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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: THE RELATION OF SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THESE ISSUES


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## Introduction

These pages are designed to engage researchers with issues of critical research design and data analysis in a range of educational contexts. 'Critical research' is not a tidy category. In these pages it is taken to mean, roughly, research which aims at understanding, uncovering, illuminating, and/or transforming how educational aims, dilemmas, tensions and hopes are related to social divisions and power differentials. Research in this area entails paying attention to fundamental issues of epistemology, truth, validity, perspective and justice. While researchers agree as to the relevance of these issues, they disagree about how they relate to power and social context. These pages provide an introduction to this complex area.

Each page includes a brief introductory section, usually followed by further explanation of key concepts. Further guidance is provided in the form of references, including, where available, full texts of articles as pdfs or Word documents. In the references, preference has been given to downloadable web documents and to Journal articles, in the belief that these are more widely accessible to educational researchers than other sources.

The pages focus largely on British research and sources. It is, of course, important to learn from educational research and practice in other parts of the world, but for simplicity, these introductory pages concentrate on more local scholarship. One reason for this focus is that educational research is highly context-specific. British social contexts are related to those in the rest of the world, through links of history and migration. However, although they are similar, the social contexts of Britain are not identical with those of its cultural neighbours in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The same is true for the way in which power differentials are affected by social class, gender and race, i.e. the contexts in these countries are similar but not identical. Another reason for the British focus is that educational terminology changes as it crosses national boundaries. For instance, two terms which are central to much critical educational research, 'inclusion' and 'multiculturalism', are each understood differently across the Channel and in North America. Highly theoretical, abstract scholarship tends to travel more

easily, which is why the focus on Britain is less marked in the highly theoretical sections.

For a more international perspective, speakers of English will find that sources from the rest of the Anglophone world are easy to find using the usual searches. It should be noted that these will be biased towards the relatively richer Anglophone countries, especially those of North America, but also Australia and New Zealand. It is harder, but possible to access critical educational research from the relatively poorer Anglophone countries of Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent, e.g. through general websites such as Questia, or through more specific ones, such as those listed at the end of this page. European research is also relatively easy to access through English Language journals, such as EERJ and others.

- AERA SIG: Research Focus on Education in the Caribbean and Africa
- African Higher Educational Research
- African Educational Research Network
- All India Association for Educational Research: this has a very useful links page to educational research associations in a number of countries worldwide
- Caribbean Educational Research Information Service (CERIS)
- E-Journal for the All India Association for Educational Research
- (Hong Kong based) Educational Research Journal
- (Pakistan based) Journal of Educational Research
- Questia

## Introduction

It is important to be aware of a range of theoretical approaches within critical research. There is however no tidy relation between individual theorists and methodologies. The relationship between the two is dynamic and dialogical, as theory becomes interpreted and re-interpreted, invented and re-invented, and as methodologies evolve. The central theories are often compex and difficult. The different methodologies are diverse and have fuzzy boundaries. Moreover different theories often overlap with each other, as do different methodologies. In the following brief pages, all I shall to do is point out some of the main contours of the area, and give some signposts. This approach requires individual researchers to learn more about the details of those parts of the landscape that seem most relevant to their theoretical and political commitments. These should be read in conjunction with this one.

The areas of theory most usually considered to underpin or inform critical research are critical theory, including marxian approaches, perspectival epistemology and postmodern /post-structural approaches. Generally, it could be said that all of these are theoretical perspectives which provide a critical approach to research. However, none of the areas is clearly definable. Each of them have fuzzy boundaries. Indeed the major figures placed within them sometimes disagree with the placing and often have serious disagreements among themselves. It is sometimes hard to know where critical theory, perspectival approaches and postmodernism start and end. There are, for instance, feminists and anti-racists or post-colonialists who embrace postmodern or post-structural theory and others who reject it as being antithetical to their political project. Other TLRP pages say some more on the background to this state of affairs.

It is not even generally agreed that the areas are separable. Some commentators claim that perspectival epistemology and some postmodern/post-structural approaches ARE critical theory. Michael Apple, himself an educational theorist associated with critical theory, explains in an interview (2001, p.viii):

“I assume by the question that when we say “critical theory” we actually mean what I prefer to call “critical educational studies” which is a much broader category [than work deriving from the Frankfurt school]. It includes Marxist and neo-Marxist work and also includes work that is more related to the Frankfurt school I spoke about just a minute ago. But it also includes multiple kinds of feminist analyses, critical cultural studies, and many other critical approaches. Because of this, I’m going to define it as that broader set of approaches.”

However it is probably safer to begin by recognising the relative intellectual autonomy of perspectival approaches and postmodern or post-structuralist ones from each other and from critical theory.

## Critical Theory

Critical theory is both political and epistemological in intent. It aims to move beyond the obvious in order to uncover the effects of political structures and their associated power relations. Its ultimate intent is emancipatory. To some, the term 'critical theory' signifies the school of thought deriving from the Frankfurt School. This was a collection of theorists in the 1930s influenced by Marx, but critical of narrow, orthodox Marxism. They drew on a wide range of theoretical resources, notably Freudian and critical cultural theory. Currently, the most influential theorist who can be identified as working within the tradition of this school is Habermas. However various other leading thinkers were influenced by this tradition, and are considered to be critical theorists. Critical theorists who are especially significant in education currently include Gadamer, Bourdieu and Freire. There have recently been a number of offshoots from the mainstream, each of which tends to have its own content and traditions of literature. They include critical literacy (de Souza and Andreotti), critical race theory (Mirza and Joseph, 2009) and critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano and Torres, 2008).

Although the underlying intention of critical approaches is easy to grasp, much of the theory itself is dense and difficult. Hinchey (1998) provides a useful and very approachable basic introduction to critical theory in education for classroom researchers. General overviews are provided by Popkewitz and Fendler (1999) and Apple, Au and Gandin (2009). In the UK the Institute for Education Policy Studies focuses especially on Marxist and Freirean theories (http://www.ieps.org.uk/iepsbios.php). Grenfell and James (1999) focus on Bourdieu. For an perspective which combines Bourdieu and feminism, see Adkins and Skeggs (2004).

## Perspectival approaches

Perspectival approaches are opposed to epistemologies which would, as critics put it, be trying to establish 'the view from nowhere.' Such approaches include epistemologies and methodologies from the stance of feminism, antiracism, queer theory, and/or post-colonialism. This list is not exhaustive, nor could it be. There are also perspectives derived from specific positioning within power structures related to disability, nationality, religion, and so forth. All these categories are overlapping, fluid and shifting. For all their differences, perspectival approaches agree about the inescapability of perspective, given the way that, variously, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and geopolitics constrain our understandings of the world as well as our capacity to act within the world.

Youdell provides an introduction to feminist and queer educational research, especially action research. Sparkes (ed) (1992) includes articles on queer theory in education, as well as on feminist perspectives. The journal Gender and Education is a source of articles which take a feminist approach in educational research in the UK. The BERA Special Interest Groups (SIGS) on Race, Ethnicity and Education (which includes a subgroup on Critical Race Theory), Inclusion, and Social Justice are useful sources of information and networking. Lavia (2007) discusses postcolonialism in the context of inclusive education and social justice. The European Educational Research Association, also has Networks on social justice, on intercultural education, and on inclusion (http://www.eera-ecer.eu/networks/).

## Postmodern and post-structuralist approaches

Postmodern and post structuralist approaches have been very influential in educational research over at least the last two decades. It is impossible to list postmodernists or post-structuralists, because these approaches logically resist definition since they have in common an incredulity towards universal and general explanations, theories or definitions. Among those who are often described as postmodern or post-structuralist are a number of theorists who have been particularly prominent. Foucault in particular has been recognised as significant, especially with regard to his analyses of the archeology of knowledge, discipline, power/knowledge, identity (in his books on the history of sexuality) and genealogy. Lyotard, has also been influential in relation to critical research, especially his book The Postmodern Condition with its analysis of the increasing identification of knowledge with information, and the simultaneous expansion of performativity. These two theorists have, not surprisingly, been particularly useful in educational theorising, because they focus on knowledge and learning. Derrida has been particularly identified with deconstruction, an approach which has strongly influenced many educational researchers using discourse analysis. Recently the Deleuze and Guattari partnership has become more influential in educational discourse. They discuss becoming, process and transformation all of which are relevant to education.

Some feminisms embrace postmodern and post structuralist approaches, while others see the two as fundamentally opposed. The argument continues within educational research. I discussed this in an early article (Griffiths, 1995). St Pierre (2000) is a more recent overview. A special issue of Comparative Education investigates postcolonial perspectives. It has an introductory article by the editors, which is freely accessible on the web. A special issue of Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood focuses on ‘applying critical theory, post-structural, postmodern, anti-colonial and related perspectives to early childhood practices, policies and research’ (http://www.wwwords.co.uk/ciec/content/pdfs/9/issue9_3.asp).

## Methodological approaches

There is no one methodological approach or set of approaches which can claim to be the best fit with any or all of the theoretical approaches discussed here. Rather a range of approaches are suitable. The issue is more how they are used, and to what end, than about the details of the technique. For instance action-oriented research methods would appear to be well suited to critical research, and so they are. However, equally, they can be used instrumentally, fitting well with technical-rational, rather than critical, emancipatory aims. Similarly, discourse analysis can be used to uncover assumptions and silences in the discourses of education. However it can also be used simply to describe and measure practices: to understand rather than to transform practice. Finally, collaborative, participative methods can be used democratically and collectively, but they can also be used to consult, to give a sense of ownership and so finally to further the ends of the researcher rather than the ends of the researched.

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: ADVOCACY

## Introduction

Advocacy is one approach used in critical educational research. It is a term which draws on a tradition of taking advocacy to be speaking on behalf of somebody else (as in a law court). It also draws on the idea that advocacy is done in the name of justice. Thus research which adopts a stance of advocacy does not start from a position of neutrality, but rather is on behalf of a person or group, with the intention of doing justice. This does not mean that it is biased. Lack of bias is not to be equated with lack of neutrality, as is explained in the page on perspective, reflexivity and bias. A particularly influential analysis is given by Patti Lather (1991) in her book, Getting Smart, in which she argues for a collaborative, praxis oriented and advocacy model in which research is openly ideological while it is also change-enhancing. In her later book, Troubling the Angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS, she and her co-author, Chris Smithies, experiment with ways of presenting the collaborative, action-oriented, project in which they were both members.

Advocacy research can usefully be divided into two kinds:

1. There is research which is participatory and collaborative, *researching with* a particular set of people in order to represent them;
2. There is research which is on behalf of the interests of a group which might/must find it difficult to speak for themselves, *researching for* them.

## Participatory and collaborative approaches: 'researching with'

A researcher may research with a particular set of people in order to represent them. Participants may have collaborated at any stage of the research, through design, data collection, analysis, and representation of the results and conclusions. Sometimes this may be termed 'giving a voice' to the participants who may not otherwise have access to public spaces in which they can make their perspectives known. Sometimes it is more literally a 'giving a voice', in the sense of voice as being in words. This would be a result of researching with participants who do not most readily express themselves in words. This issue is discussed in Walmsley (2001), Riddell, Wilkinson and Baron (1998) and Stalker (1998).

## Approaches which speak for a group

Some advocacy research is not collaborative. One reason for not collaborating applies when those being researched are not only inarticulate about their situation but also unlikely to be able to contribute usefully to a collaborative process. Especially relevant in education is research on very young children, and on students with particular emotional or behavioural difficulties or learning difficulties.

## Representation

The issue of 'representation' is both significant and difficult for researchers using either of these approaches. This is inevitable. Since research tends to be reported in words, it is not straightforward to represent a group who are not expressing their perspectives verbally. The issue is discussed in relation to this group in Atkinson and Walmsely (1999), Christensen (2004) and Connolly (2008). (Also see the page on representation more generally.)

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: EPISTEMOLOGY AND POLITICAL RELATIONS

## Introduction

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. One aspect of this is the role of ethical or political values in the construction or discovery of knowledge. This is especially relevant to educational researchers who are taking a critical approach to their studies.

What is at issue here? The relation of knowledge to values and the relation of knowledge to truth are particularly important issues over which disagreements occur. There is a continuing debate between those on the one hand who are looking for certainty and for generalisable, universal knowledge. On the other hand, are those who consider that such knowledge is, at best, unattainable (except for logical truths) and at worst, as contributing to a technical rationality which is damaging to education.

I tend to the second way of thinking. In Educational Research For Social Justice, I say (pp. 44-5):

"Some researchers argue that facts are objective and unbiased if, and only if, they are not contaminated by values. They say that once the facts are established, values are brought into play in order to use the knowledge well: to make progress and to improve things. Against this, others would argue that such facts do not, and could not, exist. A particular facet of this debate is the place of power in the construction of values and knowledge, including in some Foucauldian versions, the ethics underpinning the 'regimes of truth' which constitute knowledge in any particular society. One consequence of this position is a radical uncertainty about the very possibility of knowledge and truth. These are complex arguments, with more than two sides to them; scepticism about the possibility of reaching any objective facts or certain, universal truth comes from more than one theoretical debate."

For instance, Maxine Green, writing about the USA, explains (1994, pp.424-5):

"Some of the restiveness [about mainstream educational science] has been a response to the apparent uselessness of research in overcoming "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991) that have plagued the schools and raised obstacles to achievement for so long. Some has been a response to a sense of powerlessness when it comes to the suffering and violations of children and young people: the drug cultures, the endemic violence, the abandonments, the gropings of so many young strangers whose worlds are not understood. A good deal, of course, has been due to the disenchantment mentioned above and to the separation of research or positive inquiry from moral considerations or the ethical perplexities troubling so many Americans today. The literature of critical theory, with its emphasis on

the linking of mainstream science and “instrumental rationality” (Held, 1980, pp. 379-400), and the technical controls to which it has so often led have convinced many people of the problems of contemporary science. For Jurgen Habermas, it was the “a priori organization of our experience in the behavioral system of instrumental action” (1971, p. 309) that explained the intention to effect technical control over processes conceived to be objectified. Like Habermas and the other scholars of the Frankfurt School (Held, 1980, pp. 65-70), certain educators began to see connections between this and the development of a bureaucratically administered, postindustrial society. Seeking ways of thinking and inquiring other than those associated with mainstream science, numbers then turned their attention to critiques of ideology and, when possible, the clarification of discourse. Their objective, in most cases, became the emancipation of people from linguistic and cognitive constraints, from domination of many kinds. Other thinkers and researchers were attracted to the methods of ethnographers, to humanistic psychologists, and to participant or “qualitative” research in live contexts and with live informants in always changing schools.”

The debate is a complex one but may be simplified and summarised as follows:

1. There is the question of the role of political relations (i.e. social power relations, values, culture, history and so forth) in the discovery and construction of knowledge;
2. There is the (related) question of the nature of knowledge (e.g. its relation to truth) and hence, of what kind of knowledge is relevant to any particular enquiry and its underlying purpose.

## The role of political relations

The first question, the role of political relations is a complex one. It includes issues of the relationship of facts to values, of the nature of power, and of the kinds of inquiry which would best provide knowledge – universal, generalisable knowledge, or particular knowledge of specific contexts. Some of this is discussed in Griffiths (1998) especially Chapter 4. Maxine Greene alludes to the significance of values and perspectives for epistemology in the passage quoted in the introduction. Perspectival knowledge is situated and context dependent. It may be contrasted to the ‘view from nowhere’ or the ‘God’s eye view’ (also see pages on theory/perspectival knowledge).The criticism of the search for universal knowledge as contributing to technical rationality, and so to a form of domination, implies the need for other non oppressive forms of knowledge. Bridges, Smeyers and Smith (eds.) (2008) contains a number of articles discussing the confidence that can be placed in a range of sources of educational knowledge including: systematic reviews, large scale population studies, case study, stories and narratives, action research, philosophical enquiry, and the use of the imagination through engagement with literature.

## The nature of knowledge

The second question, the nature of knowledge, is also complex and is addressed by separate, although overlapping approaches.

1. In his influential ‘Report on Knowledge’, The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard argues for a distinction between knowledge that can be measured against a yardstick of efficiency (information and competence) and other kinds of knowledge for instance, that which is concerned with ethics, ethical wisdom, individual human beings or with beauty. As he points out, knowledge of information and competence can be measured and then expressed using numbers, which is why it can be stored in computers. In contrast, ethics, ethical wisdom, aesthetic knowledge or knowledge of a person cannot. All of these may make use of numbers but they each require a human being, a knower, before they can be adequately expressed or preserved. They are more likely to be expressed in words, stories, pictures, gestures, dance, etc.
2. Also useful is the classic discussion by Gilbert Ryle (1949, 1971) of ‘knowledge that’ (i.e. knowledge expressed as a proposition) and ‘knowledge how’ or ‘knowledge how to’ (i.e. practical knowledge of procedures, skills and techniques). For more discussion, see: Barrow (1987), Griffiths (1987), Mason (1999) and Star (2006).
3. Another view understands knowledge as a social construction, only to be understood and evaluated in the context of specific social practices. This view can be applied to both to theoretical and practical knowledge. See for instance, Burbules and Smeyers (2002) and Griffiths (2006).
4. Ethical wisdom features in many current approaches. The concept derives, implicitly or explicitly, from Aristotle’s discussion of intelligent practical action. He distinguished praxis, roughly translatable as practical wisdom, from techne, technical know-how, on the one hand and episteme, contemplative knowledge, on the other.
5. Knowledge need not be seen as differing from reality; as being a representation of something distinct from knowledge itself. In their article Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers say (2008, p.213):

“With this understanding, knowledge reaches us not as something we receive but as a response, which brings forth new worlds because it necessarily adds something (which was not present anywhere before it appeared) to what came before.”

The creation of practical knowledge is argued by many researchers to being key to action research or reflective practice of various kinds. In one version of this, Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead argue:

First, we explain the relationship between the idea of ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘teacher as ‘educational theorist’, and how we try to honour those relationships in our living practice. Making this relationship explicit enables us to demonstrate the methodological and logical meanings in our pedagogical practices.

Second, we explain how we judge our professional practices in terms of our identified critical living standards of judgement that are themselves a transformation of our ontological and epistemological values into the social criteria that act as the grounds of our living ontological and epistemological standards of judgement.

Third, we explain how by integrating the analysis of our values into the synthesis of our living practices we can come to a deeper understanding and living realisation of our lives as a creative work of art. We link our ideas of the good with the fulfilment of the aesthetic, in the sense that the realisation of our embodied values is accompanied by a feeling of a resonating harmony.

## Truth and truthfulness

Academic arguments rage in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences about the nature of truth. These arguments are many-sided and complex. There is no space here to do more than allude to them. Bridges' influential discussions (1999, 2003) summarise some mainstream philosophical discussions about different theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, etc) in relation to education. These theories are discussed further in Heikkenen et al. (2000, 2001). Walker and Unterhalter (2004) discuss the significance of multiple perspectives, experiences and interpretations when judging how far to trust a story or set of stories. MacLure (2003) draws on Derrida and Foucault to argue that truths are always textual, discursive and suffused with power relations. Such truths cannot be straightforwardly reported, she argues. Similarly, the feminist philosopher Lugones argues that those whose identity is marginalised (Lugones, 1989, p.285):

"know truths that only the fool can speak and only the trickster can play out without harm."

Carr's (1998) book discusses these issues from a contrasting perspective which seeks to avoid 'intellectually indiscriminate postmodernism'.

Griffiths and Macleod (2008) discuss a useful strategy for sidestepping some of the arguments about the nature of truth, drawing on a discussion by Bernard Williams. He proposes that we focus less on truth and more on truthfulness. He usefully distinguishes two basic virtues associated with truthfulness: accuracy and sincerity. He points out (Williams, 2002, p.45):

Each of the basic virtues of truth involves certain kinds of resistance to what moralists might call temptation – to fantasy and the wish.

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: PERSPECTIVE, REFLEXIVITY AND BIAS

## Introduction

Critical research takes a political stance. Therefore the issue of bias, and the associated issues of perspective, position, prejudice and reflexivity, are relevant to understanding and carrying out critical research. All researchers unite in their condemnation of bias. However there is less unity in how bias is understood. One group of researchers makes accusations of bias at research which takes a clear moral or political stance, or which in the words of one influential paper on research makes it clear 'whose side we are on' (Troyna and Carrington, 1989). These researchers assume that it is possible to achieve value-free knowledge which is universally true for all people, places and times. Such researchers often look to science, especially physics, as a model. They view any influence on research design and findings by a researcher's values, ideology or positionality as bias which needs to be corrected.

However, the opposite view is taken by those researchers who do make their political and moral values clear. They challenge the notion of value-free knowledge, which they see as implying that it is possible to escape from the situation which is being researched and to see it from some outsider position. Challengers have called this an aspiration to a 'God's eye view' (Haraway, 1989) or the 'the view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1989) in order to emphasise its impossibility. This group of researchers argues that since all research is affected

by the social and political position of the researcher, making this position clear is one way of avoiding bias. They argue that researchers not only take political and ethical stances, but they also inhabit them (as do all human beings). Like all human beings they inhabit specific social roles and specific historical, geographical locations.

The subtitle of my book, *Educational Research for Social Justice: Getting off the Fence*, indicates that I am in the latter group. This page should be read with this in mind!

In that book I say (1998, p.133):

"Bias comes not from having ethical and political positions – this is inevitable – but from not acknowledging them. Not only does such acknowledgment help to unmask any bias that is implicit in those views, but it helps to provide a way of responding critically and sensitively to the research."

Discussions of bias and its relation to stance use various terms and concepts. These may be differently understood, depending on the theoretical perspective underlying the discussion. Particularly significant are perspective and positionality and prejudice, which, I argue, should not be confused with 'bias'. In the following paragraphs I comment on the meaning of each of these. Then follows a section responding to the question: if these do not constitute bias, then what is bias? Finally there is a brief summary of reflexivity and its role.

## Perspective and positionality

Perspective refers to the context which influences what a person can see and how they interpret it. It may indicate ideology or value systems (e.g. feminist, socialist, anti-racist, post-colonial and queer research), and it may indicate positionality which refers, more narrowly, to the social and political landscape inhabited by a researcher (e.g. gender, nationality, race, religion, sexuality, (dis)abilities, social class and social status).

## Prejudice

In everyday language, the term 'prejudice' is used more or less interchangeably with 'bias'. But in the more technical language of educational research it may need to be used more cautiously. The term is used by Gadamer to refer to the inescapable historical and social position of researchers and philosophers, and so it becomes a positive term rather than a pejorative. Prejudice is an essential element in his epistemological approach to truth and method. Gadamer is an influential theorist in relation to critical theory. The concept of prejudice forms the basis of his disagreements with Habermas, also hugely influential in critical theory. The debate between them is significant enough to have become labelled the Gadamer-Habermas debate. A useful discussion of this is to be found in Hostetler (1992).

## Bias: if it is not perspective, positionality or prejudice, then what is it?

Bias, unlike perspective, positionality or prejudice, is to be eliminated as far as possible: to avoid it is an 'intellectual virtue'. Bias is a skewed view that is presented in such a way that the audience for the research is not in a position to allow for it. There are various ways of skewing the research, for instance by looking only for confirming evidence and overlooking or ignoring disconfirming evidence; or by reporting only some of the results and suppressing others. That is, it is something that can be guarded against in the process of research by (i) using rigorous methods of sampling, data gathering, analysis (including representation), literature search and declaring interests that arise from funding (etc.) and (ii) reflexivity about positionality. The reader of research has a right to expect that a researcher has guarded against bias. That is, that the researcher has exercised academic or intellectual virtue: i.e. has done what is right in academic, intellectual terms. Bridges discusses intellectual virtue in the Ethics and educational research resource, also available through BERA resources. In effect, intellectual virtue is the main subject of most Research Ethics policies (BERA, EERA frameworks). Pring (2001) and Bridges (2003) both discuss how far intellectual and moral virtues can be distinguished, using, for instance, concepts such as lying and trust to make the argument.

There is an interesting discussion in a special issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education about how procedures may or may not help guard against bias – in that the adoption of set procedures may itself affect the content, processes and conclusions that are drawn from educational research (Bridges, 2006, Smith, 2006). Bridges outlines how researchers might provide confidence in their research by evolving procedures and language in common. Smith, on the other hand, warns against too much systematization, arguing that this 'threatens to cut educational research free of the wider range of ideas and theories that should govern or at least inform it.'

## Reflexivity

Whatever their differences, almost all commentators agree that reflexivity is significant. However, reflexivity is itself a much discussed and often contested concept. Denzin and Lincoln's collection provides discussions of reflexivity in relation to ideologies, positioning and values, with an extended discussion in Marcus (1998). In general, reflexivity is an explicit self consciousness about the researcher's (or research team's, and/or the research funder's) social, political and value positions, in relation to how these might have influenced the design, execution and interpretation of the theory, data and conclusions (Griffiths, 1998; Greenbank, 2003). Such self-consciousness needs to acknowledge that the self is not fully transparent to itself, so enough description of the researcher needs to be given for the audience to make judgements about his or her social and political positionality. Interesting reflective discussions about this cam be found in a collection by trhe Personal Narratives Group (1989). For instance Marjorie Shostak discusses a now standard work of anthropology she had carried out twenty years earlier, showing how her younger positionality had affected what she saw and how she interpreted it. (See also Shostak, 2000.) However it is also

important to guard against making the researcher the central figure in the research. This tendency has sometimes been called ‘vanity ethnography’. Articles arguing against this tendency include Patai (1994), Pillow (2003) Smith (2006) and Burman (2006). Beyond self-consciousness is explicit consciousness about the expectations that the readers will bring to the genre that the researcher has used.

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: REPRESENTATION AND LEGITIMATION

## Introduction

Representation refers to the way that knowledge presented (or learnt or understood, or responded to – see epistemology page), is re-presented by the researcher. So long as knowledge is taken to be an external objective reality that can be described in factual, true statements, there no real problem about representation. However a problem arose in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of the growing influence of phenomenological qualitative research on the one hand, and action and process based inquiries on the other. This problem became known as the ‘crisis of representation’. At the same time and for the same reasons there was also a ‘crisis of legitimation’ about how research could be evaluated if there were no unchanging, measurable external reality against which to measure it. To put it another way, there is a question about how the validity of research should be judged. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) discuss all this in their influential model of ‘seven moments of qualitative research’ in which they divide the history of qualitative research into seven phases. This model is usefully summarised in Holt (2003).

## Representation: What’s wrong with straight reports in plain prose that just stick to the facts?

All representation involves choices and judgements. The decision about how to edit and frame a report obviously involves judgement. But so does the decisions about which medium to use, and then within that, which genre to use. The medium may be text or it may be visual (pictures, diagrams), numeric (numbers, graphs), performances (theatrical, musical), or some combination of these. Each of

these media supports a number of different genres. To take just one example, a text based report may be written as an orthodox research report, as a storied account of process, as the voices of the participants or as poetry. Orthodox research reports may be like reports in the sciences, or they may be like government policy documents. Storied accounts may be, implicitly, tales with a happy ending, or perhaps, a story of heroic failure. The voices may be presented without commentary or with academic or journalistic commentary. Poems can be sonnets, nursery rhymes or limericks. And so on and so on. Any account is influenced by the genres available to the teller: those available to the participants providing evidence, to the researcher and, of course, to the audience for the report. In other words, whether or not researchers acknowledge it, they are always already in their texts, in the judgements and choices they have made.

Furthermore, as Walshaw (2001) argues, both researcher and audience are embedded within relations of domination and subordination. So all the genres available, including the genre of 'plain prose' are already inscribed with these political relations (Walshaw, 2001, p.6/8):

These forces work through the text in ways that neither the writer nor the reader can fully anticipate or control, so that the text becomes inherently unstable, in flux, constituted by traces of other signs and symbolic statements. … Since there can never be a clear unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning, the writer can never be sure how, at any given moment, the text will be interpreted. … It is in this way that knowledge is politically and historically constituted, 'made' by human communicative action.

Stronach and MacLure (1997) provide an example of how an apparently straightforward write-up of an life story interview with a head teacher, 'Jack', is structured by expectations of research paradigms and personal narratives – and by the perceptions of the writer, including their perceptions of gender. Two different write-ups are offered from the same interview, and compared with Jack's own expectations about the representation of his own life story. This deconstruction does not, however, end up with a single suggestion about how Jack is to be represented. Rather it points not only to the limits of orthodox representations and their pitfalls, but also to the inherent openness of representation, so that it aims to 'deny the reader that comfort of a shared ground with the author, foreground ambivalence and undermine the authority of their own assertions' (p.57).

## Some responses to the problem of representation

In response to the perceived problems of representation, researchers have experimented with a variety of other forms. One response has been the production of personal narratives. For instance, Marilyn Johnston's (1997) tale of collaboration during a longitudinal study of school/university partnerships is an example of an account that uses narrative and preserves ambivalence as it aims to maintain tensions through dialogue, to acknowledge rather than wish away power relations and to demonstrate openness rather than the closure of an ending (happy or otherwise). Patti Lather's (1997) article describes how she and her co-author, Chris Smithies, responded to the task of 'telling stories that belong to others [the women with HIV/AIDS that they were working with] 'in such a way that responds

to the crisis of representation' (p.286) but which 'reaches towards a generally accessible public horizon' (p.268). They created a 'messy text' including subtext commentary, poems, letters, speeches, emails and images.

Other responses have moved away from reporting stories to writing them or to non-textual representations such as film or drama. This may be termed a poetic turn in representation (Sparkes, Nilges, Swan and Dowling, 2003). Action research and self-study regularly include personal stories written by the researcher, alongside other data, which may be in non-textual forms (Weber and Mitchell, 2004; Mitchell, Weber and O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005; Seeley and Reason, 2006). There has also been considerable interest in personal narratives written by the researcher as 'autoethnography'. Campbell (2000) explains some reasons for not only fictionalising data but also for turning it into fiction. Clough (2002) discusses and exemplifies representing data in fiction, an approach discussed in de Freitas (2003), Sparkes (2003) and Wyatt (2007). Some researchers have turned to poetry (Rath, 2001; Saunders, 2003; 2006a; Spindler, 2008). Some have used visual representations or performance (Denzin, 2003a, 2003b; Kearney and Hyle, 2004; Weber and Mitchell, 2004; Griffiths, Windle and Simms, 2006)

Some of these alternative forms of data representation are the subject of an article by Eisner (1997) who assesses their 'promise and perils'. The question of legitimation of these alternative forms continues to be relevant. The nature of truth, of evidence and of knowledge in alternative representations are widely discussed especially in articles themselves drawing on such representations (e.g. Campbell, 2000; Clough, 2002; Stanley, 2002; Denzin, 2003b; Sparkes et al., 2003; Holt, 2003; Saunders, 2006b; Griffiths and Macleod, 2008; Spindler, 2008).

## Validity

The crisis of legitimation has not been resolved. Validity continues to be an issue for qualitative, critical research. Much of the debate is a response to the specialised use of the term in the natural sciences, and in that educational research which seeks generalisable kinds of knowledge (See epistemology page). The natural sciences have developed a specialised, technical vocabulary suitable for themselves. In this discourse, 'validity' determines whether the research measures that which it was intended to measure in order to determine how close to the truth the research results are.

One response has been post-modern playfulness. Suggestions for alternative understandings of validity include 'rhyzomatic validity' or 'ironic validity' (Patti Lather, 1993; 2003). Altheide and Johnson (2000) list 'successor validity', 'catalytic validity' and 'transgressive validity' among others. Another response has been to abandon the concept altogether as being bound up with the quest for certainty (Altheide and Johnson, 2000). In some discussions, 'validity' appears to have been equated with 'quality', as in the two linked articles by Heikkenen et al. (2007) and Feldman (2007), or even with truth itself (Hammersley, 1990). Other suggestions can be found in a useful article by Sparkes (2001). My own suggestion is to draw from the original understanding of the term (Griffiths and Macleod, 2008). We point out that 'valid' was not originally a word especially associated with measurement. Rather it comes from the Latin validus, meaning

'strong'. So valid generally refers to the strength of evidence and arguments. The word retains this original meaning in ordinary speech. Only sometimes does it refer to measurement.

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: SOCIAL JUSTICE

## Introduction

Justice is a central concern for critical approaches. As the Introduction to this set of pages stated, critical research aims at understanding, uncovering, illuminating, and/or transforming how educational aims, dilemmas, tensions and hopes are related to social divisions and power differentials. Social divisions and power differentials are, precisely, the concerns of social justice. Within these general concerns, there is a range of issues that researchers focus on, using a variety of methodologies (e.g. see Vincent, 2003). Some researchers tend to stay with one specific issue while others work in a variety of areas, using a diversity of methods and methodologies.

## A focus on content of research

Some social justice research focuses primarily on the object of the research. This can be policy oriented. For instance Ball (1997) examined the previous 20 years of British (especially English, Thatcherite) education policy, to argue that policy aimed at efficiency was in tension with the aims of social justice. Hoskins (2008) and Hoskins and Crick (2008) pursue this theme in relation to European education policy, to argue that while its neo-liberal, market-oriented, instrumental,

efficiency-led discourses are powerful, they do not obliterate alternative ones of social justice, democracy and solidarity. Other research focuses on specific groups of people identified by, for instance: race, social class, gender, disability, emotional and behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties, sexuality, religion, poverty, ethnicity, language, nationality or area of the world. Or the group may be a classroom, school, community or local authority (e.g. Griffiths and Davies, 1995; Gewirtz, 2006; Reay, 2006; Fielding, 2008). Alternatively, rather than focus on particular groups, some focus on particular processes, which affect and are affected by social divisions and power differentials. These include difference, equality, fairness, opportunity, power, oppression, fair distribution, sharing, empowerment, respect, self-respect, community, participation, belonging, action, listening, voice, citizenship and democracy.

## A focus on methodology in research

There are arguments in educational research about the relation of methodology to social justice research. Much of the research into social justice has been carried out using qualitative methods, and it is clear that a phenomenological approach is likely to be appropriate for examining issues of identity, voice, empowerment, perceived fairness, and so on. Action researchers often claim a particular affinity with social justice concerns (Armstrong and Moore, 2004; O'Neill, Woods and Webster, 2005; Griffiths, 2009). Large scale survey research also makes well-founded claims to have contributed to social justice. For example, research into the exclusions of black students, especially boys, depended on well-designed statistical surveys (Osler and Hill, 1999); similarly for research into the proportions of students in HE in relation to their social class (Reay, Davies, David and Ball, 2001). In my own work I summarise general principles of social justice in educational research depending on epistemologies of uncertainty and revision (Griffiths 1998). These apply equally to quantitative, qualitative and action-oriented research. Although large scale quantitative research is often thought to deal in generalisable outcomes, I would argue that these outcomes, too, are subject to uncertainty and revision. For example, events have moved on and the context has changed since the research into exclusions of black boys and into the proportions of different social classes of students in HE was carried out. Such changes sometimes happen precisely in response to the original research itself. They mean that neither piece of research likely to be strictly replicable. The results were dependent on the (changing) context.

## Concepts of social justice

Concepts of social justice are relevant to issues of both content and methodology, so, not surprisingly, educational research has also paid attention directly to different conceptions of social justice. Different conceptions may lead to different research foci and designs although the various concepts are not necessarily exclusive and may only be a matter of emphasis. Social justice is, at root, an interest in what is thought to be right, fair and good for a society. In the Politics, Aristotle influentially wrote:

“People … are drawn together by a common interest, in proportion as each attains a share in the good life. The good life is the chief end both for the community as a whole and for each of us individually.” (III, 6, 1278b6)

The good in the sphere of politics is justice, and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest.” (III, 11, 1282b14)

This formulation is inevitably bound up with the cultures and contexts of particular societies. What is considered ‘the good life’ will vary over time and culture. Clark (2006) discusses this in relation to changes in current societies and Walker (2003) in relation to cultural differences of nation and of social class.

Aristotle went on to discuss the concept in terms of distribution, an interpretation which remains relevant. Two thousand years later, we remain concerned about the justice of who gets what in terms of material resources, time or opportunities. This interpretation is often referred to as ‘justice as fairness’ (Rawls, 1971). The issue of distribution has become strongly connected to ideas of equality. Equality (and so fair distribution) can be understood in a number of ways, including:

Equality as meaning sameness, a meaning extrapolated from mathematical identity

Equality as implying the existence of differences which need to be treated fairly

Equality of opportunity

Equality of outcome

Each of these meanings may relate to either or both of:

Equality for groups

Equality for individuals

A second interpretation of what makes up a good society acknowledges the importance of distribution but regards it as inadequate to understanding social justice. This interpretation draws attention to what has been termed ‘recognition’, a technical term which is very similar in meaning to ‘respect’. It refers to the way that some people are (dis)respected because of their social or political affiliations, for instance their gender, race, sexuality, social class and (dis) abilities. In a useful article on justice, Fraser (1995) introduces the idea of recognition and discusses it in relation to the idea of distribution. She argues that the two ideas are analytically separable, but nevertheless in any specific context they are likely to interrelate.

A third interpretation introduces the idea of associational justice. This refers to the relative chances that particular groups or individuals have of ‘participating fully in decisions which affect the conditions within which they live and act’ (Power and Gewirtz, 2001, p.41). In an interesting article, Gewirtz (2006) shows how this interpretation can be contexualised by discussing a specific instance of a child and parent experiencing difficulties with the school system.

Finally, a fourth interpretation emphasises that attention to the concept of social justice needs to acknowledge that 'the good society' is always an aspiration rather than an achievement. In Griffiths (1998) I present a set of principles for working for social justice in schools which had been worked out collaboratively with a group of head teachers and deputies. It includes the following two principles (p.148):

"Utopia is not to be found. A fair school still needs to improve. Improvements always come as patchwork or ragbag. There can never be a tidy overarching rationale or masterplan for improving fairness. Events move too fast."

More generally, social justice is radically open (Griffiths, 2003: p.55):

"Social justice is a verb, that is, it is a dynamic state of affairs in that it is never – could never – be achieved once and for all. It is always subject to revision."

An important implication is that social justice is always in a state of becoming, rather than in one of being. As social justice is bound up with personal and group identities (e.g. of gender, of class, of having a voice or of being oppressed) the issue of becoming applies equally to the teachers and learners involved.

Inevitably, specific conceptual interpretations of social justice will be more useful in some contexts than in others. This especially applies to certain groups. Learners classified as having Special Educational Needs are one such group. Slee argues that (2001, p.167):

"It is important that in a general consideration of education research and social justice space be afforded to interrogating the shortcomings of social justice research in education with regard to disabled students."

The argument is complicated because people with learning difficulties are often discussed in terms of 'inclusion', rather than 'social justice', though, as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) made clear, the two are interlinked. Riddell, Baron and Wilkinson (1998) discuss a range of conceptions in order to clarify which of these are most useful for specific groups of people. O'Neill, Woods and Webster (2005) focus on global refugees, arguing that a holistic conception of justice is of crucial importance to understanding and promoting social integration in urban environments.

Assumptions about how educational research is itself related to social justice should also be considered. In Griffiths (2009) I argue that educational research can be research as, for or mindful of social justice – or all three. Firstly, in research AS social justice it can be carried out in order to enhance social justice in the process of the research itself. For instance attention can be paid to equality, empowerment and voice as part of the process. Secondly, in research FOR social justice it can be carried out in order to improve conditions, either by producing facts to base policy on, or by illuminating and representing little heard perspectives, or by re-theorising in a way that has the potential to convince others to act differently. Thirdly, and finally, in research MINDFUL OF social justice, the research may or may not be focused directly on social justice in the process or

focus of the research but pays attention to the range of social justice concerns as part of the conduct of research in other areas.

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# CRITICAL APPROACHES IN QUALITATIVE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: THE RELATION OF SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THESE ISSUES

## Introduction

It is important to be aware of a range of theoretical approaches within critical research. There is however no tidy relation between individual theorists and

methodologies. The relationship between the two is dynamic and dialogical, as theory becomes interpreted and re-interpreted, invented and re-invented, and as methodologies evolve. The central theories are often compex and difficult. The different methodologies are diverse and have fuzzy boundaries. Moreover different theories often overlap with each other, as do different methodologies. In the following brief pages, all I shall to do is point out some of the main contours of the area, and give some signposts. This approach requires individual researchers to learn more about the details of those parts of the landscape that seem most relevant to their theoretical and political commitments. These should be read in conjunction with this one.

The areas of theory most usually considered to underpin or inform critical research are critical theory, including marxian approaches, perspectival epistemology and postmodern /post-structural approaches. Generally, it could be said that all of these are theoretical perspectives which provide a critical approach to research. However, none of the areas is clearly definable. Each of them have fuzzy boundaries. Indeed the major figures placed within them sometimes disagree with the placing and often have serious disagreements among themselves. It is sometimes hard to know where critical theory, perspectival approaches and postmodernism start and end. There are, for instance, feminists and anti-racists or post-colonialists who embrace postmodern or post-structural theory and others who reject it as being antithetical to their political project. Other TLRP pages say some more on the background to this state of affairs.

It is not even generally agreed that the areas are separable. Some commentators claim that perspectival epistemology and some postmodern/post-structural approaches ARE critical theory. Michael Apple, himself an educational theorist associated with critical theory, explains in an interview (2001, p.viii):

“I assume by the question that when we say “critical theory” we actually mean what I prefer to call “critical educational studies” which is a much broader category [than work deriving from the Frankfurt school]. It includes Marxist and neo-Marxist work and also includes work that is more related to the Frankfurt school I spoke about just a minute ago. But it also includes multiple kinds of feminist analyses, critical cultural studies, and many other critical approaches. Because of this, I’m going to define it as that broader set of approaches.”

However it is probably safer to begin by recognising the relative intellectual autonomy of perspectival approaches and postmodern or post-structuralist ones from each other and from critical theory.

## Critical Theory

Critical theory is both political and epistemological in intent. It aims to move beyond the obvious in order to uncover the effects of political structures and their associated power relations. Its ultimate intent is emancipatory. To some, the term ‘critical theory’ signifies the school of thought deriving from the Frankfurt School. This was a collection of theorists in the 1930s influenced by Marx, but critical of narrow, orthodox Marxism. They drew on a wide range of theoretical resources, notably Freudian and critical cultural theory. Currently, the most

influential theorist who can be identified as working within the tradition of this school is Habermas. However various other leading thinkers were influenced by this tradition, and are considered to be critical theorists. Critical theorists who are especially significant in education currently include Gadamer, Bourdieu and Freire. There have recently been a number of offshoots from the mainstream, each of which tends to have its own content and traditions of literature. They include critical literacy (de Souza and Andreotti), critical race theory (Mirza and Joseph, 2009) and critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano and Torres, 2008).

Although the underlying intention of critical approaches is easy to grasp, much of the theory itself is dense and difficult. Hinchey (1998) provides a useful and very approachable basic introduction to critical theory in education for classroom researchers. General overviews are provided by Popkewitz and Fendler (1999) and Apple, Au and Gandin (2009). In the UK the Institute for Education Policy Studies focuses especially on Marxist and Freirean theories (http://www.ieps.org.uk/iepsbios.php). Grenfell and James (1999) focus on Bourdieu. For an perspective which combines Bourdieu and feminism, see Adkins and Skeggs (2004).

## Perspectival approaches

Perspectival approaches are opposed to epistemologies which would, as critics put it, be trying to establish 'the view from nowhere.' Such approaches include epistemologies and methodologies from the stance of feminism, antiracism, queer theory, and/or post-colonialism. This list is not exhaustive, nor could it be. There are also perspectives derived from specific positioning within power structures related to disability, nationality, religion, and so forth. All these categories are overlapping, fluid and shifting. For all their differences, perspectival approaches agree about the inescapability of perspective, given the way that, variously, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and geopolitics constrain our understandings of the world as well as our capacity to act within the world.

Youdell provides an introduction to feminist and queer educational research, especially action research. Sparkes (ed) (1992) includes articles on queer theory in education, as well as on feminist perspectives. The journal Gender and Education is a source of articles which take a feminist approach in educational research in the UK. The BERA Special Interest Groups (SIGS) on Race, Ethnicity and Education (which includes a subgroup on Critical Race Theory), Inclusion, and Social Justice are useful sources of information and networking. Lavia (2007) discusses postcolonialism in the context of inclusive education and social justice. The European Educational Research Association, also has Networks on social justice, on intercultural education, and on inclusion (http://www.eera-ecer.eu/networks/).

## Postmodern and post-structuralist approaches

Postmodern and post structuralist approaches have been very influential in educational research over at least the last two decades. It is impossible to list postmodernists or post-structuralists, because these approaches logically resist definition since they have in common an incredulity towards universal and general

explanations, theories or definitions. Among those who are often described as postmodern or post-structuralist are a number of theorists who have been particularly prominent. Foucault in particular has been recognised as significant, especially with regard to his analyses of the archeology of knowledge, discipline, power/knowledge, identity (in his books on the history of sexuality) and genealogy. Lyotard, has also been influential in relation to critical research, especially his book The Postmodern Condition with its analysis of the increasing identification of knowledge with information, and the simultaneous expansion of performativity. These two theorists have, not surprisingly, been particularly useful in educational theorising, because they focus on knowledge and learning. Derrida has been particularly identified with deconstruction, an approach which has strongly influenced many educational researchers using discourse analysis. Recently the Deleuze and Guattari partnership has become more influential in educational discourse. They discuss becoming, process and transformation all of which are relevant to education.

Some feminisms embrace postmodern and post structuralist approaches, while others see the two as fundamentally opposed. The argument continues within educational research. I discussed this in an early article (Griffiths, 1995). St Pierre (2000) is a more recent overview. A special issue of Comparative Education investigates postcolonial perspectives. It has an introductory article by the editors, which is freely accessible on the web. A special issue of Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood focuses on ‘applying critical theory, post-structural, postmodern, anti-colonial and related perspectives to early childhood practices, policies and research’ (http://www.wwwords.co.uk/ciec/content/pdfs/9/issue9_3.asp).

## Methodological approaches

There is no one methodological approach or set of approaches which can claim to be the best fit with any or all of the theoretical approaches discussed here. Rather a range of approaches are suitable. The issue is more how they are used, and to what end, than about the details of the technique. For instance action-oriented research methods would appear to be well suited to critical research, and so they are. However, equally, they can be used instrumentally, fitting well with technical-rational, rather than critical, emancipatory aims. Similarly, discourse analysis can be used to uncover assumptions and silences in the discourses of education. However it can also be used simply to describe and measure practices: to understand rather than to transform practice. Finally, collaborative, participative methods can be used democratically and collectively, but they can also be used to consult, to give a sense of ownership and so finally to further the ends of the researcher rather than the ends of the researched.

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