

WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES FOR PhD CANDIDATES

A: Scenarios for Exploring Epistemology¹

Research is usually understood in terms of creating 'findings,' knowledge claims. As a result of the research something is known. This paper presents a series of scenarios that can be used by supervisors, with a group of research students (novice researchers), to help them think about their understanding of 'knowing' something.

It is suggested the novice researchers be given the short scenarios below one at a time and be asked to note their own response before any discussion takes place. Later each researcher might reveal his or her own response to the others, as a way to generate discussion.

Scenario 1a: Inheriting a Small Business²

Imagine you receive a solicitor's letter one day which explains you are the beneficiary of a will. You have been left a small business which the benefactor owned and managed until their death. Due to legal complications over silent partnerships you are not able (or do not want to) sell this business. Rather the issue becomes one of needing to select someone to take over the management. It is a small family business requiring much specialised technical expertise, so it is suggested you cannot manage the business yourself but rather may be wise to select someone from the existing staff. It is very important to you to select the right person so as to ensure the business provides you, as owner, with a favourable profit stream in the years to come. How would you go about collecting information to ensure you select the right person?

Why is the method you suggest the most preferable way to collect valid knowledge about the staff? Try to personalise this, it is your business, your future income stream, totally your decision how best to go about this. In the end you need to feel convinced you have made the right decision. You do not have to be accountable to anyone for your decision.

Hints for Novice Researchers: You may want to design psychological tests, and/or interview everyone. You may want to immerse yourself in the business for a while so as to get to know the staff, openly or secretly. You may want to start by drafting a set of criteria against which you can question the staff against later, or you may want to just turn up with no preconceived ideas and see what emerges. Another alternative would be to ask an experienced human resources manager to select for you.

¹ **Epistemology:** (noun) ...the study of how we know things [Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary]

² Some readers may wish to replace the business with something like a community school or hospital in a developing country.

Hints For Supervisor: While the scenario asks for inquiry or research methods the discussion can be developed to reveal personal preferences for what the novice researchers' see as valid knowledge. The method they use should generate what they see as valid or reliable knowledge. This scenario hints at the assumption that epistem(ology) is a personal choice. Some supervisors may wish to put more emphasis on the problem domain dictating the appropriate epistemology.

Those who want to use psychological testing or even some data from quantitative performance measures, to get at *the* truth, are showing a preference for a scientific definition of knowledge: objective, measured, repeatable: a positive epistemology.

Those who wish to interview the staff are showing a preference for qualitative knowledge. If they feel language exchange will reveal the truth and there are no issues of hidden meaning likely to be a problem, then perhaps they have a positive qualitative epistemology. If the researchers comment that they accept that the interviews can only result in them having one interpretation of the staff, then perhaps this is an interpretive qualitative epistemology.

Those who want to think carefully upfront about what they are looking for in staff before they meet them may be contrasted with those who think they can meet staff with no prior prejudice and see what emerges. The 'upfront' researchers might be classified as interpretive or theory driven data seekers. The 'emergents' may be thought to have an objectivist epistemology associated with some forms of grounded theory. Those who want to do both and reflect on what happens may be seen as having a pragmatic or action learning epistemology.

The desire to be immersed in the research situation may demonstrate a preference for case study research. If this immersion is to reveal a universally agreed one truth about who should become the manager, then perhaps they are suited to positivist case studies. If the emergence is to provide the researchers with only their interpretation of who should be promoted then it is interpretive.

The discussion may include concerns that the staff should elect their own manager, or that it is unethical to inherit the business anyway. This sort of discussion reveals a critical epistemology, which may use case studies, interviews and maybe even psychological testing. Those who feel a manager will emerge anyway may be revealing a structural or evolutionary epistemology.

There may be an opportunity to distinguish those who believe in private knowledge (post modern) and those who believe knowledge has to be validated either by technique or by knowledgeable community. So those who feel that if they will *know* who is the right person without justifying to others are to be distinguished from those who feel it is appropriate that whoever they feel is preferable needs to be justified to the staff or some other group.

An interpretive, ethical or post-modern episteme may also be revealed by discussion about the selection process needing to include the viewpoints of those involved; giving a voice to all.

And so on....

Scenario 1b: Foreign Aid Benefits

You will be aware of those advertisements which ask you to sponsor a child in the third world, where you are asked to send a specific amount of money to a specific child, so as to assist with his or her schooling or living costs. This sort of aid request raises questions of whether the child will or should get all the money you send. Is it wise to unequally aid one child over other members of a disadvantaged community? Are you setting up the child for exploitation, or even putting his or her life at risk? Should aid go into infrastructure like schools and roads rather than to individuals where your 'easy-cum' money may actually de-motivate the child from working hard to improve everyone's situation?

Imagine you have been employed by a Parliamentary Commission to conduct an inquiry into these particular aid agency programs and advertisements. Your report will be used to draft aid legislation. In particular, you have been asked whether the money sent is well used and how it impacts on those children who are not sponsored.

You have to write a public report, so the aid agencies will be read it and be encouraged to respond. Therefore, your evidence will need to be convincing to you, the Parliamentary committee and not expose anyone to a hostile criticism. This criticism may be of both on how you conducted the inquiry and on the validity of the knowledge you collected. How would you go about collecting valid knowledge about the aid program? What is valid knowledge?

Hints for Novice Researchers: You may want to collect national statistics in order to compare countries that gain income from this sort of program. Alternatively you may want to track the recipients over their life time. Alternatives include visiting the families for short or extended periods of time and/or interviewing a range of people with some experience of these programs. You may want to broaden your study to consider more than just economic issues.

Hints for Supervisors: Much of what was said about the 'Inheriting a Business' scenario above applies to this 'Aid' scenario. However this scenario provides more opportunity to discuss the role of community debate in epistemology and the ethical dimensions of positivist, interpretivist, critical and pragmatic epistemologies. Who is included in universal or knowledgeable audiences and how do they see valid knowledge. There may be epistemological issues about how human life ought to be, rather than how it actually is. Who is to decide how the money ought to be spent, whose knowledge is to be collected, and who decides how children should be treated?

It is assumed that concerns over the report being open to criticism will tend to encourage a conservative definition of knowledge, i.e. positivism; repeatable measurements. Given the reliability inherent in this scenario, such as the quality of some nation's statistics and the pressure on participants not to be able to tell the complete truth, this limitation may considerably distort the findings. It is hoped the researchers will feel under pressure to seek broader, more inclusive knowledge, rather than that as narrowly defined by positivism....

Scenario 2: Village Life³

In a place far away there was a culture of wives not going to work. John and Mary lived in a house in the forest. Every day but Sunday John went to work as a lumberjack while Mary kept house. However, Mary would often get a little bored and go off to visit her lover Bill. He lived across the river. To get there Mary had to pay her confidant the ferryman Peter to ferry her over the river. This continued for a number of years until one day when government soldiers turned up and built a bridge over the river. Peter's ferry business was ruined. Mary opted to use the bridge rather than the ferry.

A couple of months later, Mary was returning home from spending some quality time with Bill when she noticed a very insane woman, standing in the middle of the bridge. She was clearly out of her mind, brandishing a shotgun shouting and shouting that she would kill anyone who even tried to cross the bridge. Mary went to ask the ferryman Peter to help her. He laughed at her and said that as she had abandoned him in his time of need, he would do the same for her now. Mary went back to her lover Bill and asked him to try and remove the mad woman off the bridge. Bill was scared. He used the opportunity to explain to Mary that he had met another woman anyway, someone he loved dearly so wanted to end the relationship. Mary was now becoming very anxious because her husband, John, would soon be back from work and would ask awkward questions when he saw she was on the other side of the river. She returned to the bridge and in desperation decided to test the mad woman's threats by running over the bridge anyway. The mad woman shot Mary dead.

Without discussing this scenario with anyone, write down who you think is responsible for Mary's death? Why so?

Hints for Novice Researchers:

Possible responsible persons include the husband, the lover, the ferryman, Mary, the bridge builders, the culture, the health system or some one/thing else. The mad woman is not responsible for her actions. Note how this story is presented as a series of events, there is little evaluation or judgement of people's actions. Also note how quickly you felt able to identify who was primarily responsible.

Hints for Supervisors:

This scenario provides encourages the novice researchers to claim they know something, who is responsible. The scenario provides the opportunity to discuss at least two epistemological issues. 1) Can knowledge about something separate the thing under consideration from the conceptual frame (implicit theory, perspective, lens) used to understand that thing. Is observation always theory laden? The events in the scenario are the 'thing' under study, the novice researchers' response an opportunity to appreciate their implicit perspective (theory, conceptual frame) for such situations. For example, if viewed from a) Islamic and/or traditional moral perspective then perhaps Mary got what she deserved; b) a feminist perspective may suggest Mary was a victim of her husband's

³ My thanks to Chris Stewart for providing this scenario.

power; or c) a pragmatic perspective may suggest the ferryman as a small action by him could have easily avoided the death. And so on....

2) The scenario can also provide an opportunity to discuss researcher's bias. In some epistemologies bias is central to understanding, in others it is the devil to be exorcised from all thinking. If the researchers formed a quick opinion of who was primarily responsible for Mary's death then this questions whether humans are not able to hold knowledge in a neutral un-bias state in their minds. Is it possible to be objective. (I would suggest people confuse objectivity with repeatability, bias provides insight and motivation). Bias may be a personal perspective now implicitly applied to what is seen, that has been generated from a lifetime of personal experiences. Or it may be explicit, as in using feminist perspective. This brings into question impartial, independent, detached observation.

Mike Metcalfe, Oct 2004

B: CRITIQUING AN ARTICLE

Get the novice researchers to read an article, preferably one that is from a scholarly journal and includes a research attempt. Then ask them to complete the table below.

ARTICLE TITLE:

AUTHOR'S NAME(S):

NUMBER OF CITATIONS (e.g., use Google Scholar):

AUTHORS BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE (from web search):

Argument? What was the argument (conclusion, knowledge claim) of the article? Was it empirically falsifiable and sufficiently novel? What was it arguing against?
Object Under Study? What was the object, thing or phenomenon under study? The object of the argument? Was it well scoped, defined, and contrasted?
Viewpoint? From what perspective (viewpoint) was the object studied? What was the lens, theory, intellectual frame, concern, or worldview used on the object under study? Was the perspective well scoped, defined, and contrasted?
Definitions and language? Were all key words defined with consideration of alternative interpretations?
Motivation? Was the importance of the topic to academics, practitioners and the researchers themselves, fully explained? What was the problem in need of research?

Supporting Evidence? What evidence was brought to support the argument (conclusion, knowledge claim), was it convincing, novel, insightful? Would it have stood up in court? Was the counter evidence fully considered? Was all available empirical evidence sought? Were all those mentioned in the research given a voice?
Implications, so-what? What were the recommendations, how should people act differently as a result of reading this article? Has the article improved peoples' choices, how so?
Other comments?

Mike Metcalfe, Dec. 2004

C: LINKING THE LITERATURE AND THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Many researchers would agree that the questions or issues used in the empirics part of any research needs to be well connected with the literature review. For example, the literature review may explain what questions were used in a survey or some interviews, and why. Observations may be focused by issues raised in the literature. When using a methodology where theoretical constructs are believed to emerge from coding conversations, then these constructs (issues) need to be further developed through the existing literature. This workshop is designed to assist novice researchers in connecting the literature review with the empirics.

Get the novice researchers to read only the Abstract, Introduction and Literature review part of a good quality, fairly large, research article. From this, ask them to:

- 1) Agree on the argument of the article, what is it trying to achieve?
- 2) Identify five to seven issues raised by the literature review as key words. In an article about the design of reflective journals, these may be something like:

- Audience (who reads the journal)
- Timing (when is the journal read)
- Types of Reflection (interpersonal, critical...)
- Recording Medium (written or audio)

- 3) Using these issues, suggest possible interview or survey questions. These might use the positive and negative forms of the 6 interrogative pronouns and adverbs, why (why not), when, where, who, what and how. So in the journal example, you may interview people who keep journals and ask them questions like:

Audience:

Who reads the journal, why don't you let X read your journal? ...

Timing:

How often do you write in the journal, why not more often? ...

Types of Reflection:

What types of reflection are you not interested in, who do you reflect on? ...

Recording Medium:

Why don't you use a video recorder, what are the differences between typing a computer blog and a hand-written journal? ...

- 4) Now, ask them to read the Method, Findings and Discussion parts of the article noting what questions were actually used or issues inquired about.

Is there a mismatch between the literature review and the empirical research design?

Mike Metcalfe, Dec. 2004