The Transformative Prism: Resilience and Social Justice in Mixed Methods

Research

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First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

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The world of research can be seen as trying to understand the reality of social phenomenon as through a prism. The prism refracts the differences of experiences into an ever-changing pattern of different lights, while we seek ways to understand the use of culturally appropriate, multiple methods in understanding the pattern of diverging and converging results of the research. While the world of research is operating at the moment with several competing paradigms: The post-positivist, the constructivist, the transformative, and the pragmatic, the transformative paradigm provides a tool to examine a world view with its accompanying philosophical assumptions that directly engages the complexity researchers encounter in culturally diverse communities when their work is focused on a social justice agenda (Mertens, 2005).

The transformative paradigm provides a useful theoretical umbrella to explore the philosophical assumptions and guide methodological choices for the approaches to evaluation that have been labeled critical theory, feminist, participatory inclusive, human rights based, democratic, empowerment, or responsive. The transformative paradigm extends the thinking of democracy and

responsiveness by consciously including the identification of important dimensions of diversity in evaluation work and their accompanying relation to discrimination and oppression in the world (Mertens, 2005). It prompts the researcher to ask such questions as: What is hidden in the mandate of scientifically-based research and use of "reliable" and "valid" standardized tests when applied to populations that are extremely diverse and not found in large groups that can be ethically or logistically randomly assigned to conditions? What is the researcher's role in uncovering that which has not been stated explicitly within the context of the current research climate and the danger that lurks in applying the conceptualization of scientifically based research without consideration of important dimensions of diversity?

The assumptions associated with the transformative paradigm include: Ontology: There are multiple realities that are socially constructed, however, it is necessary to be explicit about the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and disability values that define realities. Epistemology: In order to know realities, it is necessary to have an interactive link between the researcher and the participants in the study. Knowledge is socially and historically located within a complex cultural context. Methodology: A researcher can choose quantitative or qualitative or mixed methods, however, there would be an interactive link between the researcher and participants in the definition of the problem, methods would be adjusted to accommodate cultural complexity, power issues would be explicitly addressed, and issues of discrimination and oppression would be recognized. The transformative paradigm and its

assumptions are explored in terms of how this paradigmatic shift in the research community is aligned with paradigmatic shifts in the field of international development, disability studies, critical race theory, and positive psychology.

The ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm holds that reality is socially constructed, however it does so with a conscious awareness that certain individuals occupy a position of greater power and that individuals with other characteristics may be associated with a higher likelihood of exclusion from decisions about the definition of the research problem, questions, and other methodological aspects of the inquiry. The epistemological assumption brings up the notion of the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study. In the transformative paradigm, the issues of understanding the culture and building trust are paramount.

Finally, methodologically, the transformative paradigm leads us to re-frame not only the understanding of our world views, but also to understand that subsequent methodological decisions need to be re-framed as well. Sampling needs to be re-framed to reveal the dangers of the myth of homogeneity, to understand which dimensions of diversity are important in a specific context, to avoid additional damage to populations by using labels such as "at risk" that can be demeaning and self-defeating, and to recognize the barriers that exist to being part of a group who can contribute to the research results. The transformative paradigm also leads us to re-frame data collection decisions to be more inclined to use mixed methods, while at the same time being consciously aware of the benefits of involving community members in the data collection decisions, the

appropriateness of methods with a depth of understanding of the cultural issues involved, building trust to obtain valid data, modifications that may be necessary to collect valid data from various groups, and the need to tie the data collected to social action.

The principles of the transformative paradigm and its implications for the social justice agenda are illustrated by three examples. The first example focuses on the underlying philosophical assumptions between the transformative paradigm and parallel paradigm shifts in international development, race-based research, and psychology (Wilson, 2001). In the international development community, there is a growing movement towards understanding the socio-cultural base for indigenous populations. When this is coupled with an additional layer of complexity, i.e., working with people with disabilities in an international context, the paradigm shift is from a medical/deficit model to a socio-cultural participatory model.

People with disabilities in developing countries have historically been denied basic social services by their governments and have had to rely on overseas charitable organizations for an education, job training, and basic health care. Poor governments, straining to meet the needs of its entire population, disregard the needs of its disabled populace and encourage the benevolent contributions made by foreign organizations. Social action research and participatory action research are a means through which people with disabilities can be heard, empowered and moved to action to lobby for inclusion in all aspects of society. The social model of disability challenges the medical

perspective by allowing people with disabilities to take control over their own lives by shifting the focus onto the social, rather than the biological factors, in understanding deafness. I will share data from mixed methods studies done in Deaf communities in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America where deaf people and their advocates participated in research which became catalysts for social changes. I will also share unique considerations that researchers must take into account when conducting research in Deaf communities

Since most foreign agencies have viewed deaf people as dependent and disabled, the agencies have focused on the medical impact of deafness rather than on the social impact and have given donations of hearing aids, audiology equipment, vaccines which prevent deafness, and have supported oralism in the schools they have built rather than honor the existing indigenous sign languages. By looking at deafness as a medical problem, rather considering the social barriers that deaf people face because of the inability to communicate easily within the greater community, deaf people have been prevented from developing a political framework with which they can locate and share their experience of having a unique culture and language.

A second shift in paradigms will be examined through a paradigmatic shift within the field of psychology grounded in positive psychology and resilience theory (Szarkowski, 2002). The emergence of Positive Psychology as a theoretical framework changes the focus in the field of psychology from one of mental illness to one of mental health. To date, psychology as a discipline has

done well at defining "abnormal behavior" and working to improve the lives of individuals who are suffering. Yet, psychology has much to learn about making happy people happier, and studying such constructs as gratitude, wisdom, and finding meaning in life. This presentation follows in the line of the Positive Psychology movement, finding positives within a challenging experience. It describes the ways in which hearing parents of deaf children learn to "make the most" of the situation they have been handed. Many of them come to cherish their child and their experience of raising a deaf child, indicating that it has changed their lives for the better. Their challenges have provided meaning and raised awareness.

This example highlights the use of the transformative paradigm in understanding a situation commonly believed to be "difficult." Hearing parents of deaf children were asked about the *positives* associated with their experiences of raising deaf children. The parents not only defined positive experiences, they also relished the opportunity to think about their children from a new, or often not discussed, paradigm. Parents responded in their journals and their interviews that a focus on the positive, rather than the problem-focused discussions to which they had become accustomed, was beneficial to them.

Finally, a shift in theoretical understanding will be explored in terms of Critical Race Theory in race-based research (McCaskill, 2005). Critical Race Theory provides the basis for an analytical model that focuses on the failure of an education system in the United States to adequately educate the majority of culturally and racially subordinated students. CRT shapes data collection within

a framework of five broad themes: (a) oral narrative, (b) racism, (c) educational inequity, (d) differential treatment, and (e) interest convergence. CRT posits that the experiential knowledge base of people of color is legitimate and provides them with a forum for sharing and voicing their experiences.

The voices of Black Deaf Americans are rarely head in the literature. This example discusses a mixed methods research study that was conducted with Black Deaf and hard of hearing, hearing Black, Deaf and White participants. The CRT framework allowed acknowledgment that their voices are legitimate and provided forum in which their voices can be heard. CRT argues that racism is common throughout society and racism was clearly a salient factor in the way White administrators interpreted and administered official policy for Black deaf and hard of hearing students. School funding is an obvious reflection of educational inequity. Black Deaf residential schools suffered with inadequate funding to provide a quality education to the students. The most serious and threatening form of racism was evidenced in the differential treatment in Deaf schools. Finally, the interest convergence principle maintains that the White administrators promoted racial advances for Black Deaf only when they also promoted White self-interest.

The transformative paradigm provides a philosophical framework as well as methodological guidance for researchers who work in culturally complex communities in the interest of challenging the status quo and furthering social justice. The three examples provide insights into methodological issues,

theoretical frameworks, and philosophical assumptions that are an integral part of

viewing research as a tool to further the social justice agenda.

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