Adding feeling to data

A report and commentary on the location of this researcher's project within the current qualitative research paradigms in the social sciences

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to mark the academic progress of the researcher after the first year of the study and to signpost the development of the next stages of the project. This will be done by exploring and reporting on the research paradigms that prevail in social science qualitative research in an attempt to situate the study within them. It is recognised that exhibiting an ability to comprehend, critically evaluate and synthesise these paradigms into a locational framework for the study may be identified as evidence of the researcher's academic development in the first instance but more usefully to the researcher at least, this will help to create a useful directional stability to the research agenda and also enable literature to be reviewed paradigmatically and within the context of their relevance to the project. As a corollary of this presentation, a proposal for a framework of paradigm location analysis as an early-stage research analysis tool will be presented, together with a demonstration of its application to the researcher's own research topic.

Qualitative research – inductive, interpretative, reflexive … inferential?

In social science research we shine a spotlight on a population and, like rabbits caught by a torch, we count or describe what we can see, prepare a report or analysis of our findings and hope that this reduces some of the obstacles to our collaborative understanding of our point of interest. We may already have a theory upon which to build our research questions although in that case we must be minded that theory is largely speculation which, although surely always rooted in common sense, is to be tempered with an expectation of the unexpected. Or we may otherwise be treading new ground, with little previous guidance to work from, few baseline comparisons available and a dearth of previous literature to inform both the legitimacy of the study and to act as a guide or reference to the new knowledge that the study may reveal or create.

Qualitative research is about exploring the engagement of people and their activities with their surroundings and environments as they perceive them. The research rationale is to examine these inter-relationships and attempt to disentangle their individual complexity into a less foggy understanding of human behaviour, feelings and attitudes such that these are features within the contexts of the research situation.

This research project is interested in exploring the feelings and attitudes of dyslexic students to their own dyslexia particularly from the angle of the impact of these affective characteristics on the students' self-concept and (dis)engagement with learning in Higher Education. As the thinking in, and hence the planning of the project is developing, it is felt that finding a mechanism to position the findings in such a way that compares them to the attitudes and feelings of non-dyslexic students to their learning 'self' will be establishing a valuable 'control', but since non-dyslexic students won't have any 'attitudes or feelings to their own dyslexia', finding a way to use data about self-concept from non-dyslexic students is an issue still to be teased out.

However, by using much of the relatively proven methodology from the previous research project (Dykes, 2008b) based on and developed from an existing standardized data gathering tool (Burden, 2000) and in particular building on the highly successful electronic data gathering tool that was used (Dykes, 2008a) it is anticipated that this questionnaire can have its focus sharpened by developing the section specifically created to interrogate feelings and attitudes to dyslexia (shown in Appendix 1).

Paradigms in social science research: a context-related summarization

Research paradigms can give us a broad framework within which a project can be located and it is intellectually productive to have knowledge and a good understanding of these so that the researcher can make sense of both previous researchers' work, gain an understanding of their own metaphysical position and also slowly get a 'feel' for the paradigm type that may be most helpful to follow when conducting the study.

It is clear that time must be allocated for reflection on the nuances and subtleties of paradigm scaffolds that can support doctoral research in the social sciences, research that should be directed at satisfying the curiosity of the researcher in the first instance because in this field, it is necessarily about finding out more about their interest in people, their attitudes and their behaviour and hence is dynamically rooted in the social structures of both the researcher and the researched (more of this later). But also, the qualitative researcher is an active participant in the project and the quality of the project will be directly related to the strength of convictions and passion for enquiry of the researcher which necessarily takes time to crystalize and requires development as the project unfolds: 'extended engagement [with underpinning theory] continues to be one of the hallmarks of high-quality qualitative work' (Amos Hatch, 2002). An empirical study it is not, and as such commencing with a research question, a working hypothesis and a structured, data-collecting and quantitative analytical procedure designed to 'test' the validity of an hypothesis will remain in the realm of 'hard' scientists rather than these soft ones. And although a respectful accommodation is also required of the institutional constraints and administrative specifications that are designed to support the project, at the same time these can restrict research progress because their necessity is to ensure that the 'candidate is moving forward [but this] can all too readily overwhelm the intellectual requirements of the project' (McWilliam and Tan, 2010). Hence procedure can overtake thoughtful engagement, perhaps producing at best a formulaic and tedious, or a relatively superficial and academically boring research project at worst which, whilst it may meet the standards of academic assessment criteria and conform to the structure and specifications demanded by the institution's doctoral research programme, it neither satisfies the researcher's primary interest, nor produces much robust 'new knowledge'.

But what of 'new knowledge'?

The thorny issue of epistemology forms one of the components of any research paradigm - the others being ontology: the nature of reality; methodology: how new knowledge is gained; and how these components blend into the *product* of the research, that is, what we can do with what we find out: 'new knowledge'. The researcher needs to situate the project within the perspectives of these paradigms according to his own sense of the meaning of knowledge and whereabouts he finds himself positioned on a continuum of reality beliefs – that is: that which is existent and definable, that which is existent but tenuous, that which is existent but temporarily unknown or that which may exist or not and we may know about its existence or not[1].

It must be said also, that an essential component of the structured planning of this research project must be an examination of inter-relationship between the researcher and the researched and particularly the assumptions that the researcher possesses that may colour and qualify the entire research agenda. Examining

[1] Remember the famously recorded and often repeated quotation of Donald Rumsfold, the US Secretary of State for Defence in speaking about the Iraq Conflict, taken here from his NATO Press Conference Briefing on 2nd June 2002:

> *"…there are known "knowns." There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know. So when we do the best we can and we pull all this information together, and we then say well that's basically what we see as the situation, that is really only the known knowns and the known unknowns. And each year, we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns"*

which is analogous to my premise here of reality beliefs;
[Source: http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3490, accessed 29 June 2011]

the epistemological standpoints through a paradigm lens will help to clarify the researcher's position both in terms of his own perception of the truth-to-him about knowledge but particularly for enabling him to establish the relativity between the researcher and the researched. In qualitative research models 'the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection' (Merriam, 2002) and if the researcher and the subjects of the study are assumed to be independent of each other with the one having no influence on the other then this is adopting a positivist paradigmatical position for the research. The positivist assumes that everything has its place and is in its place and that it is possible to investigate and hence *discover* this order, and for this, objectivity is key. For this research project, this approach is characterised by collecting data through a confidential and anonymous questionnaire where there is no direct interaction between the researcher and the subjects, and were this to be the only form of data collection, a positivist paradigm might be adopted to guide the project.

But it is planned for this is to form only one part of the data collection as the earlier research for the Masters' dissertation also elicited rich commentaries from the 'questionnairees' through an invitation to 'tell me more … about your feelings about your own dyslexia' (Dykes, 2008a, QNR Q5, accessible at: http://www.personal.soton.ac.uk/ad1305/msc_qnr_v2.htm). This was like turning on a tap – or for some, more like prematurely releasing the lid from a pressure cooker. For example, this response was from one of the students in the sample and is reproduced verbatim:

> "*I never feel good enough in my course … people don't want me in there group projects Because they think there grades will drop and i become depressed. I really try hard and never seem to get anywhere always told that my work is not academic enough. But I never been shown how write the way they want because my teachers at school left me out and put me in the bottom classes. I often wonder is it worth continuing uni because I don't want to fail and embaress my self*" (Dykes, 2008b, QNR respondent #10)

Clearly a deeper interrogation of such commentaries, probably through interviews, needs to be part of the data collecting part of the project as it may generate a good deal of further information, where everything said will be regarded as valid, valuable, worth capturing, and highly contributory. This indicates a more poststructuralist approach where 'multiple truths exist, and these are always local, subjective, and in flux' (Amos Hatch, 2002, p18). The poststructuralist researcher can get no further than merely surmising the truth-environment that their subjects inhabit because the evidence collected from them and about them will still remain partial: the lived experience of the subject is unique to them and impossible to exhaustively interrogate. In this sense, we are treading the epistemological ground of the postpositivist where the aim is to ensnare as close an approximation as possible to the Grand Reality of the positivist but where postpositivist's strict research techniques lean more towards a quantitative approach through the collection of empirical data, so as to be clearly detached from their *impressions* as researchers about the research questions and hence find ways to minimize the impact that their own perceptions about truth, reality and knowledge will have on the project. In this study, the researcher admires this very scientific approach but will aim to develop a research methodology that is not so much dispassionate, but which includes a clear commentary on the researcher's position and an attempt will be made to accurately report on how this may be influencing the research design.

Having said all this in the previous section, the researcher finds himself much attracted epistemologically to the constructivist paradigm as it appears to be aligned with Kelly's premise about the nature of the individual (Figure 1).

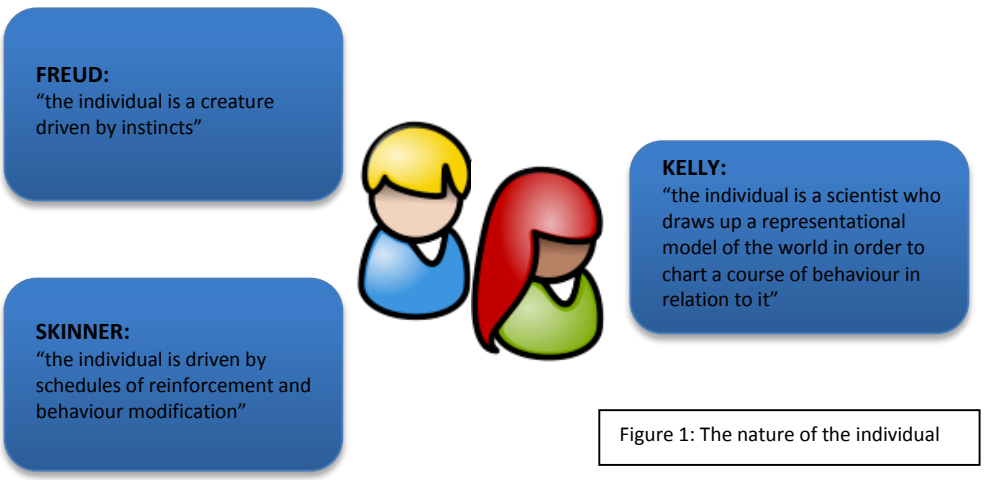

Figure 1: The nature of the individual

Kelly's premise asserts that an individual's behaviour is expressed in terms of the ways in which they construct their world around them in order to navigate a path through it. This places his 'personal construct theory' in sharp contrast with the psycho-analytical school of thinking largely attributable to Freud, and the conditioned behaviourists paradigms advocated mainly by Skinner. Rogers (1959) extended Kelly's ideas into the 'person-centred approach' and the key concept in its psychological roots is to focus on not some objective concept of reality but more more so on how the individual *perceives* reality – that is, the individual's subjective awareness of themselves and the world in which they exist (as reported in Thorne, 1992). Rogers' term for this concept was the 'actualizing tendency', which he defined as 'the basic human function that moves us towards the constructive accomplishment of our potential' (ibid, p26) and the Rogersian 'positive self regard' is said to be embedded in individuals in the core of their own self-concept, which, as it also develops through their formative years and as a result of later life-experiences, impacts fundamentally on their navigation through life's path.

So this psychological quasi-analysis of individuals' perception of reality is clearly consistent with the poststructuralist research paradigm's epistemology where 'Truth' is seen as different for each individual. For our research to make sense when following this paradigm's guidance, we can be looking for Similar Truths from which we might create a kind of 'Truth Arena' in which these individuals' Truths exist and can overlap. In this way, the research might search for 'similar case evidence' to construct an understanding from which conclusions, in whatever form these materialize, might be constructed. Just the tip of this iceberg was evident from the previous research project, where the striking similarities between individuals' Locus of Control Profiles emerged enabling them to be categorised into 'similar case groups', hence its importance for signposting the core research agenda for this current study.

Finally we should consider the attributes of the Critical Paradigm, which, in Amos Hatch's terms (2002, p16) is broadly similar to a Feminist Paradigm but with some different emphases. Amos Hatch (ibid) posits that within this set of paradigmatical assumptions, knowledge is subjective, but particularly it is where the researcher and the researched are interactively linked through the values of the researcher, which will be invariably influencing the enquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p110, reported in: Amos Hatch, 2002, p16). This paradigm does not lend itself to the this project, not the least because in its grander schema it takes the assumption that knowledge is brought about through the intervening agency of the political standpoint of the researcher which it is felt of no consequence in this project at the current stage of research planning.

So in which *reality* is our research located?

What are the ontological standpoints of the researcher and from what reality perspective is the research agenda to be constructed?

The researcher is not at all sure that he a realist, if to be one, relies on the subscription that reality is completely independent of our beliefs, that it is unaffected by our actions and practices, that it is *entirely* driven by universal 'laws of nature', that truth is the end point of knowledge.

If it is to be further believed that reality is comprised of components that can in themselves be deconstructed from the reality, inspected and examined in their isolation, verified and then returned to their compartments in the reality, then the researcher finds himself even more ill-at-ease as this is to be surely adopting a purely [sic] scientific, empirical evidence-related approach which implies a need for some mechanism for the 'counting of attitudes' and 'quantification of feelings' in its methodology – hardly qualitative! So the researcher will not be locating the study in ontological positivism.

Now as a postpositivist, the researcher is feelling a little more ontologically comfortable and given that Karl Popper, one of the first to criticise the intransigence of the positivist camp and propose modifications that would lead to postpositivism, was also a contemporary of Kelly and Rogers (historically at least), towards

whom much of the psychological leanings of this research are bent, a postpositivist ontological location for the research agenda may be more appropriate. In being a postpositivist realist, although one is accepting that there is a fixed and at least *theoretically* determinable reality, due to the limitations of human understanding and enquiry we can never fully know it, and this is a standpoint from which the researcher feels somewhat more comfortable. This project is trying to find out something about peoples interactions with their realities by exploring their affective characteristics and attitudes to a relatively unusual psychological and neuro-biological human condition that they inhabit. The enquiry will be trying to find ways to collect information about these human attributes, particularly in relation to self-concept, and apply a critical scrutiny to it so that an understanding of what the information is telling us can come as close as possible to what is actually happening. But the key phrase here is 'as close as possible' and the postpositivist approach accepts that apprehending reality *perfectly* is not possible.

Now the position of the constructivists is much more fluid. Here we have an ontological perspective which is even closer to the themes of Kelly and Rogers as this paradigm assumes that absolute realities are unknowable, and the research subjects will have individual constructions of reality developed from their own perspectives. Amos Hatch describes this standpoint thus:

> '*While acknowledging that elements are often shared across social groups, constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points'* (ibid, p15),

and the researcher identifies with this consistency with Rogers' 'actualizing tendency', defined as 'the basic human function that moves us towards the constructive accomplishment of our potential' (Thorne, 1992, p26), and with the Rogersian 'positive self regard', said to be embedded in individuals in the core of their own self-concept, which, as it also develops through their formative years and as a result of later life-experiences, impacts fundamentally on their navigation through life's path are all fundamental informing concepts that are driving this research agenda. So the researcher is a constuctivist.

However, the ontology of the critical paradigm is interesting too as it relies on assumptions that it is historical and legacy situated circumstances that have the real impact on the opportunities and chances that life presents to individuals, and the subsequent social interactions resulting from these circumstances' *perceived* realness is the driver for the different treatments of individuals according to their social, ethnic and gender differences. So given that this research is fundamentally interested in the situation in a learning society of a subgroup of individuals that is certainly labelled as disabled, the guidance that this paradigm may offer cannot be ignored.

Can the research methodology be guided by paradigm?

Cart and horses? Which way round? Are we planning a research agenda and letting others recognize which research paradigm it is most closely aligned with? Or should we be using a paradigm to aid in the construction of the research agenda?

As the researcher has learned more about the analysis and descriptions of research paradigms in qualitative research in the social sciences it has become apparent that often they are competing for relevance, legitimacy and validity. On the one hand, we have the critical analysts and metaphysical thinkers such as Popper, whose incisive and influential diagnosis of where the limitations of positivism needed development into postpostitivism were driving a paradigm shift towards closer alignment with the demands of research. Whereas the thinking educationalists such as Piaget whose deep commitment to the value of experiential learning may be said to have contributed much to the paradigm of constructivism and has had an equally wide-ranging impact on educational research and thinking. Equally significant are educational thinkers and reformers such as Dewey with his development of the philosophy of pragmatism, and pioneering psychologists

such as Vygotsky whose theories on the internalization of knowledge continue to have a wide-ranging impact on educational research and thinking. And let's not forget Montessori whose philosophical legacy is a lasting contribution to modern, 'alternative' teaching and learning to this day.

The commentary in this report so far has mused on aspects of the more philosophical components of social science research paradigms and the understanding that the researcher is gaining from reflecting on these is helping to formulate the metaphysical location of the research project, but it is also seen as valuable to consider the methodological implications that these competing paradigms may have on the broad research design.

So if the researcher is to be a positivist, then he is to manage the collection of data in a closely controlled way, and then label it, measure it, analyse it and verify propositional hypotheses in such a way that statistically significant conclusions might be drawn from it – or not.

If he is to be a postpositivist, then he will be designing a rigorous data collection system to try to ensure validity and reliability, but which is to capture participant perspectives and attitudes. Qualitative analysis will be key, with perhaps some low-level inferential statistics to respond to a 'what should be done next?' statement.

If the paradigm to be followed is constructivist, then participant observation and interview will be the most likely data collection tool as the most important information to gather is the perspectives of the research subjects in, and about their own settings so that attempts can be made to understand their constructions of the world that they are trying to make sense of.

In the critical paradigm the methodology would be to focus on facilitating ' liberation of the oppressed' by raising awareness of social or other differentiation. The researcher and the research subjects are mutually locked in a dialogue that may be transformative in a social, or in our case, educational setting. Data collection is naturalistic, but with an emphasis for the critical researcher to be attempting to improve the lot of the most disadvantaged.

For the researcher to be considered as a poststructuralist he has to decide if the agenda is to follow deconstructivist such that inconsistencies in the fabric of knowing and understanding are teased out so that the gaps can be understood, or as a biographer where the history of practices and actions are to inform understanding of situation and/or process, or as neither, because the route that the research agenda is to take and methodology to be employed by the researcher is new, unproven, tentative, speculative and not clearly established by previous research or philosophies. In this final case, it is clear that aspects and features can be drawn from the earlier more firmly rooted paradigms to create a blend of methodologies that indeed may forecast a route for others to follow. The researcher feels comfortable with this as it is finding and developing a new path in addition to extending new knowledge.

So in summary, the central discourse of this essay so far posits the questions that the researcher is working through in order to set a paradigmatic scene to the research agenda. A brief summarization of the five principal research paradigms mainly as set out by Amos Hatch (2002) has proved extremely useful and focus-sharpening and enabled the researcher to reflect carefully upon his own ontological and epistemological position. Insofar as this personal standpoint analysis has been completed to date, it seems clear that either the researcher remains unsure of his answers to these questions and that more exploration of these topics is required before much progress can be made; or as he would hope, the paradigmatic approach to the research agenda will be mixed and draw upon many of the features of several of the standard paradigms.

However, this begs the questions none-the-less that first of all: might this mean that *if* the metaphysical position that the researcher inhabits is uncertain, then the research methodology will be at best muddled, and

at worst invalid; or secondly: can the research methodology be moulded to fit a standard paradigm such that this would make it better and/or more valid? Are these rhetorical questions or should answers be sought?

Products of the research:

At this point it had been hoped to be possible to compare and contrast the possible *products* of the research, that is, the knowledge produced, in terms of the expectations of the paradigms. But the researcher feels that further reflection is required to consolidate his own new knowledge and establish more firmly his own philosophical position.

In conjunction with this, it is felt that this essay is already late, and at this point it is best to submit these thoughts and musings as they stand so far.

However, it is felt worth presenting here a resumé of paradigmatic products (Figure 2) as summarized by Amos Hatch (ibid, p13) as an indicator that the next stage of the researchers agenda-planning work will be to incorporate these, in conjunction with developing ideas about data-gathering instruments into practical mechanisms of doing so, into producing a clear, structured scheme for enabling the research to proceed to the next stages.

	Products: (forms of new knowledge)
Positivist	Facts, theories, laws, predictions
Postpositivist	Generalisations, descriptions, patterns, grounded theory
Constructivist	Case studies, narratives, interpretations, reconstructions
Critical	Value-mediated critiques that challenge existing power structures and promote resistance
Poststructuralist	Deconstructions; Genealogies; Reflexive poly-vocal texts

Figure 2: Products of research
Source: Amos Hatch (2002) p13

It had also been hoped, as flagged up in the introduction to this essay, that some kind of paradigm-analysis tool would be developed that used the main themes tentatively explored in the discourse above to provide a diagnostic tool to establish the paradigm most aligned to a researchers own standpoint. The intention was (is) to create a simple electronic question/answer list in the same mould as that used for the earlier research project for exploring the locus of control parameter in that study (Appendix 1). By setting out statements drawn from the ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives of each of the five paradigms discussed in this essay, together with 'mostly agree with' and 'mostly disagree with' selection options it would be possible to draw up a paradigm profile that may be helpful in distilling the thoughts of a researcher. Time has prevented the development of this idea, but it is proposed to complete this exercise as time permits and publish it 'on-line' to solicit opinion on its usefulness.

Concluding remarks

This essay remains incomplete as the researcher's intention is to explore in more depth the five paradigms discussed here. But it is believed that the exercise as it stands so far and such as it is presented here is a fair reflection of progress made to this point in terms of capturing key features of the underpinning theory that should be supporting study at doctoral level.

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Appendix 1

Attitudes to dyslexia QNR base – taken from the MSc dissertation research questionnaire, still available at:

http://www.personal.soton.ac.uk/ad1305/msc_qnr_v2.htm

I am interested in your attitudes towards your dyslexia. In the list of statements below please indicate whether you generally agree with or generally disagree with each one to give me an idea about how you feel. Please try to complete them all;		
I agree	**...with the statement below ..... or**	**I disagree**
	I am able to settle down to my work anytime, anyplace	
	The learning environment at University is considerate of the needs of dyslexic students	
	I've had help with strategies for dealing with my dyslexia but it hasn't made any difference	
	I feel too embarrassed to ask for help with my studies	
	However hard I try, I'll never be as good as someone without dyslexia	
	I often feel pretty stupid	
	I find it quite difficult to concentrate on my work most of the time	
	I believe that my dyslexia impacts a great deal on my academic progress	
	If I try hard, I can achieve just as much as anyone else	
	I believe that my grades are as much to do with luck as with any effort on my part	
	I don't think my dyslexia makes me any more anxious than anyone else	
	I feel guilty about being dyslexic	
	I don't consider myself to be disabled	
	I will always be held back by my dyslexic difficulties	
	I am usually surprised if I get good marks	
	I use strengths related to my dyslexia to help me with study strategies	
	I approach my written work with enthusiasm	
	I don't think my dyslexia makes any difference to the way I tackle my work	
	I don't think about my dyslexia much	
	I keep knowledge about my dyslexia to myself	
	I approach my written work with a high expectation of success	
	My friends know I am dyslexic	
	Teachers' help at school made little difference to my progress so I didn't ask them much	
	I don't use any of the support services because it makes me feel different	
	My contribution in discussions is usually rubbish so generally I don't bother	
	I believe my dyslexia helps me to be more creative	
	It would make no difference to my progress if my tutors know about my dyslexia	
	I need to work much harder than my friends to get similar grades	
	I can manage my studies quite adequately without any help	
	I often feel frustrated when trying to study	