

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The interpretivist methodological framework made its appearance in educational research in the late 1970's. Thus began a fundamental and far-reaching challenge to the dominance of the positivist methodological framework. Much scholarly effort in this vein has been devoted to excavating methodological divides. This book is devoted to closing them.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapters 2-7 are divided into two major parts: *Positivism and the Old Divides* (Chapters 2-4) and *Interpretivism and the New Divides* (Chapters 5-7). The shift from Part I to Part II marks the changed boundaries of the general methodological conversation associated with the coming of age of interpretive—or “qualitative”—educational research. As interpretivist educational research gained widespread acceptance and credibility, it, rather than positivism, began to set the terms of debate. The old divides *between* interpretivism and positivism began to disappear, only to be replaced by new divides *within* interpretivism.

Chapters 8 and 9 comprise Part III, *Ethical and Political Frameworks*. Chapter 8 revisits the shift from Part I to Part II in terms of the protection of human subjects, a central concern in the ethics of social research. The ninth and concluding chapter proffers a conception of democratic educational research, building on what has come before.

The descriptions of the chapters to follow provide thumbnail sketches of the major arguments of each chapter and suggest how they fit together so as to point in the general direction of a democratic conception of educational research. The details of the arguments in support of the many controversial claims I make will have to wait for the chapters themselves.

Part I: Positivism and the Old Divides

The influence of positivism on educational research methodology has been significant, and it spawned two stubborn dogmas: the quantitative/qualitative dogma and the fact/value dogma.

The quantitative/qualitative dogma construes the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research methods as presupposing a distinction between two radically different—and incompatible—epistemological stances: quantitative methods presuppose a positivist epistemology; qualitative methods presuppose an interpretivist one. The fact/value dogma construes the distinction between facts and values as marking a distinction between two radically different domains of knowledge, or, more accurately, between what lies within the domain of knowledge and what does not. The fact/value dogma is shorthand for a more general divide: the fact side of the divide includes rationality, science, means, cognition, objectivity and truth; the value side includes irrationality, politics, ends, interests, subjectivity and power.

These ways of construing the quantitative/qualitative and fact/value distinctions deserve the name the “two dogmas” because they are each based on the unexamined assumption that positivism is still a serious competitor among epistemological views. Chapter 2 criticizes this assumption.

Positivism embraces a rigid distinction between the theoretical or conceptual contents of knowledge claims, on the one hand, and their observational contents, on the other. It then presupposes this distinction in setting a very strict standard for empirical knowledge, namely, that it be grounded in *neutral* or *brute* observational data. But critics successfully demolished this standard of knowledge—*verificationism*—long ago, by establishing that the observational contents of knowledge cannot be separated from the conceptual contents in the way verificationism requires. Instead, observational and conceptual contents interpenetrate one another.

The collapse of positivism undermines the quantitative/qualitative dogma, for the forced choice the dogma sets up assumes that positivism is one of the epistemological alternatives to be adopted. But, or so the argument goes, positivism is not an alternative, at least not a defensible one. The collapse of positivism undermines the fact/value dogma as well, for this dogma is but a corollary of positivism’s verificationist epistemology. That is, positivism excludes values from the domain of knowledge because values fail to measure up to the standard for knowledge positivism sets. Because this standard is untenable, so is the idea that values should be (or can be) culled from the practice of knowledge production. Just as conceptual contents penetrate empirical knowledge claims, so do values. This interpenetration of empirical knowledge and values—the *value-ladenness* of empirical knowledge—is especially salient in social and educational research, whose vocabulary is rooted in the description of social practices and whose aim is to evaluate and improve such practices.

The initial critique of the two dogmas proffered in Chapter 2 is extended and refined in the two chapters that follow.

Chapter 3 examines the ways in which the descriptors “quantitative” and “qualitative” are applied at three levels of research practice: data, design and analysis, and interpretation of results. Because there is no fundamental incompatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods at any of these levels, there is no discernible reason to avoid combining them.

Chapter 3 next examines the alleged incompatibility between the epistemological paradigms that are supposed to underlie quantitative and qualitative methods. This strand of argument digs more deeply into the (dogmatic) thesis, introduced in Chapter 2, of a forced choice between positivism and interpretivism.

Not only is positivism moribund, so are certain early versions of interpretivism that emphasize understanding the insider’s interpretations to the exclusion of everything else. These versions of interpretivism have given way to more complicated interpretivist (or interpretivist-inspired) approaches that incorporate the idea of an interplay or “dialectical tacking” (Geertz, 1979) between the expert social scientific (or *positivist*) perspective and the insider’s (or *interpretivist*) perspective. Although classic forms of positivism and interpretivism are, indeed, incompatible, epistemological work has not stood still. Elements of these classic forms may be combined in a pragmatic “compatibilist” view.

Chapter 4 provides a sustained critique of the fact/value dogma, beginning with the observation that it is as entrenched as ever in social and educational research, so much so that it qualifies as the “received view.” The chapter builds its arguments on two examples: one from evaluation research, where the received view is explicitly elaborated and defended, and one from educational measurement, where it is presupposed.

Donald Campbell (1982) provides one articulation of the received view in evaluation research. For him, value claims, unlike factual claims, are “radically undecidable” (House & Howe, 1999) —they cannot be “justified.” That values have no epistemological standing is one reason to jettison them from social research, according to Campbell. A related reason is that their inclusion contributes to bias. Campbell’s view is firmly—and openly—rooted in the positivistic construal of the fact/value distinction. It is very dubious for that reason. (Campbell’s views on this point are treated in greatest detail in Chapter 2.)

But things moved on, as theorists attempted to distance themselves from an open embrace of the positivist conception of the fact/value distinction. In this vein, a contemporary version of the received view in evaluation research is exemplified by Shadish, Cook and Leviton (1995). They emphasize “practical” rather than epistemological reasons for culling value commitments out of evaluation research. For example, they observe that little agreement exists on what is right or just, and that incorporating positions on such issues into

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