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MIXING AND MATCHING PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY FOR INVESTIGATING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Investigative enquiry at the doctoral level gives the student the theoretical tools to better comprehend and consider research as both philosophy and methodology. This makes it possible for the student to engage in a philosophical introspection about the most appropriate research methodology for the construction of knowledge regarding the studied phenomenon. The systematic character of research also plays an important role in grounding research as science. This paper explores the knowledge construction process with regard the ontological, epistemological and methodological implications for investigating child sexual abuse (CSA).

This paper first seeks to answer the question: What do we know about the ways in which research has been framed in philosophy and methodology? This is followed with a discussion on what are the considerations for mixing and matching philosophy and methodology in order to select the most appropriate approaches to investigate CSA. It also explores the extent to which reflective practice in research is justifiable in philosophy and methodology.

Inspired by the writings of Agger, I argue that CSA is part of a public social science that grounds private troubles in public issues, connecting them for all to see. In this regard, I feel duty bound as a public sociologist to have the knowledge produced from my research to transcend the academy and engage wider audiences towards building a more democratic public sphere (Agger, 2002). In an attempt to experience research as epistemology therefore, where knowledge is created after a rigorous process of scientific enquiry, I mention possible routes for the publication of the findings of my research. This is intended to guarantee the dissemination of the findings for the purpose of advocacy, policy decision making and social action towards the reduction of incidence of CSA on small islands and beyond. Moreover, I expect that the publication will raise awareness at the macro level on the possible impact of CSA on the prospects of the sustainable human development of small islands.

Selecting a philosophical framework

In research, ontology, methodology and philosophy are the most fundamental concepts to be studied and understood, and as such provide a starting point to discuss what we know about the role and function of research as philosophy. Ontology is defined by Blaikie (cited in Flowers, 2009) as “the science or study of being”. He developed this description for the social sciences to encompass claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up, and how these units interact with one another (Flowers: 2). It appears that the ontology defines one’s view of the world as an objective reality that really exists, or a subjective reality created in one’s mind. For example, as a researcher interested in studying the phenomenon of CSA, I may interview children and ask them to describe their childhood experiences. However, the mega question is to what extent the children will describe what has ‘really’ happened, or what they ‘think’ went on within their families. As the children might proceed to describe the complexities of their family dynamics, how do I guarantee that what they share would be the objective reality of that which transpired, what they thought might have happened, or simply their illusions. How individuals determine their realities may therefore be based on their own subjective experience or an objective reality based on facts independent of their thoughts and feelings. The fear is that as a researcher, I might be left with a set of ontological assumptions which may affect my view on what the real situation might have been. According to Flowers (p. 2), when considering that different views exist regarding what constitutes reality, another question might be, how is that reality measured and what constitutes knowledge of that reality.

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This brings to mind the concept of epistemology, which is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge produced through research. More importantly, epistemology seeks to find the truth about various phenomena, resulting in a theory of knowledge. Any scholarly attempt to measure, and/or to discover the truth, or rather what can be known about any phenomenon will of necessity have to select the most appropriate research methodology through which reliable and verifiable knowledge might be produced. The production of reliable and verifiable knowledge can take place via a rigorous scientific process utilizing various forms of research methodology. The ultimate purpose of investigating CSA is the creation of knowledge to be shared with the wider community, including social workers and other psychosocial practitioners and policy makers as major change agents. However, prior to accomplishing this, it is important to consider the various research philosophies used to effectively classify research methodologies.

Research philosophy is an overall conceptual framework within which a researcher may work that can be regarded as the basic belief system or world view that guides the investigator (Guba & Lincoln, as referenced in Sobh & Perry, 2005: 1195). The litera-

ture reviewed for this article presented different philosophical assumptions that support paradigms of science such as positivism, post-positivism, the interpretive paradigm, constructivism, critical theory and triangulated realism. For the purpose of this paper, reference is made to positivism, post-positivism, the interpretive paradigm and triangulated realism.

Positivist research is based on a highly structured methodology to enable generalization and quantifiable observations and evaluate the results through the testing of hypotheses developed from existing theory, often using statistical methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, in Flowers, 2009). This type of research is used primarily in natural sciences (Saunders, in Williams, 2011) and falls within the parameters of deductive reasoning.

The basic reasoning behind positivism assumes that an objective reality exists which is independent of human behavior and is therefore not a creation of the human mind (Crossan, 2003: 50). A major criticism of the positivist approach is that it does not provide the means to examine human beings and their behaviours in an in-depth way (Crossan: 51). This criticism is worthy of consideration in my research, since my intention is to study the impact of experiences of CSA on children's adjustment into adulthood. Crossan quotes Ayer who questions the use of positivist and empirical approaches to the study of human behavior, and suggest that there may be something about the nature of human beings that makes the establishment of laws and the ability to generalize impossible (Crossan: 6). I must confess that I agree with Ayer, based on my social work practice experience, where I have come to realize that different persons react to the same situation differently.

Be this as it may, having reviewed the literature a little further, it would appear that positivism has been challenged and re-examined over time by generations of philosophers and it is now deemed by many to be irrelevant for conducting social science research. Thus, the concept of post-positivism has emerged which assumes that reality is multiple, subjective and mentally constructed by individuals, making it possible to explore in-depth phenomenon from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives (Crossan: 7; 9). Consequently, this makes it possible for social science researchers like myself to have with confidence that our research is indeed scientific and philosophically sound.

Interpretive philosophy posits that the social world is too complex to be reduced to laws and theories such as those that characterize in the natural sciences. This type of research philosophy believes that there are many truths and meanings for any singular fact. Hence, individuals and groups make sense of situations based upon their individual experiences, memories and expectations (Flowers: 3). Consequently, Flowers (p. 3) contends that meaning is constantly constructed and re-constructed through experience resulting in arrange of interpretations. It is these multiple interpretations that cre-

ate social reality. Thus, given the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed, it is of great importance for me to use critical thinking and analytical skills to discover and understand the meanings as well as the contextual factors that may influence, affect and determine the interpretations reached. Thus, this type of research philosophy, unlike the pure positivism is inductive in its theory building approach.

The philosophical underpinning of triangulated realism is that a reality exists independently of the researcher's mind, i.e. that there is an external reality. The triangulated realist paradigm is, however, differs from positivism in that it is based not on a single methodology, but instead on a battery of mutually supportive methodologies that reflect the interdependency of human values and beliefs that exists in the environment. In triangulated realism, the findings of different approaches and studies are demonstrated to complement one another by analytical generalization and thus 'nestle' within theories (Sobh & Perry: 1195).

The aim of triangulated realism is to generalize to theoretical propositions and not to populations (Sobh & Perry: 1195). Triangulated realism contends that there is a real world out there to be discovered, but triangulation from many sources is necessary to know it.

In light of the three research paradigms discussed, I now consider which appears to be most useful for my doctoral research on the topic of CSA and its impact on the prospects for sustainable human development of small islands. This research topic will be divided into the following five sub topics, each of which could be treated as a separate article for wider dissemination:

- 1: Prevalence, risk and protective factors associated with CSA and the extent to which this is moderated by gender: the case of adolescent girls and boys in Aruba and St. Lucia;
- 2: Received sex education, incidents of CSA and attitudes towards and experiences of sexual coercion amongst adolescent girls and boys in Aruba and St. Lucia;
- 3: The potential impact of CSA on the adjustment of children to adulthood;
- 4: Strategies to reduce prevalence and the negative impacts of CSA and sexual coercion; and
- 5: Knowledge construction through personal reflection and reflexivity in qualitative research practice on CSA.

Given my research topic, it appears that all of the three philosophical paradigms discussed above are relevant. Positivism and post-positivism will be useful as in my at-

tempt to determine the prevalence of CSA, using statistical analysis to generalize to a population. The interpretive paradigm also seems to fit my research because it seeks to validate the children's experiences, memories and expectations, and as such this will assist in understanding how they experience and cope with experiences of CSA, their resilience threshold and the likely impact of CSA on their human development. In investigating the possible strategies to reduce the prevalence and negative impacts of CSA and sexual coercion, I will solicit the opinions of social workers, health care providers and teachers. This dialogue with professionals will require both an interpretive and triangulated approach. In fact, Denzin (cited in Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2010) eloquently conceptualizes this process by stating "in social sciences, there is only interpretation, nothing speaks for itself. Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what have been learned. I call making sense of what has been learnt, the art of interpretation" (Denzin, in Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2010). Thus, combining post positivism, the interpretive paradigm and the triangulated realism appears to be compatible with the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind my research in the area of CSA.

Selecting a methodological framework

Research methodologies include quantitative, qualitative and mixed approaches. Positivist quantitative methods use large samples, laboratory experiments and simulations. My research will also necessitate the use of the interpretive paradigm, which involves a more an in-depth examination of the studied phenomenon and as such makes extensive use of qualitative research methodologies such as action research, case studies, focus group discussions, in depth surveys, participant-observer studies and scenario research (Remenyi et al., in Holden & Lynch, 2004: 9). The results of both approaches will then be triangulated to obtain answers to my research questions.

I will commence my research with a survey to obtain data on the prevalence of CSA through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative analytical techniques will be applied to draw inferences from the data regarding the variable of gender for the incidence of CSA.

I will then gather case studies to document the life history of adolescent girls and boys who experience childhood sexual abuse and sexual coercion, focusing on mental health, sexual health, sexual risk behaviors, resilience, and coping styles and on how these impact life choices in transitioning into adulthood. My approach to these case studies will therefore be more interpretivist than positivist in nature, as it will involve the analysis of more variables than is typically possible in a survey or controlled experiment. Thus, case studies are useful technique, but they also allow for bias. For example as the researcher, I am value laden with inherent biases resulting from my

years of experience as a social work practitioner, working with adult and child victims of CSA, my belief system, values, status and resources.

The process of reflective practice has been an integral part of my professional life as a social worker. It is through reflective practice that I have been able to make optimal sense of my experiences, develop mastery of skills, acquire practice wisdom and cope with compassion fatigue. Therefore, in view of the anticipated emotional intensity and possible impact that the intended research might have on me, I believe that my journal entries will be replete with observations and epiphanies that can constitute a matrix for knowledge production.

In light of the above, what is the stance of research philosophy and methodology on reflection as a source of knowledge construction? This concerns me as some have argued that reflection is not considered to be scientific knowledge. Having searched the literature, it is my view that reflection can be considered as achieving Wright Mills' notion of sociological imagination and therefore should not be discarded. It is important to note that Ben-Ari & Enosh (2010: 2) emphasize that reflectivity must be taken into account, because it acknowledges the researcher's dual position both within and outside the phenomena under study. They further argue that the researcher's position can be thought of as representing a 'liminal space' referring to a subjective conscious state of being between two different existential planes (Myer & Land; Turner, in Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2010: 2). They conclude that reflexivity is an instrumental process in the research endeavour and in the construction of knowledge.

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Given the pioneering work of Ben-Ari & Enosh on reflection and reflexivity in qualitative research, I find that it is unfortunate that some scholars still idolize the positivist obsession with facts and figures as the only form of authentic scientific enquiry. As a researcher, I will adopt a position of reflection and reflexive curiosity, stepping back from my research experience to search carefully and persistently for meaning and the development of inferences (Daudelin, in Ben-Ari and Enosh, 2010: 2).

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