, to "eliminate the difference" between ourselves and those we research. In line with this McNAMEE (2001, p.311) remarks a change from the use of the term research "subject" to "participant" which is "supposed to acknowledge an ideological shift in the researcher's own ethical and political obligations to the researched". He suggests that this has arisen from recognition of "the inescapable power dimension that privileges the researcher over the researched". [49]

The distance between ourselves and "the other" has led to a number of criticisms of "outsiders" doing research. BRIDGES (2001) considers the arguments. Firstly, having someone (the researcher) speak for you is fundamentally disempowering; secondly, outsiders cannot "properly" understand the communities they research; thirdly, the relationship between outsider and the community is essentially exploitative. [50]

HUMPHRIES (1996) refers to a "metanarrative of liberation of humankind" that has underpinned much social research. Central to this metanarrative are the concepts of "emancipation" and "empowerment". Such concepts are not, however, unproblematic. BROWN and JONES (2001, p.4) argue that "[a]ny emancipatory perspective presupposes values that cannot be agreed upon universally or permanently". And this is further complicated in considering teachers' practice since a potential tension exists between the perceived interests of teachers and their pupils. In addition, these concepts can be read as the granting of power from one group, the privileged researcher, to another group, the subordinated subjects of research. As HUMPHRIES (2000, p.187) says, "[t]he issue of power has been treated (by feminists as well as others) in terms of a commodity which can be handed over from one person to another, or wrested from one group by another—possessed rather than exercised". [51]

However, it is clear that viewing the researcher as being in a position to give power to another carries the danger of perpetuating the very inequalities that it seeks to dismantle. But it also assumes a unidirectional flow of power within the research relationship and this assumption has been questioned. McLURE, for example, suggests that power in the research relationship can be exercised by those being researched in the form of resistance and subversion, "subjects sometimes act up, make self-conscious jokes, contradict themselves, adopt different masks (without knowing that they are masks; or that there are only masks), forge their own signatures, and deflect researchers' agendas" (McLURE, 2003, p.171). [52]

McLURE goes on to suggest that there may be political reasons for this subversion "the transparent virtues of clarity, righteousness, visibility and simplicity are not necessarily in the interests of those on the margins of power and prestige". Thus power circulates within social institutions and individuals, and the power they exercise, are constituted by the position they occupy. [53]

While recognising the potential desirability of those who belong to particular communities researching and making meaning of their own lives, BRIDGES (2001) suggests that a fundamental problem lies in the way in which research is regarded as a "property" rather than a "dialogic inquiry" designed to assist the understanding of all concerned—at the very least this demands that knowledge be shared. This, BRIDGES (2001, p.382) argues, is not "simply a kind of professional respect for others but a requirement of care". A notion HEIDEGGER (1962) suggests is essential to our authentically Being-in-the-world. [54]

The second criticism of "outsider" research is that only insiders can really understand their own experience and so represent it "truthfully". However, this is to suppose that, within any particular community, there is a homogeneous experience. BRIDGES also questions whether an insider's reporting of their own experience should necessarily be privileged over another's. If "self-hood" is considered to be a fragmented or multiple condition and "since one never has access to a complete set of representations of oneself" (DHUNPATH 2000, p.545) the story told is necessarily incomplete and shifting. Researchers can view situations from different perspectives resulting in alternative understandings for both researcher and researched. This presupposes some degree of reciprocity in which "participants become authors and researchers become participants" (BREUER & ROTH 2003 [17]). [55]

Attempts at eliminating the difference in research writing have led to the conscious positioning of the author within the text alongside the "voices" of those being researched. This is intended to add transparency and openness to the research text (in contrast to traditional science writing in which objectivity is suggested through the narrative device of the author being written out of the text). McLURE (2003) lists self-reflexivity, collaborative interpretation and co-writing as means by which the researcher "intentionally curtails" their authority. The introduction of the "I" in the research text is a response to the so-called "crisis of representation"—a crisis with roots in epistemology as well as ethics (LINCOLN & DENZIN, 1998). While TIERNEY (2002, p.393) warns that this crisis cannot be *reduced* to the use of the first person and "a preoccupation with the experience of the author" he does advocate the notion of reflexivity: "My concern" he says, is with "the unreflexive voice ... in a postmodern world the author's voice is one of the most critical pieces of the narrative puzzle". And KLEINSASSER (2000, p.157) suggests that "reflexivity enables the researcher to explore ethical entanglements before, during and after the research". [56]

The third criticism is the danger of exploitation of communities by researchers. As BRIDGES (2001, p.379) contends, insensitive researchers focused solely on their own needs may result in the exploitation of communities, but he argues that

"the possibility that outsider educational research may be conducted in an exploitative manner is not an argument for obstructing it comprehensively, but it is an argument that it be conducted under an appropriate set of principles and obligations and in a proper spirit." [57]

PRING (2001, p.418) proposes that educational researchers need to be virtuous and to work within virtuous research communities in order to achieve this, "By 'virtue' I mean the *disposition* to act appropriately in a particular situation ... Moral virtues are dispositions like courage, kindness, generosity of spirit, honesty, concern for justice". As LATHER (1991, p.99) puts it, researchers must understand "what it means for our lives to become data". This ethical complexity is more than the requirement to fulfil the conditions of a research and ethics board as the ongoing debate in FQS makes clear (McGINN & BOSACKI, 2004; ROTH, 2004). [58]

## 7. Summary—A View From the Boundary

The product of any research is an artifice. The postmodern perspective recognises this and responds to it. We cannot "faithfully" represent the lives of others—or even ourselves. What we produce is a version or palimpsest of the organisations, communities, lives we are interested in. This does not, however, render research carried out within postmodern approaches incapable of informing action. Rather it provides a tool—perhaps the most useful tool—for enabling individuals to reconceptualise themselves and their practice. In terms of educational research this seems a fundamentally more empowering process than research aimed at uncovering an objective account of the "best" way to teach. [59]

While the ultimate form of "elimination of the difference" occurs in participatory research in which there is a complete break down of the separateness of researcher and researched this should not be regarded as the only form of legitimate research. The notion of "insider good" versus "outsider bad" rests on a binary that can itself be collapsed into contradiction—as anyone who has ever watched the film "*Bad day at black rock*" (STURGIS, 1954) can easily testify. What is necessary is a decentering of the role of the University academic and a genuine reciprocity in the research relationship such that researchers enter into the research "bargain", in a proper spirit of openness and humility. [60]

## 8. Conclusion

At the start of this paper I stated the need I felt to create my own research space "a clearing I could inhabit with dignity and credibility". Dignity because research is an activity that rests on moral and epistemological choices and credibility because it is subject to the judgements of others. The product is a working document (and a work in progress) that will guide my initial steps, in formulating my research question and in setting out the methodological framework. I shall now start to think about how I can "embrace the other", how I can represent, how I can research practice as a discourse, whether I am an insider or an outsider, the

control I am willing to cede, the choices I have for writing etc. How, in short, I can begin to live the life of the (educational) social inquirer. [61]

## 9. Postscript

Having submitted this paper for publication I was asked to add a piece "explaining to our readers in which way the methodological reflection influenced YOUR OWN research (decisions) afterwards" (Katja MRUCK, e-mail). Initially, this was a somewhat anxiety-provoking request—would I still agree with what I had written? Would I find it embarrassingly naïve? Would I find that it had not influenced my developing research? Or, just as bad, would I find that my thinking had not moved on at all? In the main, I have to report that I am pleasantly surprised. It has informed my research, but my thinking around some of the issues has altered. Overall, wrestling with the issues at that early stage was time well spent and I now welcome the opportunity to reflect on this. [62]

My research is on teacher identities in relation to "behaviour management". It has grown out of my own professional interests as a teacher of children deemed to have "emotional and behavioural difficulties". Recognition of the ethical issues underpinning the research (both in terms of the research process and its outcomes) was critical as was recognition of the importance of bringing my own experiences and subjectivity to bear as a strength to be drawn on rather than a contaminating feature to be eliminated (though I still felt the need to justify this, hopefully pro-actively rather than defensively as BREUER et al [2002 (4)] advocate). [63]

My research question is: In what ways do discourses surrounding "discipline" and "behaviour management" influence the development of teachers' professional identities and therefore impact on teachers' practice. The question implicitly draws on an understanding of teachers' professional identities as being shaped by the discourses, or in SCHEURICH's (1997) terms, the cultural arrays they inhabit. The purpose of the research is to theorise the power relationships inherent within discourses and so to suggest lines or node points where agency/resistance can be or is exercised as DREYFUS (2004) suggests. This recognises the ethical dimension of teaching and learning which must inform the research process. [64]

Perhaps where I have strayed furthest from the ideas set out in the paper is in acknowledging the "pre-linguistic" knowledge dimension of HERON (1981) and REASON (1998a). I have adopted a narrative approach to identity, predicated on a model in which narratives are seen as the means through which discourses create subjectivities. This means that, though I agree with LACLAU and MOUFFE (cited in HOWARTH, 2000, p.103) that discourses include "ideas, policies and actions" and are therefore not "purely linguistic phenomena" (HOWARTH, 2000, p.101), I do make the assumption that they can be analysed through, among other things, narratives of practice emerging in interviews. In doing this I recognise that a gap exists both between practice and narrative and between narrative and interview. [65]

In terms of participation, while I have not opted for research within a participatory paradigm sensu HERON I have attempted to "blur the boundaries" between researcher and participants. Teachers I have interviewed have participated in the subsequent analysis through an email dialogue and their insights have become part of the research text. In my analyses I have resisted the temptation to reduce or distil the lives of individuals to a central motivation, but have instead lived with the complexity and ambiguity of their responses. In this I am mindful of LATHER'S (1991) injunction that we should be aware of what it means for a person's life to become data. However, as other researchers have also found participants seem to accept interpretations of their lives almost "too readily" (MULHOLLAND & WALLACE, 2003, p.11; McCORMACK, 2004). (Perhaps this indicates that "participants" do not view their role in our research in the same way that we researchers say we want them to be.) I have also attempted to experience being a participant, having been interviewed by a number of people—colleagues, friends, strangers—to enable me to gain insight into the interviewing process, as SCHEURICH (1997) suggests. [66]

However, perhaps the most important thing I have taken on board is the indeterminate, messy nature of the research process—the factors I have struggled with and continue to struggle with. There are no definite "answers" and no "solutions" to problems. To be constantly aware of this, it seems, is the fate of the (reflexive) social inquirer. [67]

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