Chapter 13
The Research Process and Indigenous Epistemologies

Kgomotso H. Moahi
University of Botswana, Botswana

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the research process and indigenous epistemologies, specifically, what is involved in conducting research using indigenous epistemology. The dictionary definition of epistemology is that it is a philosophical theory of knowledge that studies the nature and what constitutes knowledge. In this chapter, indigenous epistemology is contrasted with other epistemologies, as an epistemology that seeks to advance the voices of "indigenous" people, or the marginalized. The contention is that dominant epistemologies have downplayed the role and importance of indigenous knowledge in research. Such epistemologies have not given voice to the researched communities yet purport to have an understanding of their social worlds. This chapter therefore places indigenous epistemology at the fore for carrying out research with rather than on communities and using indigenous knowledge to theorize research and inform the theories and constructs used in the conduct of research.

INTRODUCTION

Studies utilizing indigenous epistemology in information science are very few (Lilley, 2017). Although studies investigating the use of mixed methods research in Africa have been conducted (Ngulube, 2013; Ngulube, Mokwatlo, & Ndwandwe, 2009), there seems to be a dearth of research using indigenous or Afrocentric methods in information science. Not surprisingly and reflecting the history of information and library science in Africa, Bitso (2013) using an Afrocentric research approach, conducted a discourse analysis of LIS publications from and about Africa published between 2009 and 2012, and found that African LIS scholars drew their definitions of LIS from Western literature, rather than definitions informed by its practice and development in Africa. According to Dick (2006), LIS researchers in developing countries have largely been uncritical users of models and theory developed in the West. The question that researchers in developing countries should be asking themselves is, whose models are these? Under what context were they developed? How relevant and applicable are they in non-western contexts?

(Dick, 2006). These types of questions should lead researchers to reconsider the research paradigm and methodologies they use, and to recognize the role that indigenous epistemology and research paradigms might play in more in-depth understanding of LIS issues in developing countries (Dick, 2013).

The concept epistemology is defined as a philosophical theory of knowledge. It is a study of the nature of knowledge, the beliefs, values and methods that arise from how knowledge is perceived, viewed and approached. According to Scheurich & Young (1997) epistemologies are informed by social histories of particular groups, and because of that, different groups have their own epistemologies, but over time, one epistemology, the "Euro-Western" has become dominant (Chilisa, 2012; Hart, 2010; Rigney, 2001). However, the Euro-Western tradition we refer to is not homogenous. In that tradition, the scientific method of research, known as positivism was initially viewed as the one legitimate and valid way of generating knowledge. The scientific method was based on belief in objective reality (as opposed to subjective reality) that could be observed, measured, and quantified for analysis. It took social scientists in the Chicago School of Sociology in the United States of America to challenge the notion of objective reality and universal laws in the study of human behavior. They introduced qualitative approaches, associated with naturalistic research approaches. Other challenges emerged regarding the positivist approach and its conceptualization of science as seeking value free knowledge. For example, scholars from the Frankfurt School advanced critical theory that questioned the concept of value free research, and moved that research should focus on social justice and be transformative. The constructivism approach represented yet another response to the positivist and post positivist approaches, maintaining that realities are constructed from people's lived experiences, and for this reason, there cannot be objective reality. The indigenous approach goes further to question the reductionism of the Euro-Western paradigms, and their focus on a system of knowing that ignores or downplays other systems of knowing. A further discussion of this will be provided in the section on research paradigms. What is clear is that despite the criticism and emergence of other research paradigms of the Euro-Western ilk, the indigenous paradigm has emerged in opposition to the dominant, yet reductionist and patronizing research approaches. Indigenous researchers have questioned the motives of Euro-Western research approaches, and have called for decolonization of the research process (Chilisa, 2012). Decolonization can be manifested by the elevation of the role of indigenous ways of knowing in research and teaching – to be just as valuable as Euro-Western approaches (Held, 2019).

A discussion of epistemologies, would not be complete without a discussion of the politics of knowledge, specifically how they are tied up with colonialism and imperialism that have resulted in the marginalization and domination of the colonized cultures. The marginalization extended to the negation and denigration of the knowledge traditions of the colonized, denying the existence of their (African) philosophy (Hegel, 1956, cited in Adegbindin, 2015). The marginalization persists even today in the prevalent view of how knowledge is created, acquired or recognized. The knowledge of indigenous people for example, has not been recognized in any meaningful way because of its 'failure' to conform to the criteria of rationalism or objectivity. For this reason, it is research based on Euro-Western epistemologies and its theories that dominates the knowledge economy. According to Chilisa (2012), the dominant research traditions are informed by the culture, history and philosophy of Euro-Western thought, and this has led to calls to adopt indigenous epistemologies as a way of decolonizing research methodologies. One must note that the calls made for indigenous epistemologies are not limited to indigenous people, but other historically marginalized groups, such as women, the disabled, minorities, and the formerly colonized, etc., (Chilisa, 2012).

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