

EXPLORATION OF TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM WITH PRAGMATIC TWIST TO CONTRIBUTE TO EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Prof. Dr. Norma R.A. ROMM
Department of Adult and Youth Development
College of Education
University of South Africa
P.O. Box 392 Pretoria 0003
SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

In this paper I consider the contours of a transformative research paradigm with pragmatic twist. I offer an account of various ways of activating transformative paradigmatic intentions to contribute to social justice. I propose that situating one's research work within a social justice agenda in the field of education requires taking cognisance of the necessary impact of all research on the way in which people envisage and activate possibilities for enhancing educational quality. I also show how this links up with a particular way of seeing pragmatism as an epistemological stance, where "validity" is closely tied to furthering equitable social outcomes. I refer to an instance of embracing such a paradigmatic orientation in (inclusive) educational research, by focusing on the principles and practice of a research project undertaken in South Africa (Nel, Romm, and Tlale), where we re-tuned the remit of a larger international project.

Key Words: Transformative paradigm, pragmatic twist, educational change.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of education, as in other fields, there have been calls for researchers to render more explicit their paradigmatic orientations underlying their research (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Hassard, 1991; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Flood & Romm, 1996a,b; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Romm, 2001, Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Mertens, 2010). As Mertens (2010a: 7) indicates, a paradigm can be seen as composed of "certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action". These include: ontological assumptions about the nature of (social) reality; epistemological definitions of "valid" knowing; methodological assumptions concerning how knowers can go about obtaining enriched insight/understanding; and the (axiological) link – if any – between research and value-concerns.

In the literature across all disciplines and between disciplines (that is, in interdisciplinary research) there has been contention around whether it is possible to "mix" paradigmatic orientations in a single study, as they could be argued to be mutually exclusive – thus creating cognitive difficulties when mixing them (Dohmen, 2003; Bryman, 2006, 2007). However, certain authors have suggested that indeed the process of "mixing" both paradigms and methods, can provide an opportunity for researchers to reflect more fully upon the ontological, epistemological, methodological and axiological assumptions that otherwise would be invoked more or less unconsciously (Brocklesby, 1997; Romm, 1998; Midgley, 2000; Torlak, 2001; Jackson, 2003; McKay & Romm, 2008; Naidoo, 2008; Johnson, 2009; McIntyre, 2006, 2014).

Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007: 118) make the point that mixed-method designs can become an opportunity for researchers to think explicitly about philosophical questions because they have to consider the different paradigmatic stances associated with the use of alternative methods. And Majumdar and Sowa (2010: 1) point out that even in artificial intelligence, if one builds in different styles of reasoning, one can provide for the possibility of different agents working together (in society) with what they call "flexible methods of reasoning, learning, and language processing (analysis and interpretation).

Others, including myself, have argued that even when multiple paradigms are *not* brought to bear in a single study, researchers should still be cognisant of, and make transparent to others, how they are conceptualizing their research (Collins, 2000; Romm, 2001, 2010; Pollack, 2006). This, at least, allows them to recognize that however they define the import of the research processes and the results, this is not the only way that these can be seen; and it allows audiences also to reflect on the research in terms of an awareness of its paradigmatic character (as bringing to bear a world view). This also implies that researchers leave openings for other researchers as well as lay persons – with perhaps alternative orientations – to write into their “stories” (Collins, 2000; Romm, 2013).

THE QUESTION OF VALUE-NEUTRALITY

In the debate around paradigms, some authors have argued that the choice of paradigm itself is not politically neutral. For example, the choice of, say a “post-positivist” paradigm may imply a more status quo orientation (as in Burrell and Morgan’s functionalist paradigm, which has been criticized in these terms – Oliga, 1996: 74). This is because it assumes firstly, that the “regular” connections between social phenomena as discerned by scientists should be worked with rather than transformed (Romm, 2011) and secondly, it does not allow sufficient openings for audience participation in defining how to interpret the (presumed) connections (Acquah, 2007; De Souza, 2007; Midgely & Shen, 2007; Mertens, 2010a,b; Romm, 2013).

Regarding the links between positivism and post-positivism as epistemological stances, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) indicate that post-positivism is a refinement of positivism as developed in the 19th century (pp. 12–13). Within a post-positivist stance, it is conceded that scientists should not claim to verify statements about reality; that is, it is understood that the quest is to get *closer to the truth* and that only *approximations to reality* can be sought. Nevertheless, the quest is still to strive for “objectivity” in the knowing process and proponents argue that doing science requires such a stance. The argument is that it is this stance that renders the results of (scientific) inquiries more sound and informative than can be achieved using everyday modes of inquiry. Johnson (2009) explains this by pitting the (positivist/postpositivist) position against an alternative one which appreciates that, as he puts it, “raw data, especially social science data, cannot be interpreted in the absence of values. Human beings cannot fully reason on or about ‘facts’ without concurrently reasoning and relying on values” (p. 452).

Those who query the post-positivist striving for value-freedom thus argue that unwittingly values are invoked when “doing science”. The suggestion here is that when one is employing “quantitative” and/or “qualitative” approaches to investigate the operation of social reality (including patterns of meaning making) with a view to getting closer to “the truth”, *one is not providing for sufficient consideration of how the research process and the interpretation of results already are imbued with (oft-unrecognized) values.*

Ladson-Billings avers that an epistemological and associated axiological orientation that insists on striving for value-free inquiry and that provides no place for value-concerns in defining valid/credible knowing, in effect excludes consideration of what she calls “ethnic epistemologies” (2003, p. 398). Within such epistemological positions, knowing (as a more collective process, than in Western-oriented thinking), at the same time implies recognizing the way in which our “understandings” relate to a hoped-for addressal of social concerns – identified as issues of concern (2003). Ladson-Billings argues that these positions have been discredited within dominant epistemologies that govern social inquiry in academia.

Although Ladson-Billings does not wish to totally disregard what she calls (Western-oriented) dominant epistemologies, she feels that the choice to commit to them should be recognized as itself a value-commitment (2003: 421). The values that are invoked favour researchers making statements in a less-than-dialogical fashion, as they believe that “knowledge” is best achieved through following the protocols of science. Also, what is valued here is “rational” (supposedly emotionless) thinking, thus excluding ways of knowing where knowing is recognized to be filled with emotion. This itself also serves to render less credible the styles of knowing which rely on “storytelling” as evoking insights as well as feelings, where stories offer openings for inviting co-

reflection with others on values and critical themes (Collins, 2000; Kenny, 2002; Nyamnjoh, 2004; Archibald, 2008; McIntyre & de Vries, 2011).

For instance, certain “scientifically-oriented” authors would not wish to place in the genre of science the storytelling of Quan-Baffour, where Quan-Baffour and Romm together – via dialogical reflection – consider the import of his attempts to further Ubuntu as a value in his adult literacy classes in South Africa (as detailed in Quan-Baffour & Romm, 2014). The storytelling as provided in our write-up of our reflections was meant to evoke insights by also touching readers affectively, that is on the level of emotions. The idea was to offer an understanding of possibilities for incorporating Ubuntu in adult learning settings where learners could (and did) “apply” this in their community settings. The stories that we offer present this as a valued way of orienting the adult education classes, which provides an option for adult education to contribute to a more relational way of interacting in classes as well as in communities (for readers also to consider as a valued option). However, within a paradigmatic framework that favours scientific “analysis”, the storywork approach might be considered as not sufficiently analytical and as too value-imbued (Delamont, 2012: 350-351).

Nonetheless, within a stance which embraces a range of criteria of validity, the storywork approach could be seen as, say, offering options for readers to imagine alternative ways of social being (by being presented with a discussion of some possible exemplars, which they can in turn engage with). In terms of Kvale’s (2002) conception of “communicative validity”, validity “involves testing the validity of knowledge claims in a dialogue ... valid knowledge is not merely obtained by approximations to a given social reality; it involves a conversation about the social reality” (p. 15). One could argue that as long as the “storytellers” invite different interpretations – while evoking people’s imagination to consider new (more equitable) ways of organising social as well as knowledge relationships – the storywork approach fulfils criteria of communicative as well as (potentially) transformative validity.

EXPLICITLY SHIFTING HIERARCHIES IN THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Some authors contend that unless one is explicitly aware of nurturing social goals such as involvement of participants and/or audiences in structuring research and interpreting results (so as to invite dialogue in whatever ways possible), etc. these becomes sidelined (Midgley, 2000, Christakis and Bausch, 2006, Tsolidis, 2006; Flanagan & Christakis, 2010; Chilisa, 2012). It is argued that *research itself should be a process of creating more equitable human relationships, where particular “knowers” do not pose as authorities by virtue of their using “scientific methods”*.

Hence, the attempt is to seek a shift towards transforming social relationships towards a more relational style of human relating (as discussed in Romm, 2010: 9-10). It is with this “transformative agenda” in mind that the focus group research of Nel, Romm, and Tlale (as explained, for instance, in Romm, Nel and Tlale, 2013 and in Nel’s paper, 2014), was undertaken. We conceived the “research” as at the same time intentionally geared to social transformation in the sense of *transforming “traditional” research relationships* (see also Truman, 2003; Mertens, 2010a), while also *facilitating more collaborative relationships between, in this case, teachers, as well as between teachers and the district support officers from the South African Department of Education*. This, as one reviewer of our article noted, implied the adoption of a “transformative paradigm with pragmatic twist”.

Briefly put (as this is explained more fully in Nel, 2014 and in the concluding section of this paper), the focus group research that we undertook was part of a broader international project exploring the role of teachers in inclusive education contexts in five different countries: China, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. This research was conceived (in 2011) in terms of a sequential mixed-methods design, where questionnaires were to be used prior to the organization of focus groups with groups of teachers involved in school-level institutional teams to support inclusive education.

With respect to the focus group component in which I was involved, in 2012 we (the South African team) set up focus groups with teachers in three different schools, and indicated to them that we were seeing the “research” as a process of us all re-looking together at the implementation of inclusive education. The ideas that

were generated via these focus group encounters were not intended to be “analysed” by the researchers with a view to providing (more or less) value-free “information” regarding the participants’ understandings of inclusive education and challenges of implementation.

Rather, within the research process itself we hoped that we all could learn from one another via the dialogue around attempts to implement inclusive education, including learning about options for possible actions to increase the chances of effective implementation. This, as it turned out, meant learning amongst the researchers and teachers, amongst the teachers of the schools in their school settings, and amongst the teachers and the district support officers (when we arranged a meeting to discuss the “results”). The research had a pragmatic twist in two senses: in the sense that we were not aiming to develop “knowledge” *divorced from a considerations how the research process could contribute to the quality of life of the teachers and the communities that they serve; and we took some responsibility for finding “practical” ways of facilitating collaborative encounters where understandings as well as options for action could be discussed amongst those concerned.* By incorporating the “pragmatic twist” we extended the remit of the international project as a whole, which was more analytically focused.

In the subsequent sections of this paper I shall discuss more fully the meaning of an epistemological pragmatism and also of “transformative research” and how it might be seen as connected with “other” research paradigms.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRAGMATISM (AND POSSIBLE LINKS WITH THE “TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM”)

Writing about the field of education, Johnson advocates that “educational research needs multiple thoughtful perspectives” (2009: 449). He believes that this “thoughtfulness” is best achieved by using mixed methods research, which he sees as offering the most possibilities for developing what he calls a “syncretic philosophy and set of approaches or possibilities for merging insights from diverse perspectives” (2009: 449). Johnson argues that the working goal of such a research orientation is to “provide pragmatic, ethical solutions to local and societal problems”.

For Johnson, then “pragmatism” implies looking for practical solutions to issues of concern (raised as of concern within society); but it also implies an approach to knowing where it is recognized that multiple perspectives need to be taken on board in looking at any social “situation”. However, it is still unclear from his discussion how the alternative perspectives can indeed be integrated, and what the role of research participants and wider audiences is in finding “pragmatic ethical solutions”.

“Pragmatism” in mixed methods research is normally associated with the idea that researchers can match methods to specific purposes of research and work back and forth between approaches as supposedly required by the research context. Researchers can define what seems to be appropriate in terms of how to mix methods (and philosophical assumptions) and how to integrate the findings. It is admitted furthermore that there is no single reality to be “seen” (interpreted) and that individuals (including researchers as individuals) will bring different interpretations to bear. Hence it is admitted that the way in which researchers might interpret “results” will be influenced by their particular concerns and values (Mertens, 2010a: 11).

But how are different concerns and values then to be brought on board within the research process and the interpretation of results in a “pragmatic” position”? Romm (2001, 2010) suggests that a constructivist-oriented epistemological pragmatism can make provision for the development of “negotiated” knowledge by positing the need for inquirers (professional researchers and others) to be discursively accountable in the knowing process. As I put it (2010: 23):

Inquirers can be considered as *discursively accountable* insofar as they can be seen (by those concerned) to embrace an orientation of being *sensitive to a range of considerations springing from engagement with alternative perspectives and values* (Romm, 2002). Such an orientation in turn implies that one nurtures the capacity to take *seriously into account differences of viewpoint as the basis for developing one’s sensitivities.*

This is consistent with Collins's suggestion that the ethic of caring at the same time implies an openness to others' expressions of emotion and to recognizing "the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues" – rather than seeing "emotion" as separate from "intellect". (2000: 263)

This means that inquirers need to adopt a stance of reflexivity, by being prepared to look back on the way in which their perspectives may be rooted in questionable assumptions, and by being open to engage seriously with the perspectives (including emotions and value-concerns) presented by "other positions". They earn trust in their research endeavors insofar as they can signal to others that they are thus open. Again citing myself, I suggest that:

A discursive orientation on the part of researchers implies that they need to show how they are engaging with concerns that might be raised by others (or that might already have been raised when similar approaches have been employed in other research settings). In this process, they need to bear in mind a relationship not only with colleagues (taking into account different criteria that may be invoked to evaluate their work), but also with others (in the wider society). (Romm, 2010: 24)

As indicated earlier, this does not necessarily mean that in any particular research project researchers have to employ a mix of methods to help them to recognize that social reality is subject to multiple interpretations (as implied in Johnson's position, 2009). More importantly, they need to nurture the capacity to earn trust by being discursively accountable both to colleagues and to others in whatever way they choose to proceed.

Mertens (2010a: 11) argues that one of the tenets of a transformative paradigm is indeed that the "interactive link between researchers and participants" is provided for. She states that within this paradigm it is recognized that "knowledge is socially and historically situated" and that there is a "need to address issues of power and trust".

Mertens defines the transformative paradigm as incorporating the following research traditions which have hitherto been associated with valuing change towards more equitable social relationships:

- Critical theory
- Neo-Marxism
- Feminist theories
- Critical race theory
- Freirean
- Participatory
- Emancipatory
- Postcolonial Indigeneous
- Queer theory
- Disability theories
- Action research

All of these traditions as bulleted above provide options for researchers to use the "research space" as a forum for instituting change towards more just, more democratic, and more equitable social relationships, including knowledge relationships.

Mertens (2010a: 21) recognizes that this orientation does not exclude the so-called *constructivist paradigm* – as long as "constructivism" is associated with a recognition that social constructions developed by participants, together with (professional) researchers can be shifted via the research process (see also Romm, 2013: 657). And Mertens indicates that those researchers embracing a transformative orientation also can incorporate a *pragmatic* mixed methods and mixed models approach (as well as a participatory outlook), where pragmatism is defined in terms of *looking for pragmatic ways for research to make a positive difference to the unfolding of social outcomes*.

In other words, Mertens sees that both constructivism and pragmatism have some affinity with the transformative paradigm, or rather can be used so that they do have some affinity. She argues in this regard that the borders between paradigms can be seen as permeable – rather than being closed to the extent that they make no provisions for the inclusion of “other” paradigms (Mertens, 2010a: 21).

Indeed one could assert that a transformative paradigm does not necessary exclude post-positivist conceptions of research as “finding out” exercise – as long as those upholding a form of post-positivism are, as Majumdar and Sowa (2010) would put it, flexible enough to appreciate that there are a variety of ways of offering images of social realities, and that the quest is not to authorize any particular claims on the grounds that they are “scientifically derived” and therefore more “informative”. Although Mertens does not discuss this possibility, it is implied by her suggestion that the borders between paradigms can be regarded as somewhat permeable. So although she herself advocates a transformative paradigm, her position provides scope for discussion across paradigms as part of the process of doing research which is aimed at serving goals of social justice (in what ever way this is defined in specific situations).

RECONSIDERATION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE PARADIGM WITH PRAGMATIC TWIST IN THE RESEARCH BY NEL, ROMM, AND TLALE (2012).

Having discussed these “alternative” paradigmatic positions and shown how discussion can take place across their “borders” (insofar as researchers are willing to treat their borders as permeable), I now am in a position to explain more fully in what sense the research undertaken by Nel, Romm, and Tlale can be classed as “transformative with a pragmatic twist”.

Mertens considers that one of the defining features of a transformative paradigmatic outlook, is that it is recognized that it is part of the researcher’s responsibility to *consider the uses that will be made of their work*, and to take into consideration the way in which research outcomes can be linked to social justice (2010b:12). Below I explain how this outlook was instantiated in our approach to the inclusive educational research in South Africa.

Within the international project exploring the roles of teachers in inclusive education, questionnaires were administered in the first phase of the project and focus group discussions undertaken in a second phase. The survey conducted during the first phase had been geared towards comparing (across the countries) teacher profiles of attitudes towards implementing inclusive practices as well as perceived self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy was measured in terms of scales relating to participant teachers’ instructional competencies in an inclusive education context, their competencies in behavior management in the classroom, and their efficacy in collaborating with others. In the second phase of the project, focus groups within the international project were conceived as exploring in more depth how teachers perceived their roles.

In the South African research, in line with our “transformative” orientation, when conducting the focus groups we tried already to “make use of” the questionnaires in a way that would be conducive to *furthering valued outcomes (as seen by the participants)*. During the focus group sessions we referred to some “results” which suggested that teachers in South Africa were less collaborative than in some of the other countries: we used this as a springboard to raise issues of collaboration with focus group participants and to discuss with them possibilities for creating greater collaboration – amongst themselves already in the focus group sessions, after these sessions, and with officials from the department of education.

The feedback that we received from the focus group participants indicated that the learning process during the focus group encounters provided an exemplar of what could be gained from interacting/collaborating with one another. After the focus group sessions we ourselves took some responsibility for arranging (on their request) a meeting with the district officials from the Department of Education, where we tried to shift “usual” hierarchical relationships wherein district officials normally are given a higher status from which they pronounce their “knowledge” about ways of implementing inclusive education (Romm, Nel, & Tlale, 2013).

In this further meeting we thus tried to lay the groundwork for an alternative “knowing” relationship via setting up a seminar forum where all the players were *on a more level playing field* – so as to shift the dynamic where district officials usually visit the schools to pronounce their views and request implementation accordingly.

In short, in various ways we tried to cater for our recognition that *our manner of doing the research would itself make a difference to the educational field in which we were operating*; and we hoped to create positive differences in forming more dialogical social relationships amongst the concerned players. What was “transformative” was our explicit recognition that we were seeking more participatory styles of knowledge construction in both the research process and in social and educational life; and what was “pragmatic” was our practical intention to direct the research along these lines. (The details of how we proceeded along these lines can be found in Nel, 2014.)

What was *constructivist* was our appreciation that the views/insights as developed during the focus group sessions *were constructions that were indeed created in this collective context*, and were a function of this context (see also Farnsworth & Boon, 2010.) We accepted that the constructions developed in the group need to be treated as having been generated as a result of our questions and as a result of the group dynamic that emerged (Romm, Nel, & Tlale, 2013: 10).

Furthermore, we also could be said to have appreciated the worth of (post-positivist inspired) “scientifically” developed questionnaires and ways of analyzing them. But we considered that the results were to *be treated as springboards for further discussion and further considerations of what they might mean on the level of action*. That is, we did not assume that scientists should make recommendations based on “informed” scientific analysis. Rather we considered that the information should be treated as constructions for participants and other concerned stakeholders to engage with. (See Romm, 2013: 663-665 – where I discuss ways of employing questionnaires that transcend usual positivist and post-positivist underpinnings.) Hence our use of the questionnaire method (or rather, of the results as developed in the earlier phase of the project) too had a “pragmatic twist” in that it was related to the quest to develop more dialogical relationships with a range of stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have provided an overview of some of the debates in the literature on paradigms and the paradigmatic character of research. I indicated in what sense one can regard the borders between paradigms as somewhat permeable. I illustrated this largely with reference to the research by Nel, Romm, and Tlale exploring as well as activating possibilities for implementing inclusive education in South Africa. I indicated how this research in South Africa can be classed as “transformative with a pragmatic twist”, while not excluding “other” paradigmatic positions. I indicated that if we define the transformative paradigm as highlighting the need to *recognize our responsibilities as researchers for the possible consequences of our ways of conducting research*, then indeed its borders with other paradigms are rendered more open, as researchers can work creatively across paradigms to incorporate such an outlook. I indicated implications hereof for researchers wishing to contribute to (valued) social and educational change.

While the example of Nel, Romm, and Tlale’s research was a mixed-method design, I argued that opportunities for social researchers to consider the manner in which research might contribute to engendering goals of social justice arise whether one is using a mono- or mixed-research designs. I emphasized that what is important is that researchers invite others (who may advance other possibilities for seeing social realities and processes of “knowing”) to write into any “stories” that are being forwarded, so that options for both seeing and acting in the social and educational arena can become extended. (The decision to regard researchers’ accounts as *stories*, of course already implies that they are treated less authoritatively than is normally associated with scientific reports. This again opens more possibilities for “lay” persons to engage with them and to reconsider action implications.)

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BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESS OF AUTHOR



Norma R. A. ROMM is Professor in the Department of Adult Basic Education and Youth Development, University of South Africa. She is author of *The Methodologies of Positivism and Marxism* (Macmillan, 1991); *Accountability in Social Research* (Springer, 2001); *New Racism* (Springer, 2010); *People's Education in Theoretical Perspective* (with V. McKay, Longman, 1992); *Diversity Management* (with R. Flood, Wiley, 1996); and *Assessment of the Impact of HIV and AIDS in the Informal Economy of Zambia* (with V. McKay, ILO, 2008). She has co-edited two books—*Social Theory* (with M. Sarakinsky, Heinemann, 1994) and *Critical Systems Thinking* (with R. Flood, Plenum, 1996)—and published over 90 research articles.

Prof. Dr. Norma R. A. ROMM
17 De Friedland Street
Capital Park, Moot 0084
Pretoria- SOUTH AFRICA
E. Mail: norma.rommm@gmail.com

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