

**“What’s a mirror
got to do with
social justice
in research?”**

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“What’s a mirror got to do with social justice in research? **It doesn’t make sense!**”

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In viewing any report, journal article, essay, textbook, webpage, discussion, dialogue, blog, or story concerned with research in education or the social sciences, and in examining what these variously represent as ‘training’ and ‘support’ provided for new researchers at undergraduate/post-graduate level, there seems to be no doubt – *the purpose of research is to generate appropriately rigorous grounds for generating truth claims to knowledge about aspects of the world of practice.* Justice certainly does not seem to feature in any such stories. Ordinarily too, in a closer examination of research the landscape and landmarks it creates for its practitioners, of course, continues to grow evermore complicated. It’s easy to become lost in the mists of the many technical languages, providing seemingly endless details for would-be researchers, about just *how and upon what basis* those beguiling truth claims to knowledge in each paradigm of research are created.

In practice it is not surprising, then, that many researchers become aligned quite

early in their careers to a particular paradigm in which to work on their research. Positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, post-feminism, modernism, post-modernism, post-colonialism and so on provide a few examples – the list of possible paradigms available to researchers continues to grow. In addition to giving details of just how to generate rigorous truth claims to knowledge, each of these paradigms, of course, presents its own historical narratives of just how its particular philosophical grounding has crystallised. Each paradigm also has something to say about just why it adopts and privileges/excludes particular terms, theories, ideas, principles, and why it places its own particular emphases upon research.

Many leading-edge researchers in each of the paradigms further complicate the geography of each landscape and the landmarks it creates for research. Their desires, ideas, theories, philosophies, methodologies are often given expression

in various technical discourses which, in continually seeking to challenge aspects of the extant order, also sometimes make it difficult for others to make sense of exactly what is going on. For example, in the last two decades, following the leads taken by Joe Kincheloe and others with 'bricolage', and Paul Gibbs and others with 'trans-disciplinary' forms of inquiry, the very notion of specialisation and the basis for such specialisation within each of the paradigmatic divisions of research remains continually open to questioning. Indeed, the implications for other more specialised forms of research still remain in question.

Strictly speaking, in borrowing from the American philosopher and historian, Thomas Khun's [1962]¹ terminology, as 'puzzle-solving' practices, then, each of the paradigms of research constitutes its own complex landscape and landmarks. These variously influence and shape the way researchers conduct their investigations, on the basis of the seemingly ever-growing series of striations, divisions, standards and benchmarks, breakthroughs, innovations and revolutions involving specialist individuals or groups of researchers located within each paradigm.

Moreover, despite initial appearances these various landscapes and landmarks in research constituted for '*ta publika*'² – the 'public matter' of research in the many paradigms available for researchers – they are not and can never become politically neutral places: Despite indications to the contrary in some paradigms of research, not least positivist/post-positivist discourses. Hence, the benchmarks, milestones,

standards and developments reflected in any breakthroughs, innovations, revolutions in the way research is already conducted are always the express products of power. The feelings which shape various actions in any practice, generated here by these various outcomes from the "powers that be" in research, strongly shape the work of agencies as a consequence of the 'teleoaffective' structuring of the paradigmatic practices of research [Schatzki, 1996]³. For example, the geographical landscape created by much social and educational research, along with its many landmarks, draws for much of its theoretical foundations and its breakthroughs upon the social sciences – sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, education etc. Consequently the telos of such research work in being directed towards the development of the social and educational *sciences*, is not only represented as creating new knowledges in the sciences, it also doubles as a way of continuing to maintain and sustain on-going feelings of security and control in the world that the sciences create, from their production of new knowledges in this complex and ever-changing world of practice.

In this landscape and viewing its many landmarks, too, there really has been no interest in pursuing matters of justice. Politically, in creating and transforming its many landscapes/landmarks shaping and governing its practices, drawing continually upon its own deontological structuring of ethics, it is not surprising that the complex issues of justice constituted in research have only begun

to appear over the last decade or so.

This political dimension of any practice of research also becomes obvious from the etymology of power. In Latin *posse* means *to be able to do something* – for example, the capacity to, or resource used to, be able to undertake research that is accountable as a public act, itself depends upon having the necessary associated authority typically founded upon the application of particular epistemologies and methodological techniques employed so to act, here in the name of research. Any one form of paradigmatic research, therefore, is the product of a regime of power that takes as its foundation the truth claims it makes to knowledge.

Strictly speaking, therefore, as Michel Foucault [2000]⁴ suggested more than thirty years ago, much of the ‘truth’ claims constituted in such traditional paradigmatic practices of research are to be understood as ‘system[s] of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements’ [ibid: 132] operative within any one paradigmatic practice. Justice has simply not been a feature of such practices, and has only just begun to emerge as an issue over the last decade.

Consequently, as Foucault implied, ‘truth’ claims to knowledge, constituted in paradigms of social and educational research, are linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain [them], and to the effects of power which [they] induce and which extend [them] – ...regimes of truth’ [ibid: 132].

Languages as mirrors on practice

Not unexpectedly, perhaps, such regimes cultivated in the name of paradigms of research exclude much. The foregoing prefatory narrative about the complexities of social/educational research, too, has signally elided a number of significant aspects, not least the fact that such a story, itself a form of reflection, emerges from the reflective practices constituted in the languages of research.

Language itself, of course, may be understood in many different ways. In the introduction to this paper the language used itself mirrors aspects of what is done in practice, constituting a representation reflected in its mirror as an ethically homogeneous object of consciousness; that is, as an object understood as a projected *possibility* generated from practice whose *calculability* is always already *conditional* upon the paradigmatic science used to constitute it.

But, in being deconstructive, which in one sense may be understood as employing an ‘*aufbau*’⁵. In breaking down and taking away [*auf*] the layers that have been built up [*bau*] in research over the everyday experiences of practice for the body – the individual/collectivity/society – it becomes obvious that what is dissimulated in much reflective practice of research are the very possibilities open to the practices of the body on the other side of the mirror. Indeed, it is just those practices that variously give expression to being human – evident in the practices of individuals, collectivities, societies.

Surely a sense of justice demands not

only examining just how it may be possible to make sense of the practices of the body, rather than those stilled objects of consciousness, ossified on the other side of the mirror, constituted by 'regimes of truth' in research.

Phenomenologists, of course, might well retort at this point that the whole point of their approach to inquiry is one that seeks to uncover aspects of any pre-reflective practice. That may be so, but it is the dominant production of objects of consciousness in the mirrors constituted in various languages of social/educational research that remains the principle concern here. Such objects located within a homogeneous economy/ethic of practice in the research conveniently cultivate and nourish the ever-growing range of calculable objects for commodification demanded of capitalism [Debord, 1977]⁶. But, apart from specialist neo-Marxist critiques of research, there remains no thoroughgoing critical examination concerning justice in the complex relationship of social/educational research with capitalism [Flint, in preparation]⁷.

The issue of justice or strictly speaking moves towards justice is the subject of the second half of this paper.

Languages of research, the laws and justice

In everyday conversation any mention of 'justice' usually carries with it for most people a connection with matters of the law. There is no difference here.

Speaking of law in research, however, has for many years remained an anathema for most researchers; especially those working within paradigms that have sought to challenge aspects of positivism. In its earlier forms positivism in social/educational research sought to constitute laws from such practice. Such thinking for positivists is now seen to be outmoded, and its many and various critics, including: positivists/post-positivists, themselves, have all sought to avoid any references to 'law' in research.

Nonetheless, drawing from both Giorgio Agamben's and from Hegel's philosophies, it becomes obvious that everyday language used by us all may be understood to create its own law-like structures. Any words given expression in language have the capacity to include, to exclude and to make exceptions, consonant with the structure of law [Flint, 2015]. For example, in the languages of reflective practice used in research, its methodologies, theories, outcomes and so on variously represent objects of consciousness constituted in its mirrors on practice. Such representations identify what are variously included and excluded in such a process. Moreover, for the body on the other side of the mirror constituted by such languages of research, it remains continually open to many other possibilities not currently identified within the objects constituted by the mirrors. Such possibilities always already constitute exceptions to what has been registered in the mirror on practice. Generally speaking, and perhaps counter-intuitively, we all live within a 'state of exception' [Agamben, 2005]⁸ in relation to such objects of consciousness.

In a nutshell, then, the possibility of moves towards justice has arisen from the earlier partial deconstruction of the mirrors constituted in the various languages of reflective practice employed in research. What remains to be uncovered in the deconstruction is the naming force of being as presence in defining the object of consciousness formed in the mirrors of reflective practice; its powers continue to gather together the social/educational sciences around the metaphysical determinations of what 'is' as an object of consciousness reflected in the sciences' mirror on practice. That is the point of the regimes of truth constituted by paradigms that was mentioned earlier. But, such 'truth' claims to 'knowledge' within these 'regimes of truth' for many researchers conveniently appear to remain blinded to the play of difference in each and every identity created in such sciences.

Another complication arises from the fact that within the field of political philosophy its discourses, like those of the social sciences, remain largely constituted on grounds of objects/subjects of consciousness. Traditionally an initial reading of political philosophy is likely to uncover three principle dimensions of concern that focus attention on the matter of justice, identified as *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation*.

In the field of education, of course, justice has been represented in terms of a redistribution of resources in moves towards greater equality of opportunity independent of race, ethnicity, gender, class... and so on. Formal systems of education remain continually absorbed by the question of equal opportunity for

each and every member of society.

Another obvious source of injustice remains the recognition of the contribution of women in a number of areas of employment, some of whom receive poorer levels of pay than men. This obvious injustice in capitalist societies is an issue that many have been working to challenge over a number of years. Another vital aspect for some of the question of *recognition* is that in any identity other identities are always at play. For example the identity, 'woman' carries with it possible other identities including mother, sister, daughter, professional, manager, adventurer, traveller... and so on. In this way justice has been represented in terms of understanding the play of the other in any identity.

It is apparent that there is always a difference between *representations* of practice and the enactment of the practice itself in any society. Feminist writers rightly have challenged over the years the relatively inadequate representations given to women compared to men in our society. Post-colonialist researchers have also paid much critical attention to the representations given to ethnic minority groups in our society.

But, while there still remains much to do in challenging further these three deeply held sources of injustice in society, each of these conceptions of justice remains locked in the present by being as presence as objects largely formed behind the mirror of reflection on practice. Moreover, within the field of political philosophy, and in being inspired by the philosopher, Richard Rorty's, writings on 'abnormal justice', one of the leaders in

this field, Nancy Fraser [2009: 48-75]⁹ argues that within the context of the 'break up of the cold war order, the rise of neoliberalism and the salience of globalisation [ibid: 50] that 'our familiar theories of justice offer little guidance [ibid: 51]. Abnormality regarding what 'is' justice is the new norm for social justice.

Deconstructing mirrors on practice

What has become clear, also, is that despite the focus upon abnormality, the challenge is that one becomes attentive to the possibilities open to the practices of individuals, collectivities, societies located on the other side of any mirror before it constitutes any reflective practice. There is also the additional challenge of constituting the language of any such reflective practices in a number of different ways, deconstructing such practices again in moves towards social justice. And this has to remain a democratic process; researchers, philosophers, writers and others can never be positioned as gatekeepers on any understandings of justice.

1 Kuhn, T. [1996 {1962}] *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [3rd Edition], Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

2 Term used by Aristotle in *The Politics*.

3 Schatzki, T., Cetina, K. K. and von Savigny, E. [2001] *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

4 Foucault, M. [2000{1989}] 'Truth and Power' in, Faubion,

J.D. [ed.] *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Volume Three, trans. Hurley, R. and others, New York: The New York Press

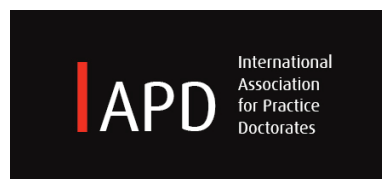
5 Caputo, J.D. [1987] *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 64.

6 Debord, G. [1977] *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Black & Red, Detroit, Michigan: Black & Red; Oakland, CA: AK Press.

7 Flint, K.J. [in preparation] Where's the justice in social and educational research? Paper presented to *Education, Philosophy and Theory* [March 2016].

8 Agamben, G. [2005] *State of Exception*, trans. Attell, K. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

9 Fraser, N. [2009] *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, New York: Columbia University Press



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