 Seeking Truth or Promoting Racism?

Comments on
Deconstructing Categories:
The Exposure of Silent Racism

Robert S Michael

Introduction

*Deconstructing Categories: The Exposure of Silent Racism* is written in the form of a research report, beginning with a statement of the question to be investigated, followed by a literature review, methods section (sampling and collection of data from focus groups), results, and conclusion. Form, however, is no guarantee that content qualifies as research.

The distinguishing feature of all inquiry is the search for “what is,” the attempt to describe accurately an actual state of affairs, motivated by a genuine desire to discover truth. “If you aren’t trying to get the truth, you aren’t really inquiring” (Haack, 1996, p. 58). Researchers must be willing to follow the facts wherever they lead, even if the results are contrary to one’s cherished beliefs. Unless one’s goal is pursuit of truth there is no unique and distinct reason for undertaking research. Searle (1994, p. 82) summarizes the nuances: “... we have built the entire university system on the proposition that we are engaged in a search for truth, that this truth concerns a reality that exists independently of our particular motivations and prejudices, that the knowledge claims that we make are objectively testable by the standards of rationality, and that claims to knowledge, if substantiated, will stand on their own.” (endnote 1)

Yet, pursuit of truth is not the motivation for all endeavors that purport to be inquiries. “... [T]here is a deliberate and explicit attempt to politicize the university towards a more left-wing point of view. ... [T]he left-wing ideology in question, unlike earlier left-wing movements in the United States, rests on a rejection

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of rationality, truth, and objectivity” (Searle, 1994, p. 83). Nonetheless, the aura of truth and respectability still clings so strongly to the traditional idea of research that even those who espouse left-wing ideologies, and advocate corresponding political views, seek to clothe their advocacy with the form — if not the substance — of research, in the hope of making their political or philosophical position appear to be supported by research — at least to those unable to distinguish between research and that which only pretends to be.

When search for truth is not the goal of an inquiry, the product is “nothing more than a political agenda cloaked in the trappings of scientific inquiry” (p. 6). The inquirer is committed to the ideological position before undertaking the empirical investigation and will generate only findings that support a predetermined position. (Studies written to support a particular ideological position appear to be occurring with increasing frequency. For example, in 1930 no scholarly articles published in the Proceedings of the Modern Language Association could be identified as politically biased. In 1970, 10 percent of articles were politically (left) biased, and in 1990, 52.5 percent exhibited a left-wing political bias. Similar studies for the social sciences and education remain to be conducted. Given the growing influence of postmodernism in these disciplines, there is no reason to expect markedly different results.)

Haack labels as “sham inquiry” those approaches that do not hold truth as their objective. Nor, as we shall see, is research, as postmodernists, critical theorists, and other contumacious individuals allege, merely an “interpretation” of power relations, valid only for a particular “belief community”; nor is it merely a “linguistic game,” nor are the outcomes merely “social constructions.”

How does the reader determine whether a report is the product of a genuine pursuit of truth, or is instead advocacy “inquiry” or politically motivated “scholarship,” or in Searle’s (1994, p. 84) characterization, nothing other than “politically committed subjectivism”? A definitive answer is impossible of course, for we are unable to read individuals’ thoughts and motivations. But we can make reasonable judgments.

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6. This approach is also advocated in some textbooks, self-described as “education research textbooks.” See, for example: Griffiths, Morwenna. (1998). Educational research for social justice. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
Haack states “the antidote to [such] pseudoinquiry . . . is . . . respect for the demands of evidence and argument it engenders.” In other words, How good is the evidence for the theory? And, What is the status of the theory in the relevant scientific literature? Evidence is generated by specific methods and procedures. Arguments, to be persuasive, must follow the rules of logic. Hence, careful attention to the methods and logic is the basis for judging whether a piece is more likely to be genuine research or sham inquiry. The standing of the theory in the relevant scientific literature and the transparency of the report enter into this judgment.

A hallmark of the researcher whose goal is discovery of the true state of affairs is careful description of measuring instruments, procedures, and methods of analysis. The investigator who searches for truth will encourage others to replicate the findings of a particular study. There is nothing to hide nor any particular position to defend, no favorite interpretation to promote. For the individual whose goal is discovery of truth, replication of results, particularly by those critical of a particular theory or position, is the gold standard. To insure that replication can occur, the investigator states as clearly as possible the public methods used to observe the phenomenon. Researchers focus on public procedures and public methods of analysis. Everything must be accessible to others. Nothing is hidden. Even when the focus of the investigation is introspection (i.e., unspoken thoughts) the methods used to access these thoughts will be described publicly so that other investigators can replicate. This standard applies both to quantitative and qualitative methods.

Stated succinctly, a transparent report is one that describes theory and methods clearly and in sufficient detail that little room for doubt remains: the methods and the logic of the arguments pass the usual tests for truth. In short, replication of results, by even the harshest of critics, is possible. In sham inquiries opacity of method and logic, not transparency, prevails. Replication by critics is not possible.

The collective experience of researchers who search for truth has, over the decades, identified certain pitfalls that may mislead both investigator and reader when interpreting results of an investigation. These pitfalls are discussed in research classes as “threats to internal and external validity.” Only three of the known problems are considered here:

9. The traditional tests for truth include consistency, correspondence, comprehensiveness, simplicity, and so forth.
1. unanticipated and/or unknown factors that may influence the outcome;
2. investigator beliefs and/or expectations that may influence the outcome;
3. participants’ desire to appear socially desirable, and so respond only in ways they consider desirable (i.e., politically correct).

Awareness of the threats to validity, along with knowledge of the additional pitfalls described in research methods textbooks, is essential in order for preventive measures to be incorporated in the research design.

With this background, we focus our attention on a particular article. The initial step in reviewing a research report is to identify the question(s) the author seeks to answer and to evaluate the knowledge claims the author asserts. The remainder of the review is devoted to answering the following questions:

- First, Did the author review appropriate literature(s) and synthesize so that the reader can grasp easily the similarities and differences among cited theorists and/or theoretical constructs?
- Second, transparency is one of the hallmarks of research conducted by individuals whose goal is to discover “what is” rather than to interpret or generate data to support a particular position. Hence, an important question is, Does transparency exist in the research report? “Transparency is achieved by including full data sets, analytic and/or coding scripts, [transcription rules, and, when possible], relevant software in order to facilitate replication studies and secondary analysis.”
- Third, if transparency does not exist, how can the reader know whether the author is willing to follow truth wherever it leads via logical relations? Is the author seeking truth or instead, presenting a particular point of view, an interpretation, clothed as “research”?
- Fourth, Did the author actually answer the question(s) posed?
- And finally, is the methodology used suitable for answering the author’s research question(s)?

While each of these points is important, not all will be discussed in the following sections.

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12. Editorial Statement. *Journal of Technology, Learning, and Assessment*. Retrieved July 2002, http://jtla.com. The statement continues: “From our perspective, transparency in research aims to make the process of research, including data collection, coding, and analysis, clearly visible to all readers. While the peer-review process provides careful scrutiny of research as it is described in a manuscript, transparency in research provides readers full access to the data, methodology (including coding and analysis scripts), and whenever possible, tools used to analyze data. The end goal is to make research as open, understandable, and clearly replicable as possible.”