



Philosophical Approaches in the Social Sciences

The Importance of Philosophy in
Understanding/Conducting
Educational Research



Objectives

To enable participants to:

Review core concepts of the philosophies of social science and consider their importance and relevance to educational research

Understand the need to map this landscape in their own research journeys

Consider critically the role of values in educational research




Is Philosophy Important?

- Why is it important to position oneself, philosophically, when conducting educational research?
- What does our philosophical positioning enable the reader to do when reading our research?
- What can happen – during the research process and afterwards -if we are not clear about our philosophical perspective (s)?



Educational Research

- ‘...research is **systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry** which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and wisdom’. (Bassegy, 1999)
- ‘... educational research is not just a rule-driven means of ‘finding out’ ... but an approach to skillful and intellectual inquiry that is rooted in ... multiple ways of viewing the educational worlds we inhabit’ (Morrison, 2007)



(Philosophical) Assumptions

‘...at every point in our research – in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers – we inject a host of assumptions. ...

Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves!) can really divine what our research has been or what it is now saying’ (Crotty 1998:17)



Philosophical Assumptions

`Ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, give rise to methodological considerations; and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection. This view moves us beyond regarding research methods as simply a technical exercise and is concerned with understanding the world; this is informed by how we view our world (s), what we take understanding to be, and what we see as the purposes of understanding'



Starting to be Clearer...

‘Well, apart from the fact that it’s necessary to include this in a Master’s dissertation, I see the point being that since I learned about these perspectives, it has impacted how I understand people. I guess it underpins your perception of the social world. Therefore, telling the reader how you perceive the social world is important as it underpins the interpretations and meanings that you make of research data you are handling I suppose! What do you think?’



What is Social and Educational Research?

- “All social research sets out with specific *purposes* from a particular *position*, and aims to *persuade* readers of the significance of its claims: these claims are always broadly *political*” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012; 4)
- “Rather must it (educational research) seek to articulate and examine the relationship between the educational realities it purports to explain and the educational values it unavoidably defends and promotes” (Carr, 1995; 99)



The Four Ps of Social/Educational Research

- **Purposive** – what is often forgotten (as too obvious) is that any piece of research in the social sciences emerges from a distinct purpose (whether or not this is apparent to the reader)
- **Positional** – since research is carried out by people, it is inevitable that the standpoint of the researcher is a fundamental platform on which enquiry is developed. All social research is saturated (however disguised) with positionality



The Four Ps of Social/Educational Research

- **Persuasive** – those who carry out social research aim to persuade readers of the significance of their claims
- **Political** – research which changes nothing – not even the researcher - is not research at all. And since all social research takes place in policy contexts of one form or another, research itself must therefore be seen as inevitably political



The Research Process

- Not just a technical process and the application of techniques (methods).
- Involves philosophical assumptions, beliefs about the nature of the world (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), values and decisions.
- Research is a human activity – a ‘social practice’ (Usher 1996).
- Different people have come to look at the world differently – across time and across cultures.
- We can, therefore, study how ideas about the nature of research have changed over time.



Key Points to Remember...

Ontological Assumptions
give rise to
Epistemological Assumptions
which will have
Methodological Implications
for the choice of particular
Research Methods
and
Methods of Analysing Data



The Rise of Positivism

- Metaphysics, tradition and theology increasingly questioned in the 18th century, given the Enlightenment challenge in Europe.
- Development of reason: rational, empirical, scientific thinking – and the growth of 19th century positivism.
- Early 20th century dominance of the natural sciences (the traditional period). Observable, measurable, social reality. Disciplined, rigorous, scientific and systematic research.
- Search for objectivity, validity and reliability. A quantitative, empirical and predictive emphasis. A natural science model (empirical/analytic)?
- A universalising discourse prioritising generalisable theory?



Phases in the Development of Western Social Science and Educational Research

- The rise of Positivism (19th century)
- Hermeneutic Interpretive Epistemology (19th - mid 20th century)
- Critical Theory (post-war - 1970s)
- Post-modern Approaches (1980s)/Post-colonial
- Contemporary Diversity?



Positivist/Empiricist (Usher, 1996)

- Determinancy (a certain truth that can be known)
- Rationality (convergence on a single explanation)
- Impersonality (objectivity)
- Prediction (generalisations) - generating laws of the social world/social facts
- Unreflexive (focus on methods and outcomes)

Positivism

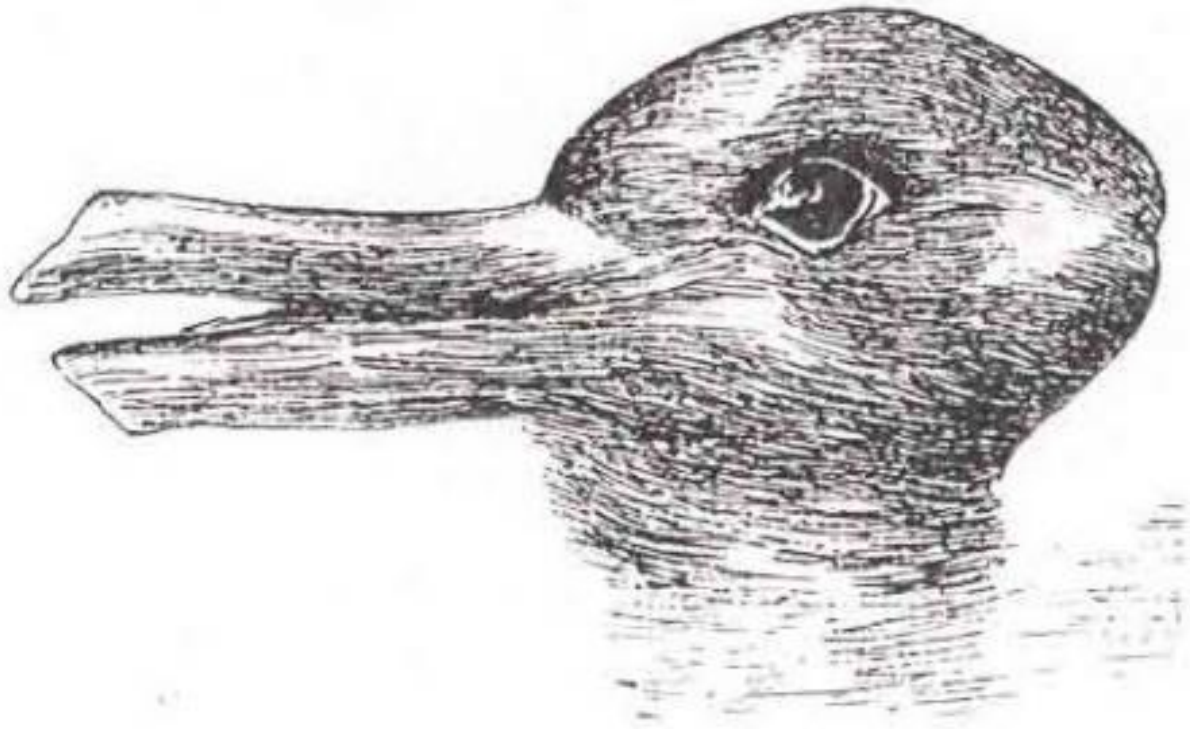
| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| | |
| Ontology | Reality exists |
| Social science is ... | identifying laws and regularities of human behaviour |
| The researcher ... | is detached value-free observer |
| People are ... | objects of study |
| Methodology | quasi-experimental or large scale |
| Research methods e.g. | Questionnaire survey, statistical analysis |

Post-Positivism

- "...scientists 'from within'...challenged its claims to objectivity, precision and certitude...This is a less arrogant form of positivism. It is one that talks of probability rather than certainty, claims a certain level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity, and seeks to approximate the truth rather than aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence." (Crotty, 1998 p.29)
- Karl Popper (1902-94) 'every scientific statement must remain *tentative for ever*.'



What is this?





Hermeneutic/Interpretive Epistemology

- Emergence of varied challenges to positivism (scientism) especially from the mid-20th century.
- Other ways of knowing the social world – more context sensitivity (and historical) – a questioning of universalistic aspirations.
- Development of hermeneutic/interpretive epistemology as ways of understanding different constructions of meaning in social interaction. See Berger & Luckmann (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality*.
- Emphasis on human knowledge for understanding, interpretation, illumination and insight – in the context of social practice.
 - Max Weber - idea of 'verstehen': access individual perspective

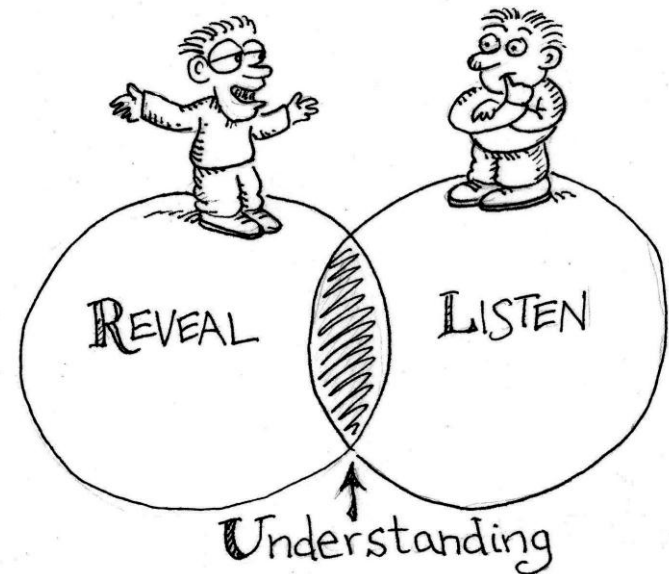


Hermeneutic/Interpretive Epistemology

- The rise of qualitative approaches to research, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, etc.
- Knowledge formation is, therefore, circular, iterative and spiral, not linear and cumulative as portrayed in positivistic epistemology – not objective in a positivistic sense. Reflexivity and dialogue.
- Gadamer: 'double hermeneutic'?

Hermeneutic/Interpretivist (Usher, 1996)

- “To explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour.”
- The researcher plays a further role as interpreter...



Interpretivism

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| | |
| Ontology | Reality is socially constructed |
| Social science is ... | exploring subjective 'meanings' |
| The researcher ... | is subjective, part of social world |
| People are ... | Subjects/participants |
| Methodology | e.g. case study, ethnography |
| Research methods e.g. | Observation, semi-structured interview |



Critical Theory

- Challenges both positivist/empiricist and hermeneutic/interpretive traditions.
- Habermas and links between research and social interests (Frankfurt School).
- Emancipatory interests of critical theory.
- Unmasking ideologies that maintain the status quo by raising consciousness and awareness.
- Understanding for positive change.
- Argues there is no 'objective' knowledge – no neutral or disinterested perspective – all knowledge fits some social interest. Socially constructed.
- Seeks 'undistorted communication' where all statements can be defended by four validity claims (Usher p 23). Dialogue again, but also praxis (informed, committed action).

Critical Theory (Usher, 1996)

- “Whose knowledge is best?” - the ‘ideal speech situation’
- “The main approach of critical theory is *ideology critique*. However, in the critical theory tradition research is not confined to unmasking or consciousness-raising but is also about taking action to change situations.”



Dominant Philosophical Approaches

| | Positivism | Interpretivism | Critical Theory |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| Ontology | Reality exists | Reality is socially constructed | Ideological, subjective views of reality |
| Social science is ... | identifying laws and regularities of human behaviour | exploring subjective 'meanings' | analysing power and ideology, to bring about change |
| The researcher ... | is detached value-free observer | is subjective, part of social world | has explicit value-based political position |
| People are ... | objects of study | Subjects/participants | agents (actively create reality) |
| Methodology | quasi-experimental or large scale | e.g. case study, ethnography | Theory-led |
| Research methods e.g. | Questionnaire survey, statistical analysis | Observation, semi-structured interview | Policy analysis, Critical discourse analysis |



Post-modern Approaches

- 'Crisis of legitimation' (Habermas)
- Scepticism about grand narratives. Awareness of complexity and socio-historical contingency – loss of certainty.
- Challenges the view that we can definitively know and understand the world – knowledge is more indeterminate and open-ended (constructed)?
- All research is value-laden, so we need to be self-critical and reflexive. To recognise values and power in research.
- Focus on the way in which the world is written in the research text – focus on discursive representation/discourse analysis.



Post-modernism (Usher, 1996)

- "...loss of certainty in what is known and ways of knowing."
- focus on knowledge as contingent and perspectival and on the situational features of research practices.
- decentred subject
- multiple truths



Post-colonial

- “As I reflect on my colonial education, I cannot deny the lingering (in)visible traces of the Eurocentric models of talking, theorising and even living.” (Wane, 2008)
- Dominance of Western philosophical traditions
 - Under-representation of non-western ethnic groups
 - Representation of the ‘other’ (Edward Said)



Critical and Indigenous Inquiry

- Research should not be judged in terms of neocolonial paradigms
- Disruption of taken-for-granted epistemologies – decolonisation of 'Western' epistemologies/methodologies
- Continuing development of methodological approaches that privilege indigenous knowledges, voices, experiences



Critical and Indigenous Inquiry

- 'Allied others' – those who seek to deconstruct from within the 'Western' academy
- 'Western' theoretical constructs must always be open to re-examination and change
- BUT – NO methodological approach is ideologically neutral



Contemporary Diversity

- All major approaches to social research continue to operate and compete. Many alternative models/positions have also emerged, including feminism, action research and narrative inquiry.
- All can be well justified within their own frameworks and with reference to their own criteria.
- Researchers need to position themselves, and judge what approach, or combination of approaches, may be most appropriate for the task in hand.
- This requires philosophical and epistemological decisions and is not just a technical process.
- But power relations also continue to extend influence; and, for example, the emergence of the 'evidence-based research' movement in the West, can be seen to privilege positivistic/empirical research.



Contemporary Diversity

‘I was torn between my belief system, one that is firmly embedded in the absolute truth of the Islamic world, and my newly discovered ideas about postmodernism’ (A.Samah, 2013, p.93)



Positional Differences and Research Criteria

- Judgements about the quality of research are always made according to criteria – whether or not we are aware of them
- Criteria usually involve *methodological* considerations – how well the research was conducted – and considerations of the *substance* – what it achieved
- There are different approaches to educational research and different criteria for evaluating quality
- Criteria do vary between research traditions – but terminology is slippery and contested
- But criteria do provide a useful basis for use in evaluating research studies within different paradigms



Empirical Analytic Criteria

- Reliability – are the results repeatable?
- Validity – does it measure what it says it does?
- Internal validity – do the research results mean what they appear to?
- External validity – can the results be generalised to other settings (ecological validity) and to other populations (population validity)?
- Objectivity
- Systematic application of method



Interpretive/Hermeneutic

- When based on realist/modernist assumptions, some interpretive research strives to satisfy empirical, analytical criteria modified to accommodate qualitative data. Searching for causality, generalisability, predictive potential, etc. - e.g. grounded theory
- More constructivist qualitative approaches adopt different criteria. Reliability and validity are replaced with trustworthiness
- Extrinsic trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, contextual transparency, verifiability
- Intrinsic trustworthiness: fairness, authenticity, internal ethics



Critical Analytical

- Positionality – researcher declares a standpoint
- Attention to voice – who speaks for whom?
- Critical reflexivity – researcher self-awareness
- Reciprocity –
 - trust and mutuality
 - dialogue
- Potential for emancipation and action – generation of praxis (informed, committed action)
- 'Undistorted communication'



Postmodern/Postcolonial

- Substantive contribution
- Persuasiveness of discursive critique
- Depth of reflexivity
- Participatory ethics
- Experimental/narrative
 - Aesthetic merit
 - Impacts on reader
 - Communicates 'lived experience'
 - How does this individual with whom I am speaking reflect wider social and historical changes that form the context of his or her life?



Finally...Philosophy and Educational Research (1)

- Accounts of the world are constructed by the researcher who makes a series of choices about strategy, method and appropriate ways of writing/presenting the findings
- Most 'conventional' research seeks to conceal from the reader the constructed nature of the account produced
- What is the ideological/philosophical position held by the researcher?
- What view of knowledge is held by the researcher?
- How does this relate to choices made by the researcher about methods and strategies?



Finally...Philosophy and Educational Research (2)

'The final difference between a persuasive and a merely sufficient methodology is that the convincing one takes little for granted. It worries endlessly at its own terms and is not content to justify its decisions largely by reference to other research...research...should also be located – and justified – in terms of an argument about the very nature of structure of knowledge and knowing' (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012, p.21)