



Delivering on Poststructural Ontologies: Epistemological Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce and clarify the logic of the ensuing group of three papers, which derive from a graduate seminar I taught in spring 2011 that engaged research strategies as they connect with particular strands of poststructural ontological principles. Reflecting research at different stages, the three papers nonetheless converge on non-essentialist, non-totalizing, non-relativist, ground up research strategies to identify, problematize, contextualize, and explain multiple, often conflicting truths. This article also seeks to clarify the intellectual heritage of the critical epistemology embraced here and in the ensuing articles, specifically tapping Foucauldian thinking and poststructuralist feminism.

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The following articles read differently because there is no blueprint for the type of research they pursue. The articles filter issues surrounding the ontological-epistemological connection through each author's research, and each author emphasizes different types of issues. The general objectives are to make explicit the ontologies underlying one's research, and to develop research strategies that connect with, and deliver on, those principles. The group of articles presents research in different stages. Chris Riley's article looks back to primary and secondary data collection and analysis that had been completed, and Nick Crane's



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and Christine Biermann's articles discuss data collection and analysis that were in progress at the time they wrote their articles. All the articles explicitly pursue strategies to concretely resolve epistemological challenges posed by provocative ontological principles.

The ensuing articles converge on the non-essentialist, ontological principle that there exist multiple realities, as opposed to a singular Truth. Epistemologically, the articles present research strategies that move in different directions and permit a view of multiple, possibly divergent approaches. Riley recounts his dissertation field research that critically examined how the federal policy No Child Left Behind (NCLB) plays out in complex ways in classrooms as teachers pursue a variety of strategies – both constructive and destructive – in response to NCLB pressures. Biermann scrutinizes the meaning of the American chestnut tree with reference to its social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological contexts, and connects the multiple meanings while preserving the integrity of each. Crane is interested in the multiple representations of 1968 in Mexico City, and how these different representations delimit contemporary political possibilities.

The three articles in different ways engage *messiness*. In an interesting synthesis of poststructural science and technology studies (STS), John Law (2004) pointed out that research engaging a multiplicity of truths lacks the tidiness of modernist research; it is “messy” (see also Latour, 2005, on the “messiness” of research). At issue, then, is how to engage the challenges.

From a specifically geographic vantage point, all three articles embrace a non-Euclidean sense of space. Although often understood in ontological terms (e.g., Allen, 2011), thinking about space topologically in the design of research becomes an epistemological matter. Michel Foucault (2000a), for example, was interested in localizing problems (in non-Euclidean, not Cartesian, terms relative to different sectors of society such as prisons, the army, education, and so on) to observe similar patterns of behavior across these different contexts, reflecting complex and intersecting processes of governance. In her article, Biermann discusses how she pursues the construction and articulation of nature across space, across multiple axes of difference. Crane pursues the topology of a state-sponsored massacre in Mexico City in 1968 as it articulates with other events and processes across time and space, before and after 1968 and well beyond the Cartesian coordinates of the massacre; his article focuses specifically on the vital role of a non-Euclidean sense of space for research strategy. Riley follows the contours of a federally conceived policy across different scales of government (from the federal level to the school district) and into different schools and classrooms to clarify the mixed effects and variation in policy and pedagogical trajectories.

In pursuing these various topologies, all the authors proceed without presuming outcomes or predicting behaviors. Crucially, this approach is not to be

confused with a strictly inductive, grounded approach, which can be positivist² or relativist. Beyond rejecting the idea that a singular truth awaits ‘discovery,’ all the ensuing articles depart from relativism and strive to *explain* multiplicity and tensions relative to a non-Euclidean contextualization.

Whether poststructural research should be descriptive or explanatory is contested. Some would say that poststructural approaches should be descriptive to adequately represent a variety of voices and avoid imposing a particular perspective (e.g. Ellingson, 2009). Bruno Latour (2005) has argued that description need not be ‘mere description’ if it is understood as non-neutral and mediated – itself a translation across a network of mediated relations.³ For Latour, the drive to mimic the sciences by trying to ‘explain’ is unnecessary, and moreover, focuses on broad social forces while missing the details. Yet there are ways to approach explanation without recourse to grand narratives, which preordain outcomes and overlook details that bespeak messy realities. The heritage for explanatory frameworks in poststructural research is itself untidy; in particular, I call attention here to Foucauldian-oriented analysis and particular strands of feminist theory.

Foucault’s research on governance aimed at non-totalizing explanation in terms of a “pluralization of causes” pertaining to multiple processes across a network of relations (Foucault, 1998; 2000a, 2000b, 2007). In this vein, Biermann’s article explains the restoration of the American chestnut tree with reference to the intersections of racial biologies, class divisions, national identity, and the political, economic, and environmental histories of Appalachia. Foucault’s (1980a) analytical framework entailed what he called ‘ascending analysis’ – a critical response to structural Marxist ‘descending analysis,’ which begins with theory and selects cases to support the theory; in descending analysis, data that diverge from predictions of theory become inconsequential in a move that can mask minority politics (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) or clues regarding the possibility of transformative change. Foucault (1980a, 99) argued against attempting “... some kind of deduction of power starting from its centre and aimed at the discovery of the extent to which it permeates into the base, of the degree to which it reproduces itself down to and including the most molecular elements of society.” He suggested in contrast, “One must rather conduct an *ascending* analysis of power, starting... from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonized,

² Postivism is often connected with the hypothetico-deductive method, although it also can follow inductive reasoning; see, for example, Brody (1970) for a wide range of approaches to positivist research and discussion surrounding those approaches.

³ Latour (2005) argued strongly that ‘mediator’ should replace ‘intermediator’ because the latter implies a value-neutral interaction; mediation is crucial toward understanding acts of translation and transformation. The term ‘actor-network’ derives from the view that research should deploy actors as networks of mediation.

utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc., by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination” (Foucault, 1980a, 99). Analysis begins with localized practices and then connects with a wide array of societal organizations, institutions, and discourses to explain how particular regimes of practices emerged, developed, and connect with other regimes of practices. Riley explicitly used ascending analysis to question the dominant, unilaterally negative view of NCLB in critical studies, which has been based on aggregated data and examined in ‘descending’ fashion. His ascending approach entailed examination of actual practices in classrooms to explain local adaptations of a discourse conceived at the national scale and translated differently across scales of governance.

The Foucauldian framework is, however, one part of a larger heritage of non-totalizing, non-relativist explanatory analysis. Independently yet similarly, feminists such as Sandra Harding (e.g., 1990, 1991, 1995; see also 2004) and Donna Haraway (1988) have argued strongly against relativism, and also begin analysis ‘on the ground’ and connect with larger-scale processes. Like Foucault, Harding clarified that everyday life is the starting, not the end, point. She emphasized the need to “start from the lives excluded as origins of their design – from ‘marginal lives’... to explain not only those lives but also the rest of the micro and macro social order, including human interactions with nature and the philosophies that have developed to explain sciences” (Harding, 1995, 342).

Contra feminist scholars who privilege and implicitly essentialize the knowledges of the oppressed, and women in particular, Harding, in part as a response to misinterpretations of her expression of standpoint theory, clarified that the particular strand of standpoint theory she embraces neither privileges nor essentializes any group of people.⁴ Relatedly, as Gill Valentine (2007) has pointed out, the theory of intersectionality that has developed in feminist scholarship – that gender cannot be stripped away from race, class, sexuality and a variety of axes of difference – has various connotations. Whereas some theorists of intersectionality implicitly rank types of difference and thereby implicitly essentialize certain categories and groups of people, others are self-conscious about implicit hierarchies and depart from such ordering. These differences reflect Riley’s conceptual journey: his field strategy led him to question his earlier presumptions that certain categories of people relative to the policy hierarchy were more important or privileged than others. Specifically, at the outset of his research he implicitly presumed that specifically *local* actors represented the oppressed and that ‘oppositional consciousness’ (Sandoval, 2000) would be ‘located’ in this group. His use of ascending analysis revealed considerably more complexity at all scales

⁴ Harding developed what is variously called ‘standpoint epistemology’ and ‘standpoint theory,’ which evolved into an internally heterogeneous body of literature; see for example the edited collection *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* (Harding, 2004). While critics of standpoint theory/epistemology have argued that it is essentialist, Harding (e.g. 1991, 1995) has maintained that her view is resolutely non-essentialist. Further, ‘strong objectivity,’ which she links with Haraway’s (1988) ‘situated knowledges’ is a critical dimension of her version of standpoint theory (Harding 1991, 1995).

than he had anticipated, and prompted a conceptual, non-essentialist revision. Recognizing the variety of pitfalls of intersectionality, feminist legal scholar Trino Grillo (1995, 22) advocated approaches to anti-essentialism and intersectionality that "... define complex experiences as closely to their full complexity as possible and ... [do] not ignore voices at the margin." This broadly construed and anti-essentialist approach to intersectionality resembles both Harding's approach to standpoint theory as well as Foucault's (1980b, 138) concern for beginning with "this point of view of the plebs, the point of view of the underside and limit of power, [which] is... indispensable for an analysis of its apparatuses (*dispositifs*); this is the starting point for understanding its functioning and developments." What Foucault meant by 'the plebs' was not a particular group of people in a neopopulist sense, but rather the daily life of everyday citizen-subjects. Biermann's approach is fundamentally intersectional and non-essentialist in a relational approach to meanings and practices surrounding the American chestnut restoration with reference to an array of axes of difference across different moments in history. Similarly, Crane treats the approaches of different positionalities associated with Mexico City's 1968 as unordered but interwoven through dispersed practices that exceed the circumscribed space-time of the Tlatelolco Massacre.

Although these approaches to multiple truths are ways to make sense of what Law (2004) called 'messy' realities, crucially, there are other epistemological challenges. Specifically, Law (2004) also clarified that the political content of research renders *research practices* 'messy.' However, his trenchant critique frustratingly stops short of constructively engaging such mess.

Research practices can become politicized intentionally as in the case of participatory action research (PAR) (e.g., Kindon *et al.*, 2007; Klodawsky, 2007; Fraser and Wenginger, 2008) and/or in light of the power relations that lace interactions. Riley discusses how his original intentions towards PAR dissolved in a balancing act between his values and normative goals with the practical demands of his field research, such as the necessity of obtaining consent from people in positions of authority (e.g., school district officials, principals, teachers) who were in a position, and possibly inclined, to obstruct access to teachers and students. He nonetheless did manage to coordinate a small intervention regarding a particular destructive pedagogical strategy, but the project overall took a different direction than initially intended as the political 'mess' unfolded – a not uncommon feature of field research.

Another type of mess in research practice pertains to the way in which researchers engage conflicting data. Conventional 'triangulation' poses a dilemma because it is incompatible with non-totalizing and non-essentialist principles. The objective in triangulation is to use different field strategies (e.g., interviews, focus groups, archives) as checks on each other to arrive at a singular truth. Alternatively, 'crystallization' accepts and indeed pursues multiple realities. Developing Laurel Richardson's (1994) early conceptualization of crystallization, Laura Ellingson (2009) further shifted attention from the triangle to the crystal as a

metaphor for how research should be strategized. Rather than aiming at singular validation, the central objective is to document multiple realities, notably with the use of multiple genres of representation (e.g., autoethnography, photography, poetry, field notes, grounded analysis, narratives from interviews, and so on). This multifaceted approach is consistent with emergent trends in geography that have opened up possibilities and opportunities for hitherto unconventional ways of presenting research; consider, for example, the discussion on the Critical Geography Forum (CRIT-GEOG-FORUM@JISCMail.AC.UK, June 25-26, 2011) regarding the inclusion of videos in academic journals.

Epistemological frameworks such as crystallization are in their relative infancy, and there is much to discuss. For example, Ellingson's mandate for descriptive documentation is, as I have indicated, contested. Further, I would suggest that Ellingson implicitly reified multiple-genre research, and in the process, her rendition of crystallization implicitly becomes an enrollment of different methods with the potential to lose sight of the purpose of multiple methods at the outset. Different modes of representation can construct similar realities, and any one research strategy (e.g. interviews) can produce either a singular truth or a multiplicity of truths depending on researchers' self-awareness, approach to interviews, and the like. The idea of crystallization – recognizing and actively pursuing different perspectives, realities, truths – is appealing, as is openness to multiple genres of presentation. Yet I would argue that the important take-away message should be multiple-genre research as an enabling possibility, not a mandate; the quality of a strategy of crystallization does not necessarily improve as the number of methods increases. More fruitfully, the mandate should be an approach to research that accepts conflicting data by any one of a number of methods, or combination of methods, for the purpose of problematization – a principle argued in Riley's article. Although all the authors of the ensuing articles did use more than one method, none of the authors used a wide variety of methods. More importantly, they all used a few methods with the explicit goal of revealing multiple realities and engaging the divergences. Riley's double-edged research strategy entailed analysis of policy documents emanating from different scales of governance to detect translations and possibilities for adaptations of a federally-conceived policy, followed by ethnographic field work in a particular school district to examine the multiple and often incoherent pedagogical strategies on the ground, in classrooms. Biermann uses interviews and participant observation in a variety of contexts to pursue a relational, intersectional, and historical view of multiple, often conflicting realities. Crane combines archival research and ethnographic field work to reveal the fragility of different, contradictory narratives surrounding 1968 as well as the historical geographic unit(s) in which such narratives are situated.

Both Biermann and Crane engage a relational approach not only to multiple truths at a particular time, but also to the past and present. Rather than use a particular method such as archival and ethnographic research as 'containers' of the

past and present, respectively, a more processual approach casts the present in terms of the past, and explains the present relative to historical processes to develop complementary and relational knowledges about the present and the past. Consider, for example, Foucault's (2000a, 244) comments about his historical research:

"... I don't depend on a continuous and systematic body of background data... I haven't written a single book that was not inspired, at least in part, by a direct personal experience." Katherine Gibson's (2001) study of the Latrobe Valley also exemplifies how the past and present articulate; she used narratives of three people from a focus group and then explained the nature of the narratives by engaging critical historical moments in the construction of the region in which those people lived. Biermann's article in this issue similarly takes current narratives and roots them in important historical moments, such as the spread of the chestnut blight in Appalachia in the early 1900s and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In different ways both Crane's and Biermann's articles examine how events of the past become transformed into and through everyday practices of the present, and also how those historical moments connect with preceding events. Crane brings a fresh analytical approach to the burgeoning literature on the politics of memory, and Biermann more generally shows how apparently disparate historical moments cohere in a multidimensional understanding of a particular phenomenon, the not-quite-American chestnut tree.

The project of this introduction to the ensuing interventions has been to frame them in terms of the epistemological demands of poststructural ontologies. The heritage of the critical epistemology discussed here is 'messy' insofar as there is no single origin, but rather, "multiple beginnings" – a phrase used by Foucault (1998, 374) in his discussion of presenting history, specifically genealogical analysis. My intention is to name a few beginnings, notably Foucauldian thinking and particular strands of poststructural feminism, recognizing that there be many more.

The connection between Foucault's scholarship and feminist theory overall is complex. Some feminists have criticized Foucault's scholarship notably on governance during the 1970s because it lacks attention to the issues of agency, subjectivity, and critical normative thought (e.g., Fraser, 1981; Hartsock, 1990). However, Foucault's ethical shift in the early 1980s (e.g., Foucault, 1988, 1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2000c, 2004, 2007) recognized by other feminists (e.g., Taylor and Vintges, 2004) emphasized agency and subjectivity. Other feminists have long valued Foucault's contribution regarding discourse and his historical epistemology (e.g. Ferguson, 1991; McWhorter, 2009; Sawicki, 1991; Scott, 1988; Stone, 2005). Extending positive connections between Foucault and poststructural feminism, I have suggested that self-consciously non-essentialist standpoint and intersectional

feminist theories converge with Foucauldian thought in terms of a critical epistemology, the fruits of which are a ground up, multiscalar approach that is neither totalizing nor relativist, and overall a means by which to engage and explain messy realities.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank David Butz, Lawrence Berg, and all the reviewers for their thoughtful commentaries and constructive suggestions.

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