

## **Challenging convention: methodological explorations in contemporary qualitative inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

Based on a recent inaugural lecture, this article presents a critical appreciation and analysis of the application of different research methodologies to selected social and educational research contexts. The analysis is set against the backdrop of an ontological question concerning the possibility of truth. Specifically, it seeks to explore the untenability of any notion of absolute truth in contemporary qualitative inquiry, and examine the corollary implications for determining the nature, role and status of research. It is argued that the ability to challenge convention offers both the possibility and productive capacity to unsettle dominant research methodologies, while also critiquing normative social and professional research practices. Utilising three contrasting methodological frameworks: Gadamerian hermeneutics; Foucauldian theory; and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory; the narrative follows a journey of personal development and shows how seemingly different and diverse

theoretical perspectives can reveal critical new insights on contemporary social research issues and practices, cultures and communities.

## **Introduction**

This article draws substantially on a recent inaugural lecture, entitled: 'Challenging convention(s): Methodological explorations in contemporary qualitative inquiry', given in May 2014 at the University of Chester. In many ways the theme and articulated substance represent a very personal journey: a voyage of discovery, of challenge, curiosity and sustained intellectual development charted over time. It also reflects a keen emphasis on research methodology, the underpinning philosophies which show a variety of approaches adopted throughout my career, dating back to the time of my doctoral experience in the late-1990s.

One of the most difficult challenges in writing my inaugural lecture was deciding how best to capture the methodological diversity of my work. How to incorporate the spirit of a critically reflexive orientation in the content of the talk was thus a prime consideration. In practice, this involved thinking critically and creatively about which aspects to privilege and select in, but also, crucially, what to leave out of a growing body of work increasingly characterised by its inter-disciplinarity and theoretical eclecticism. In the end, the theme of research methodology resonated strongest and loudest, and spoke most palpably and persuasively of my academic identity. It reflects who I am and how I think, and, because of this fact, has perhaps received more critical attention over my career compared with other aspects of scholarly engagement. Thus, I elected to focus upon three significant, albeit conceptually disparate theoretical influences on my thinking and writing. Such methodological

explorations reflect the apparent untenability of any notion of absolute truth, while simultaneously speaking a provisional 'truth' to power across different and diverse contexts of social and educational discourse, research policy and practice.

The title of the article itself presents an interesting point of departure and context for critical discussion methodologically. The etymology of the term convention derives from the Latin *conventionalis*, or the 'nature of an agreement', of what counts intersubjectively and of the use to which it is put, both socially and professionally. Here, the purpose is to raise some critical questions concerning the epistemological basis on which such agreements are reached in the absence of an ontological foundation of truth. In addition, to probe further in the light of often frequent concerns and *disagreements* in the field of social and professional research enquiry.

The first influence derives from an article co-authored with an early mentor and now retired colleague Professor Phil Hodkinson, entitled: Can there be criteria for selecting research criteria: A hermeneutical analysis of an inescapable dilemma (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998). The theme of the article challenges convention by questioning the basis on which the legacy and pervasive influence of a positivist epistemology, and its attendant preoccupation with method as a route to genuine knowledge, is conceptually premised. In this critique, the article challenges the apparent obsession with the search for permanent or universal criteria for judging quality in research. Yet I argue this analysis is not merely limited to the theme of judging research quality. It has, significantly, a much wider application to the concept of truth, as well as our understanding of the nature of convention in a range of social, educational and professional research contexts. Reflecting back on the article, some sixteen years on, it is appropriate to set the historical context in order to appreciate the argument hermeneutically. This, in any case, seems wholly relevant given the

particular emphasis on historicity that is so germane and conceptually pertinent to philosophical hermeneutics.

### **Politics of research**

At the time of writing, back in 1997, there had been a considerable shift in the politics of 'what counts as knowledge' within the field of educational research. The debate was perhaps first sparked by Professor David Hargreaves, back in 1996, at the annual lecture of the Teacher Training Agency, when he argued that educational research provided 'poor value for money' (Hargreaves, 1996: 1). That is, in order to become a research-based profession such research would need to change both in type *and*, more significantly, in terms of how it was organised. The espoused concept was built on the philosophy of a positivist epistemology. Advocacy of an accumulation of knowledge was promoted to ensure that teachers, much like medical professionals, were able to draw upon a 'shared technical language'. This could be counted 'authentic' and replicable, and would paradoxically serve to determine research quality *a priori* through the assembly of an evidence-based medical model.

Subsequently, the release of the report of James Tooley and Doug Darby:

*Educational Research: A Critique* (Tooley and Darby, 1998) further added to the view that educational research was not making the contribution to understanding that it should. It was becoming rather, as Chris Woodhead, former Chief Inspector of Ofsted, put it in the foreword to the report: 'at best no more than an irrelevance and distraction' (p.1). Together, these reports exacerbated a somewhat depressing view and further escalating paranoia surrounding the theme of quality in educational research, which according to its many detractors should always be judged against

pre-ordained criteria. Moreover, such criteria should provide the defining rules for research engagement, in particular the view that outcomes should render explicit the *effects* as well as *effectiveness* of what teachers do in classrooms. The corollary implication would displace the idea that outcomes are the very things which follow research activity i.e. emerge and 'come out', rather than being either fixed or paradoxically predetermined in advance.

In many respects, little has changed in the last sixteen years. Similar arguments continue to be made regarding the purpose and role of educational research. In the UK, for example, this is manifest in a variety of ways that continue to reflect the impact of a neo-liberal imaginary. Indeed, the emphasis is also germane and more widely applicable to other western Anglophone societies, including New Zealand, Australia and the United States (Allach, 2013; Connell, 2013; ERA, 2012; Denzin, 2009). In the UK, the pervasive influence of globalisation and neo-liberal politics has resulted in the further regulation and control of the educational improvement agenda. This is especially true in terms of what counts as valid, relevant research and how education has curiously come to function as a governmental apparatus – (an example of which is former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove's mooted independent review of initial teacher training to define what counts as 'effective practice'; and, in a different example, the alliance of 'teaching schools' [a projected 600 schools by 2016] to encourage 'research and development' linked to strategic priorities and impact on practice). All of which reinforce the view, in relation to David Hargreaves' thesis, that teachers, and not university academics, are the ones who should be doing educational research in order to improve on practice.

More than this, however, we have seen, both here in the UK and elsewhere, a tightening up of the apparatus of peer reviewing in a variety of academic and

educational research contexts, including, for example, in the UK the submission of abstracts to the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference – (where the prevailing criteria of quality, timeliness, national/international significance, impact on practice, policy or theory are now enshrined in the reviewing process). In similar vein, we have also paid witness to comparable developments in the publication process of the British Educational Research Journal - (in terms of emphasis and the shift in cultural politics towards empirical research and empiricism more generally, and in relation to what counts as ‘good quality’ research, where alternative research perspectives and approaches – [including, for example, postmodern and/or post-structural work and critical race perspectives] are more marginal and arguably much less conspicuous). Quite notably, of course, both examples align with the discourse and prevailing view and criteria of the Research Excellence Framework (or some such similar nuance in Australia [ERA, 2012] and New Zealand [PBRF, 2014]), where stories of ‘impact’ are inseparably interwoven with notions of international excellence, if not always perceptibly ‘world-class’ research.

Lastly, but no less significantly, we can observe the presence of conventional, ‘realist’ research criteria: validity, reliability and generalizability, elaborated in many popular social science research texts. These are not merely linked with education but can be found more widely associated with research contexts outwith, including nursing, social work, sport and sports coaching, to name but a few. Thus, the critical question is to ask and further understand why this might be the case: that research must comply with particular preordained standards and rules or run the risk of simply being classed as *not research*. Then it might be possible to assess how to entertain a fresh and more radically compelling perspective. For example, producing more

open research can demonstrate greater recognition of the need for diversity, and yet do so with a moral compass that shows more humility, less certainty, and a willingness to proceed with ever greater caution, virtue and integrity.

### **Philosophical hermeneutics in research**

Through an appreciation and understanding of Gadamerian, philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1979; Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998), I argue it is possible to examine and challenge the assumptions on which hegemonic research processes and practices are often uncritically asserted and further casually propagated. A more constructive way forward thus begins with the acknowledgement that the selection of criteria, to guide our judgements and research engagements, should be related to the nature of the particular inquiry, piece of research or social and educational context under evaluation. This is because, for Gadamer (1979), the 'project of formulating *correct* criteria, by which interpretations of the world [or indeed schools or other social and educational settings] can be made is a futile aim' (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p.528). Similarly the idea that it might be possible to expose truth through 'method' is an arguably inappropriate and mistaken view. Instead, following Heidegger, it is 'the phenomenon of understanding that is crucial to human existence and the ontological character of its linguistic makeup that is central to our being' (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p.528). Gadamer begins his analysis about the nature of knowing and understanding with a critique of the aesthetic consciousness. He argues that it is neither content nor form that is central to the aesthetic experience, but rather the actual thing meant that is most significant.

Accordingly,

‘the understanding of art does not arrive through a process of “methodically cutting or dividing it as an object” (Palmer, 1969: 168). Nor, for that matter, does it reveal itself through the artificial separation of its content and form. Instead, its meaning is derived from the context in which the experience (between the interpreter and work of art) has taken place, where it is both within and through the experience itself that meaning comes into being’ (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p.528).

In this sense, understanding does not stand alongside us but rather runs in and through our existence. Thus, it is impossible to understand or see things as they actually are, for this would imply interpretations of the world can be made from a standpoint above history. Indeed, as Kant reminds us, there can be no method that can neutralize itself in relation to its own ontological foundations. This would belie the fact there is more to the world than meets the eye: that understandings of the world are inevitably contingent and always historically located, assuming an untenable prior status for meaning in relation to experience. In contrast, vis-à-vis Gadamer (1979), it is the very historicity of understanding, where older works of art have meaning in relation both to present and future contexts, which ‘prevents the ideal of seeing the past in terms of itself, and further stands in opposition to the idea of procuring objectively valid knowledge’ (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p. 528). Thus, crucially because understanding can never be removed from the context of its situated experience it cannot therefore be *presuppositionless* – (in the Heideggerian sense – *Being* is always already, and so research is always already theoretically over-determined). Yet understanding is not a subjective process either, so much a matter of placing oneself in a tradition in which the past and present are constantly fused – what he refers to as a ‘fusion of horizons’. In this way, understanding is part



of an experience 'that fuses the prejudices of the interpreter with the nuances of tradition, though this is perhaps best thought of as a reflexive process that we can never fully understand' (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, p.529).

In the context of judging quality in research, Gadamer's (1979) analysis suggests that although the content and form of written research are significant, they are not themselves central to the experience of reading and understanding such research. Lists of criteria imply, and further require the artificial separation of content and form from the context in which any reading takes place. Yet because interpretation and meaning derive from the experience of reading itself, this is one which unavoidably occasions the reader's disposition and prejudices – (located in a contingent historical tradition), as they are brought into view. Sometimes the encounter is challenging and uncomfortable, for placing one's prejudices at risk involves being open and receptive to reflection and change, as horizons collide and merge through discursive interchange and meaningful dialogical encounter. In summary, this analysis suggests that 'the process of judging research would be integral to the [r]eader's experience of the text, and the choice and application of criteria, whether conscious or tacit, would emanate from the text, from the dispositions of [the reader, and from the historically, socially and culturally situated interactions between the two' (Garratt and Hodkinson, 1998, pp.530-531).

In the context of contemporary qualitative inquiry, and given the prevailing view of different onto-epistemic assumptions informing such against the arguably dominant empiricist, post-positivistic research perspective, this disposition may serve to challenge the tendency to impose criteria used to pass judgement on one upon the other. This constitutes a form of cultural imperialism that builds in failure from the start as other types of inquiry, seen as un-conventional or simply *not* research, are

systematically denied (*ibid.*). It is an argument that also applies equally well to the earlier points relating to the school improvement agenda, peer-reviewing and what constitutes 'impact' in an increasingly focused and performatively driven research environment. Furthermore, it may also apply, in process, laterally to the way that judgements are made by Ofsted, for example, **in England** in the context of mooted changes to the assessment practices of primary schools anticipated for 2016. The domestic proposal to remove level descriptors at Foundation level and Key Stages one and two of the curriculum, for example, and replace with the statements: 'national curriculum ready', 'key stage two ready' or 'secondary ready', produces the opportunity for an arguably more nuanced and flexible process of decision making around such practices, which might also usefully show more sensitivity to local demographic, social and educational contexts. Indeed, to refuse to apply a more nuanced approach to assessment practices in this way may well leave some children being *not* 'national curriculum ready', *not* 'key stage two ready' or, indeed, *not* 'secondary ready', with corollary implications for impaired progress and further multiple cases of children, much like those within the high stakes environment of the US (Au, 2007), Australia (Wyn et al. 2014; Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith, 2012) and **New Zealand (Allach, 2013)**, being literally left behind.

### **Foucauldian theory in sports coaching**

The next part of the article shifts the attention and focus somewhat towards the influence of Foucauldian theory on my thinking, writing and methodological orientation. Broadly considered, if Gadamerian hermeneutics is concerned with the project of exploring the 'deep' or 'implicit' *meaning* of culture and every day practices – (howsoever positioned in relation to one's self-understanding), then ontologically speaking Foucault is more concerned with the social *effects* of such everyday

practices, in particular the role of institutions and their influence and bearing upon discursive practices. This is not to fathom a rule-governed system, but rather trace their emergence in relation to dominant social practices. Such analysis is to understand the way that discourses speak into existence the practices to which they refer, which enables Foucault to raise the genealogical questions: How are these discourses used? And what role do they play in society?

Having previously employed Foucault's panoptic metaphor (Foucault, 1977) to explore the technology of school discipline and its appropriation of power through the modern techniques of surveillance (Garratt, 1998), more recently I revisited his work to examine the theme of safeguarding and child protection in the context of sports coaching (Garratt et al, 2013). This is a theme that has much greater resonance and meaning beyond the immediate social, cultural and professional context considered here. The value of genealogical analysis is its recognition of the inter-relationship between discourse, power and knowledge. Broadly speaking, that is all discourses represent more than simple words or linguistic units because they have a particular function, which varies according to context and can be often contradictory. When words and things meet they do so within particular relations of power in order to produce specific forms of knowledge. Such knowledge, in turn, makes it possible for some statements but not others to be made, and for people to be spoken about in particular ways. This manifestation is historically and culturally produced and arises at certain key moments in time.

Thus, methodologically, genealogy offers a productive way of studying discourse in order to reveal power-knowledge networks, where discourse produces meaning *and* certain *effects*. The kinds of objects and subjects, for example, teachers, coaches and higher education professionals, upon whom, and through which relations of

power are manifest and productively realised. In this way discourses are always uncertain and truth infinitely deferred. There is no hidden essence contained within a policy or discursive text. As Foucault would say, genealogies have 'several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies' (2002, p.5). Thus, 'discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of an origin, but treated as and when it occurs' (p.28).

Recently, I was able to apply this perspective and other elements of a Foucauldian conceptual framework to the context of safeguarding in sports coaching. The article, which drew on ESRC-funded research (Piper et al, 2012), was entitled:

'Safeguarding' sports coaching: Foucault, genealogy and critique' (Garratt et al, 2013). This piece draws critical attention to the influence and *effect* of policy discourse in constructing the field of sports coaching and in speaking into existence the particular practices to which coaching refers, and is further constituted epistemologically.

Through this methodological frame, it was possible to trace the continuities in policy making over time, while also identifying significant discontinuities. These are what Foucault refers to as key points of diffraction, which change the historical emphasis with the resultant effect of transforming contemporary practice in ways that are not always positive. In seeking to expose the discursive terrain on which safeguarding and child protection policy have emerged and developed in sports coaching, it was equally important to recognise, quoting Foucault, that 'discursive practices are relational modalities, with networks and connections' (2002, p.59; Garratt et al, 2013, p.617). Their dispersion across the boundaries of different professional settings gives rise to new 'practices' in safeguarding across a wide spectrum of social discourse. Accordingly, the domain of sports coaching is subject to a 'reciprocal

determination' or 'interplay' (Foucault, 2002, p.33) between the professions. This is where coaching discourse on safeguarding and child protection meets the influence of similar such in the field of health, social work and education, articulated through the crucible and transmitting authority of *Working Together; a guide for inter-agency cooperation for the protection of children from abuse* (DHSS, 1988) in tandem with the Children Act (1989) (Garratt et al, 2013).

The Foucauldian frame has significant explanatory power. It shows how broader concerns about safeguarding and child welfare, coupled with extensive media reporting of serious cases of child abuse and child death inquiries have produced a reactionary politics in sport. This is a form of politics with arguably serious deleterious consequences for coaching policy and practice (Garratt et al. 2013). The profusion and ratcheting up of policy appears to have had an unsettling effect on the practice of coaching. Coaching pedagogy is now 'governed' by a fear of perceived professional malpractice (of the deviant coach or potential paedophile volunteer). This can be seen through an observing hierarchy of discourses of safeguarding and child protection. It is further reflected in an intangible quality and effect of, what Foucault (1983) calls, the 'conduct of conducts'. That is, the ways in which people are both governed and self-governed through a field of action which guides the possibility of conduct by putting in place the possible outcome. In this respect, "acceptable practice" is that which measures up to the rule and thus complies with the normalizing gaze. In turn this gaze has had an arguably toxic effect on intergenerational relationships between coaches and young people, the manifestation of which has produced a situation where neither now knows how to anticipate and/or respond to the Other.

Of course, all this is not to say that safeguarding discourses are unimportant. Rather, that it is possible to be serious about protecting children and young people without acting as if, and further encouraging them to believe, that all adults willing to support them are best regarded as potentially dangerous (Garratt et al, 2013).

Methodologically, then, what genealogy does is show us that the discourse of safeguarding and child protection cannot be traced to an essence or single origin. Nor should it be construed as ontologically prior. Rather, it is to be seen as one among many competing discourses (albeit a dominant one through the abovementioned observing hierarchy). As such, its 'truth' is contingent on a complex constellation of networks of power, authority and distributed governance.

What the Foucauldian framework shows then is that observed defensive practices between coaches and young people - (for example, of coaches policing themselves as well as each other), related to concerns around touch and abuse, are, in fact, corollaries of a culture of extensive surveillance. This culture is manifested through intergenerational fear and mistrust, and exacerbated by an escalating and disproportionate paranoia around risk and protection. This is potentially damaging for sport, sports coaching and, perhaps most fundamentally, what is considered quintessentially 'human'. Moreover, the substance of this argument is also clearly relevant and more generally applicable to other social and educational contexts. Not least, for example, in the context of higher education. Here similar safeguarding discourses are at least as prevalent as those in schools, sports coaching and/or other spaces in which adults work, either professionally or voluntarily, with young people or other designated vulnerable groups. On this view, the preoccupation with the on-going agenda to appease to safeguarding has, it can be argued, served to exacerbate a culture of fear and mistrust (Furedi, 2002). The consequence of which

has resulted in an escalation of a ubiquitous politics of enhanced scrutiny and surveillance (Garratt et al, 2013).

### **Psychoanalytic theory and the body**

Fashioning a shift from Foucault to Lacan, I seized an opportunity to respond to a flier for an international, interdisciplinary conference, entitled: 'Talking Bodies: identity, sexuality and representation', hosted by the University of Chester in 2013. The proposed theme caused me to reflect on the possibility of examining, in much greater depth, my own corporeality located in the liminal space between identity and embodied masculinity. The analysis would speak to, and conduct a critique of the sport of competitive natural bodybuilding. It would interrogate the symbolic representation of a sub-culture that presents as one thing, 'good, clean, proper' – (in essence ethically pure), while ostensibly practising another. The presumed benefit and outcome would provide an opportunity to challenge the convention of a deviant sub-culture, by revealing a series of untrue truths in relation to dominant cultural practices. It would also reach further methodologically through an exploration and arguably original application of theoretical ideas. This would take the form of a Lacanian psychoanalytic application to the substantive field of *natural* bodybuilding. Following the conference, the paper was published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (Garratt, 2014).

This excursion proved interesting in a number of rich, challenging and methodologically diverse ways. For example, as Dean (2003, p.244) reminds us, while Foucault's notion of discourse 'so effectively accounts for the operations of power, it fails to distinguish the pre-discursive from what exceeds language's grasp' - i.e. that which cannot be symbolised. However, as with Foucault's concept of 'bio-

power' – (as power not invested in an individual but rather across individuals, discourses and institutions), Lacan's theory of the Symbolic Order, with its many cultural anchor-points, is remarkably quite similar. That said, for Lacan, the cause of desire is not merely a cultural construct located in discourse, but rather contained in an object: *l'objet petit a*. This object represents language's impact on the body but is not itself discursive. It is rather a left over after 'culture's symbolic networks have carved up the body' and produced an 'imperfect fit between language and corporeality' (Dean, 2003, p. 244). It is the remnant that resists symbolisation. In Zizek's view a hole in the Symbolic Order that reveals some secret to be explained (1996, n.p.). Accordingly, the object-cause of desire is extra-discursive, a thing which cannot be 'mastered by language and therefore cannot be understood as a cultural construct' (Dean, 2003, p.244). Applied to the context of *natural* bodybuilding, the so-called 'thing' is the enigma and deceptive lure of the hyper-muscular and hyper-real. Conveying a deception, this is couched within the ethical frame of the Symbolic Order, with the promise and surface appearance of a pharmaceutically unassisted sport.

*Natural* bodybuilding as distinct from conventional bodybuilding presents as the 'clean, pure and innocent' counterpoint to the pharmacologically enhanced 'Other'. Put simply (and somewhat unconventionally), it is bodybuilding *without* drugs (Garratt, 2014). The UK's three natural organisations are thus posited as authentic representations of the hyper-real and hyper-masculine within a space of unblemished innocence situated at the locus of perceived excess. Yet the concept *natural* is not, *de facto*, as pure or complete as it seems. The status of such organisations, for example, as the embodied representation of drug-free competitive sport, produce a *prima facie* appearance of equality that in actuality reflects a



'dividing practice', in the Foucauldian (1977, p.50) sense. The spoken purity of the ethical claim allied to a differentiated testing protocol in turn produces a moral hierarchy of difference between the governing bodies. Such technologies are observed through key differences in the rigour and authenticity of different testing protocols. The corollary implication is that polygraphing and urinalysis are technically flawed and therefore unequivocally imperfect (Garratt, 2014).

Moreover, 'significant gaps in the ethical frameworks that define the sport are exacerbated through the syntactic juxtaposition of 'natural' and 'bodybuilding' as terms producing an uncanny paradox of the familiar and strange' (Garratt, 2014, p.3). It is a type of seduction in which the 'normal' body infiltrated by the image of the hyper-real desires to become a caricature and/or hyperbolic representation of itself. The bodybuilding subject is thus trapped in a narcissistic impasse in which the 'natural', so called is made irreducibly contingent upon the image of the hyper-masculine self, a bigger, stronger and more muscular body (Garratt, 2014). This is exemplified by 'Lacan's (1977) mirror stage, where the image of oneself reflected back produces a distortion that brings a mental permanence, yet also marks the subject's profound *méconnaissance*' (Garratt, 2014, p.3). Such misrecognition, a product of forged images, of one's ideal ego and self-satisfaction, produces an untrue truth for the subject. It is a means of identification and abridgement, through the imaginary order (how I imagine myself to be), as this articulates between self and 'Other' (Garratt, 2014). In this uncanny sense, the sport is 'dependent on the hidden object of the hyper-masculine, which serves to engulf the subject in a realm of excess without dissonance' (p. 3). Put simply, this is where the putative *natural* devoid of pharmaceutical assistance, strives to achieve the 'look' of the hyper-

masculine bodybuilder in a context free of contradiction, if not ultimately psychological crisis (p.4). The corollary implication emerges at the meeting point of the ethical and corporeal: is it ever possible that the natural body can become the object of its repressed desire? And, how can the hyper-masculine be realised within the symbolic order (that is, the person I am supposed to be and thus culturally anchored to) of a pharmaceutically unaided sport? 'Paradoxically, flaws in the ethical frameworks create the very spaces within which it is possible to engage crisis the phenomenon of 'muscle dysmorphia' ... in the corporeal reality of the hyper-masculine' (p.4).

## **Conclusion**

So, in bringing this article to a close, what might the analysis of an apparently deviant sub-culture have in common with the practice and plight of educational professionals? Methodologically, the Lacanian frame offers a persuasive language with which to explain and depict the significance of the extra-linguistic or remnant that resists representation. In similar vein, teachers often find themselves chasing an unrealisable goal. This chimera or illusory notion of professionalism, presents the putative concept: 'good teacher' as a figment resisting symbolization. Thus, much like 'good research' or, indeed, the 'good coach', the 'good teacher' becomes a representation of the 'reality' to which the concept: 'good practice' points but can never truly reach. It is an enigma at once deferred and displaced by the emergence and symbolisation of the next new reform, curriculum innovation or pedagogy presented as the new evangelism. Yet what all such discourses have in common is the ability to conjure the *appearance* of substance and 'truth' in its absence. They render the uncertain certain and further secure the provisional in the face of reality

which has no true, fixed ontological status. In this context, educational professionals much like their coaching counterparts can be interpreted as performative individuals both empowered and constrained at the nexus of Lacan's symbolic and imaginary orders. Alternatively, in the Foucauldian sense, they are conceived as the masters and slaves of their own professional subjugation. Thus, the ability to challenge convention allows the possibility and productive capacity and potential *not* to solve what are conceivably largely intractable methodological concepts and problems, but simply recognise them as such.

This latter point has strong resonance with, and significant implications for our understanding of the concept and role of power. In particular, the effects of truth that power produces and transmits in a variety of social and educational research contexts. Power is not a sovereign force but a heterogeneous, complex social technology situated in the liminal space between individual agency, contemporary structures and regulatory practices. Thus, its productive potential offers the possibility of new learning opportunities which may be usefully harnessed and developed educationally. In turn, these can aid our understanding of the various mechanisms that shape, for example, dominant research practices and their concomitant corresponding pedagogies. In deploying power's productive capacity to question truth, a process of critical engagement can have a positive effect in unsettling and further resisting dominant research hierarchies that serve to construct and sustain contemporary orthodoxies. In the process, this can produce new ways of seeing and operating as a means to challenge prevailing methodological convention(s).

The resultant positive value is an arguably less certain but more critically diverse and theoretically enriched range of methodological approaches to be applied to social

and educational research contexts. Thus, if we move beyond the idea of power as possession or sovereign force, to appreciate its somewhat nebulous and characteristically dispersed nature, we can come to recognise the value of difference and multiplicity. We can also see the need to relinquish the current quest for certainty and 'truth'. Indeed, much in the way that Foucault points to the great paradox of liberalism: that posits the sovereignty of the free individual against the requirement for ever greater regulation and control; there is a similar parallel tendency in the culture of contemporary qualitative research. This can be recognised as the interminable obsession to ground new knowledge in absolute certainty, while paradoxically repeatedly playing out the theme of uncertainty (Flint and Peim, 2012).

To see the effect of power as an appropriation of discourse, is not to dismiss the possibility of truth's authority or, indeed, overlook the fact that, in practice, power does not fall evenly upon its subjects, but typically favours some more than others. Rather, it is to recognise truth's fallibilistic nature such that new knowledge is inevitably a product of one's ability to access power's influence, where discourse can promote only, and no more than a semblance of 'truth'. Expressed a different way, this is simply a micro-politics that serves to unsettle the ambition to assert knowledge as essential truth. In this regard, methodological diversity offers the potential not only to challenge convention, but has a positive effect in ensuring that new philosophical approaches can be productively applied in ways that are more relevant and properly fit for purpose. Thus, critical involvement rather than implicit resolution, I suggest, is the methodological means through which competing narratives may be productively employed. They may then be used to critique the surface structures and appearances on which numerous contemporary social and educational discourses and regulatory practices are based and further casually accepted.

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