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Chapter 16

Paradigmatic Perspectives for Social Justice Research: Method, Paradigm, and Design for Dissertation Research

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a conceptual analysis of the current trends for research paradigmatic perspectives used in doctoral social justice research approaches. The chapter offers a concise resource for doctoral scholars and their research supervisors to establish and illustrate a relevant paradigmatic perspective aligned with the research method and design choice to view the dissertation research problem in doctoral social justice research. Paradigmatic perspectives from feminist, critical theoretical perspectives, and grounded theory are also included as examples of specific approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral researchers' understanding of the selection of a paradigmatic philosophical perspective for the dissertation research as aligned with the method and design can be a complex and daunting process for many new investigators (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). The paradigm has been described simply as providing the lens by which the study views the world

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(Kankam, 2019). Moreover, the intricacies of paradigm formulation may be even more complicated for doctoral researchers who desire to conduct social justice research or include a component of social justice research within the dissertation study. “These ideas, which are notoriously difficult to understand, are much closer to philosophy than to science as commonly understood, and while growing in popularity, they currently form a slim minority of the social science literature” (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018, p. 15). Thus, new researchers must learn to apply a paradigmatic perspective underscored by the tenets and principles underpinning the doctoral study’s philosophical approach in alignment with the discipline (Kankam, 2019). The selection of a specific paradigmatic viewpoint serves to allow the new doctoral researcher to contribute new knowledge to the discipline from the contextual findings of the dissertation research study.

Situating where emerging doctoral researchers’ positionality may lie within the nature of reality, understanding for how new knowledge is constructed, and the unique ontological and epistemological worldview can be an intimidating and overwhelming conceptual process for new investigators¹. As Clemente et al. (2020) explained, the paradigmatic perspective for the doctoral research study must be constructed from the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological considerations for the study. The same can be said for the doctoral research supervisor, so much so that the foundational philosophical paradigmatic perspective for the new researcher is enhanced. Thus, the dissertation study may be confined to the rationale for the study research method and design choice, or for the theoretical framework, without requiring a discussion of the paradigmatic philosophical assumptions for the method and design choices. At minimum, a choice of paradigmatic perspective by the new researcher must not only demonstrate methodological alignment but also ontological alignment with the new researcher (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Makombe (2017) noted the gap in the application of paradigm aligned with methodology across many dissertation research studies and stressed the importance of a clear use of not only the term paradigm, but paradigm and methodology alignment as well as clarity in the choice of paradigm. The integration of the expectations for descriptions of the philosophical underpinnings may be too elusive or abstract and thus requires the guiding hand of the researcher supervisor (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Makombe, 2017). However, when a new investigator is required or desires to articulate the philosophical paradigmatic assumptions that underscore the dissertation research study, it may serve to frame and ground the study and the emerging researcher’s ontological and epistemological viewpoint (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). This added layer of transparency for the work serves to clarify the researcher’s positionality, which may in turn reduce researcher bias for the dissertation study findings (Throne, 2021a). More often in social justice research, these insights may further enhance the new investigator’s agency, fidelity, and understanding of the sociocultural implications for the dissertation research otherwise not seen or attended. “When this lens involves the transformative or interpretivist paradigmatic perspective, new knowledge may emerge with valuable societal implications for the research focus,” (Throne, 2021b, p. 25).

Emergent researchers may benefit from explorations of structural or disciplinary instruction that creates more simplistic formats for the choice of specific paradigms, thus bringing the understanding more in reach of novice researchers. For example, Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) cited Candy’s (1989) approach who grouped paradigmatic perspectives under three broader categories: (a) positivist, (b) interpretivist, or (c) critical. The authors also referred to Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (2003) addition of pragmatism. The use of such models may be extremely helpful for novice researchers to rely on established scholarship when requested to align the research methodology with the particular paradigmatic perspective for doctoral research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

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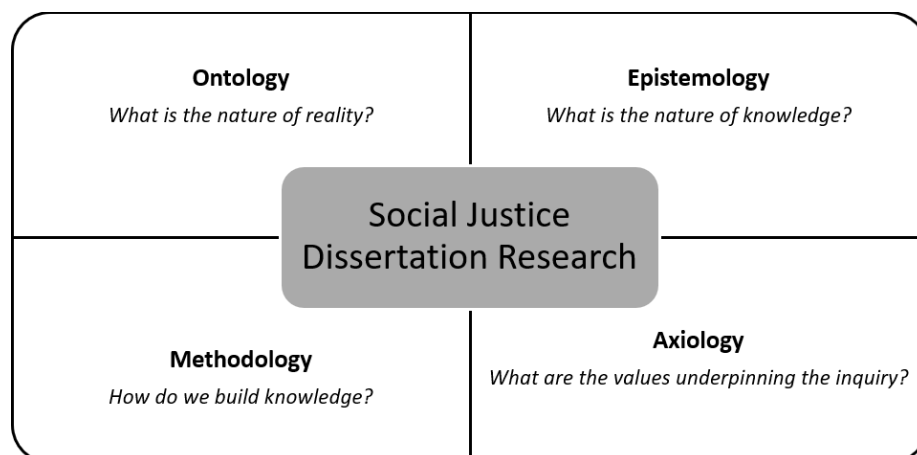
Likewise, Günbayi and Sorm (2018) presented a model that aligns four paradigms with specific qualitative research approaches used within social research. New researchers may more easily absorb such guides as they tackle paradigmatic and methodological alignment. Further, Makombe (2017) suggested new researchers may better understand the use of paradigm when required to directly align paradigmatic perspective, method, and research design.

I recommend that early career researchers, Master's and PhD students should apply my simple and easy to understand organizational scheme of the concepts paradigm, method and design early in their research careers and then, if need be, relax the restrictive assumptions underpinning my suggested structure as their understanding of the concepts deepens and broadens (Makombe, 2017, p. 3380).

While ontologically subjective, social phenomena remain epistemologically objective and measurable thereby appropriate for empirical inquiry (Alvarez et al., 2017). Therefore, the research supervisor may need to guide the new researcher to align a particular philosophical paradigm with the dissertation methodology (see Figure 1). For example, the choice of interpretivism for a qualitative study may necessitate a sound discussion of the philosophical tenets of interpretivism and how they will underscore the specific qualitative approach for the study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Or the research supervisor may need to guide a doctoral scholar toward constructivism, where it would be important to align the phenomenon of inquiry within specific sociocultural ideologies or ontology paradigmatic perspective, especially due to the subjective nature of social phenomena (Alvarez et al., 2017).

Thus, the philosophical underpinnings of the paradigm are important for both quantitative and qualitative research as the new researcher's ontology: "the 'position' of the researcher in terms of their beliefs about the nature of reality and truth which provides the starting point for research" (Bleiker et al., 2019, p. S5). As a doctoral researcher demonstrates agency and a deeper understanding of one's own researcher positionality, the researcher may be able to articulate the study paradigmatic perspective in more sophisticated narratives when guided by the research supervisor. In turn, this may bring further transparency to the research focus and alignment with the researcher's positionality, which may lead to advanced researcher agency and deeper insights into the researcher's identity as scholar and researcher. Finally, this development may also allow for improved justification and alignment with the methodological choice for the dissertation research study (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018).

Figure 1.



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It is in this light that the philosophical underpinnings necessary for relevant paradigmatic perspectives for dissertation research, and ultimately method choice for the study, are explored within the current scholarship. The philosophical debates within the doctoral discipline can be confusing and conflicting and thus often lies with the research supervisor to help navigate doctoral researchers through these divergent discussions. Thus, the chapter objective is to provide an illustrative foundational guide for dissertation writers, especially those pursuing social justice research, to select and articulate a paradigmatic perspective aligned with the research methodology for the dissertation study. These considerations can be wholly or partially distinct from the theoretical or conceptual framework and may be synthesized for a complex lens to view the dissertation research study problem.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Paradigmatic Perspectives for Social Justice Research

Many current researchers have commented on the philosophical alignment of the principles, tenets, and researcher positionality within social justice research. Yet, Baškarada and Koronios (2018) called out the plethora of social science research from a paradigmatic perspective of positivism or post-positivism continues as dominant as too many researchers tacitly accept this choice as default. In addition, scientific researchers have noted gaps in paradigmatic clarity and for how to construct a paradigmatic perspective (Brown & Dueñas, 2020). Further, “a consequence of this situation is the paradoxical tacit denial of human agency and the capacity for critical self-reflection, the very denial of our humanity and arguably our special status in the universe. Social sciences can and ought to do more” (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018, p. 15). The authors noted the challenge new qualitative researchers face in navigating the complex literature of postmodernism and post-qualitative perspectives, especially for the nebulous self and other, subjective/objective considerations (Baškarada & Koronios, 2018). Despite the barriers to understanding, it is important for dissertation researchers to consider, select, and articulate these aspects within the dissertation research when social justice research is the methodology or a component of the methodology. For example, Günbayi and Sorm (2018) stressed the articulation of the worldview or paradigm enables the reader to judge the research more scientifically.

Social justice research holds a wide range of interdisciplinary perspectives and transdisciplinary paradigmatic roots to embrace and investigate social justice research problems. Social justice researchers have noted the established paradigms from the Western-centric academy often tend toward tenets and principles perceived as elitist and exclusionary (Mehra, 2021). The emergence of social justice research has shifted “predominant majorities of white and female constituents that have sustained their own hegemonic canons, theories, methods, and paradigms to entrench themselves and their impact, while including some and excluding others” (Mehra, 2021, p. 5). This has led some social justice researchers to advocate for critical inquiry and philosophies such as critical realism that blends tenets from positivism and interpretivism while abandoning the limitations of the paradigmatic orthodoxy (Lennox & Jurdi-Hage, 2017). In addition, others have stressed that shifts toward critical and emancipatory paradigmatic perspectives are needed due to the moral, political, and societal role of social justice researchers (Hutton & Heath, 2020).

Still others have called for a decolonial paradigm due to paradigmatic historical conventions of rational, abstract knowledge, which were established in the context of colonialism and explained through a lens of the dominant culture and power structure (Kerr & Andreotti, 2018). Further, Held (2019) called for the decolonization of the paradigmatic canon and movement away from Western paradigms, especially

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within indigenous research. As these perspectives are new and continue to be emerging, use of more contemporary paradigmatic perspectives can be accomplished in dissertation research through successful guidance by the research supervisor. They require understanding of traditional paradigmatic tenets and reflexivity to embrace other worldviews and a more fluid epistemological standpoint. Held explained,

To decolonize research paradigms and methodologies is to include Indigenous ways of knowing in academia, that is, to teach them, to use them in research, to value them as equal to Western approaches to knowing and to creating knowledge. There is a growing body of literature concerned with the justification and practicality of doing research at the interface of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, both from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars who experiment with combining Indigenous and Western methodologies in their alternative interpretive research or in qualitative methods teaching (p. 2)

Likewise, Kaushik and Walsh (2019) illustrated how a conventional paradigm such as pragmatism can serve as a paradigmatic advocate for social justice research due to pragmatists' long-standing principles of fairness, equity, and freedom in meaningful research. As guided by their research supervisors, dissertation social justice researchers may benefit from the current scholarship surrounding the social justice phenomenon of inquiry and carefully consider the applicability of the established paradigms or more contemporary paradigmatic perspectives. Such approaches may provide a foundational perspective and aligned methodology to critique the power dynamics inherent to the dissertation social phenomenon of inquiry and inherent power dynamics (Lennox & Jurdi-Hage, 2017). Kaushik and Walsh (2019) concluded

To recognize the importance of the basic assumptions of a particular research paradigm does not mean that those assumptions are isolated, that they constitute a unitary and coherent pattern, or that they can easily be integrated. It does not mean that a paradigm should be perceived as a logically consistent and unified systems of thought (p. 12).

Despite the complicated and confusing journey, a dissertation researcher may face in formulating an aligned methodological and paradigmatic viewpoint for the social justice research, it remains essential. Following are examples of two theoretical foundations that can be used to assess and formulate an aligned paradigmatic perspective for social justice dissertation research.

FEMINIST THEORY AS A PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVE OF RESEARCH

Feminist researchers in higher education have long-held views of the paradigmatic challenges in conducting feminist research or in the use of feminist theory to conduct empirical research (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011; Saarienen, 1988). Past researchers have long noted the need for sex/gender to be an integral component of any study of the realities of human societies (Saarienen, 1988); yet, more than three decades later, the scholarship remains limited and compartmentalized when compared to other factors of human existence or social realities (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). The historically disproportionate numbers of white men holding executive positions within higher education continues gendered contexts and unequal power dynamics, named by many feminist researchers, continues barriers to the use of feminist research across higher education (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011; Stewart et al., 2021).

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Therefore, it is no surprise that the formulation of a feminist paradigmatic perspective can be complex and challenging for new doctoral researchers.

In a systematic review of the literature, Perez (2019) noted how past researchers have interrogated societal assumptions to challenge systems of oppression. Such “third wave” perspectives have given way to post-structuralist, feminist, critical race, queer, and other theories that have brought new perspectives to view current social justice research (Perez, 2019). These critical paradigmatic perspectives have allowed contemporary researchers to “illuminate and critique social inequalities; moreover, they call for the emancipation of the oppressed and an equitable distribution of power, resources, and opportunity” (Perez, 2019, p. 74). In this light, feminist theory, and the synonymous feminist research, can serve as a unique paradigmatic perspective for new doctoral scholars who desire to integrate a feminist paradigmatic viewpoint for the aligned methodological approach to the phenomenon of inquiry.

Pati (2006) highlighted the fluid, non-static nature of frameworks, especially those used for interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary research with gendered perspectives. Likewise, Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality and the further interpretations of intersectionality by Hills Collins (2000, 2019) has offered an analytic sensibility for many new researchers to utilize this lens for both theoretical frameworks and paradigmatic perspectives across doctoral dissertation research (as cited in Stewart et al., 2021). Due to the complexities of various feminist theories, both past and present, it is essential for the doctoral research supervisor to be proficient in guiding the new investigator through the philosophical underpinnings of feminist theories, as well as feminist research, to ensure the doctoral scholar is conversant in the distinctions between the study theoretical framework and paradigmatic perspective.

The articulation and distinctions between theoretical framework, paradigmatic perspective, researcher positionality, and research methodology can allow for a holistic approach to feminist social justice research for the dissertation study. In contrast, Heath (2020) concluded that gendered-defined leadership may undergo a further paradigmatic shift when fit-defined and gendered perspectives are no longer needed. Until then, feminist research used for social justice research requires a foundational understanding of the complexities and societal power dynamics that continue the need for further social justice research for gender equity and parity (Stewart et al., 2021). The doctoral research supervisor is therefore key to navigating the dissertation researcher through these complex layers and situating the specific context to articulate the paradigmatic perspective for the dissertation research among them.

Critical Theory as a Paradigmatic Perspective of Research

The purpose of this section is to express paradigmatic perspectives of a specific sociocultural research phenomenon with a focus on values and beliefs, or axiology, for how dissertation researchers should perform in research settings from a social justice perspective. Beliefs and practices within practitioner education using critical theory can serve as the basis for the formulation of a paradigmatic perspective in dissertation research (Kaplan et al., 2019). Likewise, the importance of integrating values, beliefs, and assumptions in the construction of paradigmatic perspectives of research is to motivate others to advance personally and professionally. The guidance by the research supervisor is essential to (a) ensure concepts are assimilated, (b) provide opportunities for critical reflection and transformation, (c) develop an awareness of personal and professional relative influences, and (d) develop an engaging theoretical basis with an aligned paradigmatic perspective (Priniski et al., 2018). Moreover, dissertation research can be complex and challenging as a form of intellectualism. For instance, research, and the underlying

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philosophical assumptions, has the role of holistically developing new doctoral researchers, which is critical to building relationships and promoting critical reflection throughout the dissertation process.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Further, culturally responsive research must include a critical review of literature, researcher perceptions, interviews with participants, interviews with several researchers, and discussions with an array of stakeholders to ensure inclusivity in the process. In this way, diversity of thought is encouraged. Most importantly, to create authentic social justice constructs, researchers must encourage diversity of experiences and thought where participants can gain perspectives from those of the different or same race, class, sex, physical ability, and sexual orientation (Kumar et al., 2018). Indeed, these aspects thwart traditional outcomes resulting in multifaceted, fluctuating and often subtle social and systemic undercurrents rather than perspicuous and deliberate bias on the part of individuals. Thus, the research process becomes more dynamic when power relationships are challenged, and their dependence is decreased (Kaplan et al., 2019). Notwithstanding, given the cultural dynamics of oppression in Western educational environments, researchers of color may have issues implementing culturally responsive theoretical frameworks and the philosophical foundations of culturally responsive education.

Moreover, nontraditional research participants indeed have complex lives and, on the surface, may find traditional and online research participation more flexible, and thus, researchers must be more innovative with meeting participant needs (Kimmons & Johnstun, 2019). Likewise, researchers need to bridge the technology gap between older participants and younger ones. While online research technology fits many participants' schedules, lack of familiarity and training with technology means that some participants can become frustrated and will not participate in a research study. Moreover, under-resourced researchers, inattention to researcher development, research design, and participant support services for participants are often lacking because a research study is under-funded or not funded at all.

Critical Theory as a Philosophical System of Education

A philosophical system of education, its meaning, reality, and the nature of humanity can be viewed through the lens of critical theory. Critical theorists have an intense responsibility and desire to change society for the better. Scholars working from the critical perspective want to improve the state of society and the human condition, rather than simply define rules. Critical theory is not limited to a particular field or specific content (Priniski et al., 2018) and entails reflection upon the premises, concepts, and categories used in different disciplines such as business, literary studies, history, political theory, and technology, to name a few. Thus, critical theory is often referred to interdisciplinary and useful as a research paradigm across fields (Gates, 1996). Notwithstanding, the role of a doctoral researcher is to explore the scientific method to ascertain new theory and to support or refute theoretical claims (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Through methodical research design, new researchers incorporate intriguing topical matter, delivered in a thoughtful and pragmatic manner, and as situated within current scholarship. This requires the firm hand of a research supervisor to oversee excellent research outcomes derived from the researcher and adhering to the methodological alignment with a clear philosophical and paradigmatic perspective.

*Paradigmatic Perspectives for Social Justice Research***PARADIGMATIC ALIGNMENT WITH A GROUNDED THEORY DESIGN FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE RESEARCH**

Doctoral dissertation researchers may benefit from the review of a dissertation research example that utilized a paradigmatic perspective development process. Understanding the underlying positional forces that influence the researcher's choice in methodology informs the basis of the research focus and research design selection (Bleiker et al., 2019, p. S5). In this example, a qualitative Charmazian grounded theory study on women healthcare leaders' process to cultivating courage was used (Charmaz, 2012). The example illustrates how the reader can identify the paradigmatic perspective within a grounded theory context. Taking a closer look at the axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology, it is illuminated how the researcher's paradigm forms a holistic perspective of the research study itself.

The doctoral researcher's positionality reflects a strong belief that research is an avenue in which to generate positive transformation for gender equality. Therefore, it is evident to see the emergence of the researcher's axiology and inherent value system that allowed for the selection of the study paradigmatic perspective. Additionally, the researcher views reality as a relative creation of human experiences, perceptions, and context; therefore, the paradigm choice is formed from a relativism ontological perspective.

The axiological and ontological views refine the paradigmatic perspective and further, the epistemological alignment points to a philosophical paradigm grounded in the understanding that knowledge is derived from human interaction as the basis of learning reality. In this example, the epistemological theory selected is social constructivism. This perspective indicates a communally formed truth may lead to the construction of new reality and theory built out of the extrapolation of meaning from the verbal data gathered from study participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Likewise, constructivism supports the subjective nature of social phenomena as a sensemaking of the human experience from the context of narratives, conversations, and intense inquiry into participant perspective to establish understanding of reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

In turn, the research methodology is derived from the collective feministic axiology, relativism ontology, and a social constructivist epistemology. When aligned, the methodological philosophy for this example, points the research to an inductive, qualitative approach that supports the researcher gathering information in an in-depth, contextual manner that requires participant interaction (Bleiker et al., 2019; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). From this viewpoint, the researcher was able to select and align the qualitative method, grounded theory research design, and research questions to best align with the phenomenon of inquiry within a situated paradigmatic perspective.

The example highlights how and why the researcher selected a qualitative Charmazian grounded theory method to study women healthcare leaders' process to cultivating courage. Within this known paradigmatic perspective, the alignment of the phenomenon can now be assessed as Charmazian grounded theory acutely honors the very nature of the social constructivist paradigmatic approach as it is grounded theory's most foundational purpose to construct new theory from the research data (Charmaz, 2012; Urquhart, 2013). Additionally, the dissertation research study demonstrates a humanistic style as courage is an emotional and vulnerable experience. In support, the constructivist paradigm argument is deeply rooted within the emotional life and inability to draw back the complexities of humanity away from the study participants (Goulding, 2002). The doctoral researcher is thereby able to articulate a clear understanding for the dissertation study paradigmatic perspective and was successful in fully aligning the phenomenon of inquiry in a manner most beneficial to the dissertation researcher's natural, unique epistemological perspective.

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RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The chapter is intended to supply a foundational guide for doctoral dissertation writers, especially those pursuing some form of social justice research within the dissertation research study, to select and articulate a methodologically aligned paradigmatic perspective for the dissertation study. When a dissertation research study involves a social justice research focus and/or component, it can be essential for the doctoral scholar to formulate a clear and compelling paradigmatic perspective for the dissertation research study. While this may be a complex and daunting process, it may be helpful for the doctoral research supervisor to guide the new investigator through an introspective analysis to align the doctoral researcher's ontological, epistemological, and axiological perspectives with the study methodology and paradigmatic perspective. The philosophical underpinnings necessary for relevant paradigmatic perspectives for dissertation research explored within the chapter illustrate the philosophical debates within the doctoral discipline, which can be confusing and conflicting for new researchers thereby requiring the research supervisor to help navigate doctoral researchers through a coherent path to these decisions. One example, Priniski et al. (2018) stressed this importance and offered steps to (a) ensure concepts are assimilated, (b) provide opportunities for critical reflection and transformation, (c) develop an awareness of personal and professional relative influences, and (d) develop an engaging theoretical basis with an aligned paradigmatic perspective. Likewise, Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) underscored, at minimum, a choice of paradigmatic perspective by the new doctoral researcher must demonstrate methodological and ontological alignment.

Thus, the chapter authors call for more research into clearer models and frameworks to better support new doctoral researchers through the process of selection, alignment, and articulation of the paradigmatic perspective for dissertation research.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Axiology: Axiology involves the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings for values of the discipline, the individual, and/or society as well as ultimately the value for methodological choice within the specific inquiry (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020).

Critical Inquiry: Critical inquiry is defined generally as “research undertaken beyond the theoretical to intentionally engage the political discourse to advance the public good, social justice, power structures, or critical consciousness within a socially-just democratic society” (Throne, 2020, p. 173).

Critical Theory: Developed by theoreticians at the Frankfurt School. Although Horkheimer was the progenitor of critical theory, other theorists of critical theory consisted of Adorno, Benjamin, Fromm, and Marcuse (Horkheimer, 1937; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). While the term has been largely applied particularly to the work of the Frankfurt School, critical theory is generally defined as a lens to critique and confront the social, historical, and ideological frameworks and structures as used across the social sciences and philosophy.

Epistemology: Epistemology is a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how one’s knowledge is acquired, validated, and communicated (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Grounded Theory: Grounded theory is meticulous qualitative method of conducting research in which researchers assemble conceptual scaffolds or theories by way of constructing inductive theoretical examinations from data and successively verifying the notional analyses (Charmaz, 2012).

Ontology: Ontology refers to the nature of one’s beliefs about reality and form the foundation of beliefs that comprise one’s comprehensive worldview (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Social Justice Research: Social justice research involves full and equal participation from within the community of research to achieve the objective and seek truth. Social justice researchers engage self-determination, interdependence, initiative, situate themselves as a transformative agent with a commitment to act in solidarity with others (Throne & Bourke, 2019).

ENDNOTE

- ¹ See Rehman and Alharthi (2016) for an introduction to research paradigms that names a framework for how new investigators across disciplines may examine and specify the study assumptions to align 1) ontology, 2) epistemology, 3) methodology and 4) methods. The article illustrates the selection of a philosophical paradigmatic perspective specific for the construction of a research study by novice researchers.