



Critical Inquiry: A Research Method

Seeing 'Truth' through a
Feminist lens

- Lisa Taylor

Positivist Inquiry – the anti-critical approach

- **Positivism**, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (eb.com):

“Any philosophical system that confines itself to the data of experience, excludes a priori [knowledge independent of experience] or metaphysical speculations, and emphasizes the achievements of science. Positivism is closely connected with empiricism, pragmatism, and logical positivism.”

Positivism continued

- Also from eb.com:

The basic affirmations of positivism are:

- (1) that all knowledge regarding matters of fact is based on the 'positive' data of experience, and
- (2) that beyond the realm of fact is that of pure logic and pure mathematics.

Strict adherence to the testimony of observation and experience is the all-important imperative of the positivists.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/471865/positivism>

Positivism continued

- According to socialresearchmethods.net, **positivism** can be defined as:
“a position that holds that the goal of knowledge is simply to describe the phenomena that we experience. The purpose of science is simply to stick to what we can observe and measure. Knowledge of anything beyond that, a positivist would hold, is impossible.”
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/positivism.php>

Post-positivism – moving towards a definition of critical inquiry

- Post-positivism, again according to socialresearchmethods.net, can be defined as:

“a wholesale rejection of the central tenets of positivism.”

- This theory system stands opposite to experimental and scientific methodology.

George Demetrion – Post-Positivist Scientific Philosophy

“In certain lab-like environments where independent variables can be tightly controlled, **experimental design** can be a valuable, and, depending on the nature of the problem under study, an essential instrumentality. The methodology, even according to the more qualifying precepts of **quasi-experimental design**, is more problematic where variables interact in less than precisely discernable ways. This is particularly the case over regions of research like motivation and the even murkier critical arena of consciousness... In these regions evidence pointing to causal attribution may be susceptible to multiple explanations, which may require the “thick” description of case study analysis. In **post-positivist design**...such areas of subjectivity do not simply collapse into the relativism of constructivism. They remain subject to the **rigors of “experimental inquiry”** (Peirce, 1955, p. 47) and to **the ideal of “verisimilitude” (approximation to the truth)** (Popper, 1963) even if in a manner that would be difficult, if not impossible or irrelevant to be precisely broken down into statistically discernable categorizations or certain-like truth statements, however provisionally they may be held.”

(Emphases mine.)

Demetrian continued

- Another clarification of post-positivism:

“Critical in post-positivist design is a problem focus, the stimulation of imagination in the making of bold conjectures, attunement to the significance of provisional hypothesis formation in pushing an investigation forward, the correlative role of guided experimentation, and the capacity to discern which data in which contexts is relevant to the problem at hand. Also needed is searing and, as relevant, comparative analysis of any given theory or study, acceptance of falsification as a core criteria...a probing into alternative scenarios suggested by the data or a given hypothesis, a drive for problem resolution, and the search for truth, however provisional, as a regulative ideal.”

Post-positivist Scientific Philosophy: Mediating Convergences

by George Demetrian, 2004

<http://www.the-rathouse.com/Postpositivism.htm>

Critical Inquiry as a Post-Positivist Paradigm of Inquiry

- Ontological view:
 - we exist as unique, interpersonal beings, whose behaviour, motivation and search for meaning cannot be empirically known (or at least not *only* known empirically or scientifically).
- Epistemological view:
 - knowledge is subjective, grounded in culture and experience, and personal.

From *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences*, 2004, ed. by de Marrais & Lapan

- “Doing critical inquiry means taking into account how our lives are mediated by systems of inequity such as classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism.”

Patti Lather, *Critical Inquiry in Qualitative Research: Feminist and Poststructuralist Perspectives: Science “After Truth.”*

http://www.contaduria.uady.mx/sec-cip/articulos/libros_online/educacion/LawrenceErlbaum2004FoundationsforResearchMethodsofInquiryinEducationandth.pdf#page=220

Critical inquiry continued

- From Lather again:

“Positivism is not dead, as anyone knows who tries to get published in most journals, obtain grants from most funding agencies, or have research projects accepted by thesis and dissertation committees. What is dead, however, is its theoretic dominance and its “one best way” claims over empirical work in the human sciences” (p. 207).

Critical inquiry continued

- And again, from Lather:

“In sum, there are many ways to do science. Positivism, with its claims of methodological objectivity and mathematized procedures, is one way. Critical inquiry, with its belief that there is no transhistorical, culture-free, disinterested way of knowing, is another way” (p. 207).

Critical inquiry continued

- Critical inquiry posits that the theories of being and of knowledge that we hold as social scientists, and in our case as educators, are based on issues of power, and its distribution.
- If we live in a postmodern, post-positivist age of inquiry, then how can we best discover the truths that are around us and embedded in our practice of education? How can we explore issues in education without sidestepping the larger issues of emancipation as women, minorities, or members of politically charged groups?

The feminist lens as an example of critical inquiry in practice

- In direct opposition to the idea of sidestepping these issues of power imbalances, and their ramifications for the results of any experimental study, critical inquiry as a research method relevant to our task looks at aspects of education through the lens of one or more of these issues. Rather than merely 'taking feminism into account,' for example, feminist critical inquiry sees all of the questions in an inquiry or research project in the light of the issue of the power imbalance implicit in the traditionally paternalistic culture of North America (or the cultures of other countries).

Research Methods

- From Patti Lather again:

“Very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry...the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (p. 71).

Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern*, 1991.

Types of Questions

- “Unlike traditional qualitative methodology...feminist methodology promises a more interpersonal and reciprocal relationship between researchers and those whose lives are the focus of the research. Feminist methodology seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched.”

Leslie Rebecca Bloom, *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*, 1998

Types of Questions continued

- Questions then become part of an ethnographic, narrative, interpretive methodology, focused on the individuality of the subject:
 - What has been your experience as a woman within your workplace?
 - Has being a girl in an educational setting made a difference in your life? Have you ever felt that boys and girls weren't treated equally? How so?
 - Do male teachers in your school receive preferential treatment in classroom distributions, supervision schedules, face time with the principal?

Participant recruitment and involvement

- This aspect of a research project would also be subject to the 'lens' of feminist inquiry – participants would be those who could contribute to an understanding of an area of experience that involves the aspect of male/female power imbalances.
- Researchers in this field would need to be transparent in communicating their critical lens to the participants in their study, though not all participants would need to see through the same lens – and the study would be deepened without that sameness.

Possible procedures

- In most examples of post-positivist research studies, the methodology involves interviews, personal histories and narrative re-telling in the presentation of findings, along with researcher reaction and reflection in the light of the inquiry's lens.
- There could also be a reading of women's letters or diary entries from various time periods, or videos taken of women in various settings, or audio of women sharing memories of situations affected by their gender, etc.
- Of course all procedures must be subject to ethics review policies.

Critical research designs from a feminist perspective

- They explore more interactive, dialogic, and reciprocal research methods that work toward transformative action and egalitarian participation;
 - They connect meaning to broader structures of social power, control, and history;
 - They work toward open, flexible theory building grounded in both confrontation with and respect for the experiences of people in their daily lives and profound scepticism regarding appearances and 'common sense;'
 - They foreground the tensions involved in speaking *with* rather than *to/for* marginalized groups.
- Lather, *Critical Inquiry in Qualitative Research*, p. 209.

Types of data collection

- Interviews with single mothers, teachers, girls in certain grades in school, etc.
- Literature reviews of articles and studies carried out by women or with women subjects in which the lens of feminist theory can be postulated to apply
- Surveys that lead to a better understanding of the situations lived out by women in different settings.
- (It is most likely that direct interviews will be used in this methodology.)

Types of data interpretation

- Resonance – how does the information resonate with me as researcher and/or with the feminist critical inquiry lens?
- Correlation – how does this information correlate with research in the field of feminist inquiry?
- Themes – how do these results/reflections fit into the broader themes of feminism?

Scientific, empirical methods

- Validity, reliability and credibility in the sense of scientific, experimental methods are not of value in this methodology – not because the researchers are uninterested in having their work taken seriously, but because the ontological and empirical foundations of critical inquiry don't allow for the objectivization of knowledge.
- The interpersonal, relational method of research values the subjective, unique and individual experience of the subject, so interpretation must be narrative and related to a feminist construct.

Examples of studies using feminist critical inquiry – Study example #1

1. 'Richardson's (1992) essay about her interview with "Louisa May" as part of her study of unmarried mothers' (Lather, 2004).
 - Richardson presented her interview findings in the form of poetry (thus also including aesthetic inquiry in her methodology).

Richardson continued

- Richardson wrote in an autobiographical mode, tying her subject inextricably to her own experience of the research process, and framing her study within her own changed relations with children; spirituality; her return of her book contract because she felt she could no longer write conventional sociology; her increased attunement to differences in herself and others, including more caution about what “doing research” means; and some disillusionment at “the hold of positivism on even those I consider my allies.”
- Richardson felt that her “feminist mission...intensified” (Lather, 2004, p. 210).

Richardson continued

As Lather says,

“Richardson blurred the lines between the genres of poetry and social science reporting... [she] is mother, wife, scholar, and poet in her desire to move toward some way of doing science more in keeping with her feminist poststructuralism” (p. 210).

Study example #2

- Again from Lather's chapter in *Foundations for Research: Methods of Inquiry in Education and the Social Sciences* (2004) comes this second example: a dissertation on African American women and leadership positions in higher education (Woodbrooks, 1991).

Woodbrooks continued

- This study was again based on interviews with African American women. However, instead of presenting her findings in an empirical way (charts, graphs, comparisons with other studies), Woodbrooks transcribed the interviews and analyzed the data; then she reanalyzed the data and asked her interview subjects to read over a second draft and respond over the phone to her interpretation of the findings.

Woodbrooks continued

- As Lather says,

“This resulted in a textual strategy that juxtaposed the voices of the White female researcher with those of the African American female participants” (p. 211).

Woodbrooks' methodology:

1. She gives the 'realist' version – we hear the voices of the women who were interviewed.
2. She gives the 'critical' version – the data is interpreted in the light of Woodbrooks' “theoretical investments” – she uses “feminist and critical theory to ‘say what things mean’ as she theorize[s] out of the words of the African American women research participants.”
3. She gives the 'deconstructive' version – she tells us how the participants reacted to the critical version.

Woodbrooks summarized

“In sum, holding up to scrutiny her own complicity, Woodbrooks created a research design that moves her toward unlearning her own privilege and decentering the researcher as the master of truth and justice...” (Lather, 2004, p. 211)

Why use feminist critical inquiry as a research method?

“Women’s resistance comes out of women’s subordinated status to men, institutionalized in society and lived through every day in countless personal ways. Women’s resistance is not necessarily or intrinsically oppositional; it is not necessarily or intrinsically contesting for power. It does however have a profound impact on the fabric of social life because of its steady, cumulative effects. It is central to the making of history, and...it is the bedrock of social change” (Aptheker, 1989, as quoted in Petra Munro, *Subject to Fiction: Women Teachers’ Life History Narrative and the Cultural Politics of Resistance*, 1998).

- Without doing research that looks at social and educational constructs through the lens of feminist theory, inequalities will be continued, cemented and accepted as incontrovertible by successive generations of female teachers and researchers.

Why continued

- “While the concept of advocacy research [the use of research methods such as feminist critical inquiry to change/re-formulate the lens through which data is interpreted] remains an oxymoron to the many who take scholarly objectivity as both a possible and desirable goal in the human sciences, the mantle of objectivity has been irreparably rent” (Lather, 1991, p. 14).
- Since there is no going back in the post-positivist view of theory and research methodology, we are committed to accepting critical theory as a valid method of doing research, and perhaps even a necessary one as well.

Activity:

- Take a few minutes to think about your research topic, and the method you are considering using. Write a few notes about how you could re-frame your topic using a critical theory method, considering the lens of feminism, post-colonialism (or even postculturalism), Marxism, etc.
- Turn to someone near you and share your thoughts with each other. How would this critical theory lens benefit your project? How would it undermine it?
- Share with the larger group if you wish, in order to enlarge our understanding of this methodology in relation to various project proposals (2 or 3).