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Provocative Idea:

It's We, the Researchers, Who are in Need of Renovation

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I have been teaching qualitative research in education at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem for some years now. I have a sense that dealing with the issues of research methodology is of importance if we do indeed consider anthropology and qualitative methods to have something to contribute to improve the world in which we live.

I write this rather short note out of a commitment to empirical research in the social sciences, emphasizing that which is observed and experienced, and recognizing the complexity of studying that which is human. I reflect on my experience as a learner looking for ways to understand educational practice through methods able to capture its complexity. I then reflect on my experience as a teacher of anthropology and education, and consider the problems I encounter when trying to share my trade with my students. I hint at the potential connection between the political organizations within which we evolve and the paradigmtic perspectives which seem to become an obstacle in overcoming traditional empirical perspectives in the social sciences in general and in education in particular. Last, I consider multiple literacies as tools which might help us realize the problems mentioned and emphasize that these do not belong only in the world outside but also inside our immediate academic settings.

What I want to say has been said before. Biologists (Mayr, 1988), philosophers (Churchman, 1968, 1979), and even plain anthropologists (Bateson, 1979) have long recognized the limits of the modern dream for omniscience mostly constrained by a system's complexity, which will not easily bow to our traditional scientific tools. While it has all been said before, when looking around in the academy I wonder whether it need not be remembered once again. Our methodologies and methodological tools are central to this commitment and stand at the basis of the paradigms which guide our inquiry.

If guided by conventional quantitative positivist perspectives when pondering over these issues, I could be expected to seek new formulae so as, for example, to improve our dealings with more variables simultaneously, or to allow for better graphical representations of patterns of relationships, or, even better, to permit the improved investigation of small samples. By so doing, I would implicitly acknowledge that the researcher, given a good methodology, is almost irrelevant in the research equation.

An empiricist I am but a positivist I am not. Working as I do in the anthropology of learning or education, I have for long been convinced that the customary scales and graphics produced by the social sciences offer poor representations of that which I study, i.e., humans learning, which, by the mere fact of being alive, is intermittent, always in flux and stubbornly refuses reification. I seem to stand alongside the biologists in the scientific wars of the old hard natural sciences who, when criticized by physicists for their "soft" scientific approach, would answer: What else can we do? What we study moves (Mayr, 1988). While physicist have, by now, removed themselves and their science from simplistic positivist stands when uncovering that relativity, uncertainty, and chaos govern that which they research, social scientists seem, for the most part, unfortunately not be able to overcome the traditional positivist paradigm which governed the physics of old.

Alternatively I could be a "traditional" philosopher who, guided by modern western thought--which, in a nutshell, is said to be merely footnotes to Plato--engages in the trajectory which directly connects Plato and Descartes while trying, through the efforts of a solipsistic self, to uncover metaphysics in the shadows (as in the Platonic metaphor). But again biology comes to the rescue and I worry not about that which I have never seen, the individual mind/self, and rather align myself with the true empiricist of all times, Darwin, who in 1838 already knew, "He who understands baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke" (Charles Darwin, Notebook M: 84e, 16 August 1938, cited in Barrett, Gautrey, Herbert, Kohn, & Smith, 1987, p. 539).

Either way I seem to follow that which is alive, and when so doing, have come to realize that that which is in need of bettering for our social research to move forward is not our methodologies nor the efforts of an individual mind, but instead we humans, the researchers ourselves. We are the ones who carry and implement the methodologies and analyses.

I discovered anthropology as a discipline over 30 years ago when I was working as a young moderator at a voluntary organization offering seminars to high school students. I do not remember exactly why but I remember being curious about what the academy had to say about what my educational activity was, at that time. Reviewing traditional quantitative educational research, I had a sense that what was being offered in terms of results and interpretations did not at all reflect my own experience while working in the field. By chance I picked up Geertz's book, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973), read it and was seized in a dialogue with the complexity of understanding the living.

When compared to cause and effect relationships, the manipulation of variables, and generalizations, which did not at all mirror my sense of what I was doing in class, Geertz's descriptions resonated with my complex experiences and offered a sense that there was a way of looking at what I was doing and of reflecting on my and my colleagues' activities. Since then I have been trying to train my senses to meet the world and think about what I encounter in it through what I understand to be the traditional tools and paradigmatic perspectives that anthropology has to offer.

Ten years ago, I started teaching qualitative methodology courses at the university; that is to say, I started failing at teaching others what had been so helpful to me, and for the most part failing to engage my students in a dialogue about the complexities of that which makes us human, i.e., our insatiable urge--indeed necessity--to learn. I would readily take all responsibility for my failure if I would believe that my rather weak teachings skills could carry all the blame. But I believe responsibility rests, partially at least, somewhere else; it rests in the many years of training that my students have endured in the institutions created by the sovereign state to inculcate them with a modern western ideology, one which rests on a positivist monologic paradigm that will justify their present grip and their future survival. The powerful machinery developed by the nation state, mostly in the shape of massive educational efforts (Gellner, 1997) which market universal and anonymous literacy, has been successful in making look natural or banal (Billig, 1995), the detailed practices through which nation states become real. Thus nation states become almost invisible settings in which we "mistakenly" hold a sense of individuality--an individuality always measured against a contingent other (Laclau, 1990) and thus intolerant of difference, and against that modern court of human appeal: the "high" culture of the nation state (Williams, 1961).

A parallel may be drawn with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that attributes a powerful role to language in shaping our thoughts. Likewise, nationalism seems to shape and direct our most basic paradigmatic conceptions both of society and of individual identity. The discursive resources and practices it offers both express and reinforce its power. These resources point at the deep-rooted cultural schemes that organize the way we interpret our environments in verbal communication. Patterns of talk that are available to organize communicational processes of given groups through a mediating textual form embedded in the symbolic realm of a given social setting; in our case the setting shaped by the power of the nation-state through the ongoing constitution of the political field by two irreducible poles of essentialist determinacy (e.g., good/bad, particular/universal, Jew/Arab, etc.) (Neuman & Bekerman, 2001).

Still it is not about who carries or shares the responsibility for my failure that I wish to talk; what I want to do is to try, at least, to point at what it is I could possibly want to achieve when trying to better the human in the researcher. This clarity is to me necessary because without it I cannot even start to organize my teaching in a way which, if allowed, would be successful.

Many (almost all) students of mine come expecting to get, without much difficulty, the credits needed to receive their degrees so as to join the lucky ones who might enter the race to achieve positions of power in the state bureaucracy which will allow for more than a rather minimalist survival in our consumerist society. They expect their teacher to offer a clear course of action, some straightforward formula which, if followed, promises success in the examination. I cannot blame them for this; I did much the same when I was a student.

Nonetheless, I want them first to have an appreciation for theory. But they fear theory as if the word belongs only to those who can afford the time for reflective introspection. They react to theory as if they knew the word's historical roots (from Greek *theoros*), which designated the clerks who were licensed by the sovereign to determine whether something had indeed taken place, to bear witness. Today's students fear it as if they would have known the etymology throughout and realized that theory, thus understood, represents the power of the state.

I would like my students, instead, to take seriously that we all beget theories while our lives unfold in the complex tasks the world relentlessly affords us. I want them to appreciate that there are multiple ways in which the world can be known, and a variety of languages through which reality can be described. Still as true heirs to years of shallow positivist thinking in the social sciences, they want to know how to uncover a true reality; they hope to find ways to describe it exactly so as, in the best of cases, to change it for the better. Even when I'm successful in showing that the realities they experience are far more complex than any answer they can expect to uncover through positivist perspectives, their expectations from research efforts do not change much. They still believe that good research should be able to offer a secure and easy path to a change for the better. If they are successful enough to join those in power, they know they will need first to be able to offer a convincing and sound analysis of reality, and later some clear, sharp conclusions as to how to act so as to change the reality described. The fact that education has gone unchanged in spite of the large amount of research conducted through the years seems not to bother them at all. They seem to think this to be so because that research has not yet been done properly, or, in the worst case, because its recommendations have not been properly implemented by the teachers, the curriculum writers, the principals, or the policy makers.

When teaching them about us humans as the central tool of research, they doubt their potential to be objective, as if numerical manipulations could offer objective perspectives. When teaching them about using their senses to collect data through observing, interviewing, and gathering documentation, they fear their personal perspectives might contaminate an otherwise immune/sterilized research effort. But even when the tools are explained and adopted (for lack of any other option, while participating in a university course) they endlessly express insecurity regarding their understanding of what it is exactly that they should do and how to do it well. My continuing attempts to convince them that the human world of activity is complex and forever influenced by changing contexts and historical trajectories, only creates more tensions; they prefer rather to be

allowed to look for “facts” and “truths” but now armed with ethnographic tools. They become now a living questionnaire or a traveling laboratory site in which to uncover causality.

When I insist on the complexities of human interaction, when I emphasize the multiple contextual levels of analysis that need to be accounted for (i.e., micro-, mezzo-, macro-, exo-), they lose patience. They insist that, if at all valid, what I expect would make the research process irrelevant for it would be too time consuming or in a sense made frivolous for it denies the possibility of making any clear statements on what to do next. When I ask my students to suspend, for a moment, their search for what stands behind what they are looking at--the transcendent, the unconscious, the intentional, and the unintentional--and instead to pay attention to the richness of the material as this is expressed in the physical and the verbal realms, they are annoyed as if I would be denying their and their “research subjects’” humanity. They seem to believe it is much more human to judge, to interpret a situation according to the observer’s perception of that which is totally unavailable to the observer--that which the subjects think. As our worst enemies, they fancy more our intentions than our deeds. At times I fear they are the true (hopefully unintentional) heirs of a psychologized essentialized worldview whose relations to the development of the nation state seem to be unknown to them (Foucault, 1969, 1973).

Engaging in a critical dialogue with these perspectives is no easy task. Still, in recent years it has become a central focus in my teaching activity. It mainly involves re-presenting science as relative and arbitrary while trying to construct new means of seeing other aspects of constructed realities. Human understanding is not mere representation--linguistic, mathematical, visual, or auditory; understanding is the exercise of proficiency. We understand a thing when we know how to interact with it and use it well. Though we have classically been taught that science is driven by the formulation of hypotheses and by experiments designed to discredit them, Popper’s formulation seems insufficient for that which is alive and thus unpredictably complex, be it a biologist’s cell or a social event. Only my fear of reproducing the dichotomies I blame the nation state of enacting prevents me from bringing Feyerbend’s “anything goes” into the picture.

Countering these perspectives is to get us all to appreciate that the first step to understanding is to first comprehend how best to interact with the information we have received and that to understand is a creative, pleasing, or useful interaction with the information in hand--such interaction is the creation of meaning.

As Conant (1951) posited it, science is an interconnected series of concepts and conceptual schemes that have developed as the result of experimentation and observation and are fruitful for further experimentation and observation. Thus the process also involves abandoning the hope of finding fast solutions or writing praiseworthy bureaucratic reports. It involves acknowledging the intricacies of human interaction and networks, the intermittent nature of meaning making, and the necessary exuberance and deficiency of all trans-cription and trans-lation. It involves using the revealed

complexities as a lever to humble our perspectives when confronting multifaceted "realities." Finally it requires getting all to realize that the anthropological quest is one that to become acceptable is in need not only of an epistemological change but also of a political one. The political change required is one which prevents its own reduction to convenient dichotomies and essentializations. It is a change which pervades all active spheres while recognizing that the practices of research constitute the relations among the participants and also are constituted by them in turn.

Politics, unfortunately, is the frame the state's institutionalized educational system hides systematically so as to seize and hold my students and me in the positivistic paradigm for life. We, all, need to work hard to further uncover the banal practices which the sovereign national state context utilizes to trap us in its cultural/semiotic frames. The task is similar to the one described by Duro for the arts: "The task of any discussion of frames and framing in the visual arts is first and foremost to counter the tendency of the frame to invisibility with respect to the artwork" (Duro, 1996, p. 1). This activity is not easy. Derrida, in one of his less obscure pieces, poetically points at the difficulty:

> The parergon [accessory or frame] stands out both from the ergon [the work] and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground. But it does not stand out like the work. The latter also stands out against a ground. The parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other. With respect to the work which can serve it as a ground, it merges into the wall, and then gradually, into general text. With respect to the ground, which is the general text, it merges into the work, which stands out against the general ground. There is always a form, on the ground, but the parergon is a form which has its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melt away at the moment it deploys its great energy. (Derrida, 1987, p. 57)

The sovereign is a *parergon* (or frame) to present paradigmatic perspectives in the social sciences. They constitute each other, neither being absolutely intrinsic or extrinsic to each other.

Untying the knot that connects them, overcoming the nation state's paradigm involves finding ways to offer our students literacies with which to read the world--ours as well as any other. In Burkean terms, I want to offer them "dramatism" (Burke, 1969): the realization that the relationships between life and theatre are not metaphorical but real and that the understanding of symbolic systems holds the key to the understanding of social organization. This literacy requires abundant theory and rich descriptive faculties in order to uncover and cope with the complexity of the sites and social phenomena that we expect the students to interpret. Thus they need familiarity with a variety of disciplines and discourses. They need an economic discourse for discussing commodities, supplies, and management; an aesthetic discourse, to discuss architecture, advertising, and display; a political discourse, to discuss bodies, policies, planning, and discipline; a

historical discourse to talk about change in organization, consumption, and community. They also need interpretative discourses to articulate understandings of each of the texts and their necessary *intertextuality* in practice, which, in concert, create culture.

All of the above are needed in order to read the world and the politics that constructs it, not only in the world outside but also inside the classrooms. It might not be all that is needed, but it is a critical step before offering solutions or directions.

More frontal teaching of theory, even when accompanied by fieldwork, though good, might not be good enough. We are in urgent need of new pedagogies and educational strategies. We urgently need to take risks and renegotiate horizons within our own institutions. We are in urgent need of reshaping the academic, compartmentalized curriculum--the one that constitutes and is constituted by the present relations of academic power. To better the central tool of research in anthropology, i.e., the researcher, we need to reconnect students to themselves and to that which constitutes them in the ever-changing contexts of living. Needless to say, we the teachers need to do exactly the same. Doing the same might be painful and at times risky, taking chances in the academic world by truly engaging in dialogue while uncovering for and with our students how our own positions of power are constructed and maintained is no easy task, but from any anti-transcendental scientific perspective there seems to be no other way. It is not our intentions that count, though when declared they become consequential in the world, but our deeds. From our perspective the only possible answer to W. B. Yeats' question "how can you tell the dancer from the dance?" is this: You can't, the dancer is the dance.

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