

Interview with Jethro Pettit, Director of Teaching and Learning & Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies.

Introduction:

My name is Jethro Pettit and I am a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, at the University of Sussex. And I am also Director of Teaching and Learning responsible for our MA and PhD programs and our short courses

Q: Can you please provide a brief overview of how Denzin & Lincoln have distinguished between research world views and their approach to research?

So Denzin and Lincoln talked about competing paradigms in social research. A paradigm is a world view, it is a way of seeing the world, making sense of the world, and also understanding how it is that we can go about claiming validity and rigor in the way that we do that. One of the dominant research paradigms for many years has been the positivist paradigm, and what is now sometimes called post-positivism, and that is the point of view that there is an objective world out there that we can understand, independent of our own perspective or position or interpretation of that world as researchers. And we would tend to use certain kinds of methods to ascertain that reality. The post-positivist view is a little bit less rigid than that and it assumes that there is some interpretation going on, on the part of the researcher.

Contrasted with positivism and post-positivism, and this sort of objective realism as a scientific world view, is the more interpretivist or constructivist approach to research and this is a paradigm that recognizes that there are actually multiple versions of reality and that our understanding and interpretation of that reality will depend somewhat on the perspective, experience and position of the researcher, so we have to take into account the lenses through which we are seeing the world. It is not existing independently of our understanding.

Now there is a third paradigm articulated in their work which, in a sense, tries to bring the two together but does so from an ideological perspective of in what ways this research can make a difference in changing the world and making it better; and this is the critical perspective on research.

So a critical epistemology is one that recognizes that the world is real and that we can understand it, there are objective realities but there are also subjectivities and interpretations that we have to take into account and that these are ideologically constructed, so it is necessary to gain a critical perspective on both the reality and the way in which we are understanding the reality.

Now, in the most recent version of their article, they also discuss what they call the participative paradigm, which in a way goes beyond the critical interpretivist and constructivist perspectives to say that reality can only be really understood through an intersubjective process involving participants in making sense of that reality through a participative world view.

So those are, in a sense, the four main competing paradigms of research, and it is worth noting that each one carries with it what it is sometimes called an ontology, or a sort of philosophical foundation, which is the basis of that approach; and that would be: is reality independent of me the viewer or am I playing a role in interpreting it or do I need a critical stance to try to take that apart or do we need a participative approach to make sense of it? So there is a philosophical basis.

That gives way to what is sometimes called epistemology, which is ways of knowing; that is how is it that we can claim to have a truth or knowledge of a subject. Following from that comes the actual methodology, the ways of going about making claims and analyzing data and collecting information, interpreting it and so on, and cutting across those three, we can't forget that there is also the influence of ideology; there are values; each of these perspectives embodies within it a set of understandings about the world, how it is the we are making sense of it but also the purpose of the research and what it is for and what it can do to affect the world. So that in a nutshell is what the competing epistemologies are about in social science research.

Q: Some researchers may describe these distinctions as needless philosophizing. Could you explain why it is important to have an appreciation of these various ways of thinking about these issues?

So it is very true that we can get caught up in sort of fancy words like ontology, epistemology, methodology and so on and to think that this is actually not so important. But, really, these are the fundamental building blocks of what we mean by good social research.

Denzin and Lincoln do not make a value judgment about these paradigms, saying that one is better than the other, although they position themselves very much as social constructivists. But what they are saying essentially is that we need to know where we stand when we are doing research; we need to know, we need to be explicit and clear about what our own understanding is about how we can make claims to truth, how it is that realities can be observed, evidence can be gathered, analysed, documented and what claims can be made from that.

And there are different ways of doing that, and what they are saying is that this is not a question of picking sort of the best one, it is about which one makes sense for the type of research and the type of question and the type of evidence that one is approaching and the

approach that one is taking. So it is about being clear about that and then selecting, or taking, the appropriate approach to understanding knowledge, making sense of it, interpreting it and making claim to truth for that particular problem or issue. Now, sometimes there is an old debate that says to be quantitative is to be more rigorous and to have greater validity and there is somehow a hierarchy of validity running through the approaches that I described. I think that view is now considered a bit old fashion; that sort of debate about quantitative versus qualitative and some methods being more rigorous than others. I think there is not a much greater appreciation of the particular strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches for particular kinds of issues and problems. And each of them has quite well developed criteria, standards for validity and rigour, and each of them can be done very well or done not very well; so it is more a question of the quality and integrity with which the research has been done and also it is a question of mixing methods and increasingly there is an appreciation of the value of bringing in a combination of perhaps more objective realist, or positivist methodologies, which would tend to use, but not always use, quantitative methods, and the more constructivist or interpretivist or participatory or critical methods, which would use other approaches. There is an appreciation of the value of bringing them together and mixing the methods and forming teams of people who can work with, right across the spectrum, and approaches.

Q: Could you give an indication of how various world views would influence the nature of our research?

So I think that one of the most fundamental implication of all this for the researcher is that each of these paradigms or world views has implications for how the researcher positions themselves in relationship to their subject matter and in relationship to other, say stakeholders, within the research process. So, for example, in a positivist or post-positivist stance the researcher is saying that the reality out there doesn't depend on me being in the middle interpreting things; I am going to apply these methods and what I would find out would be a representation of that reality. And if somebody else wanted to replicate what I did, they would get the same results if I did it well. And it wouldn't depend on my interpretation.

So the researcher is positioning themselves, in fact, as being removed from the interpretation or sense-making of that research. It is very much the idea of, sort of, building on, kind of, objectifying the verifiable facts.

Researchers who are positioned more in a, say, interpretivist and constructivist world view would have to acknowledge their own lenses and interpretations and also those of other stakeholders within the research. In fact, what they are doing is negotiating different perspectives, multiple perspectives on a reality and recognizing that the reality is going to lie somewhere between these different points of view and they are going to have to account for the lenses and interpretations that are taking place.

A critical perspective would go a little bit further than that and say well, actually we also have to understand the way that ideologies have been constructed to normalize a particular point of view and we might need to deconstruct or critique those assumptions that have shaped those world views and take a critical stance toward them in order to get to the truth under the surface.

The participative world view would say perhaps go even further than those two in saying that the only way we can really make claims to truth is by bringing the voices and perspectives of the various people who are subjects of the research into the process of the research itself not just as key informants but as researchers, as action researchers, as participant researchers. They would be helping to frame the questions, to collect the data to do the analysis and draw the conclusions from that, not relying necessarily on an external expert to be doing that for them.

These are the most fundamental implications for the researcher is to think about where they are positioned in relation to their subject matter and also in relationship to other actors, key informants and participants, subjects in the research.