I have rewritten this first paragraph about a dozen times as I debate in my mind what my own ontological and epistemological views are. I do not know why I find these concepts so confusing, but I realize that, after my multiple drafts, the reason I am having such a difficult time diving into these two conceptual definitions is because of the dynamic and fluid nature of my perception of ontology/epistemology. Despite three years in the doctoral program and an additional two earning my Master’s degree, I find my understanding of the world and how it operates to change more frequently than I could possibly keep track. As I begin to frame this internal debate in the realm of mixed methods research and paradigms, I find myself confronting an old friend, the voice of Mike the Teacher, that constantly and consistently prods and pokes at my mind, telling me that no matter how hard I try, how much I research, it will matter for naught because of the divide between researchers and teachers, as we discussed after the Sandelowski article. This divide has become the very center of my own perception of academic research and paradigms.

Fortunately, our discussions and exploration of Greene have helped me to understand that this divide, a mental wall that I have created between the world of academia and the world of practitioner, is a fabrication of my own fears. My background has always been a place of doing, accomplishing, and problem solving, and I worry that by fully enveloping myself in the world of academia, I will forever tarnish my connection to the life of professional educator. As a result of our discussion on alternative paradigms, I have developed an appreciation and desire to further investigate the ideas of pragmatism and realism as they attempt to explain both the existence of the world around us as well as how we form and understand knowledge within that construction.
Ontologically, I perceive the world to be a realist construction, one that is heavily influenced by the interactions, emotions, beliefs, and perceptions of the actors within a studied phenomenon. Despite any attempt to create objective observation, I agree with Greene, “Social inquirers cannot attain complete ‘objective’ knowledge of this real world because all theories are grounded in a particular perspective and world view” (85). Despite attempts by social inquirers to discover Truth (capital T), it is simply not possible because of the chaotic nature of humanity and its interactions on the world. We create our own understanding of the world that is based on our values, experience, and existence within a much larger, much more complex system. As a result of this interpretation of the world, the goal of research should not be to discover the Truth of any situation, but an understanding of the process and how that process influences each actor’s interactions within a system.

My perception of the world, one of chaos where truth and understanding can change on a whim depending on multiple influences, variables, and unrecognizable events, leads me to believe that definitive knowledge and understanding of our world and systems within that world cannot truly exist. **OK, but the problem is with the term “definitive.”** Certainly “knowledge and understanding of our world” is possible; it is simply never “objective” or absolute. Instead, my epistemological views are that of understanding and comprehending the process of actors engaging with the system around them. While we will not be able to definitively predict and account for every event within our world, we can begin to understand how events unfold, how the people within these events perceive and react to their world, and how we can influence that process to improve the experience of future actors. ☺

My ontology and epistemology are driven by my personal experiences and professional expectations. In my personal life, my father instilled in me the idea that the world is not
constructed on a simple scale of right and wrong, black and white. He raised me to believe that the world is a sliding scale of gray that changes depending on an infinite number of variables that are unpredictable and complex. Ironically, I believe these discussions with my father when I was younger developed a deep desire within me to truly understand how and why we have come to define our existence in the way we have. 😊 A great example of this, and I believe part of the reason I personally love teaching the history of various cultures, was the debate I had with myself over defining the sky as blue. Every answer I received was different, whether it was the scientific explanation, the reflective conversation over the type of blue, or the roots of the word blue. As I grew older, I believe my perception of the sky helped to shape who I am as a researcher, unconvinced of the sky’s color as anything more than a socially constructed device that changes based on the person giving the answer or their experiences restructuring the answer they gave. Ronald Giere's book *Scientific Perspectivism* has a good discussion of why color perception can't possibly be "objective," because of the wide variety of color perception mechanisms across species and individuals (some people and species have four types of cones in their eyes, which allows them to distinguish colors that look the same to three-cone individuals).

This influence continued into my professional life as an educator, finding it difficult to treat every situation and every child as right or wrong, black or white. Each child is, by their very nature, a chaotic system where ‘T’ruth will never actually be discovered. Every child is comprised of so many complex variables that we should strive to understand the process of those variables interacting to help explain the child, not to solve the problems they encounter. OK, but I wouldn't necessarily frame this in terms of "variables."

Due to this ontological and epistemological belief, I find the great quantitative/qualitative wars in the Social Sciences to be extremely frustrating. So do I. If our goal as Social Scientists is
to explain and understand how the world operates, how people perceive those operations, and how we can better explain those perceptions, how can we truly dedicate ourselves as researchers to one set of methods or paradigms? Instead, we should better assess and respond to the needs of the problem and the subjects to ensure that we truly encompass and understand their perception of the problem, not what we imagining it to be or how we frame it to be. This belief over doing what works and not dedicating myself to any set paradigm or methodological constraints is extremely inviting. By embracing pragmatism, or at least embracing some important elements of pragmatism, such as the “attention to transactions and interactions; to the consequential, contextual, and dynamic nature of character of knowledge”, I can use various research methodologies to develop an understanding of the structure of the world as I perceive it, through the lens of a realist that believes a chaotic system is in place where we are examining a moment in time, not a definitive explanation of an occurrence, where the actors’ perception influences our understanding as much as their actions upon that system help us develop an explanation of the process (Greene, 85). Additionally, I find pragmatism supports my desire to provide research that is applicable and practical to practitioners. An extremely large component of my internal struggle between practitioner and researcher is my perception and belief that, while research does occur, it does little to influence the lives of teachers in any discernable way that impacts their students. By providing research that dismisses the importance of logical and paradigmatic compatibility and instead chooses to focus on practical compatibility that is reflective of the system and subjects being researched, I can develop an understanding of the world that is applicable and meaningful to teachers, cognizant of the chaotic and transient nature of a child’s emotions, beliefs, and values.
As I begin formulating the foundation of my dissertation and future research, I believe that my pragmatic-realism view on ontology and epistemology are both beneficial and dangerous towards research. I am confident that my views are beneficial because they enable me to think of the practitioner, the student, the parents, and all of the actors involved in the complex system of education. My perception, being grounded in my own experience in education, affords me the ability to analyze and investigate problems within the system with a discerning eye that recognizes just how chaotic and challenging educating can be for all parties involved. This perception is, I believe, helpful in addressing problems and attempting to solve them in a manner that will be reflective of the various lenses and perceptions applied to the problem. Due to the challenging nature of education, it requires a lens that is flexible and capable of perceiving education from multiple angles and different constructions of reality, allowing for the mixing of various research methods to uncover the process behind a social problem.

While I believe this flexibility and unique perspective is beneficial, I also believe it becomes my greatest validity threat and my greatest fear at the same time. I worry that many researchers will not recognize or respect my perspective and analysis because of my emotional connection and desire to frame research in a manner that is communicable and connectible to practitioners. I'm not sure that this is a real problem (as opposed to a subjective perception). There's a lot of respected research that takes this view. I worry that my approach to mixed methods in this manner becomes a validity threat because, rather than combine methods that are traditionally or paradigmatically compatible, I desire to employ methods that are chosen because of their ability to help interpret and understand a problem, regardless of their potential conflict. I'm not sure what you see as a "potential conflict." Additionally, I am concerned that, as an educator, my proximity to and perception of educators is positively flawed and will lead to
incorrect analysis of problems. Even if this were a serious problem (and I don't think it is), there are ways of dealing with it.

These are challenging conceptual and theoretical issues that I am constantly wrestling with. My interpretation of the nature of reality and role we play in shaping it continues to mold itself on daily basis as I continue engaging with the material in my courses, my own research, and my own experiences. As a person who prefers action to patience, I am sometimes conflicted about my own role in educational research, concerned that the time necessary to accurately describe and understand a problem fails to quickly and readily address the situation for those already involved in the problem. As we discussed in class, I recognize that doing research well, even if it takes decades, will help many more people than a quick intervention poorly designed and implemented, but I still face a crisis of conscious about the students I see on a daily basis and how what I am doing now may never influence their lives. I am not sure that any amount of discussion, reflection, or research will ever eliminate this concern, but at the same time, I’m not sure that I ever want to this concern to disappear, because I believe it remains a core element of who I am as a researcher and a practitioner. True; it's a real dilemma and tradeoff, and in any particular situation, “it depends.”

Mike:

Nice work on this. Keep wrestling with these issues.

Grade: A