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Justifying Research as Conscious Intervention in Social and Educational Life: Activating Transformative Potential¹

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Abstract

In this article, I expand on Mertens' advocacy of the *transformative paradigm* for social research, where research is consciously geared to the advancement of social justice. I indicate certain links with Indigenous paradigmatic approaches to "knowing," where legitimate knowing is rooted in a quest to enhance relationality in the web of relations in which we as knowers and actors are enmeshed. In considering how we might justify associating knowing with transformative-directed (interventionist) intent, I suggest that the justification rests on us recognising that the research enterprise is always more or less consciously implicated in the continuing unfolding of the worlds of which it is a part. I spell out what is involved in recognising that research is world shaping. I furthermore propose that taking a transformative perspective on the research enterprise allows us to reinterpret other paradigmatic positions (e.g., constructivism, and critical realism, and even some renditions of postpositivism) by looking at their potential to cater for an inquiry process that enables participants, concerned stakeholders, and wider audiences to participate in envisioning and enacting possibilities for enhancing the quality of our existence. I provide some examples from the educational arena.

Keywords: Transformation-oriented research, collective responsibility, evolving research paradigms, reality as becoming, research as world shaping

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Introduction: Recognition of Research as Future Forming

Mertens (1999) indicated that when embracing a *transformative paradigm*, researchers co-organise inquiries with concerned participants and stakeholders in such a way that the research is likely to be socially impactful in serving the ends of justice. When pursuing this agenda, she noted that transformative researchers express an allegiance to benefitting, via the research, “the lives and experiences of marginalised groups, such as women, ethnic/racial minorities, people with disabilities, and those who are poor” (Mertens, 1999, p. 4). The transformative paradigm, as she named it, which she recognised draws on critical and emancipatory theories, provides an umbrella for researchers who view their roles as “agents to further social justice” (Mertens, 2012, p. 811). Mertens and Farren pointed out that even though what is involved in transformative research may not be evident, the aim of it is to become transformative in the sense of “generat[ing] a radical shift in our perception of social, political or educational theories, ideas and actions, creating different kinds of understandings that lead to new practices” (2019, p. i). In considering the relationship between transformative and Indigenous paradigms, Cram and Mertens averred that there is room for “negotiating solidarity” between these positions given that both are specifically concerned with enacting research towards transformative ends (2016, p. 161). From an Indigenous standpoint, such transformation entails countering the continued effects of Western-centric approaches to knowing, where professional researchers typically control the process of knowledge-development—instead of the research participants/participant researchers (cf. Chilisa, 2020, p. 23; Higgins, 2016, p. 270; Foley, 2003, p. 45; Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 335; Ritchie, 2015, p. 77).

Indigenous scholars sometimes refer to the pertinence of what became termed, “standpoint theory,” introduced by certain feminist authors (Collins, 1990, 2000; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). For example, Moreton-Robinson noted that feminist standpoint theory aims to expose “spurious truth claims to impartiality of patriarchal knowledge production” while proffering an alternative view of knowledge-production as necessarily value imbued (2013, p. 333). Likewise, Indigenous standpoint epistemology focuses on the contribution of Indigeneity to offering a distinct relationally oriented ontology-and-epistemology (onto-epistemology) and attendant axiology informed by Indigenous experiences, social positioning, and worldviews (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 338; Ritchie, 2015, pp. 85–86). As stated succinctly by Kovach, Indigenous authors reject the view, which they see as characterising much Western thought, that knowing as an enterprise involves professional researchers setting out to seek “a singular static truth from an objective distance” (2009, p. 26). Indigenous scholars are furthermore wary of epistemologies that exclude from legitimate consideration people’s sense of connectivity to their myriad of relations—including the more-than-human world (Chilisa, 2020, p. 24; Higgins, 2016, p. 272; Ritchie, 2015, p. 82; Ryser et al., 2017, p. 54; Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 337)—an exclusion with devastating ecological effects. However, Indigenous scholarly work is often rendered inferior in the Western-centric academic regime (Agyanga, 2012; Foley, 2003, 2018; Harris & Wasilewski, 2004; Romm, 2017).

Chilisa, in her writing about Indigenous research methodologies (2012, 2020), expressed some concern that Mertens did not include in her matrix of “major” paradigms the Indigenous one as a distinct paradigm (2020, p. 20). She argued (citing Romm, 2018) that this paradigm provides a distinct language, that is, the language of relationality, as its specific contribution to how research can contribute to potentiate transformation in reshaping our ways of living together as humans, including our ways of connecting with “all that exists” (Chilisa, 2020, p. 20). In this article, I do not focus so much on how the research process can be transformative in strengthening relationality across the board, although this is one of the points stressed by many Indigenous scholars from regions all over the globe, as noted above. My focus is rather on how we can justify that research can be conceived as contributing to creating new futures at the moment of “knowing.”

My justification for a consciously interventive stance rests on the understanding that research can always be said to have a performative function in bringing forth “realities” through the ways in which we as inquirers engage with the world. The idea that research always in some ways performs world shaping (as Gergen put it, 2015, p. 287) is based on the recognition that the research processes that we use to study the (posited) world, and the kinds of questions we raise during research processes, are always socially and politically consequential as revealed, *inter alia*, in various versions of standpoint epistemology.² I suggest that it is on these grounds that we need to cater for justice-oriented transformative intent being built into the research remit so that research becomes conceptualised, as Mitchell et al. proposed (2017, p. 21), as “research-as-intervention.”

Turning again to the distinctiveness of an Indigenous research paradigm (cf. Chilisa, 2012; Chilisa et al., 2017; Kovach, 2009; Rix et al., 2019; Smith, 2012), this paradigm emphasises that research is potentially equipped to destabilise prevalent social meaning making as well as social dynamics that reproduce the inequalities arising from colonial legacies. In terms of this paradigm, research can and should be part of a process of creating a different, more relationally oriented quality of existence across the globe (Chilisa, 2020, p. 20). In adopting this position, Indigenous authors consider it important to underscore that worlds being collaboratively explored are in *process of becoming*, and that research is implicated in the way in which reality—seen as a web of relations—*becomes* (Romm, 2018, pp. 9–10, 2020, para. 9).³ Molefe contended in this regard that conceiving the world as relational through a relational ontology contains also a “normative load” from the start to strengthen such relationality (2014, p. 129).

An appreciation of research as future forming can also be provided for in other paradigms. Various types of epistemological constructivism,⁴ such as the types advanced by Gergen (2015), Denzin and Lincoln (2003), Lincoln and Guba (2013), and Roth (2018), advised that we should admit that social research endeavours impact on the meaning making of research participants, stakeholders, and wider audiences—either serving to reinforce or to shift social constructions in-the-making. Lincoln and Guba (2013, p. 65) called this the “social Heisenberg” effect.⁵ In view of this, Lincoln and Guba proposed that the research process should be used to facilitate the development of constructions that have liberative potential in reviewing options for conduct (2013, pp. 73–74). Mertens (2014, p. 44) stated that when constructivists operate with the view that research can be more consciously tied to the realm of action, they can be considered as entering “transformative” paradigmatic territory.

Certain versions of critical realism, too, can be considered as recognising the future-forming/transformative potential of inquiries (e.g., Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010; Redman-MacLaren &

2 Space does not permit an extensive account of standpoint epistemology in this article. In Romm (1997), I discussed how feminist standpoint positions offer a different mode for people (professional researchers and lay people) to participate in reality construction—distinct from that offered by authors who strive for a supposedly neutral stance, such as Hammersley and Gomm (1997). In Romm (2010), I explored how ethnic epistemologies (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2003) too, offer a counter position to understandings of science that try to separate out “facts” and “values.”

3 Some examples of research directed in terms of a recognition of research as implicated in the unfolding of realities are Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) in Botswana, Foote et al. (2018) in New Zealand, Hemming et al. (2016) in Australia, Tawana (2019) in South Africa, and Thompson (2017) in Canada.

4 I have used the term epistemological constructivism here to indicate that I am focusing on the notion that all knowledge constructions—formed in daily life or in professional research activity—involve people, with others, creating the objects of discourse rather than “finding” them.

5 Barad (2003) offered a detailed account of the understanding in quantum physics of the inseparability of “observed object” and “agencies of observation,” called the Heisenberg effect (2003, p. 814). She drew out implications for challenging the “representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things” (Barad, 2003, p. 802). Midgley (2000, p. 42) added that the implication of the Heisenberg effect is that any “observation” is indeed a form of “intervention.”

Mills, 2015). Maxwell and Mittapalli suggested that professional researchers, together with others, can try to develop ways of working against mechanisms that are taken to be limiting the life chances of those most affected by structured social inequality (2010, p. 150).⁶ Although as critical realists they subscribed to an ontological realism in that they posited that there are mechanisms in reality that influence people's life chances, on an epistemological level, they admitted that humans (including scientists) create theory- and value-laden conceptual schemes in their relations with "reality." In extending some of these statements of Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010), I suggest that there is a need to seek, together with participants and stakeholders, what Cram and Mertens (2015, p. 100) called "versions of reality" that can become fruitful towards addressing justice concerns.

As far as postpositivism is concerned, this position postulates that research is defined by its seeking to examine relationships between variables and associated meanings. This paradigmatic position is the least likely to admit that social research itself is a future-forming enterprise because the quest is, Popperian style, to concentrate on trying to get "nearer to the truth" (Popper, 1966, p. 377). However, I suggest that certain versions of postpositivism, especially those that have been forwarded in the mixed methods community (e.g., Hunter & Brewer, 2015a, 2015b, whose work I consider as postpositivist in orientation),⁷ too can take up the call to recognise that research carries social consequences. Hunter and Brewer recognised that any statements made about "observed" relationships between variables (based on creating constructs that operationalise them) or statements made about meanings and views accorded to research participants, all arise in relation to the research contexts wherein observations are made (2015a, p. 619). My argument is that once we recognise how our sets of questions *generate* rather than *find* data, and once we recognise that researchers' interpretations of the "results" in turn shape (lay) people's perceptions, it is incumbent on us—with participants and communities—to consider consequences as part of the "validation" of constructs. What I find significant about Popper's (1966) position, is that he recognised the potentially self-fulfilling effects of scientifically created constructions in the social realm, in that people become influenced by these constructions. That is, he admitted that the subject matter with which the social sciences deal can be affected by self-fulfilling dynamics (Popper, 1966, p. 362).

While Popperian followers do not at this juncture seem to take this admission of his seriously into consideration, I suggest that it provides the seed for researchers in dialogue with those concerned to take into account the consequences of the research work. Collins too pointed out (2000, p. 255) that her focus on criticising the way in which positivist-oriented researchers normally go about research and present their claims should not be interpreted "to mean that all dimensions of positivism are inherently problematic for Black women" (in terms of her standpoint position). Her point was that any research space that is used for "social justice projects" can be accommodated, and that there is no need for insisting on creating an exclusivist position (Collins, 2000, p. xi). Chilisa too endorsed this approach when she underlined that what is important is that as a researcher—no matter what choice of paradigm is made—"you will have a responsibility to critically assess the research process and procedures to see if they allow the researched to communicate their experiences from their frames of reference" (2020, p. 45). Her concern is that, thus far, dominant research paradigms tend to delegitimise "the histories, worldviews, ways of knowing, and experiences of the colonised and

⁶ Following Bhaskar (1989), Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010) stated that neither inductive nor deductive logic can get to grips with the underlying mechanisms that may account for any apparently observed correlations or observed meanings. In Romm (2018, pp. 338–345), I offered a discussion around the *retroductive logic* proposed by critical realists; I offered suggestions for it being more dialogically based, while also including Indigenous conceptions of ways of knowing.

⁷ I have argued (Romm, 2018, p. 422) that Hunter and Brewer's statements regarding the research enterprise can be classed as postpositivist in orientation due to the way in which they justify the scientific pursuit, drawing on Popper's (1959, 1966) terminology that many philosophers of science associated with postpositivism (e.g., Adam, 2014; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). What they stressed (as in the Popperian argument) is that science cannot set out to verify any particular claims, but can set out to tentatively corroborate them if they have withstood repeated attempts to falsify them.

historically oppressed” (Chilisa, 2020, p. 45), and it is for this reason that it is important to forward the strong option of the Indigenous research paradigm without necessarily constraining our thought along “exclusivist lines” (Chilisa, 2012, p. 25).

In short, I contend that irrespective of what paradigmatic position or positions in combination⁸ we subscribe to, we need to revisit our understanding of the transformative potential of research to enhance the quality of social existence. I discuss this below with reference to two examples of educational research.

Educational Research as Social Change: Examples and Paradigmatic Deliberations

In this section, I deliberate on two examples (set in South Africa) of how educational research for social change involved efforts on the part of those initiating the research to inspire processes of the following:

1. Reviewing teachers’ attitudes (in-the-making) to inclusive education, using questionnaires combined with focus groups in a specific way, in terms of a transformative agenda (Romm et al., 2013).
2. Prompting the re-representing and revisiting of preservice teacher experiences of restrictive childhood gendered relationships, including implications for their pedagogical practice, using photovoice and photo albums to spark conversation around these relationships (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019).

I reexamine the accounts given by the authors (with myself being one of the authors in the first example). I consider how they conceived their contribution in the inquiry process, and I briefly comment on how this could be reconceptualised in terms of various paradigmatic stances—with my brevity being due to space limitations in this article.

Researching Prospects for Inclusive Education: A Mixed Methods Approach With a Transformative Twist

This international project, undertaken from 2012 to 2014, comprised six countries, namely, China, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. It was entitled “A Comparative Analysis of Teachers’ Roles in Inclusive Education.” Inclusive education is associated with the suggestion that, as far as possible, learners experiencing what are called “barriers to learning” should be incorporated in mainstream schools rather than separated from their peers in so-called “special” schools (see e.g., Miles & Singal, 2010; Paugh & Dudley-Marling, 2011). To undertake the project with a cross-country team of researchers, a sequential mixed method design was adopted wherein questionnaires preceded focus group (FG) discussions.⁹ The Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIC) was one of the scales used in the questionnaires. It has three sub-dimensions: efficacy in using inclusive instruction, efficacy in dealing with disruptive behaviours, and efficacy in collaboration (Sharma et al., 2012, p. 17). Sharma et al. proposed that researchers using this scale should supplement the data generated via the scale with qualitative data in order to contextualise “the

⁸ Johnson stated that “many researchers want to listen to more than one paradigm and do not subscribe to either/or thinking” (2015, p. 690). Whether or not people as researchers can be multilingual across paradigmatic languages, I am making the point that all paradigmatic positions—especially when expanded on—can cater in their philosophies (seen as evolving) for a recognition of research as a consciously future-forming enterprise.

⁹ Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from all the universities involved. The certificate number obtained from the University of South Africa’s College of Education was 2011/90166949/003.

teacher efficacy construct in different cross-cultural contexts” (2012, p. 17). Apart from measuring teacher self-efficacy in terms of the TEIC scale, the questionnaires also were used to measure teachers’ attitudes to inclusive education using a scale called SACIE (Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education)—see Savolainen et al. for details (2012, p. 55).

In administering the questionnaires across the six countries, only minor modifications of certain questionnaire items were made to take into account country context. I joined the study in the South African team during the second phase of the project, that is, the FG phase. For this phase, the project design provided leeway for us to organise FG inquiries with sets of teachers in selected schools using the preset questions and guidelines for all the FG sessions across the various countries as a springboard to develop a more fluid conversation around the issues and challenges experienced by the teachers. The research team here—Norma Nel, Lloyd Tlale, and I—facilitated FG sessions in three schools in Atteridgeville. Our intent was to develop a relationship of partnership with participants in the research process. Hence, to prevent what Chilisa (2012, p. 238) called a top-down use of questionnaires, and to try to decolonise the more usual way of using them in Western-styled research when meeting with the FG participants, we asked them to comment on some of the statistical results that had been created by the researchers who analysed the questionnaire data. We asked them whether this made sense to them.

For example, one of the results obtained through the professional analysis was that across the countries, self-efficacy in collaborating with other teachers and parents seemed to be the best predictor of attitudes toward inclusive education. When we discussed this with teachers in the FG sessions, new visions of “collaboration” came to the fore. (Interestingly, in the research facilitated by Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2013 in relation to teachers’ handling of HIV/AIDS issues in their teaching practice, they also noted that initially the researchers had focused on the possibility of encouraging “self-efficacy in teachers” [p. 77]; however, they increasingly came to realise that the construct of self-efficacy was not appropriate in the sense that it did not help teachers to address their experienced struggles with the complexity of the social context. Put differently, the construct did not have “action potential” and, in this sense, was regarded as inadequate to the research-and-intervention task.) What came to the fore during the FG sessions with teachers in the inclusive education research, were their concerns primarily regarding their relationship with district officials. In view hereof, we decided, on request of the teachers, to try to make an input into the dynamics of this relationship through a meeting that we facilitated with the teachers, district officials, and head office—held at our university (see Nel et al., 2015, p. 45).

Another important feature in our engagement with the teachers is that during the FG sessions we encouraged a process of discussion in which all participants, including the facilitator (Norma Nel), could add input to enrich the dialogue (Romm, 2015, para. 22). This is in keeping with what some Indigenous scholars advocate as talking circles as a way of collectively generating meanings that arise as people together share and discuss viewpoints and options for action—with researchers/facilitators not shying from sharing their own understandings too, as advised by Kovach (2009, p. 125).

Although we did not liaise with members of the team in the other countries around paradigmatic commitments, it is fair to say that not all of us would have had the same or even similar visions of what the researchers’ roles in the project might be. The transformative intent of the South Africa team—influenced by the transformative paradigm—implied that we were committed to using the research space to enrich perspectives (our own and those of others concerned) with a view to people using this enrichment as a lever for new actions. In this case, new understandings of collaboration were developed among the teachers and in their relation with district officials, in turn affecting their attitudes about their own and others’ responsibilities (see also, Romm et al., 2013, p. 2).

In the next section, I point to how other paradigmatic positions that could conceivably have geared this research—if extended somewhat—too, might make provision for inserting a vision of research as future forming into the handling of the research.

An Extended Postpositivist-Oriented Vision of the Project: Providing for a Transformative Outlook

A postpositivist account of this research might suggest that the mixing of methods meant that data from the quantitative measurements and analyses could be fruitfully compared with those obtained from the FG discussions, leading the researchers to better appreciate (or, in Popperian terms, come nearer to the truth about) the realities being investigated, namely, teachers' attitudes to inclusive education. Hunter and Brewer (2015a, p. 622), whom I suggested above can be considered as postpositivist in their orientation, stated that it is helpful to be able to compare the findings from different types of data collection and analysis in the search for better understanding.

In extending this position to include a transformative agenda, I would point out that in a Popperian position, “findings” are recognised to be fallible and as being subject to reexamination by reframing them. Meanwhile in the process of this reframing, insofar as participants are involved as was the case in this research, the realities themselves can become revisited—with attendant consequences. This is a different, more transformative-oriented agenda than believing that researchers should try to “find” fixed attitudes and their supposed causes in the social world. What is important, I would emphasise, is that on an action level people can be encouraged to negotiate or develop new ways of approaching their various involvements in inclusive education.

An Extended Constructivist-Oriented Vision of the Project: Providing for a Transformative Outlook

Self-identified constructivists (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2003, 2013) stated that we need to revise the status of the claims made by those using what they called “positivist methods” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5) that focus on using the research process to generate statements about the social world in numerical form. Denzin and Lincoln suggested that use of these methods can be considered as “no better or worse than other methods” and as just another way of “telling stories” (2003, p. 15). As long as this was appreciated by us in the project, and as long as we did not present the (quantitative) findings to participants, stakeholders, and wider audiences as fact—but as having the status of a story to be engaged with in dialogical fashion—this phase of the research would be justified as a precursor to the FG research and involvement with other stakeholders.

We can be regarded as having extended usual understandings of constructivism as advanced in some of the research literature, which define constructivism as suggesting that the role of researchers, is, as Creswell (2014, p. 37) put it, merely to explore and interpret the social construction of multiple realities as operative in social life. Instead, we can focus on the way in which social realities become formed via the very process of research interaction. This would be consistent with the position of Freshwater and Fisher when they claimed that “research does not merely reveal a world waiting to be discovered but is instead active in constructing the world by reconfiguring it in ways previously not thought of” (2015, p. 674). This is the position that we can be said to have taken in the South African part of the international project, which is also why we called our position transformative-oriented.

An Extended Critical Realist Vision of the Project: Providing for a Transformative Outlook

Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010, p. 152) noted that in the face of the ontological realism and epistemological constructivism characterising the critical realist position as elucidated by Bhaskar (1989), it becomes difficult to adjudicate between theoretical accounts that become proffered. As Scott too noted, critical realists admit that interpretative acts (including those of realists) “are always

positioned within a variety of contexts, and these are epistemic, cultural, historical and, even more importantly, methodological” (2014, p. 31). I would add, taking further these arguments, that this implies relinquishing the claim that the purpose of scientific inquiry is to find structures, in favour of arguing that the purpose is to locate leverage points for possible action as people are invited to participate in exploring and unsettling restrictive social mechanisms that are considered as underlying felt inequalities. This highlights the pragmatic intent of critical realism (see also Romm, 2018, p. 343).

During the project, we did try to encourage reflection around this by setting up inquiry processes to explore options for creating perturbations in the system of educational inequalities towards generating more inclusive educational environments for the benefit of those most vulnerable (the learners). Nevertheless, more fully invoking a transformative-oriented critical realism might have required us to open explicit discussion around historical legacies with a view to considering prospects for more radical transformation.

An Extended Indigenous-Paradigmatic Vision of the Project: Accentuating a Transformative Outlook

Authors propounding the value of an Indigenous research paradigm emphasise that for research practice to become decolonised, the research process must include establishing less dominative relations (than they see as currently acceptable) between professional researchers and research participants—who become participant researchers (e.g., Chilisa, 2012, 2020; Khupe & Keane, 2017; Ndimande, 2012, 2018). During the South African execution of the research, we were intent on trying to establish less hierarchical relationships between ourselves as professional researchers, the teachers, and other stakeholders—as part of the process of knowing about possibilities for implementing inclusive education.

What is also important to underline or accentuate, is Indigenous scholars’ proposals to use the research process in transformative fashion to try to shift any deficit language towards what Bishop et al. (2009, p. 738) called “anti-deficit thinking” (see also Chilisa, 2012, p. 174; Ritchie, 2015, p. 77). This was implicit in our way of engaging with the teachers’ “attitudes-in-the-making.” In another, related, project Tlale focused on challenging deficit discourses, such as discourses that individualise the notion of barriers as if learners themselves “have” learning difficulties, without considering this systemically (Tlale & Romm, 2018). While we can call the new endeavour “another project,” one can also aver that it is not possible to describe when one project actually “ends” (as noted also by Mitchell et al., 2017, p. 45).

Using Family Photo Albums to Encourage (Female) Preservice Teachers’ Memory Reconstruction and Re-vision of Childhood Gendered Relationships

This project was initiated by Notshulwana and de Lange, and their starting premises were: “Foundation Stage teachers have a responsibility to facilitate gender sensitive practices” (2019, p. 106) and “teacher educators need to create spaces in their programmes to enable new teachers to explore their current and developing teacher identities” (2019, p. 108). The research process used photovoice in the form of prompting participants to (re)construct their family photo albums using a gendered framing, on the understanding that this could “potentiate critical self-reflection towards understanding gender sensitive practices” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 106). Their intent was *not* that the participants (foundation stage preservice teachers) would merely be encouraged to *remember* their childhood experiences so that the researchers could report upon these expressed memories. The researchers intended that in the process of remembering these experiences, they would also be *reconstructed*, prompted by the research prompt to “create a new photo album” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 109) and also prompted by discussing their experiences (as now remembered through the gendered frame) with one another.

Notshulwana and de Lange stated that the research was explicitly set in a “critical paradigm,” which meant for them that the “research required a research-as-intervention” methodology; the research-as-intervention purpose was to “create a context for awareness, reflexivity, action and social change” (2019, p. 108). Notshulwana and de Lange remarked that “in order to consider gender sensitive thinking, one must first interrogate one's own constructions of gender starting with one's own lived experiences, past and present” (2019, p. 107). Instead of seeing the research as “world mirroring” (as Gergen, 2015, p. 287 put it), research was here consciously recognised as being world shaping—in this case, in the direction of people’s being more sensitive to (restrictive) gendered relations.

The participants were asked to select six to eight pictures from their family photographs that would say something (to them and to others) about how they developed their gender identity. The idea was that a seemingly seamless story can become broken up to “tell another one” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 109). This is one way of unfreezing a seemingly static construction of gender in order to reframe gendered identities. The researchers offered an example of a preservice teacher who, reflecting on what was being said in the group (as they discussed their photographs and interpretations thereof), “wondered why she had to be either/or and, perhaps, started to realise that she could perform . . . a masculine femininity” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 112). The researchers comment that she had been socialised to think in a dualistic way and now was able to rethink this male/female dualism. The preservice teachers began to appreciate how the construction of “feminine” was learned (and could be unlearned). The group work also helped the participants to tie their (new) thinking to action, in this case the action of being a teacher. One of the participants highlighted this possibility by pointing to females who “question the realities of societal gendered expectations” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 113). She had become more aware of the consequences of people in society not understanding that gender is a concept or construction, and of the need for this awareness to be part of her (and by implication, others’) teaching practice. In a nutshell, the researchers suggested that through the research process as a whole “the participants began to question their thoughts, the origins of their thoughts, and the consequences of their thinking” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 113). As they did this, they were participating in data generation (via the selection of photographs and discussion around these) and in “action-oriented” data analysis, where they together considered “actionable steps that they could take in their personal and professional lives” to avoid reproducing gender inequalities (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 109).

The researchers for their part undertook a “second layer” of data analysis, by creating themes and recontextualising these with reference to relevant literature (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 109). What I would draw out here is that the creation of themes was not merely a matter of identifying or highlighting what was in the data (as generated), but was also a matter of creating meaning with further action intent. The explication of the themes can be said to have had a performative function in urging readers (wider audiences) to shift expectations associated with restrictive norms: for example, in dress; in decisions concerning in which activities those defined as “females” and “males” can properly partake; and about who they are or, rather, can be (other than determined by restrictive gender concepts). As I interpret their data analysis (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, pp. 109–110), the themes were not a matter of building up a theoretical understanding supposedly neutral in effect—they had an intentional performative function. This understanding of the theorising as a call to action also enhances the transformative function of the research, insofar as audiences are moved by the analysis (for a more detailed discussion on generative theorising, see Romm, 2018, Chapter 7).

I have focused above on elaborating and drawing out how the researchers consciously directed the research process in various ways to “potentiate transformation” (Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019, p. 108). Of course, in view of this intent, the “transformative paradigm” might be the umbrella term into

which this research can be deemed to fit. However, below I also offer some deliberations with reference to other paradigmatic considerations. I start with some brief considerations of how an extended postpositivism might be able to accommodate this research. I then move on to constructivist, critical realist, and Indigenous paradigmatic deliberations.

An Extended Postpositivist-Oriented Vision of the Project

Although normally those subscribing to postpositivism would not regard as “proper” the quest to consciously influence what is being researched, it is worth remembering Popper’s (1966, p. 362) recognition that outcomes in the social world may be influenced by ideas that people have about possible outcomes. Now, one could argue that if we capitalise on the notion that ideas (including the theorising of scientists) can affect the worlds being investigated, we can expect professional researchers to take this into account when undertaking research, and to be open to reexploring ideas with research participants with a view to considering desired outcomes. This would be an opening in the postpositivist position that could allow for the kind of conscious research-as-intervention approach adopted by Notshulwana and de Lange (2019). For a more detailed account of how we might stretch the postpositivist argument in this direction, see Romm (2018, pp. 425–426.)

An Extended Constructivist-Oriented Vision of the Project

Lincoln and Guba suggested that any data “found” during the research process are always generated via the interactions between the researchers (and their “tools”) and participants (2013, p. 65). Notshulwana and de Lange (2019) did not shy away from admitting that the research process—prompted by the researchers’ request to “create a new photo album”—meant that data were being generated and were not a “representation” of memories but a recreation of them, generated by the participants as they participated in the research process. The strength of using participative visual methods, as expressed by Mitchell et al., is that they can “work as a springboard for more talking, listening and reflecting,” thus consciously contributing to shaping worldviews and attendant visions of possibilities for action (2017, p. 23). The constructions generated in the research process are not meant to extract, but to shape, participant (and professional researcher) constructions being explored or interrogated. This is a different, more active, vision of constructivism than that expressed by Creswell (2014), as I noted earlier.

An Extended Critical Realist Vision of the Project

Like Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010) and Scott (2014), Redman-MacLaren and Mills (2015) suggested that instead of placing the task of critical realist-type theorising in the hands of professional “scientists” as expert theorists of social structures, it is important to invite the active involvement of “participants throughout the research project” to participate in “a structural critique for purposes of social change” (2015, pp. 4–5). My suggestion is that the transformative potential of the theorising around social mechanisms considered to be restricting life chances and life choices of people (in gendered ways in the case of the research by Notshulwana & de Lange, 2019) lies in its being helpful in locating points where people might enact some agency towards making a better quality of life—especially for those experiencing the brunt of the felt restrictions. It is in this way that an extended (practically oriented) critical realism can endorse the first and second layers of analysis referred to by Notshulwana and de Lange (2019, p. 109) as both working towards theorising that invites justice-oriented actions.

An Extended Indigenous-Paradigmatic Vision of the Project

Chilisa (2017, p. 813) emphasised that a decolonising approach must consciously embrace the Indigenous epistemological view that there are many ways of knowing that need to be respected as

part of the knowledge-creation enterprise. This is all part of the process of creating what Khau (2018, p. vii) called “cognitive justice.” Seen in this light, the way of knowing as developed in creative reconstruction of photo albums and discussion around these, should be appreciated as legitimate and valued entries into the knowing process. Moreover, in this project the binary of reason and emotion, which is so prevalent in Western thought, could be shown up to be a restrictive cultural construct because people, together, could fruitfully use reason connected with emotion to interrogate felt-to-be restrictive gendered expectations for conduct. What can be drawn out further—as crucial to accentuate—is that through the research prompt to create a new album, people’s sense of, and action in, reality shifted as they reconstructed their memories and visions of action possibilities to destabilise the concept of gender as a social construct guiding our relationships.

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the basis for justifying a transformative intent for undertaking research, whether or not it is self-defined as operating with a transformative paradigm as named by Mertens (1999). I explored the distinctiveness of the Indigenous paradigm for transformative research and expanded on the commitment to use the research space to forward relationality as part of the becoming of reality. I then (re)interpreted and extended various other paradigmatic positions in order to provide further philosophical justifications for enacting research in consciously interventive fashion for justice-oriented purposes. Although Mertens speaks from her acknowledged transformative paradigmatic commitment, this does not mean that she excludes dialogue between different paradigmatic positions as to how research should be undertaken and justified (Mertens et al., 2016). In this article, I have argued that the basis for legitimately adopting a transformative stance is that research willy-nilly involves some kind of impact, in that ways of proceeding are never neutral in their consequences. Hence, no matter what paradigmatic position or combination thereof is adopted, researchers—professional and lay—need to take seriously their responsibilities, together with others, for the continuing unfolding of our existence. In order to substantiate my argument with reference to educational research I outlined two examples. I discussed these by proffering paradigmatic considerations from various perspectives in terms of their potential to cater for such co-responsibility. While I did not offer examples of how research approaches are also implicated in the unfolding of ecological existence, I noted that this is also one of the central concerns of Indigenous scholars who focus on researchers being accountable to “all our relations” (Wilson, 2008, p. 56) or to “all that exists” (Chilisa, 2020, p. 24).

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