

Educational Researchers: Experiences from the Inside

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Educational Researchers: Experiences from the Inside

This study puts aside paradigmatic categories and explores the experiences of educational researchers from the inside. It addresses the questions: How do researchers describe their research perspectives, beliefs, and values? How do they determine what types of research and research questions are useful and valuable? The perspectives of educational researchers on research credibility, quality, paradigms, and experiences after graduate school are presented. Their perspectives and experiences are pluralistic. There are moments and issues, however, where researchers cluster, and then disperse in the ideals of how to realize or judge the particular concept. Many scholars are changing and re-conceptualizing their assumptions and criteria as they teach themselves new ways of doing research. The study also reveals how faculty experiences as educational researchers are tempered by their lived experiences as embodied beings in relationship with others, and in multiple social, cultural, and political contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Ontology, epistemology, and methodology are the triumvirate philosophical questions we ask of research and researcher worldviews. The notion that paradigms occupy positions situates research within a theoretical or abstract framework. Scholars have thought about paradigms as categories such as positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln, 1989), as a continuum (Toma, 1991, 1997a, 1997b), and as orthogonal—subjective versus objective and regulation versus radical change (Burrell and Morgan in Milam, 1991). Across disciplines most agree to the norms of disinterestedness and communality, but not to perspectives on universalism and organized skepticism (Coopersmith & Braxton, 1990).

Many think of research as objective, or at least consider some form of objectivity as an ideal. Even though we are beginning to see more research reports with the researcher's presence written in the text, many still rely on language that excludes the researcher. The effect is a report with an authoritative and objective voice that seems to come from nowhere or the heavens. Research, however, is not a heavenly, but a human endeavor. However, when we consider research, particularly the research of our times, the connection or interaction between the researcher as a person and the research is not clear.

The body of research called the "sociology of science" studies the processes of science as other social human endeavors are studied. Through these observational studies, we begin to see the scientific process as social, constructed, contextual, and reflexive (Woolgar, 1988; Knorr-Cetina & Mulkay, 1983; Knorr, Krohn & Whitley, 1981; and Knorr-Cetina, 1981). This study draws on the knowledge of these studies, and extends the exploration to researchers in education. Because these researchers are less likely to work in laboratory groupings, this study has drawn more from naturalistic inquiry and phenomenology than sociology and ethnography.

Methodology

I have designed and conducted a study in the constructivist paradigm, relied heavily on qualitative methodology, and worked in the tradition of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and phenomenology (VanManen, 1990; Husserl, 1999). The study focuses on researchers' experiences, and naturalistic inquiry and human science offers a more thorough way of understanding, exploring, and describing these experiences.

Interviews with research scholars provided the data for this study. This interview process allowed for asking probing questions were specific to a respondent's comments. The interviews were scheduled via telephone contact (and e-mail, if necessary) with the scholar, held in the respondents' offices, campus meeting rooms, or homes, and varied in length from 45 to 210 minutes with most lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Twelve faculty research scholars who conduct research in education at universities in central and Southeast Texas volunteered to participate in this study. Four professors of education were consulted as informants for additional nominations, and were asked to nominate two educational scholars for interviews—one whose approach to and assumptions about research was similar to their own, and one whose approach was different. Each interviewed respondent was also asked to nominate two scholars

with the same instructions as the informants. This process produced three respondent generations, and allowed for a selection of respondents with diverse research experiences. The result was 12 interviews with educational researchers who focused on history, technology, psychology, curriculum, and administration. Seven (7) participants were female, five (5) were male, three (3) were ethnic minorities, and three (3) were journal editors. Their years of experience as faculty ranged from one to 34 years. All respondents were volunteers, and this study was conducted with the approval of an Institutional Review Board.

Handwritten fieldnotes (114 pages) were taken during the interviews, expanded following each interview, and then transcribed. The transcriptions were divided into textual data units (over 1500) with a process that maintained the audit trail by connecting all data to its original written source. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze data. All data units have been categorized into themes and sub-themes, and relational patterns among the themes explored. In order to chronicle my evolution of thought and action in this study, I maintained a reflexive journal during the processes of conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing. The journal captured my working hypotheses, observations about the logistics of conducting the study, and considerations about themes and relationships among the themes. This report presents the themes related to the researcher as a being situated in a body, relationships with others, and multiple social and cultural contexts.

Findings

Pluralism best describes these researchers' approaches to and assumptions about research questions, topics and projects, methods, and data sources. They are choosing research traditions and methods based on their personal skills, style, background, and values. Some researchers speculated during the interviews whether one's research approach is "something chosen" or if "it has more to do with what one is like." Sometimes the research approach is selected based on the innate skills or characteristics of the researcher. Who the researcher is and the relationships in which the researcher engages are not separate from research decisions and processes, and researchers commented on this without my asking direct questions. The researchers in this case study chose to describe themselves, their research, and their research experiences in multiple ways. Respondents gave multiple descriptors that ranged from one word or a short phrase to a sentence or short paragraph, and few chose to describe themselves with paradigmatic classifications, but most spoke of the arguments across paradigms and the qualitative/quantitative division. Pluralism best describes their approaches to and assumptions about research questions, topics and projects; methods; and data sources. In some cases the mix of methods and data sources used by a researcher were obvious. Other respondents had developed surprising repertoires that combined unlikely methods and data sources. Researchers in this study explore connections, although their approaches to connections are different. Integration of topics and methods of integration are the most common ways that researchers in this study make connections. Researchers—whether economists, sociologists or historians—connect bodies of work.

The themes of diversity and multiple approaches in research methodology were echoed in respondent comments about the criteria for judging research. Scholars, even those working in traditional paradigm(s), have developed non-traditional criteria for judging research. Some respondents speak to flexible guidelines that would be inclusive of fundamental (paradigmatic) differences. Some scholars are more flexible with research that explores new areas, and expect more rigor in work that has a history and has been studied by many. Others present stricter criteria, such as withstanding standard criteria—adequate use of methodology, limiting methodological effects, and conforming to standards of rigor, logic and cause-effect relationships. Responses about the ultimate purpose of research were quite interesting in that they did not define a unified, coherent theme. Instead researchers presented perspectives and arguments that converged and diverged from others' responses in subtle and palpable ways, and on a few occasions this dynamic happened within a single scholar's interview.

A surprising finding was that every researcher identified some aspect of their practice that they learned after their academic training, because it was not included or not adequately taught in their graduate programs. In some cases the omissions were minor. In others cases, researchers faced situations in which they had to teach themselves about a method, paradigm, or approach that was drastically

different from their studies. For some scholars, the act of omission by their graduate programs led them to explore the omitted from straightforward curiosity.

Researcher situated-ness was made visible in the ways they talked about research experiences. Some researchers identified themselves with their research or methodology, "I am a researcher" or "I'm a meta-analysis person." They used strong affective terminology (love, having a blast, feeling burned, passion, enjoy, surprise, frustration) in describing their work and research experiences. When researchers talked about their emotions several words kept repeating themselves—passion, enjoy, surprise, and frustration. Their major driving force for their research tends to be a genuine interest in the topic or question. They also used embodied metaphors, particularly that of sight in describing what they do—"looking at" and "looking for". They have ways of seeing themselves, the participants in their studies, their data, and their interpretations. The sight metaphor is also used to describe what researchers learn, and their ways of understanding. The metaphor of hearing is used to describe how they listen to their data and their respondents. These are embodied ways researchers know and learn.

Researchers are learners. They see the process of research as learning, and most face careers of learning how to do research better. The researchers in this study acknowledge that they and their colleagues are capable of making errors, and are aware that researcher errors can be the result of unintentional and willful misrepresentations and interpretations. To control for these potential errors, researchers have developed rather sophisticated criteria and methods for judging the work of their peers and colleagues -- methodological expectations, peer review, ethics, institutional review boards, etcetera.

While talking about their research, faculty frequently talked about their relationships with peers. In these relationships researchers produce, form, create, and construct knowledge. Their products of research are not simply products of design, data collection, analyses, and reporting--they are products of relationships. Researchers differ in their relations with participants in the amount of contact (minimal to intensive; distant to close), the type of relationship (one-way, exchange, collaboration, or connection), and desired outcomes for respondents (participate, painless participation, feel good about participation, benefit from participation).

Teaching relationships were an important topic in the interviews. Faculty wanted to talk about a more intimate relationship among teaching, service, and research than the dichotomy of teaching versus research. They consider student interests when selecting research topics, are willing to follow student research interests, and work collaboratively with students on research. Some have re-framed the teacher-student relationship with terms like "collegial" relationships. These faculty seek a balance, want real connections with graduate students, and see relationships with students as a way of integrating teaching, service, and research.

Faculty members do not work on research in a vacuum. Their environment is the institution of higher education and their disciplinary invisible colleges. Academia, the culture of faculty research scholars, creates opportunities and limitations. The limitations included the departmentalization of the Academy into disciplines, the view that a good teacher cannot also be good at research, the focus on money and funding, and studying for the sake of studying. Publication of research findings is extremely important in academia. Many scholars expressed concerns with the processes and the assumptions underlying this culture. Aspects of the culture legitimate and shape researchers and their work, and most researchers experience the culture as intense and stressful.

One could argue that doctoral level researchers are a privileged group. They are privileged by their education, status, and for the most part, are members of the dominant gender and racial groups of our culture. In their interviews, they talked about the privileges their positions allow, even in their formative years. When researchers enter research situations, they bring their bodies (directly or indirectly) and people in the research context have perceptions of and reactions to them. In direct and subtle ways, the researcher is a sign and statement (Foucault, 1972; Kendall & Wickman, 1999). Their bodies (and perceptions of them) are constructed by social class, culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, size, ability, etcetera. Personal experiences such as upbringing, socioeconomic class, personal struggles, overseas experiences, and involvement in social movements influence how research is conducted, the selection of research topics, and types of research faculty will avoid. Researchers also consider their values and worldviews and look for practical, theoretical, and political fit.

Educational researchers bring interests, worldviews, and voices that are influences on their work. Some are concerned with the ways research is used (consciously and unconsciously) to maintain differences or enforce stereotypes through research findings and the processes researchers use when conducting their studies. In response to criticism from marginalized perspectives, like feminism, some researchers have reviewed their work and noticed how certain perspectives, experiences, and peoples were excluded from their studies and knowledge construction. Other researchers find themselves drawn to similar epistemologies and methodologies. Some researchers consciously use their positions of privilege to influence change and make situations more just. They see the ultimate purpose of research as improving the human condition and making things better.

Educational researchers are concerned with influencing how people think, what people know, the information people draw on when they dialogue, and policies that affect lives. In their writing, they consider the reader as an embodied person or group of persons with interests and limitations. They work to present their research in ways that will attract and keep the reader's interest, make it easy for the reader to follow, and keep the reader motivated. Researchers consider how much room they want to give their reader for independent thinking, and a few have tried or are considering non-written ways of sharing research findings to broader, non-academic audiences.

Implications

The literature on research paradigms in education is growing, and has become central to our conversations. This literature, however, focuses primarily on speculations about researcher paradigmatic orientations based on external sources such as their publications and chosen methodology. We do not know much about how researchers “know when they know” or “determine the value of [their and others’] findings.” In fact, scholars are changing, re-conceptualizing their assumptions and criteria, and teaching themselves. Even though the educational researchers in this study have differences, there are clearly places where they are similar. Their ideas about the criteria for judging research, their assumptions, and preferred research methods and data sources are pluralistic.

For these researchers, paradigmatic and pragmatic research choices beg the questions, Who am I? (Reinharz, 1979, 1997), Who are you?, What is research? and How do we/these relate to each other (Reinharz, 1979)? The experiences of researchers in this study suggest a notion of situated-ness that is as central to research as ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Situated-ness, is related to Gergen's (1991) relational self, and what Reinharz (1979) calls the "reciprocal relation between the researcher-as-person and the process of research" (p. 371), but also includes research participants and socio-cultural contexts in the reciprocity. I am proposing that the philosophical questions of research are not as abstract as most assume, and cannot be seriously considered without understanding more fully the situated-ness of the researcher scholar.

The insights from this study may have relevance for researchers, colleagues, mentors and instructors of nascent educational researchers. Considering the pluralistic nature of research experiences, it may well be time for academic research training and faculty development to include in depth experiences in, not only multiple methods, but also multiple approaches, assumptions, and paradigms. Few researchers in this study described positive experiences of interacting with or watching faculty interact across paradigms and even across methods. The primary focus on particular research approaches has not precluded educational researchers from exploring alternatives that were excluded from, briefly mentioned, or negatively presented in their graduate studies, departments, or “invisible colleges.” Considering the plurality of perspectives regarding the purposes of research, it may be time to facilitate deeper understanding of ontological and epistemological perspectives and assumptions. This study attempts this by exploring researcher experiences of research.

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