Chapter 1
Methodological Pluralism and Graduate Student Research in Education

Brent Davis
University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter surveys the range of research attitudes and methodological positions that are represented in contemporary educational research. Oriented by integral methodological pluralism, the discussion includes an analysis of the diverse ways that research foci are conceived, the sorts of conceptual and methodological distinctions that are necessary to deal with different research attitudes, associations to broader categories of scientific study, types of intention manifest in educational research, and varied criteria for claims to truth. The chapter concludes with considerations of the nature and place of methodological pluralism in graduate-level research, specifically, and educational research, more generally.

INTEGRAL THEORIES

Some years ago, a story entitled "Study links obesity to a virus" appeared on the front page of my morning newspaper (Vancouver Sun, 2007, pp. A1 & A6). The article was brief but compelling – partly because it was written with the usual assurance of scientific reporting, and partly because it offered hope for a growing problem in the provocative suggestion of "an obesity vaccine."

Coincidentally, several pages later, there was another piece that presented a different window into roots of obesity. Entitled "Are your friends making you fat?" (Vancouver Sun, 2007, p. E1), this report's answer was that, yes, it seems that they are. Based on social network analyses, the article offered insight into how tacit norms are established and implicit permissions are enacted among friends.

Of course, like any critical reader, I recognized each story to be partial – and my skepticism was no doubt amplified by a culture of caution in the modern academy. We have been trained to watch out for claims of simple causes and singular solutions to complex problems. I thus reacted with a barrage of "What about?" questions. What about increasingly sedentary lifestyles? Accelerating consumption of processed foods laced with high fructose corn syrup? Growing stress and other pressures on emotional health? Permissive and indulgent parenting? Simple overeating?

At the same time, I felt destabilized. The pair of articles opened a space of tension for me as I thought about my long-time habit of assuming obesity was almost entirely a psychological issue. Had I been ignorant and cruel in the assumption that responsibility for one's body-mass index rests mainly with the individual? Had a succumbed to the manipulations of a weight-loss industry that had been using pop psychology and cultural mythology to prey on unwitting victims? How much unnecessary emotional distress and unjustified social stigma had been borne by persons carrying extra weight?

The issue of obesity isn't an outlier around such matters, of course. Clearly, it's a phenomenon that is subject to conflicted and potentially damaging reads. But, as a teacher and an educational researcher, I have encountered similar diversities of interpretation – and similar damaging consequences – around perspectives on intelligence, attentiveness, behavior, and personality. In particular, I have vivid memories of a heated staffroom discussion around how I, as a new teacher, should make sense one student's acts of aggressive disinterest in my math class. Opinions ranged from "He's just a bad kid" to "You just need to make the questions more relevant," when the "real" issue unfolded to be a complex mix of physiological and interpersonal matters that had relatively little to do with my classroom.

It might seem that the lesson of such experiences is that we should all embrace complexity. I for one, however, have never been particularly good at doing that. Neither, for that matter, has modern schooling – which, for as long as I've been part of it, has been oscillating between a traditional impulse for standardization and a progressive insistence on personalization. To complicate matters, the past few decades have seen a new tension arise between nurturing the individual psyche and attending to collective ethos.

This context of competing foci has contributed greatly to my interest in efforts to integrate diverse habits of interpretation and disparate claims to truth – that is, to shift the terms of engagement away from the simplistic binary of "fact vs. fiction" and toward such matters as means of deriving truth, modes of representation, intentions of utilizing truths, and strategies to avoid false claims.

Ken Wilber's (1995, 1996, 2000) integral theory is by far the most popular of the genre, and it forms the basis of this discussion. His main strategies for drawing together perspectives and conclusions is to create a matrix by crossing axes that span the continua of "interior–exterior" and "individual–collective." These axes are not offered as actual fault lines of the universe, but rather as perceptual tools that are useful for highlighting how different habits of seeing and different strategies for looking give rise to different sorts of observation. The resulting four-quadrant matrix, along with a sampling of phenomena associated with those quadrants, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The four quadrants of Ken Wilber's Integral Theory
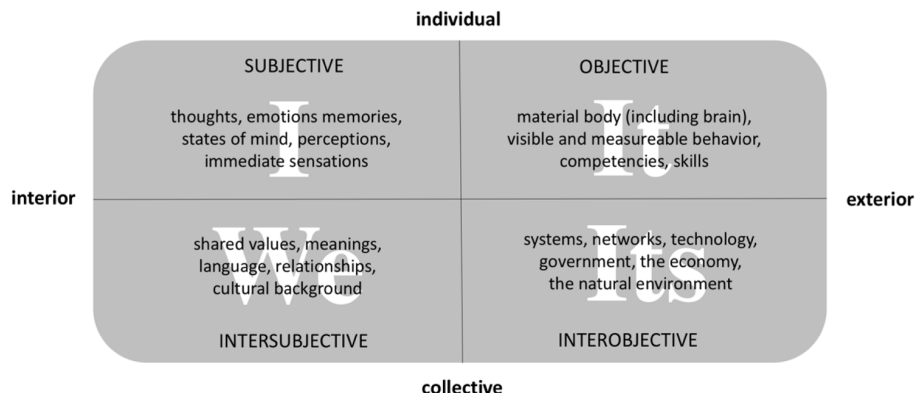
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