

The poverty of ‘theory’: historical methodologies and a humanist approach to research.

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Abstract

The paper argues two related points. The first is that research aims to produce knowledge based on evidence. The second is that the methods used by historians have much to offer contemporary VET researchers in the evaluation of evidence, the application of analytical reasoning and the presentation of results.

The claim that research can in fact produce knowledge is disputed by some sociologists of science, and by postmodernist theorists. Examples range across the humanities to the social and physical sciences. Education and VET research are not immune. In the United States and elsewhere some self-titled ‘progressive’ educators have recently attacked ‘evidence based research’ and proposed the adoption of ‘post-modernist’ approaches.

Social construction of knowledge theories depend largely on the philosophies of science developed by Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. These accept David Hume’s sceptical argument about inductive knowledge. From this it is argued that inductive research and reasoning are fatally flawed and/or that knowledge is sociologically rather than empirically determined. Postmodernism is less coherent but more pervasive. It explicitly seeks to undermine enlightenment rationality, empirically derived knowledge, and western humanism.

In part 1 of the paper we defend the assumptions of social science research. We argue that both inductive scepticism and post-modernist ‘discourse’ lead to forms of irrationalism and relativism.

In part 2 we outline the methods used by historians to evaluate evidence and interpret social change. Against post-modernism and the sociologists of knowledge we argue that historical and other social science methods can produce valid knowledge. We defend the validity of inductive reasoning in knowledge production. We illustrate our discussion using two examples from current work.

1 Introduction

The aim of this presentation is to open a discussion on some general principles that underpin social research, within which we place VET research. It should be seen as a ‘work in progress’ rather than a finished document. It is a response, at least in part, to an approach recently apparent in the United States, (but also becoming prevalent in Australia. eg; *Qualitative Research as Interpretive Practice Conference 2003*, see www.csu.edu.au/research/ripple: an article featuring Professor Yvonna Lincoln, keynote speaker for the Conference, was published in the Campus Review, November 5-11 edition and is titled, 'A third way for research' www.campusreview.com.au) where self identified ‘liberal’ (in the US sense, ‘left’ in the rest of the developed world) critics amongst curriculum and evaluation writers have attacked ‘evidence based research’ as (in part at least) a tool of educational conservatives, particularly those attached to the Bush Administration.

In these debates, ‘evidence based research’ is generally identified with large scale sample surveys or other quantitative analyses of students/populations are used to justify politically conservative policies which disadvantage marginalised groups. To counter this, ‘qualitative research’ methods and programs (particularly that associated with ‘action research methods’) have been promoted as politically progressive. The attack on ‘evidence based research’ is, we argue, part of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences where the traditional claims of academic disciplines that they are engaged in the production of knowledge have been challenged. Radical forms of scepticism, frequently combined with even more radical anti-humanism, now seem to have escaped the quarantine of English departments and now pervade broad range of academic communities.

In contrast we argue two deceptively simple points. These are that purpose of research is to increase human knowledge, and that knowledge is derived from an engagement with the real, empirical world. Although particular methodologies used to produce knowledge and the uses to which knowledge is put may have social, political and moral consequences, these consequences are logically distinct from the status of knowledge itself. Culturally contingent belief systems may influence the direction, assumptions, limitations, interpretations and acceptance of the results of research activity, but belief systems, by definition and bitter historical experience, are not systems of knowledge. The distinction is that knowledge appeals to verification in the world, belief systems to subjectivity and prejudice.

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2 ‘Qualitative’ versus ‘quantitative’ research debate

- A reflection of the ‘two cultures’ – science and the humanities?

What’s the difference? Is it just ‘numbers’?

- Statistical inferences from large data-sets? [eg; regressions]
- What about simple enumeration / descriptive statistics? [Historians use trade statistics, population stats etc]
- What about content analysis of a number of ‘qualitative’ case studies?

Whatever the methodological rule(s) employed, the real issue is that valid inferences can be made. ie; the test for validity of both is the real world.

3 Knowledge is ‘objective’ – it can be accessed by anyone

- It is not ‘subjective’ – inaccessible to others. Subjectivity just leads to
- Universal scepticism/solipsism; or
- Relativism, +where one subject’s perspective is as ‘true’ as any other. [Nietzsche – there are only perspectives]

For historians, acceptance would mean David Irving’s history is as valid as A.J.P Taylor’s, just ‘different’; Voodoo is just ‘incommensurable’ with science; and ‘creationism’ is as true as evolution.

Common sense would suggest to most that we know considerably more about the world than we did in the 16th century. However, forms of radical scepticism and relativism now argue

- Instead of knowledge we have ‘knowledges’
- Instead of accumulation of knowledge we have an aggregation of ‘knowledges’ – often used to justify identity politics

4 Where does this come from?

Two identifiable sources.

- 1 Modern irrationalism and/or the ‘sociology knowledge’ [Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend]
- 2 ‘Post-modernist’ ‘discourses’ [Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan, Irigaray, Kristeva et.al]

5 Modern irrationalism

Popper – ‘falsification’ is the test of a scientific theory [validation by deductive logic].

- Accepts Humean induction problem as unsolvable [ie; that propositions about the observed do not give valid reasons for propositions about the unobserved]
- observation statements ‘theory laden’ – solved by ‘falsification’
- statements about society lead to others in an infinite regress – therefore historical knowledge is impossible.

6 Post modernist discourses

Term used by Lyotard – not accepted by all. But to some degree all

- Adopt ‘scepticism towards meta-narratives’
- Reject the ‘Enlightenment project’
- Generally proclaim Nietzschean ‘nothing but perspectives’
- Profoundly anti-humanist
- Consider knowledge a social/cultural construction; and

And as a consequence are epistemologically and ethically relativist

Some examples from Post-modernist theory

- ‘history is fiction’

- 'theory does not express, translate or serve to apply practice: it is practice'
- 'There is nothing outside the text'

A Kuhnian explanation for this silliness?

- Follows from 'romantic' rejection of modernism
- 'End of certainty' with relativity and quantum theories in the sciences
- Failure of Soviet Union and Marxism
- Post-war battle in the French intelligentsia post-war between Satre and Levi-Strauss

7 Why reject it?

'Theorising about the social construction of reality won't help us find an effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming. Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics and politics if we reject the notions of truth and falsity' [Sokal, 1996]

Some 'classic' post-modernist articles and statements

'A simple criterion for science to qualify as postmodern is that it be free from any dependence on the concept of objective truth. By this criterion, for example, the complementarity interpretation of quantum physics due to Niels Bohr and the Copenhagen school is seen as postmodernist'. [Madsen and Madsen]

'the mathematical sciences, in the theory of wholes [*théorie des ensembles*], concern themselves with closed and open spaces ... They concern themselves very little with the question of the partially open, with wholes that are not clearly delineated [*ensembles flous*], with any analysis of the problem of borders [*bords*]. Irigaray in 'Is the Subject of Science Sexed?'

... in order to be revolutionary, feminist theory cannot claim to describe what exists, or, "natural facts." Rather, feminist theories should be political tools, strategies for overcoming oppression in specific concrete situations. The goal, then, of feminist theory, should be to develop *strategic* theories -- not true theories, not false theories, but strategic theories [Kelly Oliver]

Such statements beg for parody; for example

Hamill, Graham. 1994. 'The epistemology of expurgation: Bacon and The Masculine Birth of Time.' In *Queering the Renaissance*, pp. 236-252, edited by Jonathan Goldberg. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Hayles, N. Katherine. 1992. 'Gender encoding in fluid mechanics: Masculine channels and feminine flows'. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 4(2): 16-44.

Lacan, Jacques. 'Of structure as an inmixing of an otherness prerequisite to any subject whatever'. In *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of*

Man, pp. 186-200, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato.
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1970

Sokal, Alan D 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text* #46/47, pp. 217-252 (spring/summer 1996)

Actually only the last [Sokal] is a parody – the rest take themselves seriously, and of more concern, are taken seriously by others

8 The passing historical phase of postmodernism

- romanticism re-invented
- suspect politics (dead white males)
- the linguistic turn (I missed it!)

Its 'discourse'

- signifiers and signified (word and its object)
- language as perception, not a reflection of reality
- death of the author: removing authorial privilege
- deconstructing text/intertextuality (cultural relativism)
- privileging 'presentism' over historicism
- dissolution of modernist/Enlightenment logic and empiricist methodologies
- removing privilege from canonical historical works
- history as literary production
- nihilistic

9 The historian's response

'theoreticians of all kinds circle around the peaceful herds of historians as they graze on the rich pasture of their primary resources', - Eric Hobsbawn

- Aspects of postmodernism are being assimilated by historians; for example challenging the idea of a unified historical subjects such as 'nation' and 'working class', or grand narratives such as progress and the industrial revolution)
- historians look more closely at their texts and multiple layers of meaning through discourse analysis etc.

Historians also take greater cognisance of their writing as a literary form

10 The historical 'bottom line'

- historians retain a preference for experience and observation: induction and the ideographic over deduction and the nomothetic
- historians retain an assumption that language is representational rather than self-referential (commonsense suggests it 'works' most of the time); that is, 'the truth is out there' and it can be accessed

- historians retain a sense of context: words and things are located in a specific time with real cultures and real social relations, and not just within 'other texts' (a 'historicist' approach rather than one located in the 'continuous present'); historical 'mentalities' are accessible through regarding the past as another country
- historians retain a sense of modernist/ Enlightenment reason: explanation through assessing evidence and patterns of correlation of cause and consequence
- historians retain an open and eclectic canon of historical texts and methodologies
- and finally, historians believe in the existence of an observable 'objective' reality that can be accessed and represented in various ways, in spite of its mediation through ideology, historical contingency, cultural boundedness, class, biography, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, mentality, age, geography and ...

Historical training: the Monash narrative tradition:

- story telling (show don't tell): people live storied lives
- extended conversations through endnotes
- embedded theory
- beware the god of tidy theory
- plain English

11` Practising the bottom line

- a question-driven than archive/document driven project
- key questions:
- How do we make history?
- How do we remember history?
- How do we forget history?
- How does history become heritage, tradition, or myth?

But first: what happened and why?

- A quest to tell the story 'as it really was' (von Ranke) and to uncover historical witnesses 'in spite of themselves' (Bloch)
- Searching for context (secondary texts)
- Searching for documents (archival documentation)
- Searching for witnesses (oral history)
- Making sense of the evidence

12 Putting it together through narrative:

- 'a single, coherent story, albeit with subplots (Stone, 1979).'
- 'some reason-giving account of why past actors did what they did (Roberts, 1996).'
- Socially contextualised explanation that moves beyond narrowly institutionally-based history to include consideration of the wider construction and evolution of forms of learning and knowledge (Holford, 1998)

- Writing clearly: ‘an historian who tells good stories, whose narrative style is clear and lively, may well live on through his or her readers long after other interpretive material has passed from use’ (Burstyn, 1990)