

White and black: the personal politics of research methodologies

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Engaging in research, in particular choosing methodologies, is a deeply personal act that reveals truths about the world of the researcher even as the researcher seeks to reveal new truths about the world. These choices are not neutral; and neither are they merely practical, but rooted in our alignments, our identities, and our research communities. Just as they can locate us as servants to a hegemonic paradigm or as subverters of norms, they can locate us at the core of communities, or on the boundaries of them. In this paper we explore some of the possible models which may support researcher dialogue around the ways in which we (may be seen to) position ourselves and our research and the potential implications of those choices.

Keywords: methodology; methods; philosophy; epistemology

Context and background

This is a work-in-progress paper, arising from philosophical, epistemological and philological considerations that we have dug at, archaeologically, as we make decisions relating to the design of our research. While our individual research interests are intersecting but fundamentally distinct from each other, we have established a shared perspective that the principles and guiding beliefs that underpin our methodological choices are broadly aligned. These extend beyond our beliefs about the nature of knowledge and the oversimplified pragmatism of the ‘best’ methodology for our research questions. Instead, we are guided by wider socio-cultural considerations of agency and identity, and the question of who research is generated by, for, and where power is situated. As early career researchers, we are not persuaded by those who have advised us to ‘just use the best tool for the job’ - this advice, to us, smacks of unconsidered privilege. We suspect, for many, it is not that simple. As researchers, what we do is who we are, and who we are is what we do - and yet we are more than what we do (Butler, 1990). Our choices about the methods we use construct the research, and they also construct us. This paper comes from the dialogues we have had together and with others, in the tradition of bell hooks, who said that “to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries” so we can begin to “occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern” (hooks, 1994, p. 129).

Perspectives on methodology

Methodology can be broadly thought of as the ideological as well as the strategic element of research design. This can be contrasted with methods: the specific techniques used to collect and analyse data (Taber, 2013). Situated in the conceptual space between the philosophical and the practical, “[a] methodology refers to a model to conduct a research within the context of a particular paradigm. It comprises the underlying sets of beliefs that guide a researcher to choose one set of research methods

over another” (Wahyuni, 2012, p. 72). While drawing on researcher beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge and the knower (epistemology), and the values of the researcher (axiology) (Ponterotto, 2005), practical considerations such as access, ethics, connections, resources, available time and researcher capacity also informs decisions. Decisions that inform methodology are therefore both philosophical (what should/can research do in any space?) and pragmatic (what should/can research do in this space?). Researcher identity is fundamental to both of these: to the first, because it forms the basis for our values, which we discuss in the next section; and to the second, because access to gatekept resources is conditional on identities (e.g. McAlpine & Lucas, 2011).

Choice of methodology is therefore dependent on establishing those things that we hold true as researchers in the context of the research we are trying to undertake, the theories we are seeking to establish, and the identities we wear right now. How are we placed within certain ideological frames or binaries and how does this construct our sense of researcher self? In using positivism or constructivism, are we thus becoming positivists or constructivists - or something else? So too might we be/use nomothetic or ideographic methodologies, or quantitative or qualitative ones. It is tempting (and widespread) therefore to see the selection of a methodology as a process of following a kind of binary branching structure (e.g. Cohen et al., 2007; Crotty, 2005) through which we iteratively narrow down our options until we establish the ideal methodology through which to conduct our studies – and then proceed on that golden path.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
 Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
 Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
 Strong and content I travel the open road. (Whitman, 1856, para. 2).

Does this sound familiar? Perhaps not. What if we conceptualised the process of methodological selection instead more flexibly, acknowledging that many of the boundaries and categories on which we may rely for our choices are blurred, or overlapping? It might be tempting instead to think of ourselves more like methodological butterflies, alighting on the branches that suit us most, flitting away likewise when it suits us, and cross pollinating richly (see Figure 1).

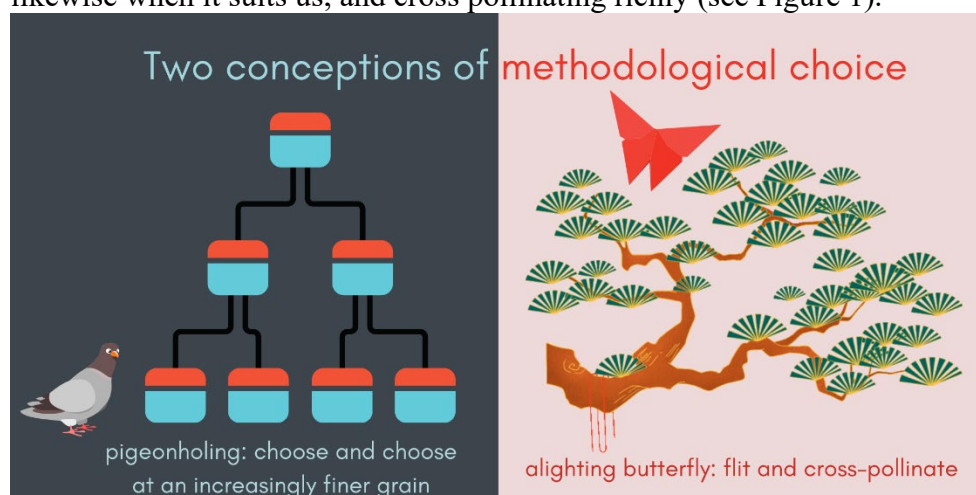


Figure 1: Two conceptions of methodological choice

While both of these are useful models, neither feels particularly realistic to us. The pigeonholing conception is overly restrictive; the alighting butterfly overly free. What is the constraining factor in the real-world model that places us, the agent, somewhere

between a pigeon and a butterfly? We contend it is the researcher identity, as constructed and performed in the research community as the site of power.

Choices and identity

No research is neutral or value-free at any level (e.g. Jaggar, 1989; May, 2011; Swann & Pratt, 2004). While it may be comforting to believe that research is objective and that as researchers applying a scientific and rigorous approach we can somehow remove the effect of our own values and beliefs from the work we undertake, this is in itself a values-based position (May, 2011).

Once we accept that values are fundamental to the methodological choices we make it seems logical to conclude that our identities are equally fundamental, not just as researchers within the academy, but also as people in the world with our own unique intersections of identity markers such as “race”, sexuality, age, gender, and class. This reality is highlighted in the various approaches that reflect these identities including queer theory, critical race theory, post-colonial theory, critical disability theory and feminist theory (Cohen et al., 2007). It is pertinent both to ask who makes the choice to adopt these approaches and the methodologies that arise from them, and why we do not have symmetries of theoretical families named in the same way. Where, for example, might we find scholarly work on ‘heteronormative theory’, ‘unquestioning white supremacy theory’, ‘colonial theory’, ‘unquestioning able-bodied theory’ and ‘misogyny theory’? These labels do not exist because they have never needed to. Historically, knowledge and learning - theory itself - has been defined mainly by white males from the global north, with bold yet wholly naïve claims to objective and bias-free methodologies. Yet researchers are always present in their work (Jaggar, 1989), and it is a choice whether to make this clear to the reader, or lie to them.

Academics do not work in isolation, but as part of multiple communities at different scales. These communities can be considered as social fields (e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) through which dominant orthodoxy is reproduced as the participants use or seek to build different kinds of social capital. Accordingly, certain beliefs, behaviours, internalised practices, and expectations can be advantageous or disadvantageous within a given field (Costa & Murphy, 2015). With this in mind we propose that the idea of methodology itself can act as a disciplining structure within a community of researchers, placing boundaries around researchers’ choices which are considered acceptable with regard to methodology. Each methodological choice is a moment in which as researchers we choose to enact or disrupt the status quo, and in many cases perhaps do both simultaneously across the different communities with which we are associated. For some researchers this may create a push towards engaging with and situating their work within communities whose methodological beliefs align with their own, while for others it may provide a pull towards boundary-blurring approaches which contain elements intended to appeal to multiple communities at the same time. In other words, constructing a methodology is constructing the self within the community.

For all of us who pay attention to it there is a tension between challenging the dominant discourses around methodology and being absorbed into them, and it is important to consider the personal cost of embedding methodologies that are at the boundaries of acceptability to a particular community. Pushing boundaries may have an academic cost, as funding or academic positions may be unavailable as a result of non-conformist methodological choices, and also an emotional cost, as the energy and effort required to justify approaches may be disproportionately high, as the bar for

demonstrating credibility is raised by the community. In this way, researchers with restricted access to both social and cultural capital are jeopardised twice because they also must pay this cost while having fewer resources to begin with (Aguirre, 2020).

Epistemic responsibility and ethical decision making

Researchers are not automatons enacting a process of knowledge production but “human beings who have both minds and hearts. However, their minds and the products of their minds have dominated research discourse...throughout the Western world” (Banks, 1998, p. 4). Consequently the act of conducting research is inevitably political, and the perceived “neutrality” of the researcher a convenient conceit. Exercising this faux-neutrality inevitably supports and upholds existing structures of power and aligned interests (Hubbard, 1989). An ethical researcher therefore must consider methodology in the context of “epistemic responsibility” (Code, 2020): considering the moral implications of claims to knowledge generated by research, and using methodological choices in context of the beliefs of the researcher both as a (social) scientist and as a social being. It is important then that as researchers we are conscious of our values:

Received values—epistemic, social, moral, political, ontological—deeply if silently embedded in, yet constitutive of, the dailiness...of “everyday life” carry a normative force whose (often silent) power demands recognition in thought and action. (Code, 2020, p. xx)

These values demand attention when we are making our methodological choice if we wish to make ethical decisions that don’t require us to compromise our identity or uphold structures of power and oppression through our work, as Code states:

Like all human practices, knowing is situated within and enabled or thwarted by material, political, geographical, situational, cultural, and numerous other factors, many of which evoke matters of responsibility. Feminist, antiracist, multicultural and other “difference sensitive” theories and practices are acutely sensitive to such issues. By this feature alone, in its multiple modalities, they depart from the bland neutrality of Anglo-American orthodoxy. (Code, 2020, p. xix)

As researchers we cannot claim to be ethical while also being agnostic to or ignoring issues of, for example, structural racism or misogyny within society, the academy, and the outcomes of our methodological choices (Jaggar, 1989).

Conclusions?

We contend, therefore, that methodological choice in the ‘real world’ of research – in institutions as microcosms of social injustices replete with minoritisation - is more fully captured by the chess moves model suggested in Figure 2. For example, one might conceptualise the idea of minoritisation by gender as analogous to being cast as the blue bishop – condemned forever to travel as one wishes, provided one does not trespass beyond the half of the board doled out in blue squares (and as long as another piece does not stand in one’s path).

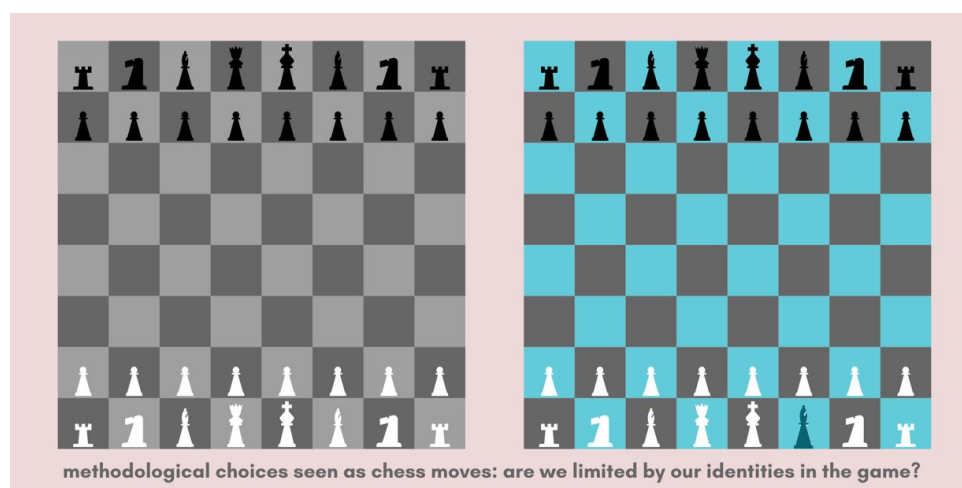


Figure 2: methodological choices seen as chess moves

Thus is the researcher at once “free, and...everywhere in chains” (Rousseau, 1895, p. 3). The researcher’s paradox is that they are at once unfettered as a butterfly to make methodological choices; and yet those choices are pigeonholed by both their identities as seen by others (the pieces they are in the game) and their strategic vision of the game itself (their *political conocimiento* as researchers). Gutierrez (2017) contends that this *political conocimiento* is needed in mathematics teaching because mathematics is seen as neutral, value-free, emotionless, and used as tool for conferring intelligence and importance in society; we argue the same for research. Gutierrez defines *political conocimiento* as the kind of knowledge needed to deconstruct and negotiate the system – “knowledge that allows you to see how politics permeates everything we do” (2017, p. 20). Gutierrez also utilises the model of a game in her writing about identity in mathematics education:

we learn from conceptual tools like counter narratives, subversion, testimonios, and resignification that resistance exists in forms that are not easily unearthed in interviews or classroom observations and, perhaps more important, that exercising agency does not necessarily mean choosing to fail. Students can knowingly play the game without letting the game define them. (Gutierrez, 2013, p. 52)

What might playing the game without letting the game define us mean for researchers? We contend that for a researcher, to choose a methodology is not merely to choose a tool with which to do scientific inquiry, but also to choose a way to perform identity and locate oneself in power, within the boundaries that the community allows. As bell hooks suggests, “there can be no intervention that challenges the status quo if we are not willing to interrogate the way our presentation of self as well as our pedagogical process is often shaped by middle-class norms” (1994, p. 185). hooks calls us to do this work by the simple but crucial process of *coming to voice* – sharing, listening, recognising, confessing and resisting together.

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