It’s Your World, I’m Just Trying to Explain It: Understanding Our Epistemological and Methodological Challenges

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I presume that one of the reasons I have been invited to speak to the Qualitative Inquiry Special Interest Group is the fact that I contributed a chapter to the second edition of the Handbook of Qualitative Research. But perhaps if the program planners realized I came kicking and screaming into that assignment, they may have thought twice about the invitation. When Norman Denzin first approached me about contributing a chapter to the Handbook, my first response was an unequivocal “no.” I explained to him that I had just accepted the editorship of the American Educational Research Journal, I was a member of my university’s athletic board, I was woefully late on several major writing projects, and I was attempting to have some semblance of a life. There just was no room in my schedule for another major writing task. But Norman was wise in the way those who have endured the academy almost always are. He suggested that I take a look at the current chapter he was asking me to replace and then get back to him. I went back and reread that chapter, and although it was indeed a good chapter, I knew that there was something else I wanted to say. Thus, my ego led me into yet another challenge for which I had no time.

But even the writing of that chapter, titled “Racialized Discourses and Ethnic Epistemologies,” takes on a different set of meanings in our current sociopolitical context. The events of September 11, 2001, have colored almost all public discourse in this country. There is no way to ignore it or minimize the way it has shaped the material and symbolic world we inhabit. But this shaping of our world is a perfect example of what this talk is about. First, let me be clear: Nothing can excuse the horrific acts perpetrated against the people in the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the three airplanes that were hijacked and turned into weapons. But how we have shaped that event and the subsequent public conversation are perfect examples of the epistemic panic (Gordon, 1997) I tried to capture in the handbook chapter.

There are three epistemological themes that were made manifest as a result of the attack. One theme is that of defining humanity. The second theme
is that of defining importance, and the third theme is that of determining the future. In this discussion, I will attempt to draw parallels between these themes and the knowledge construction process that governs the academy.

From the very moment of the attack, the official rhetoric told us we were dealing with madmen, lunatics, and evildoers. We also learned that there were two choices available to us—either to be with “us” or to be with the “terrorists,” and clearly, because the terrorists were “deranged” fanatics, the only humanity available was that which was associated with the moral, civilized “us.” Next, the images that accompanied the “them” were from a premodern era. Without the trappings of the West—modern dress, daily conveniences, and reason-governed institutions—configuring the “them” as other than human was fairly simple. Such an us-them paradigm makes sense in a cold war reality. However, in a new world configuration, such binaries are useless. According to Huntington (1996) in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, affinities are less related to nation-states and more related to cultural or civilizational ties. Thus, the lack of humanity we have ascribed to those who are half a world away is also mapped onto those who share their cultural and/or religious ties. Americans of Muslim, Arab, and/or Middle Eastern descent no longer can lay claim to the same humanity as those of us wrapped in this new national “we.”

The creation of the inhuman “them” is a very old ontological strategy. Indeed, my handbook chapter is about the way the Enlightenment thinkers defined humanity—as those for whom knowledge was, first, scientific and, second, absolutely knowable and truthful. The human is he (and he is deliberate and definitive here) who understands that “natural science could be summarized by its laws and employs an experimental method to seek truth” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 259). Thus, those who subscribed to an epistemology that conjoined the seen and unseen, the flesh and the spirit, this world and the next were either religious fanatics (if they were White) or primitive, unevolved, and not yet human. Yet scholars such as Ani (1994) suggested that if you “rob the universe of its richness, deny the significance of the symbolic, simplify phenomena until it becomes mere object, [then] you have a knowable quantity. Here begins and ends the European epistemological mode” (p. 29).

Now it is important to be clear that there is nothing wrong with this mode of thinking. What is wrong is the imposition of this mode on all people and the dismissal of modes of thought that conflict with it as untrue, biased, ideological, and/or superstitious. The real challenge of this current era is to understand as Geertz (1983) pointed out that all cultures are local—not universal and, as Pandian (1985) further elaborated, that the Judeo-Christian culture of the West is a local culture, not a universal, transcendent, supraculture under which all others must be subordinated. However, the combination of opportunity, economics, military might, and technology has afforded the West unique and powerful influences in the world—first through the indus-
trial age and the rapid manufacturing capabilities and next through the information age where ideas, symbols, and whole cultural systems can be transported and inserted into other cultural systems in an instant. Scholar Sylvia Wynter (1992) cited Eritrean ethnologist Asmarom Legesse in pointing out that

as Westernized scholars, we invariably see the “models of the universe” native to this specific “local culture” (even if one that is now secularized and globalized), as if they were models of an in-itself reality. So rather than being aware of the fact that we too conceptualize and know our social reality through the prescriptive categories of a “local” world view, we have come to believe that the knowledge we have of our social reality is a supra-cultural rather than a culture-specific order of knowledge. (pp. 8-9)

Today, we continue to grapple with a cultural logic locked in binaries. It understands dichotomy and opposition and has little room for complexity. It cannot hold two competing thoughts at once and imposes on us a “regime of truth” that makes it impossible to confer humanity on anyone outside of its system of thought and mode of behavior. Stanley Fish (2001), in his New York Times editorial following the September 11th attacks, pointed out that like Edward Said, we must reject “false universals.” He further asserted,

How many times have we heard these new mantras: “we have seen the face of evil”; “these are irrational madmen”; “we are at war against international terrorism.” Each is at once inaccurate and unhelpful. We have not seen the face of evil; we have seen the face of an enemy who comes at us with a full roster of grievances, goals and strategies. If we reduce that enemy to “evil,” we conjure up a shape-shifting demon, a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counterstrategies. (p. A-19)

Fish’s point is that without an understanding of the basic humanity of an opponent, there is no opportunity for worthy confrontation and real resolution to our problems. Rather, we continue to chase ghost, always presuming the Other to be without reason, rights, or rationale.

The second theme is one of determining importance. Over and over, people in this country describe the world as pre–September 11th and post–September 11th. Yes, this is a significant date, for now, but it takes history to determine whether it will become a teleological fault line. For me, time and chronology can be divided in an infinite number of combinations—pre–April 4, 1968 (assassination of Martin Luther King) and post–April 4, 1968; pre–summer of 1963 and post–summer of 1963 (bombing of the little girls in the Birmingham church); pre–summer of 1955 and post–summer of 1955 (murder of Emmett Till). Each of these events made me feel less safe, less secure, less able to lay claim to any notion of myself as American. But now I am learning that September 11th is the dividing line I must use if I am ever to claim “real” citizenship. All other notions of what is or is not important become subjugated to this new indicator that is reinscribed in every newspaper, every
broadcast, and every popular media outlet. For instance, on December 20, 2001, we learned that the economy of Argentina was collapsing. There was rioting and looting in the streets, and the president had announced his resignation. On the CBS *Nightly News* that evening, Dan Rather devoted almost all of his coverage to the 100-day “anniversary” of 9-11. We learned that Liberty Island was reopening to the public (but not the Statue of Liberty itself), the government had come up with a plan for compensating the victims of the attacks, and the Pentagon was being rebuilt. The story about Argentina’s literal collapse was inserted on the 2-minute “world wrap” section of the news. This is a glaring example of how our “local culture” creates significance and insignificance. September 11th as a declared date of significance negates all others in the same way 1066, 1492, 1776, and December 7, 1941, are supposed to stand in high relief against all other dates, times, and places.

A friend and colleague, Hassimi Miaga, has developed a sociocultural chronology we use with preservice students, in which he examined a series of events that occurred at the same time. For example, in 1492, his chronology states,

> After 800 years of occupation by Africans, the edict of expulsion forced thousands of African Muslims (Moors) and Jews to flee Spain. Sonni Ali Beer, the great Malian conquerer, died. Columbus made his way to the Americas and the Renaissance began in Europe.

All of these things were happening simultaneously, and their importance was specific to the people who were directly affected. This is not meant to minimize the arrival of Europeans in the Americas so much as it is to place it in the context of a variety of human events. The dominance of European or Western science and technologies has made Western worldviews the valued worldviews. Again, my Malian friend shared with me that growing up in Mali he sang a song that swore allegiance to “our ancestors the Gauls,” and his school calendar included a Christmas holiday for a Muslim nation with built-in snow days in a country that does not experience snow.

Thus, our penchant for fixing a point in time as the point in time for everyone to reverence reflects our continued misunderstanding of the ways our epistemological biases shape the realm of possibilities for everyone.

The third theme that has devolved from September 11th is that of determining the future. This theme is more interesting because it is imbedded in a national narrative that we all realize is a persistent myth. In this narrative, we say something like, “We’ll never be the same because of what happened to us on September 11th.” Actually, that would be a comforting thought—that we would never be the same. Unfortunately, this notion of a differently oriented America is one that will not materialize. No sooner than the events of September 11th sank in, the nation took up a rhetoric about the need to place Americans of Arab/Middle Eastern descent under strict surveillance and to restrict their freedom. There have been a number of proposals aimed at curtailing
civil liberties—military tribunals instead of civilian courts, restricting access to presidential papers, coercion of national loyalty. These kinds of things reflect not how we are different but rather how easily we retreat to old patterns of behaviors and old discourses that almost always lead to bad results. The same kinds of responses were apparent after Pearl Harbor. The difficult issue is that we are more likely to be exactly like we were (and even more so, if that is possible) because of September 11th. Before the attack, the very concept of an American was being contested. It was a fluid concept that was being made and remade in a myriad of ways. In some places, it included a variety of language groups—English, Spanish, French Creole, Vietnamese, Hmong. In other places, it included a variety of religious practices. In still other places, it included race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability differences. However, it was not a settled or definitive concept. Soon after September 11th, who and what constituted an American became a fixed and rigid image. And that concept has little room for dissent or challenge. I fear there will be a retreat to nativist and parochial thinking about who we are and who or what the “Other” is.

A local example of this narrow construction of “American” and “patriot” came into play in Madison, Wisconsin—the place some call the last bastion of communism in the western world. Well before the events of September 11th, some state legislator inserted a rider into the upcoming state budget agreement. This rider required all schools in the state to have students recite the Pledge of Allegiance or sing the “National Anthem” every day. Typically, such rulings would have little or no impact on Madison schools. However, after September 11th the newspapers constantly reminded the public of the new state requirement. When the pledge/anthem edict went into effect, several parents from the elementary school with the most international student body appealed to the school board about the coercive nature of the ruling. Three of the five board members present at that meeting voted to have the district play the “National Anthem” only. Their decision set off a firestorm. Before long, Madison’s “anti-American,” radical, left-leaning sentiments were made fodder for conservative voices throughout the country. Specifically, the decision was the topic of Rush Limbaugh’s radio program and had city officials fearful that conferences and other business interests would desert Madison. Before long, a recall effort was put into motion and a special school board meeting was held at the largest high school auditorium. More than 1,000 people showed up at the school board meeting. People stood up singing the anthem and reciting the pledge. Although speakers were given only 3 minutes to share their views, the school board meeting lasted until 3 a.m. Two of the school board members rescinded their votes. One stood firm. Hate and vitriol spewed out of the mouths of the audience members. One man, a local radio “ shock jock,” told the newly elected Hmong member of the board to “go back to Vietnam!”
After some discussion, the recall proponents decided to just try to recall the one board member who refused to change his vote because the other two members would be standing for reelection in the spring anyway. In the meantime, one of the local newspapers (that generally supported the recall folks) did a feature on the school board member. He was a former English teacher in the district and devotes his free time to assisting non-English-speaking immigrants with acquiring English so that they can prepare for the citizenship examination. In the article, he was quoted as saying that he would never change his vote about the pledge because you could not coerce people to be patriotic. “Patriotism is what you do, not what you say.”

The current end of this story is that the recall movement failed to garner the 30,000-plus signatures, and the democratic process allows the duly elected school board member to remain in office. But think about what this has meant to the community. A school district that has an abysmal track record educating Black and Latino students cannot get anyone to a board meeting on the achievement needs of students of color, but not saying the pledge brings people from miles around. The attack has not made us different; it has made us predictably more like ourselves.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR RESEARCH

The ability to define humanity, to determine significance or importance, and to determine the future has an important impact on research and scholarship. Not too long ago, a colleague attended a meeting where the president of a major philanthropic foundation commented, “I don’t know why we keep receiving all of these critical theory proposals. We’re not going to fund any of them.” The attitude of the funder is shocking, not because the funder has predetermined what she or he will fund—foundations do that all the time—but that it is the basis for this decision. This funder has mapped out the epistemological landscape and decided what is worth knowing. I think we could agree that if a funder decided that she or he was willing only to fund mathematics- or science-related proposals, that is her or his privilege. We might disagree with this strategy, but at least we could understand the funder’s position on prioritizing what to fund. However, when a foundation decides that an entire epistemological stance is illegitimate, it is not merely stating a priority but rather determining what does and does not count as knowledge.

In my own work, I have used critical race theory (CRT) to explicate new epistemological perspectives on inequity and social injustice in education. Although some might consider a “racial” theory an essentialized approach to analysis and interpretation of social phenomena, CRT actually attempts to make plain the racialized context of public and private spheres in our society. It functions as a useful rubric for understanding the taken-for-granted privi-
leges and inequities that are built into our society. It employs narratives and counternarratives to add context and complexity to the micro-aggressions people of color experience daily.

CRT asserts that racism is normal, not aberrant, in U.S. society, and because it is so ingrained in our society, it looks ordinary and natural to people in the culture. Indeed, my students who are most taken aback by racism tend to be my international students because the racism seems so evident and explicit. U.S. students of color have grown accustomed to the exclusions, the surveillance, and the inequities.

CRT often takes the form of storytelling, “in which writers analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). This means that CRT understands that our social world is not fixed; rather, it is something we construct with words, stories, and silences. But we need not cave into social arrangements that are unjust; we can write against them.

CRT calls for deeply contextualized understandings of social phenomena. Unlike the positivist tendency to strip down and sterilize social and cultural issues into distinct component parts, critical race theorists insist on providing a context to make sense of what transpires, to fully elaborate a story, and to make evident complexity.

CRT is informed by a notion of “interest-convergence,” a concept developed by Derrick Bell. It argues that White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for people of color only when they also promote White self-interest. So, if you examine legislative and judicial changes such as affirmative action or school desegregation, you can see that the ultimate payoff went to Whites. In the case of affirmative action, the figures are clear that the biggest benefactors were White women, and because White women typically live in White families, the benefits accrue to entire White communities. In the case of school desegregation, the proliferation of magnet programs, school desegregation workshops, courses, and so forth all created work opportunities that often went to Whites. Indeed, as Foster reports, the greatest casualties of school desegregation were Black teachers and administrators.

Critical race theorists are willing to try out new forms of writing and thought. Some are postmodernists; some use biography and autobiography, stories, and counterstories. Others have been experimenting with humor, satire, and narrative analysis “to reveal the circular, self-serving nature of particular legal doctrines or rules” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).

CRT represents a space of both theoretical and epistemological liberation. It offers an opportunity to challenge the taken-for-granted theories and concepts that govern our disciplines and circumscribe our thinking. I would never suggest that CRT is the only way to theorize the racialized subject. I would not suggest that it is the only way to make sense of the ongoing inequity and social injustice that shape our society. Believe it or not, I might be the first to say that if you are working with thousands of data points, you may
want to quickly reach into your methodological tool kit for multiple regressions or structural equation modeling. But I ask that you reach with full knowledge of what those tools can and cannot do. I ask that you step back to look on what epistemological ground you have planted your feet. I ask you to recognize the “truths” your epistemology illuminates and what “truths” are simultaneously occluded by it. I ask you to keep open the possibilities of limitless thinking and innovation. I ask you to remember that in a society structured by dominance and subordination, it’s someone else’s world; we just try to explain it.

REFERENCES


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