

A Short Reflection on Values and Educational Research

Patrick J. Camilleri, M.Ed. Science (Sheffield)
Department of Physics, University of Malta Junior College Malta
e-mail: patrick.camilleri@um.edu.mt

Abstract: *Value free research is a highly controversial and subjective proposition. Aspects including epistemological, ontological, and political issues make it very difficult to achieve neutral based research. Issues that cause educational research to be rated as inferior and second best include the fact that besides being criticized as being non cumulative, it is unrealistic and distant from practice. Educational researchers are also shackled by the dogma of unattainable ideality of neutrality and non-partisanship. In the attempt to imitate and fit in the deterministic and empirical ways of the natural sciences they disregard the uniqueness of their research.*

Keywords: *Educational research, epistemology, ethics, ontology, scientific research, values, value-free research, theory and research.*

Introduction

In the process of getting in line with his surroundings man adopted three important strategies including 'experience, reasoning, and research'.¹ Experience and reasoning may fall outside the issues in the arguments to be mentioned, but they are not to be alienated from research and must be seen as having features that actually overlap and complement the research process in the search for the truth, whatever it may be.

I will not be quoting any definition for research as there is no universally accepted meaning for the term. It is probably 'easier to recognize than define'.² It varies from a simple exercise to a highly complex one. It may take place in a laboratory, in a library, or with people.³ Research may play an important contribution to humanity or it may extend our knowledge. One probable option for its definition lies in the fact that it is a systematic form of study⁴ and it is validated both by reason and experience.⁵ It arises as a result of situations and queries that go beyond the mundane encounters of experiential learning and triggers queries and interests that cannot be easily

¹ Cohen and Manion, 1998, p. 1.

² Wellington, 2000, p. 4.

³ Verma *et al.*, 1981, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid*, 1981, p. 1.

⁵ Nachimas *et al.*, 1996, p. 26.

quenched by the immediate circle of people that surround us.⁶ The deliberate addition of 'educational' by Wellington⁷ further emphasizes this fact as (if in its widest sense) learning is achieved through research and that the acquisition of knowledge would enhance experience in future methodologies while on the other hand through reasoning it would provide new insights in the aspects being considered.

Besides being systematic, research may also be empirical and probably more inductive than deductive as deduction is in itself quite powerless in the method of scientific discovery.⁸ In the process of critically investigating a hypothetical proposition it is therefore committed in the establishment of reliable and valid knowledge.⁹ It is also self correcting as it contains specifically built-in mechanisms that check against human errors and makes results available for scrutiny to the public at large.¹⁰

Paradigms, Values, and Methodological Inclinations

'All research is influenced by the ideology of the researcher: sometimes the researcher is also a major actor [. . .]. It is good practice to provide a clear statement of methodological stance in terms of the values and beliefs of the researcher.'¹¹

In Malta we have a saying that from an early hour outlook, one can forecast the general outcome of the whole day. There are directions that a research can take depending on various values and beliefs that the researcher would have. The fact that a method or a composition of methodologies from 'partisan approaches' are considered, then even from its onset, research attributed as neutral would not be value free.¹² At some point research has to rely on interpretation and broadly speaking there is a polarization in the paradigms underlying the research methodologies.¹³ Research is used to acquire and gain knowledge which may have various outcomes in a set of objectives and goals. Objectives and goals may vary in their implementation, and, directions taken wholly depend on the researcher who is either hired to implement a specific research project or else is following professional and/or personal interests. Even though educational researchers can claim to study education without some particular commitment, one cannot say that values do not permeate in their work.¹⁴

⁶ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 1.

⁷ Wellington, 2000, p. IX.

⁸ Medawar, 1963, p. 229.

⁹ Bulmer, 1984, p. 5.

¹⁰ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 4.

¹¹ British Educational Research Association, 2000, p. 5.

¹² Greenbank, 2003, p. 791.

¹³ Sikes, 2000, pp. 1, 2.

¹⁴ Carr, 2000, p. 440.

As Carr strongly puts it:

James Tooley claims to have uncovered 'partisanship' in 'the focus, content and argument of educational research.' . . . Tooley's study is simply one more manifestation of the failure of many educational researchers to take account of the extensive theoretical and methodological developments that have occurred over the last four decades in the political and social sciences.¹⁵

The way that a research study is approached would not be value-free.¹⁶ Virtually all aspects in education are value laden and debatable. Therefore, no matter how well research is set, it can neither be conclusive nor value-free.¹⁷

This is even more pronounced when research is being funded by agencies that have interests others than those of the researcher. Pring (2000) expresses unease in the centralization of state funded research in the UK.

[. . .] research is often tendentious and politically motivated – and exclusive of those who do not share the ideological underpinnings of the research programme.¹⁸

Consequently the confinement (by the government and the department of education) in the process of monitoring the production of existing knowledge has relegated educational research to an inferior position.¹⁹

The preferential choice of one method to specifically reveal a trait in favour of another is already subjective and therefore value laden even before the actual onset of the exercise, meaning that the adoption of a research method would be inevitably influenced by the underlying epistemological and ontological perspectives.²⁰ Still it may be argued that a dichotomy may be a false one, and people may mix different ideas in the formulation of a research methodology.²¹ In actuality researchers may adopt a mixture of methods defined by various paradigms.²²

Research may be classified according to different attributes. It has been defined (probably unrealistically) in terms of its 'academic discipline',²³ or 'competency values'²⁴ including theoretical contrasts like 'positivist', 'rational', and 'empirical' versus 'antipositivist' and 'interpretive',²⁵ or according to methodological approaches

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2000, p. 437.

¹⁶ Wellington, 2000, p. 15.

¹⁷ Boyd, 2000, p. 350.

¹⁸ Pring, 2000, p. 2.

¹⁹ Ainley, 2000, p. 310.

²⁰ Greenbank, 2002, p. 792.

²¹ Sikes, 2000, p. 2.

²² Wellington, 2000, p. 15.

²³ Verma, *et al.*, 1981, p. 18.

²⁴ Rokeach, 1973.

²⁵ Cohen *et al.*, 1998.

that tend to be influenced by underlying paradigms and including qualitative/quantitative, and case-study/survey.²⁶ Other broad categorizations and/or terminologies include combinations like pure or basic research, applied or field research, action research, and evaluation research.²⁷

In the social sciences the concept of values in research is assumed to be crucial in the understanding of human behaviour. In the process, survey researchers have generally measured and preferred one research mode with respect to another according to 'rankings'.²⁸ Rankings have their own drawbacks as they are intrinsically difficult and lengthy, burdening the participants with a substantial cognitive load but more accurate than the shorter less demanding alternative techniques involving ratings that may also give rise to biased responses.²⁹

The ranking or categorization model developed by Rokeach (1973) offers 'a clear conceptualization of the multidimensional nature of values'.³⁰ Rokeach's ranking methods have been the major way by which research ratings and ranking have been compared.³¹ Rokeach (1968) ranks values according to the preferred modes of conduct that include and involve the moral and the effective ways by which research may be implemented.

The instrumental values (modes of behaviour) include the 'morality' and the sense of righteousness or guilt behind the research while the 'competency' values deal with what the researcher deems to be the most effective way of doing the research.

On the other hand terminal values (end-of-state) are more sociologically and politically dependent as they relate to the 'personal' values of the researcher and what is intrinsically expected to be achieved and the social values including educational and political beliefs.³²

Competency Values and Critique

When does theory come in: a priori or a posteriori?³³

If the onset of a research is to be considered as a point of reference in its classification or in its demarcation then, at one extreme there is the 'theory-then-research strategy'.³⁴ Social scientists that use such strategies, in the epistemological sense, qualify as rationalists and empiricists as they are concerned with the objective building of theory from hard facts generally favouring naturalist or scientific methods

²⁶ Wellington, 2000, p. 15.

²⁷ Verma *et al.*, 1981, p. 18.

²⁸ Alwin *et al.*, 1985, p. 535.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1985, pp. 536, 537.

³⁰ Greenbank, 2002, p. 792.

³¹ Alwin *et al.*, 1985, p. 537.

³² Rokeach, 1973, in Greenbank, 2002, p. 791.

³³ Wellington, 2000, p. 28.

³⁴ Nachimas *et al.*, 1996, p. 46.

utilizing large scale surveys and quantitative approaches. From the ontological perspective they may be defined as positivists or normatives essentially representing one of the now numerous ‘bygone intellectual movements’.³⁵ Such a scheme embodies the normative researchers who strive to validate general theories in human behaviour accomplishing progressively more intricate methodologies of research.³⁶ Karl Popper (1902–94), stated that the growth of knowledge proceeds from problems and our attempts to solve them.³⁷ Scientific knowledge advances much more rapidly when attempts on developed ideas are empirically tried to be proven wrong.³⁸ On the other hand scientific reasoning is an exploratory dialogue that alternates between imaginative and critical in the process of forming an opinion, take a view and/or explain a specific phenomenon.³⁹ In the process, theories which must go beyond existing knowledge must be created and therefore require a leap of the imagination.⁴⁰ Accordingly there should be a kind of dialogue between the possible and the actual in a hypothetico-deductive scheme.⁴¹ Thus theory is fed in the beginning to come out confirmed or falsified in the end.⁴²

Such kind of research has been criticized as being divorced from reality. A major criticism of this kind of research is that in the process of being ‘empirical, precise, reliable, and generalizable’ (probably to be easily adopted and employed by others) researchers may only produce findings that are directly justified through their meticulously gathered data.⁴³ The larger the effort that researchers make to simplify controlling variables the higher would be the tendency of creating ‘a constructed play of puppets in a restricted environment’ ending with ‘pruned, synthetic version of the whole’.⁴⁴ The scientific method is thus a reductionist mode of carrying out and analysing research, in the process eliminating notions of freedom, choice and individuality.⁴⁵

In sharp contrast there is the ‘research-then-theory’ strategy as proposed by Robert K Merton.⁴⁶ As Halliday (2002) discusses in the process of grasping the meaning of research: ‘[. . .] the interpreter must participate in a shared way of life within which the event has a significance.’⁴⁷

³⁵ Kincaid, 1996, p. 18.

³⁶ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 37.

³⁷ Thorton, 2002.

³⁸ Nachimas *et al.*, 1996, p. 46.

³⁹ Medawar, 1969, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Thorton, 2002.

⁴¹ Medawar, 1969, p. 48.

⁴² Bulmer, 1984, p. 21.

⁴³ Carr, 2000, p. 440.

⁴⁴ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 1998, p. 22.

⁴⁶ Nachimas *et al.*, 1996, p. 46.

⁴⁷ Halliday, 2002, p. 51.

Methodologically it focuses more on individuality with the personal involvement of the researcher and includes non-statistical and qualitative forms of research.⁴⁸ This kind of methodology (qualitative methodology) has emerged as being the most commonly employed in educational and sociological issues.⁴⁹ Categorically it includes the interpretative researchers or anti-positivists who believe that good theories are not built upon speculations but around evidence and facts⁵⁰ in actuality working directly with experience, which, 'glossed with meaning and purposes'⁵¹ helps to devise a theory around data collected. Those that follow the interpretivist doctrine believe that subjectivity may lead to multiple realities and accept the influence of their values⁵² not only during the research procedure but also in its outcome. It is an applied kind of research or action research where control is not only sacrificed in order to conduct an enquiry in a setting which is similar to the findings but which is concerned more with the immediate application rather than the building of a theory.⁵³ In the process (unhampered by stringent and often artificial theoretical boundaries) a set of meanings as diverse as the people and situations involved is obtained. For instance in the application of interviewing techniques qualitative researchers may recognise non-verbal signals as messages which would have been practically ignored in quantitative research.⁵⁴

Lately, qualitative approaches have not only been criticized and referred to as indeterminant and incomplete,⁵⁵ but deemed as weak and unsystematic.⁵⁶ Hargreaves (1996) argues that unlike other scientific research, educational research is non-cumulative with an existing gap between the researchers and the practitioners making research irrelevant to classroom practice.⁵⁷ Mouley (1978) makes reference to the 'ivory-tower isolationism'.⁵⁸ He identifies multiple reasons for this gap in terms of inconclusive research results, the lack of appreciation of the research by the practitioners, in its role of lack of relevancy and ultimately the finality and unquestionable way that research findings are accommodated and implemented.⁵⁹ This may be incorrect and even misleading especially when noting that various educational research papers carry extensive references to other related work from other researchers.

⁴⁸ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 39.

⁴⁹ Shah, 2003, p. 550.

⁵⁰ Verma *et al.*, 1981, p. 10.

⁵¹ Cohen *et al.*, 1998, p. 37.

⁵² Greenbank, 2002, p. 793.

⁵³ Verma *et al.*, 1981, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Shah, 2003, p. 562.

⁵⁵ Greenbank, 2003, p. 794.

⁵⁶ Boyd, 2000, p. 347.

⁵⁷ Tooley *et al.*, 1998, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Mouley, 1978, p. 310.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1978, pp. 308, 309.

The death-blow for qualitative research is succinctly expressed by Boyd (2000) as:

[. . .] grants may only go to reading programmes that use 'scientific based research' which was defined as the kinds of 'quantitative studies' (with attributes that include) randomised experiments that use comparison and control groups to gauge the effects of the treatment being studied.⁶⁰

Therefore research that would not fall in these set categories would not even qualify for funding.

Conclusion: Ethics, Conflicts and Measurement of Interests

The main criticism for the positivist approach in educational research is that the objectivity of neutrality cannot be sustained.⁶¹ A weakness in the research policy is that too many educational experts are hindered and influenced by ideology more than by the science. Consequently education is not a mature profession.⁶² On parallel grounds,⁶³ one seeks to understand why it has become such a popular dogmatic aspect amongst social scientists to believe in a value-free doctrine. Berlyne (1966) rather sweepingly states that: 'The best way to get research done is to pick capable researchers and give them their freedom to proceed.'⁶⁴

The question then would be who and on what grounds would capable researchers be identified to carry out research. Contrastingly as if in a counter argument, Rokeach defined public opinion research as 'a race-horse philosophy' designed more to entertain than to inform.⁶⁵ Data is not collected but produced and the issue for researchers is not simply on what but how social theory is produced.⁶⁶ There is no such thing as an unprejudiced observation, but it would always be more or less biased.⁶⁷

There are various ethical aspects that could be considered in conducting and reporting research including research design, sampling, data collection, processing, analysis and finally, data presentation and interpretation. There are instances where research has led to controversies. Notable ones include the study on, and quantification of, intelligence carried out by the eminent educational psychologist Sir Cyril Burt, whom after his death there were claims in the faking of at least some of the data, but

⁶⁰ Boyd, 2000, p. 347.

⁶¹ Greenbank, 2002, p. 793

⁶² Carnine, 2002, in Boyd, 2000, p. 348.

⁶³ Gouldner, 1962, in Carr, 2000, p. 438.

⁶⁴ Berlyne, 1966, in Nisbet, 2000, p. 419.

⁶⁵ Rokeach, 1968–69, p. 547.

⁶⁶ May, 2001, p. 29.

⁶⁷ Medawar, 1963, p. 2.

rebutted by others.⁶⁸ Another example includes the study on differences in achievements as in relation to gender and research involving teaching methods and student progress vis-à-vis traditional and progressive modes of teaching.⁶⁹ A strikingly high controversial issue over which there is also a long raging war in the implementation and interpretation of ‘human nature’, ‘value-free science’, and ‘value-involved humanities’ involves an ethnographic/anthropological programme carried in 1964 by a leading anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon.⁷⁰ Chagnon is allegedly accused with population control exercises and journalistic sensationalism over the Yanomami natives of the Amazon forest bordering Brazil and Venezuela. Allegedly the natives, described by Chagnon, as the most aggressive, fierce and erotic people⁷¹ were virtually wiped out causing anthropologists to deeply reflect upon the ways in which research should be conducted.⁷² However Chagnon’s work remains one of the most cited and most fiercely criticized scientific research.⁷³ On the other hand Tierney’s book, *Darkness in el Dorado* (2002) is criticized as containing numerous unfounded shocking assertions about the conduct of anthropology⁷⁴ including misleading claims on the leading geneticist accused as a eugenicist and of initiating a measles epidemic amongst the locals.⁷⁵

Regarding ethical behaviour in research, BERA (British Educational Research Association, 1992) mentions thirty four points in five sections, but in its opening statement of ethical guidelines the Association states that: ‘[. . .] all ethical research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for person, [. . .] knowledge [. . .] democratic values [. . .] and [. . .] quality of educational research’.⁷⁶

The ASA (American Statistical Association, 1999) mentions eight general topic areas with respect to quantitative methods but notably that: ‘Application of these or any other ethical guidelines generally requires good judgment [. . .],’⁷⁷ and in the case of practitioners, to conduct their research activities with responsibility towards: ‘The social values of their work and the consequences of how well or poorly it is performed. This includes respect for the life, liberty, dignity, and property of other people.’⁷⁸

⁶⁸ Jones, 2000, p. 155.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2000, p. 156.

⁷⁰ The American Anthropological Association, 2002, p. 10.

⁷¹ Tierney, in Shermer, 2001, p. 25.

⁷² American Anthropological Association, 2001.

⁷³ Tierney, 2002.

⁷⁴ Chagnon, 2001.

⁷⁵ The American Society of Human Genetics, 2001.

⁷⁶ British Educational Research Association, 1992.

⁷⁷ American Statistical Association, 1999.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 1999.

The subject of values in research is vastly complicated and open ended, especially where it comes to classifying what is and what is not ethical. Probably it is wrong to expect with a certain degree of determinism to classify and quantify research especially if it is qualitative in nature. There is no doubt that in retrospect it is easy both to condemn and criticize research. In recent years there has been an increase in concern and emphasis on ethical issues. This may be observed in standard educational research textbooks including Cohen and Manion's, fourth edition *Research Methods in Education* (1998) which comprises a final chapter on ethics in educational research. To close my arguments I will refer to the analysis carried out by Keith Jones (2000). He noted that even in the then recent editions, none of the popular text books about research 'that contain a reference to statistics in their title' refer to ethical issues in their contents or even in their index.⁷⁹ This leaves a lot to ponder upon.

Kincaid (1996) states that:

The Idea that social science can be a real science is attacked [. . .] both from the right and the left by those who want to defend traditional scientific standards and by those who see them as irrelevant or even pernicious.⁸⁰

Maybe even though education is as old as civilization, educational research still has to define itself and its validity through its own qualities and not through mimicking or by trying to fit in the image of scientific determinism.

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⁷⁹ Jones, 2000, p. 148, in Simons *et al.*, eds.

⁸⁰ Kincaid, 1996, p. 8.

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