

Chapter 2

The Power of the Paradigm in Scholarship in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the six paradigms explored in this book – positivist, neo-positivist, interpretivist, transformative, pragmatic, and supercomplexity – are described and the key elements of each paradigm are discussed. The paradigms are discussed here as they apply not only to research, though this is the usual area of scholarship to which they are applied, but also to the other areas of scholarship as identified by Boyer. Scholarship as discussed is based upon Boyer's definitions of the four scholarships of discovery, application, integration, and teaching, and his subsequent addition of the scholarship of engagement. The key elements of paradigms are ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology, intent, and outcomes. The paradigm is the focal point here because awareness of the paradigm within which the scholarship is undertaken helps to ensure consistency between elements of the activity and clarifies within the scholar's mind how best to undertake their scholarly activity.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the underlying themes and issues addressed in the book are detailed. The book is focused on the discipline of education and the forms of scholarship, including research, that occur within it. In particular, the paradigms within which the scholarships are pursued, and the methods employed are addressed. The term paradigm used throughout the book is taken to mean a world view or a set of assumptions and understandings about key aspects of an academic activity: the nature of reality or truth (ontology); the intent, ethics and values of the scholar (axiology); the understanding of the nature of knowledge and how it may be known (epistemology); the way information is obtained (methodology); and the nature of the research outcomes. The paradigm underpinning a particular education research project or report may well be implicit rather than explicit.

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SECTION 1: EDUCATION RESEARCH PARADIGMS

There are many labels used for the various paradigms that have been discussed in research literature (for example Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2015; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this book, five labels that broadly align with paradigm distinctions found in other literature are used – positivist, neo-positivist, interpretivist, transformative, and pragmatic. What we have styled neo-positivist is usually referred to as post-positivist. There are two problems with using the prefix ‘post’ as post describes what something is not rather than what it is, and any of the paradigms, other than positivist, could be described as post-positivist. There is, however, a paradigmatic approach, generally referred to as post-positivist, that shares something of the same ontology – the same notions of order and pattern in the world – as positivism but with a lower level of certainty. In the social sciences this paradigm may be said to have superseded simple positivism. We use the descriptor ‘neo’ to indicate a new and qualified version of positivism.

A sixth paradigm is advanced in this book – the paradigm of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000). It is introduced both to acknowledge the multiple complexities found in the contexts in which education research is now conducted and to provide for imaginative, creative, divergent research outcomes and for research that problematizes rather than resolves issues and situations.

The intent is to use these paradigms to discuss the philosophical assumptions and intentions that underpin each paradigm and to indicate how key elements – ontology, axiology, epistemology, methodology, and the nature of the research outcomes – are reflected in each of the paradigms.

One of the key messages put forward is that it is the paradigm within which the research is undertaken that will allow the researcher to decide on the purpose of the research, for whom it is likely to be beneficial or valuable, how it may be conducted, from whom or what to obtain data, how the data may be best gathered and analyzed, the rhetoric or discourse appropriate throughout the research study, and the action verbs that will describe what it is that the researcher is actually doing, for example: exploring, inquiring, testing, measuring, confronting, disturbing, uncovering, creating, problematizing. The claim is made here that for coherence of research design, implementation and conclusions, the researcher needs to address these decisions and clearly nominate and articulate the paradigm of research within which the study is to be carried out.

RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND RESEARCH METHODS

Much has been written about the so-called paradigm wars. Bryman (2008), Jones and Kennedy (2011), and Gage (1989) trace the perceived conflict that has occurred since the 1980s, at least between positivist advocates and interpretivist advocates which has caused a tendency to draw battle lines between the two paradigms. In many instances this was less a war about paradigms than a war between specific disciplines or philosophical positions. However, the so-called paradigm wars discussions and debates also confused methodology with paradigm such that what became unclear was whether there was a conflict between the paradigms (epistemology, ontology, axiology) or just about methodologies (qualitative vs. quantitative). In alluding to a tendency to exacerbate this confected dichotomy, Jones and Kennedy (2011) claim that:

By 2009, peace had broken out, but... rather than being settled or resolved in favour of a clear winner, the paradigms of research in the social sciences embedded the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods in a way that often implies that they are incommensurate approaches (p. 21).

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