Overview

One might assume the long sustained epistemological assault on objectivity would make anyone apprehensive of centering their research on its pursuit. And yet in the U.S., "objective" empiricism continues to dominate many fields. Rather than acknowledging the ongoing debate, many have simply ignored it and instead continue to attempt to mirror the natural science approach to quantitative and even qualitative research. Education has increasingly followed these trends, working to gain credibility by adopting the "objective" methodology of economics, political science and other positivistie oriented disciplines.

But what is objectivity? It is defined in the *Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary* as the state or quality of being objective, which is itself defined as "1. Free from or independent of personal feeling, opinions, prejudice, etc.; detached; unbiased. 2. Pertaining to what is external to or independent of the mind; real: opposed to subjective. 3. Treating, stressing, or dealing with external or actual phenomena, as distinct from inner or imaginary feelings and thoughts" (p. 932). If we turn this definition toward social sciences research, a number of questions emerge: Can researchers excise all of the biases they bring into their research? Is any methodology really external or independent of the mind and acquired knowledge? And how free of opinions, prejudices, and personal feelings is objectivity itself?

This paper explores these questions in detail, focusing considerable attention on the explicit and implicit goals of objectivity. It starts by engaging the critiques of positivism and objectivity from a variety of theoretical lenses including critical theory, post-structuralism, feminism, and post-colonialism. It then explores recent trends in educational research that fit within the positivist framework, including the 2002 National Research Council report *Scientific Research in Education*, and provides a multifaceted critique of objectivity. It concludes by offering an alternative vision of critical educational research, where objectivity is abandoned as a goal and a modified standpoint theory and critical hermeneutics are combined to create a more reflexive, phenomenological, and dialogical epistemology founded on clear ethical and political positionality. In the end, it attempts to show that objectivity is itself an ideological position and one with profound implications for research.

Objectivity Under Assault

Before moving specifically into the realm of education, it is fruitful to first offer a brief overview of the critiques levied against objectivity in general. The

attacks began with skepticism in Ancient Greece and have a long tradition from the Cynics and David Hume to Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, for practical reasons, this discussion will begin with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who deconstruct objectivity right at the moment that positivism was becoming *the* accepted form of American research, and then continue with a concise summary of the postmodern critique. Finally, more contemporary arguments from feminist standpoint theory and postcolonialism are examined, which further question the objectivity of Western philosophy, social theory, and even the physical sciences.

Given this long tradition, a first question that emerges is why objectivity remains so central to American scholarship? The positivist tradition encompasses a diverse array of theorists from Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, the Vienna Circle and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein to Karl Popper. Their shared commitment is to parallel the social sciences with the natural sciences by co-opting the scientific method to study human behavior and interaction. They center this position on a binding faith in sense data and the ability to quantify what is seen, heard, or felt. Any theory must be validated through the experience of facts, quantified in a rigorous process that eliminates subjective intervention. That which cannot be shown through observation or experimentation becomes de facto inferior, a mere exercise in speculative dreaming (Giroux, 1983). Popper (1992)—as a strong advocate of this approach and critic of all forms of skepticism, conventionalism, and relativism—added the idea of falsifiability, where no theory is scientific if it cannot in principal be shown false by observation (leading him to claim theories like Marxism and psychoanalysis outside the realm of science). The theorists in this tradition then set out to separate science from questions of ethics and ends, and instead prided themselves on their ability to suspend judgment, bias, and politics in lieu of the type of increasingly complex statistical manipulation that purports to maximize reliability and validity. Within education, a subset of theorists and researchers has increasingly followed the central tenets of this project, working to gain legitimacy and respect in the broader research community and among policymakers.

The collection of intellectuals that become known as the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, were committed to an alternative vision, where they sought to penetrate objective appearance and explore the underlying social relations the surface often concealed. They rejected rationality that subordinated human consciousness and action to the imperatives of universal law and instead highlighted the contradictions, alienation and subjugation that existed below the cohesiveness and universality of functionalist traditions (Giroux, 1983). By looking at the relationship between political domination and culture, subjectivity, and consciousness, Frankfurt School theorists hoped to critique the social order as

part of a radical project for change that offered a normative vision of what society should be like based on deeper psycho-social phenomena.

Adorno and Horkheimer, as two of the leading members of the Frankfurt School, were among the first to recognize the dialectic nature of objectivity and offer a trenchant critique of positivism and its over-reliance on science, reason, and objectivity.[1] They argued that instrumental rationality had penetrated all aspects of everyday life and that science had become a vehicle of social domination and control that actually denied the critical faculty of reason in deference to the empirically provable fact. In their view, *science* had fallen prey to the *scientific method* and analysis had become separated from the questions of ethics and ends, being solely focused instead on description, classification, and means. Positivism thus ushered in a paradigm that always stopped short of critique, and was forever stuck in describing the world as it was seen, heard, and felt. This problem is at the heart of much research today, where efforts to let the data speak for itself leave questions of structural inequality and power largely unresolved.

Jurgen Habermas (1973) furthered this line of reasoning by arguing that adherence to reason alone eliminated the ability to hope, to take a position, to desire, to strive for happiness, and to dignify all other aspects of human experience that did not fit into the scientifically observable fact. In Habermas's view, science had separated reason from desire and suffering, and had increasingly centered itself on production, technological "progress," and efficiency alone. As a result, anything associated with transcending reality was deemed nonsensical and outside the scope of scientific study. In the end, he felt, science had abandoned its role in aiding the progress of humanity.

Postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty went even further than their predecessors, rejecting the notion of one objective, universal truth implicitly. Lyotard, for example, argued that all knowledge exists within language games and there was thus no means to gauge the validity of one kind of knowledge over another. In this context, he ultimately labeled scientific knowledge as a particular discourse (Lyotard, 1984). In the process, he called into question the whole course of Western science and theory by privileging difference and plurality over any form of universality or foundationalist theory. Earlier, Foucault (1970) had taken a huge step in this direction by challenging the "objective" basis of history and connecting knowledge, truth, and power in a manner that rejects the "normalization" and "subjectification" of modern science and philosophy. He argued that history is generally written by those that control its outcomes and that what has been taken for universal truth is actually just a discourse underwritten by particular perspectives and power dynamics. At about the same time, Derrida (1980, 1998) attacked the very basis of Western metaphysics, arguing that the

Western philosophical project has always been about erasing time, history, difference, and contingency from the world in a false attempt at a unifying theory. As proclaimed in his famous maxim, "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," Derrida's method of deconstruction thus becomes a process of perpetual critique that seeks to trap meaning within a text unable to maintain the authority of even the author.[2]

Yet, one could argue that these thinkers went too far in their critique, eliminating the possibility of science as a mechanism for social change. Their absolute subjectivity evacuates the potential for a political project and, although some like Derrida worked from a position of critique and a progressive worldview, it is difficult to follow these theoretical positions to their logical conclusions without falling into a tempest of ethical relativity and radical idealism. In interpretative educational research, many have embraced these insights and done empirical work divorced from the larger structural and power dynamics that invariably affect the local situation. Thus, none but those working in the space between the modern and postmodern have been able to articulate a position that does not appear to contain major logical contradictions or fail under the force of these contradictions (Kellner and Best, 1991).

Among the most compelling efforts to bridge the postmodern critique with the earlier radical politics is feminist standpoint theory, as exemplified by Sandra Harding in her edited volume *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (2004). In Chapter One of the anthology, Harding systematically explains the epistemological position of standpoint theory as relying on a series of assumptions. The first is the inextricable link between knowledge and power, an insight previously explored in great detail by Foucault. For standpoint theory, knowledge is never neutral or universal, and it always has a particular perspective that serves a particular set of interests. A second assumption of standpoint epistemology is the necessity of moving beyond description to incorporate a prescription for change. Feminist standpoint theory is thus normative in outlook, attempting to reincorporate values into science. Finally, standpoint theory assumes that inquiry itself is a political project, which can empower the oppressed. The project is not solely for women though, incorporating the achieved positions of many oppressed groups working to overcome domination. As Patricia Hill Collins and Chela Sandoval argue in the same volume, the goal is to establish an "oppositional consciousness" that escapes the totalizing and oppressive knowledge of the dominant discourse and ideology.

A host of other feminists have also attempted to move beyond the mere critique of the subjective and androcentric nature of history, social theory, and science to offer alternative paradigms that can reestablish a foundation for turning empirical work to radical causes. Donna Haraway (1986) argues that we must combine an account of radical historical contingency with a critical reflexivity to language and a commitment to a faithful account of the real world. She believes

this can be accomplished by starting from a dialectical position, but moving beyond it to see the object of knowledge as an actor and agent, allowing the synthesis of a multiplicity of perspectives into a larger, more coherent (though panoramic) whole. Likewise, bell hooks (1994) and Collins (2004) illuminate the centrality of marginality, critiquing feminism itself for essentializing all women under the umbrella of a white, middle class perspective, and therefore call for a more inclusive science that serves the multiplicity of subjectivities that the empirical world entails.

In *Is Science Multicultural?* (1998), Harding followed these general premises to further question Western science, treating all social and even natural sciences as emanating from a particular discourse and worldview.[3] Similarly, other postcolonial theorists like Partha Chatterjee, Ashis Nandy and Edward Said have underscored Harding's conclusion by locating the scientific method and social theory in Eurocentrism. All of this work further problematizes the notion of objectivity, by locating an underlying perspective at the center of all epistemology and metaphysics that dictates not only its content but form.

The Educational Dilemma

Within educational discourse, Paulo Freire mirrors these thinkers in first locating, and then rejecting, the oxymoron of objective, apolitical knowledge. Freire recognized that teaching and research were by their very nature political acts that necessarily involve taking a position: "It seems fundamental to me to clarify in the beginning that a neutral, uncommitted, and apolitical educational practice does not exist" (1998, p. 39). He believed that separating education from its underlying politics worked toward dehumanizing students and served the interests of neoliberalism and its fatalistic exodus from hope.

The positivism that was coming to dominate educational research in the 1980s and early 1990s was thus of great concern to Freire and his followers, particularly its reliance on a "value free" methodology. The obvious manipulative potential of statistics was secondary, in their view, to the more insidious nature of extricating ethical considerations. In the introduction to Freire's last book, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998a), Donaldo Macedo outlines his particular concern with the power of positivistic overemphasis to effectively cloak ideology "behind a facile call for 'scientific rigor' and 'absolute objectivity'" (p. xi). He claims that attempts to adopt the methods of the "hard sciences" have led toward scientism, where intellectual work cultivated by specialists has fragmented knowledge. Additionally, he argues that naïve empiricists were beginning to believe that facts were not human statements about the world but, rather, embodied the world itself. In the process, such empiricists were forgetting what philosophy and social theory

have been demonstrating for at least the past 60 years—that human beings are cultural animals which see the world and interpret it through socially constructed spectacles. Macedo further recognizes that the adherence to neutrality has also absolved researchers of responsibility for their work—a problem that is increasingly relevant in the world of high stakes testing and accountability.

Many since Freire have continued and enriched this work. In *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983), Henry Giroux outlined a new vision of educational reform focused on resistance and radical social transformation, basing many of his insights on the Frankfurt School philosophers. Michael Apple, in his classic *Ideology and Curriculum* (2004), modified Gramscian ideas to examine the profound ways in which official knowledge cloaks ideology and indoctrinates children into a worldview that serves the powerful. hooks (1994) highlighted the centrality of lived experience in knowledge, while challenging the essentialism that some critical theory and feminism invoked. And a host of others, from Stanley Aronowitz and Ira Shor to Peter McLaren and Antonia Darder, have augmented the discussion by incorporating deeper discussion of class, race, gender, the body, and difference as essential components of critical educational research.

To begin to combat these issues, much empirical work in education has turned to anthropology and its use of interpretative research. Instead of looking at larger structural issues through a purely quantitative lens, some have turned to participatory research and direct observation (Erickson, 1986; Hammersely, 2003). One of the key benefits here is that anthropology long ago recognized and corrected its adherence to a false methodological objectivity and thus interpretative research offered educational researchers a more critical starting point where the centrality of the researcher's point-of-view in what is observed, what is recorded, how it is recorded, and how it is later adapted into a research report were well established. Educational researchers have come to see that data are always data for some hypothesis, and that underlying theories generally affect the method of data collection, data analysis, and reporting. Some, like Rob Rhodes (2003), Frederick Erickson (2002) and Pedro Noguera (2001), have gone even further, using action or participatory action research and critical ethnography as ways to bring politics and ethics to the forefront of their research. In adopting a more critical, interpretive and reflexive approach in this vein, much educational research has taken a huge step along the path away from objectivity and positivism and toward intervention. But a question that remains, outside the auspices of this paper, is the extent to which this research reframes larger ethical questions by offering information within a relatively narrow context hard to extrapolate to the larger whole. When grounded theory is the starting point, a further question is whether research becomes trapped in an extreme form of positivism where data alone dictate the nature of inquiry.

Statistical Fetishism: Objectivity as Ideology

Even with the long tradition of critique outlined in some detail above, much educational research today is produced from a positivistic standpoint or has become so specialized in focus that it excludes the ability to offer a path to real social change. Apple (2004), in an interview included in the 3rd edition of *Ideology and Curriculum*, explains the ways in which the story on contemporary educational research is mixed. Many more are doing critical ethnography, critical historic work, life histories, cultural studies and general theory than in the 1970s. Yet, much of this work is maligned by fragmentation, esoteric language, and other barriers that estrange communication between progressive researchers from diverse backgrounds and educators themselves. More importantly, he argues that funding has severely proscribed what is counted as "legitimate inquiry." This agenda pushes toward positivism and the empirically observable fact, concentrating on issues like testing, evaluation and assessment, or achievement and attainment without any critical analysis of what is actually being taught and learned. Funding agencies tend to focus more on business and economic models for success, favoring research that uses complex statistical methods and projects that offer concrete results that are generally less critical in nature.

A classic example of research in the positivist tradition was *The Bell Curve* (1994), a now debunked work that used deeply flawed data to argue for the genetic inferiority of blacks. The book hid a clear agenda behind a false sheen of objectivity and scientific rigor, when both were in fact absent. More recently, a report by the National Research Council (NRC), *Scientific Research in Education* (2002), exemplifies the new sensibility where educational research must become more scientific and objective if it is to be respected in the broader research community and useful to policymakers. The report was a response to a series of legislation, including the Reading Excellence Act of 1999, the OERI Reauthorization Act, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, which all sought to codify what counts as scientific research in education.[4] While the NRC report mentions the importance of context and claims not to call for one correct method for doing scientific educational research, they do offer a series of guidelines for research including posing questions that can be *investigated empirically*, linking research to *relevant theory*, using methods that permit "direct investigation of the questions," providing a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning, ensuring replicability and generalizability, and disclosing data and methods to allow professional scrutiny and critique (p. 3-5). As the subset of authors then argues in a follow-up to the report in *Educational Researcher* (2002), all of this is to "foster a culture of objectivity through enforcement of the rules" (p. 7).

Yet how can the scientific community become more objective if a panel of "experts" is dictating the scope and form of acceptable research, while maintaining close ties to the government and the political pressure those ties entail? How does the panel escape its own biases regarding epistemology, methodology, and methods? For example, in the same article, the authors argue, "when well-specified causal hypotheses can be formulated and randomized to treatment and control conditions is ethical and feasible, a randomized experiment is the best method for estimating results" (p. 8). They further suggest that while this should not be mandated, randomized experimentation should be used more in education to improve validity, a contestable claim if one believes that the important thing is to contemplate radical change in education that allows teachers to have more autonomy in the classroom, embrace difference, or carefully consider the externalities of pedagogical practices. In the conclusion, they implore researchers to "move beyond particularized views" and to found a core set of norms and practices, which one could argue then proscribes acceptable methods and subjects to study (p. 12).

In the same issue of *Educational Researcher*, a number of noted educational theorists offered critiques of the NRC report, recognizing the importance of combining methods to capture the complex and multiple effects of education in different contexts (Berliner, 2002). They argued that educational researchers must move beyond evidence-based research alone to make qualitative research an essential component (Erickson and Gutierrez, 2002) and addressed the issues of this paper, as well as the postmodern, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial critiques of positivism (St. Pierre, 2002). Yet, the authors and many of the commentators reaffirm their commitment to positivism and objectivity, even going as far as arguing in their response "educational science needs to be at least partly aimed at solving real-world problems" (p. 29). This comment seems indicative of a troubling trend, where science for science's sake is often the rallying cry, and the ramifications of research and the environment under study become secondary to the methods themselves and the increasingly sophisticated ways to tell researchers what they already know to be true.

Another noteworthy example of this trend is found in the now popular research on social capital. Social capital is a polysemic term that has a number of meanings, but generally relates within education to the social ties and networks, civic norms, and social trust within a school or community that help improve academic success. While Bordieu (1986) argued that social capital was essentially the investment of the dominant class in maintaining and reproducing group solidarity and in preserving their dominant position along gender, race, ethnic, and class lines, most U.S. based research has instead followed the more positive vision of James Coleman (1988), where the presence and activation of social capital helps explain better academic performance.[5] But what is this research

really showing? Often it is used to show how changes in the behavior of community members could lead to better educational outcomes, ignoring the deeper structural differences between poor and working class children and the middle-class normative ideal. And it also tends to ignore the negative attributes associated with high levels of social capital, like sectarianism, parochialism, massification, and the downward leveling of norms.

Ironically, it is research that incorporates ethical considerations and underlying structural problems that is today received with critical weariness and an almost reflexive rejection. As Giroux argues, "theory and knowledge are subordinated to the imperatives of efficiency and technical mastery, and history is reduced to a minor footnote in the priorities of 'empirical' scientific inquiry" (1983, p. 87). Haraway (1986) further highlights the reductivist character of this agenda, where the boundaries of the acceptable are severely constricted.

The Ethical Imperative and Research

Does the stance of objectivity bring with it certain political positions? Can objectivity be a cloak for maintaining current power relations and the status quo? Moreover, does the absence of overt political reference really reflect the absence of political overtures? Albright and Graf (1992) perfectly capture the nature of the problem in discussing the attacks on multiculturalism when they declare, "Change is political, but keeping things as they are is not" (p. 164). Or as anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes argues, "If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless." (1995: 410). The remainder of the section highlights the major flaws with objectivity as a goal, including the failure of those who utilize the discourse to acknowledge its underlying ideology and bias contemplate its unintended consequences, incorporate ethical concerns, and so study what *can be* alongside what is.

As outlined in great detail above, one of the central problems with a researcher's over-reliance on objectivity is the inability to recognize the inherent biases that always inform research. No researcher can eliminate all of the prejudices and presumptions they bring into their work, nor can they escape the theoretical optics they use in deciding what to study and how to study it. As Donna Haraway has so aptly put it, "All knowledge is socially situated." Objective scientific research tends to ignore the social constructivist position that knowledge and truth are formed in particular social interactions and contexts and that knowledge doesn't exist outside of its social situation. Feminists have spent a considerable amount of time highlighting the ways in which objectivity cloaks ideology and comes from the perspective of the elites. Harding (2004b) seeks to

address this problem by calling for imbuing research with a "strong reflexivity" that openly acknowledges these biases and capitalizes on them in the subordinate or outsider position she believes is more objective, "The subject of knowledge – the beliefs its members are likely to hold 'unknowingly,' so to speak – must be considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method" (p.136).

And this relates to another question, which is whether the findings are credible outside the sphere of their intricate and often elegant statistical methods. As British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once quipped, "There are lies, damned lies, and statistics." While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage this question in detail, it is clear that data can be manipulated to yield desired results. One can skew a sample, eliminate outliers or disconfirming evidence, create biased survey questions or experimental models, use econometric or other statistical methods to sculpt the data, or otherwise intervene to ensure that the results support the intended conclusions. Evidence of this manipulative power has been repeatedly shown, as has the now commonsensical idea that statistical data can be shaped to support any plausible position.

A second major concern is the issue of unintended consequences. Objective research tends to look at an outcome and the various factors that positively and negatively influence it in isolation from the larger whole. Like in neoclassical economics, the externalities associated with factors and outcomes are largely ignored, or given minimal attention. The unintended outcomes, however, are often more important then the factors under study. Burbules and Callister (2000) capture these very contradictory dynamics by highlighting the inevitable unplanned consequences that result from any change in circumstance and the inability to accurately predict all of the tangential affects that sprout outward from it. They explore the way we tend to examine issues from a Manichean worldview of "good" and "bad," or measure things through costs and benefits, without acknowledging the innate subjectivity of those costs and benefits or the difficulty in ascribing their value or weight. To them, the "tradeoff" or "balanced" assumptions underlying an objective approach fail under the glare of closer scrutiny. In transcending these approaches, they argue that we must acknowledge unintended consequences, the interdependency of multiple factors, and outcomes that may be difficult to isolate from one another and the "value-laden character of even the most rudimentary identification of pros and cons" (p. 11). The key insight is that all change is perilous and never free of normative assumptions of its desirability.

A third point is the flight from ethical concerns that objectivity ushers in to the sciences. As Horkheimer argued, positivism presents a view of knowledge and science that strips them of their critical potential (Giroux, 1983). Likewise, feminists have spent years critiquing the ways that objectivity maintains current

power dynamics along the lines of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Harding (2004) put it succinctly when she noted the conventional view that, "Politics can only obstruct and damage the production of scientific knowledge" (p. 1). Even forgoing the obvious biases and ideologies that underwrite all language, if researchers refuse to take positions by clinging to a discourse of neutrality, it seems fair to claim that they are essentially supporting the current order of things. If we as researchers neglect discussion of the political ramifications of our work, then what purpose does it serve? If we only look at the present and past in our studies, don't we miss reporting what could be? Objectivity in this broader view becomes but a shroud protecting us from the deeper theoretical and systemic issues at the heart of social injustice.

In a November 2004 *Tikkun Magazine* article, Michael Lerner added a fourth important aspect to the discussion of objectivity and science. He argued, following Hume and Wittgenstein, that there is no way to empirically verify the good or right, the beautiful, sacred, or even the just. There is no way to quantify love, kindness, happiness, or sympathy. There is no way to quantify unhappiness, alienation, or general discontent. Instead the empiricist worldview precludes discussion of how to organize society, how to change society, or how to incorporate the diverse array of subjectivities into a more totalizing view of the world. In their stead, it offers reform based on prevailing rationality and a cataloging of *what is*.

The problem that looms largest, perhaps, is thus that objective empirical work cannot really quantify a new or unique solution, but only describe a problem and the past efforts to eradicate it. It implicitly disavows utopia as "utopian," and thus outside the sphere of the scientific method. Empirical researchers can quantify what was or is, but cannot quantify what can be, and any effort at the latter is a *bête noire* to the positivistic community that is to be condemned for falling outside the rigor of the scientific method and the requirement of falsifiability. So while critical pedagogues and feminists in the U.S. and abroad continue offering normative alternatives to prevailing practices in schools and the larger society, they general exist at the periphery, outside the acceptable continuum of science and official knowledge.

Toward a New Vision of Educational Research

In critiquing positivism, Horkheimer offered *dialectical social theory* as an alternative to the over-reliance on the scientific method (Kellner, 1989). Dialectical social theory is founded on empirical evidence but is underwritten by values and a normative political standpoint to attack injustice, suffering, and alienation. It assails the notion of "value free" research and calls for the centrality

of critique based on a symbiotic relationship between theory, morality, and politics. Further, it is underwritten by an ethical foundation based on minimizing the unhappiness of the poor and suffering and maximizing the happiness of all. This involves locating the socio-historical sources of suffering and injustice and working to overcome them.

Harding (2004) and other adherents of standpoint theory have furthered this project substantially by incorporating the concerns of race, sexuality, and gender into the discussion. Taking her lead from Georg Lukács, but altering the focal point from the working class, Harding has established the centrality of perspective on research and the need to move beyond description to prescription. She argues that the subordinate position offers a more accurate starting point for research, as it exists partially or wholly outside the system and discourse that promote and sustain asymmetries of power and access. By attempting to eliminate dominant group interests and values from research, a more accurate rendering of the world is possible that can combine with the ethical principles that seek to eradicate suffering and oppression and create a more just social order. Part of this move is predicated on a "stronger objectivity" that relates to increased reflexivity and the power of the outsider looking in from a subordinate position

In calling for a stronger objectivity, however, is it possible that critical researchers are falling back into the very discourse that they seek to overcome? After spending considerable time analyzing the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge and the position that all knowledge is contextual and socially situated, it becomes difficult to understand how objectivity can be reclaimed, even from the subordinate position. Being outside the dominant discourse and reality might better equip some to deconstruct its biases, but how can they escape their own? How can they move beyond their own situation and context? Harding believes that objectivity can help bridge the gap between the world we want and the world that is (p.138), but objectivity seems too closely inured to the latter.

This is not to say that critical researchers should disdain starting from a subordinate position, nor that they should overlook the key ethical position of eradicating injustice and oppression. It is just to argue that these positions are not necessarily more "objective" than those of the dominant discourse. To be objective, remember, is to be "free of bias and prejudice caused by personal feelings." It is "based on facts rather than opinions." While standpoint theorists are clearly not attempting to return to this logic, the semantic implications are hard to overcome. Could the language of objectivity then condemn even critical research to being encased within the positivist paradigm? For, if researchers are caught within the spider's web of what they can observe, then where can they find the inspiration to question what might be? Where does the utopian vision go in a more "objective" approach to epistemology, and how can researchers escape the

prison house of data that underwrites its compatriot of language? Is it not possible for research to stand on the side of an ethical position, or a way of viewing the world, without having to claim its "objective" superiority? Can such research not stand in a privileged position based on the normative grounds of its inclusiveness, reflexivity, and embrace of pluralistic democracy?

Research can still start from a standpoint with a particular ethical and political project in mind, but it should adhere to the rigors of scientific inquiry and ensure that it is not skewed to a given end. Through a balanced and reflexive approach, a science could be implemented that is verifiable, open to critique, and that looks for evidence that does not simply produce the results that comport with researchers' desires. In this vision, practitioners would scrutinize research methods and theory for their limitations, lacunas, and underlying biases, as they work sedulously to engage disconfirming evidence and alternative narratives. At the same time, they should work to avoid dogmatism and exaggerated claims about the significance of their research at all costs.

If objectivity is abandoned as a goal of research, its inherent limitations can be abandoned as well. Scientific research can still be generalizable and replicable outside the auspices of a call for neutrality and distance. It can still critically examine the world and offer alternatives to blind faith and normative judgment in isolation from the material world. As a result, it can reemerge as a response to the world of faith and uncertainty by studying phenomena with a criticality and rigor related to a project for positive social transformation that is itself always tied to a particular worldview and normative position. Important in this movement is also openness to inventiveness and imagination as part of inquiry. The past can offer researchers advice and benchmarks, but it is often the imagination that offers it a path to an alternative order of things. As Maxine Greene (1986) argues, the radical project needs the imagination, as enlivened through art, speaking, and making, to free the capacity to unveil and disclose. This seems especially essential in the current milieu of cynicism and disengagement, where love and hope falter under the weight of perpetual critique. Science can still serve the cause of radicalism, if it takes a radically different course than that offered today, when it is largely an active advocate and effective apologist for conservative ideology.[6]

In the move beyond positivism and objectivity, it is worth mentioning another epistemology that might be useful in interaction with standpoint theory. Freire (1970; 1998a; 1998b) advocated *critical hermeneutics* as a way out of the impasse of strict positivism and absolute relativity. To this end, he employed a reinterpretation of phenomenological epistemology to argue that we can reach a provisional and generalizable knowledge that can be used constructively in the struggle to name and then redefine the world. This new knowledge is tied to everyday life, rather than universalizing principles, where dialogue and

experimentation lead people to produce new knowledge based on *collective lived experience*. In the process, research creates a space where individuals become conscious of the social, cultural, and political world around them, as well as the power relations that underwrite those realities. Haraway (1986) agrees, arguing that a power-charged social relation of conversation between active agents in history is the best way to overcome the extremes of social constructionist relativity and absolute empiricism. The knowledge created by research will thus have a provisional and collective nature, tied to place and time, and to larger issues of culture, language, and social structures. Research, in this sense, will be social in form and highlight the centrality of intersubjectivity and the social nature of all knowledge and reality.

In much critical pedagogy this is already the norm. And many ethnographers have also seriously grappled with the dual issues of reflexivity and difference. Fine and Weiss in *The Unknown City* (1998) and Valenzuela in *Subtractive Schooling* (1999) offer two exemplars of this movement. Both attempt to highlight their standpoints, as white women and researchers in one case, and as a Latina woman who was twice pregnant in the other, to critically examine the effects they believe their positionality had on their research and findings. The theoretical positions of the books are articulated through a broad and diverse range of theorists and consistently argued within the context of concrete examples and statistics that support their central claims. They admit that their research and findings are informed by these perspectives and standpoints and attempt to reflect on what this means. While many would critique this research as inherently biased and unscientific, another position is that their clear articulation of political positions and particular standpoints is a more honest attempt to examine the influences upon their research.

Conclusion

While I have been arguing for the limitation of objectivity as a goal of inquiry, it is absurd to argue that researchers should abandon its spirit completely. Instead, research can move to a position where balance, fairness, and reflexivity replace value-free norms. Science can then return to the study of uncertainty rather than the attempt to overcome it, and thereby, re-engage the centrality of questioning official knowledge. Researchers would be in a position to recognize their own biases and prejudices and, to the extent practicable, communicate those to the audience. They could be clear about their political objectives and offer a project for positive social transformation together with the now ubiquitous critique.

Educational research could also benefit greatly from acknowledging the dialectical nature of all reality and the subjectivity that confronts all empirical work. Rather than simply saying that factor *x* led to positive outcome *y* or negative outcome *z*, research could study the ambiguity of outcomes associated with different educational policies and practices, as well as the ambiguity of the goals themselves. Better test scores and grades could be measured against self-esteem, critical thinking skills, and motivation to learn. Students' performance could be measured against whether the teacher provides a nurturing and caring environment that fosters learning, imagination, and humanization, and school performance could be measured against funding differentials, a real measure of teacher quality, civic educational goals, and the motivation of students to do well on the tests that increasingly decide their future.

At the same time, balance and fairness are goals that should continue to stand at the forefront of all research. Educational researchers can have a political end in mind, but must not allow this to cloud their judgment or make them blind to disconfirming evidence. Accomplishing this involves acknowledging the biases inherent in all research, the larger structural issues empirical work often cannot see, the diversity of opinions and perspectives ignored among the group actually observed, and the limitations of the findings. The work should acknowledge its political implications and attempt to limit essentializing narratives, while working toward replicable and generalizable findings grounded in the present, and comprehensiveness in offering provisional utopian alternatives.

Empirical work should never be marginalized or dismissed as sometimes occurs among critical theorists. It should be remembered that Adorno and Horkheimer undertook extensive empirical work in laying the groundwork for critical theory and many who have followed have done the same. Empirical work is critical to any project for social change, but this work must itself be critical in nature. This does not mean a return to positivistic fetishizing of statistical methods and neutrality. Instead it involves a new vision of educational research underwritten by a commitment to tying together theory and practice, communicating positionality, emphasizing results over methods, and linking research to material circumstances and relevant policy. More than anything it involves a movement from the cataloging of what is to the struggle to define what can be.

Notes

[1] See Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), where they challenge the Enlightenment's power to solve the world's problems through rationality, as with this illustrative opening remark, "In the most general sense of progressive thought the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from

fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."

[2] For further critique of philosophy in this vein see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1981), and, in history, Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in late 19th Century Europe* (1975).

[3] See, for example, Harding (1998).

[4] See Lather & Moss (2005).

[5] To be fair, there are a number of American researchers that have taken the more critical approach to social capital. Among them are Angela Valenzuela, Ricardo Stanton-Salazar, Rudiger Dornbush, and Annette Lareau.

[6] In this way, we can reengage praxis, or the unity of theory and practice, toward research that seeks to find deeper structural phenomenon and power relations and offer movement toward critical consciousness and real avenues for change. At the same time, we should not use this as a call to reject all other research, or become strictly anti-positivist in the critical theory tradition. Instead, we should heed the advice of Torres and Morrow, who in *Reading Freire and Habermas* (2002) opine, "a critical theory of methodology, we would argue, is reflexively pluralist but not relativist because there are both situational (pragmatic) and universalizing criteria for assessing and evaluating research traditions and specific research practices" (p. 54).

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