

Mimi Corcoran
EDRS 797 Summer 2012
Module 1
Paradigm Reflection Memo

These questions have sent my head reeling thinking about what I should have thought about for a long time. It is akin to the painting of a man who is painting a man who is painting a man, ad infinitum. How do I think? How do I know? Why do I think the way I do? How do I get knowledge? Why do I believe some things and dismiss others? What causes my thinking or believing to change? What does this tell me about my view of the world and how I interact with it and its other occupants? How will my views, my perspectives, my experiences, and my paradigms play roles in my research endeavors? I surely do not have all of these answers; but, the self-analysis I have been mulling the last couple of weeks has at least given me a starting point.

The subject of ontology takes me back to the introductory psychology course from my freshman undergraduate year. I remember writing about only taking the next step (literally) because I believed there was a floor beneath me. I believed it existed. My reality was that it existed. I did not believe that I was standing on the edge of a huge cavernous wasteland, or even a small one, which was deftly disguised as a harmless floor and that my next step would possibly be a fatal fall into an eternal abyss. I saw the floor; I had experienced floors previously and I believed the floor was there. Given the special effects of the movies these days, and technologies which enable floors to light up, retract, vibrate, spin around, tilt and more, if I was a college freshman now, I probably would have a different view of that floor. But, really, what if I was wrong? That would mean that what I saw was not real and I could not trust my own senses. Then, logic would have no meaning either. That thought makes me cringe.

While I believe that there is more going on in this world than anyone could ever comprehend, I function based on my senses. What I can see, hear, touch or otherwise experience is what is real to me. However, I do believe in some things whose existence cannot be proven or reduced to explanation in some formulaic manner. These would include God, the strength of familial bonds, true love, the transformation which occurs when becoming a parent, and the healing power of a positive attitude. I do not believe that anyone can communicate with deceased persons, nor do I put any stock in astrology, numerology, psychics, or any others of the soothsayer ilk. I find that all to be illogical nonsense.

I exist in a physical world with its laws of physics, changing weather, ever-expanding technology and other human beings. Of these, humans are the most unpredictable. I sometimes wonder why I did some of the things I have done in the past. Hindsight is 20-20, of course. I also wrestle with being different people in different scenarios. I do not mean simply that being quiet in church and telling a joke at a party is ok but the reverse would get you labeled as a disrespectful clod in the first case and socially inept in the second. I mean that everyone has different aspects of their personalities which come to the fore in differing circumstances. Gravity always works the same way. People do not. I am moderately comfortable asking questions in my GMU classes, although I will admit to pangs of fear at appearing stupid. However, when I am in a room with 800+ other Calculus teachers, as I will be this coming week, raising my hand and yelling a question out is not going to happen.

So, I think that existence does not need to be completely explainable, such as chemical reactions, but existence does need to be symbolized somehow, maybe just by a word. Actually, I need existence to be symbolized. Who knows what God looks like or if seeing is even sensible when experiencing God? We do, however, have many artists' renderings. Who knows what true

love looks like or smells like? Can the feeling ever truly be completely described? Well, we have little red hearts, wedding rings, hallmark cards, and insurance policies as representations. For me, some representations are not physical at all; they are imprinted in my mind and they evolve as I grow. They are embodied there but they defy explanation through language. I just know them.

In my view, knowledge is the result of experiences. I learn from my physical experiences as well as my mental experiences. I have heard people say that “you never know what love is until you have a child.” I would argue that love is not the private territory of those who procreate. A childless person does not experience paternal/maternal love, but I am not willing to assume that they cannot understand it, know what it would feel like, or even ache for it. And, there are many other kinds of love. Is one type better or greater than another?

Experiences do not infer active involvement. I do not have to experience poverty to know what poverty is; but, I do not know the experience of poverty. I do not have to hate to know what hate is; but, I do not experience the feeling of actually hating. I can be exuberant at an American athlete winning an Olympic gold medal; but, I do not know the thrill of actually standing on the dais and hearing the Star Spangled Banner being played. Tears still roll down my face as I watch on television, though.

When I was younger, I thought that if a person worked hard and was honest, she would do well. Once my scope of life extended beyond my parochial school, I saw that some honest, hard-working people never achieved the success they desired and some very successful people were lazy and dishonest. I was angry and confused. All of those Aesop’s fables which I had read had assured me that goodness was rewarded and evil was punished. My little equation for success had just been disproved. Likewise, as I began to travel both throughout the USA and

abroad (I actually have lived in three other countries: Germany, Canada and Wales), my experiences gave me a much clearer world perspective and changed my views on a number of issues.

A few years ago, I would have described myself as a post-positivist. I saw the world as comprised of quantitative stuff and that other “fuzzy” stuff. I was not denigrating the fuzzy stuff; I just did not understand it and had not been exposed to its value and breadth of usability. I yearned for accuracy and order and, as Greene (2007, p. 183) describes, “to be able to explain, and thus control and predict the external social world.” The existence of the fuzzy stuff, while I was aware of it, was not something which (I thought) was applicable to my work as an oceanographer (I was an oceanographer before I switched careers to teaching). It is somewhat disconcerting to admit that I thought that qualitative research was something which was not of much use to a mathematician. I did appreciate the value of qualitative research and actually marveled at the complexity, thoughtfulness and insightfulness of it. However, I continued to think of myself as a “quantitative person.” Thankfully, I can now laugh at myself. Perhaps I should be embarrassed at my ignorance; but, on the contrary, I am glad to be in a position to admit that I was short-sighted, uninformed and completely devoid of understanding how qualitative research can be an extremely powerful tool for all researchers, even stubborn mathematicians. My experiences informed my knowledge base.

Today, I have difficulty compartmentalizing myself as an advocate of solely one paradigm. I am glad of this, too. Being not too quick to jump up and say, “oh, that’s me,” I think is indicative of my growth. I see value now in what I previously did not understand. However, the paradigm which most closely fits me is scientific realism, and not just because of the word scientific. I am drawn to the idea that there are many pragmatisms “stemming from

different disciplinary roots of the original pragmatists and from different topics they engaged in their work” (Greene, 2007, p. 83). This paradigm recognizes the need for many perspectives dependent upon situation and goals. One-size-fits-all does not seem very realistic to me.

Mathematicians have a special symbol to indicate existence, the backward capital E, that is, \exists . As a variation of the currently popular phrase, “there’s an app for that,” I see scientific realism as saying, “there’s a paradigm for that” or, for the mathematicians, “ \exists a paradigm for that.” As I think about my personal evolution as a teacher, I know that I had social, intangible, “fuzzy” aspects of my students, the classroom dynamics, school culture, student relationships, etc. in my mind and these greatly affected my actions. For the life of me, I cannot comprehend why I did not realize the importance I placed on those when dealing with my classes. I’m a qualitative person; I have been all along. I just never knew it. I am still a quantitative person but now I know I am qualitative, too. The idea of mixing methods, including my own perspectives, including narratives in addition to *p*-values and *t*-tests, is enormously appealing. The numbers themselves cannot possibly give a complete description of human phenomena.

My “discovery” of mixed methods has been cathartic. I had thought that mixed methods meant that you addressed research question #1 in a qualitative manner and you addressed research question #2 in a quantitative manner. I realize I risk sounding obtuse here; but, reflections are supposed to be truthful and personal. I consider myself to be a reasonably intelligent person; so, I am mystified that my thinking on mixed methods was so limited. Although I find it daunting, it is energizing to realize that the methods can be mixed and complimentary and mutually supportive and so much more for the same research questions. Why did I not realize that? It is more than a little humbling.

At times, when reading our class assignments, I get to the bottom of the page and ask myself what I just read. I have found that I need to read some of the passages multiple times. The theoretical ideas become more understandable for me when we discuss a real case. There is my need for symbolizing or representation again. The real life, the tangible examples, help me to understand theory; but, I also gain so much from the criticisms we discuss in class. I am getting rid of the mindset that if something is published, especially by a recognized expert, that it is correct in every way.

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods and approaches are exciting ideas for me because I have learned something about which I knew practically nothing. I certainly appreciate that I am a rank beginner and have so very much to learn. But, I know that I want to learn more about it. I look forward to reading and discussing actual mixed methods studies so that I can learn how they methods support each other. In thinking of my classroom scenarios, I can see many layers to students' interactions, motivations and successes. Each child is more than a summary of class grades and attendance figures just as I am much more than a source of equations, weird symbols, and numerous stories on how math is used in everyday life. Getting at the whole story, how facets of school and home life, teenage angst, (lack of) maturity, social pressures, learning styles, et. al., interact is what I am after.

I think it may be a common human trait; but, even if it is not, I will admit to dismissing or disliking things which I do not understand or things which I do not know. I do not dislike history because I cannot eloquently discuss the leadership skills of Attila the Hun; but, I did think that I would not like qualitative research, and by extension, mixed methods research. I was wrong. I was very wrong. And, I was wrong because I really did not know what these things were. I had

not experienced them. The existence of what they really are was outside of my knowledge collective.

In the Jeter vs. Everett article, the James (2008) told a story, peppered with personal humor; he included quantitative data to support his seemingly exhaustive variety of approaches in comparing the two shortstop players. I am not a big baseball fan; but, I enjoyed reading the article because of the narrative approach and the personality which came through the writing.

My fears are, not surprisingly, making mistakes and overlooking important considerations. I think of a story about a young wife who was preparing a ham to bake. She cut off both ends and placed the three pieces in the roasting pan. Her new husband asked why she had cut the ham. She replied that that is how her mother taught her to bake a ham. So, the young man asked his mother-in-law why she cut a ham and she replied that that was how her mother had taught her. So, he asked his mother-in-law's mother why she cut the ham in three pieces. She replied, "to fit it in the pan." I want to use a path for a purpose, not because "that's the way it's always been done." But where are the paths? Where are the rules?

I waver continuously. One day I think I am really starting to "get it," and the next day I bemoan that I will never understand or be able to navigate the complex and dynamic web of qualitative research, let alone a combination of this beast with quantitative methods. I fully "get" math equations, theorems and logic. That is what I want. I want that with mixed methods, too. Although my mind knows that is not possible, my heart still hopes. We all agree that $1+2=3$; but, experts in mixed methods do not all agree on facets of research. There is no rule book.

In the 1997 puzzle adventure game Riven (the sequel to Myst), I quickly realized that the natives used a number system based on 5, not 10. Oh, now there is my contentment zone. I figured out the rules, I know how to proceed. I can predict with reasonable accuracy. This is

also what makes me so uncomfortable with qualitative research and by extension, mixed methods. Not only have I not figured out the rules, I now know that “the rules” can change and adapt and maybe there aren’t any rules for a situation.

I remember my final project for EDRS 812. I was so intent on finding the themes that I was scouring every sentence. I finally stopped and just read my research without highlighters, post-it notes or a pencil. I found that the themes just jumped out at me. I think this may be an approach which will help me with mixed methods research, too. Weisner (2005) questions how we can maximize the opportunities for children’s success unless we holistically study the pathways. I am thinking that the same applies to my own success in research. Being intent on finding rules, on avoiding making mistakes (from which I could learn and perhaps discover), and on thoroughness as much as humanly possible, would be so limiting. I would miss the connecting stories, the advantage of multiple perspectives, and, perhaps, even the human face of my research. So, I have learned that I want to breathe in the macro view first and get that full, holistic look. And, I do think of this as a dynamic picture, not a static road map; it is full of stories, contradictions, pitfalls, discoveries, joys, frustrations, and more than I now know.

References

Greene, J. C. (2007). *Mixed methods in social inquiry*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Weisner, T. S. (2005). *Discovering successful pathways in children's development: Mixed methods in the study of childhood and family life*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

James, W. (2008). *Jeter vs. Everett*. Retrieved from

<http://www.billjamesonline.net/fieldingbible/jeter.asp>