**GEG7120: Geographical Thought and Practice: a reminder of ontological and epistemological variety in scholarship**

This brief document aims to recap why ontology/epistemology matters in the process of doing research – what is out there to know about? It also positions methodlogy at the intersection of ontology and espitemology: as a way of pegging into part II of the Semester after Reading Week.

There are many different ways of thinking ‘about’ research, or in more formal terms, ‘the production of knowledge’. In Thomas Kuhn’s *The structure of scientific revolutions*, first published 1962, objective (scientific) knowledge about the world is organised within “paradigms”. These constitute the dominant world-view in science. A paradigm is a sort of ‘settled’ version of what is taken to be the nature of the social or natural world (an accepted ontology) and how we should know about this (a dominant epistemology). You can see how such ‘settlement’ might last for a while, and then eventually be challenged and forced to reform itself.

That usually happens when anomalies are found (perhaps even in your own research) – things that don’t fit within the dominant paradigm.

This is a process that is intensely political as well – people are committed to their world-view – they have invested in it and can’t easily change. There will be hostility, defensiveness and denial before anything changes.

Geography has gone through a number of paradigm shifts and it seems that they increasingly over- lay each other.

In summary, these paradigm shifts can be summarised through the following statements:

1. The world can be described.
2. The world can be measured, and spatial patterns allow us to generate theory about the

world.

1. The world is shaped by the nature of culture, and particularly language, and that reflects

power relations.

1. The world has its own dynamic, and when we are open to it, we will be promoted to create

new language to describe it.

You might think about which of the various ‘approaches’ we have discussed fit within this (eg. Marxism)

**As further reading here** (and don’t forget many of the books are available as e-books in the library), You may find the various chapters in *Approaches to Human Geography*, edited by Stuart Aitkin and Gill Valentine (2006) Sage, useful for thinking about these issues. The introduction is also very useful for setting the scene [there is an e-book of this available from the library website].

Also, the two opening chapters in Pryke et al, 2003 *Using social theory*, are very helpful in relation to starting to think about your own work.This is more for later in Semester A but may be worth looking at now. You could read these chapters to think about generating a research question from which to begin your own project. I believe I have already recommended as well the Tim Cresswell introductory text to some of you.

As Aitkin and Valentine (2006, 8) put it in their introduction:

“Embracing a particular way of knowing distinguishes a thesis or dissertation. It is what examiners and reviewers focus on as they try to place the work; the success or failure of a particular study often resides with its ability to contextualise itself in a larger corpus of knowledge. For example, thesis or dissertation abstracts that announce respectively a post-colonial approach to the development of squatter settlement, a humanistic appraisal of belonging and being-at-homeness, an econometric appraisal of regional housing demand, or a feminist critique of suburban spatial entrapment, suggest diverse and perhaps contradictory ways of establishing academic credibility. Postcolonialism, humanism, econometrics and feminism are three [sic, should be four?] sets of methods and practices with their own assumptions, values and ways of proceeding. Each are legitimate geographic ways of knowing that leave a new student struggling to place them amongst dozens of others and to get a sense of how they might relate to each other as well as to the student’s own interests and passions. There is nothing absolute or sacred about any particular way of knowing; each is elaborated and argued about, and there is no single set of criteria by which one way of knowing legitimizes itself over another. The clash of knowledge, the lack of boundaries and absolutes, the tensions between ways of knowing are at once confusing and exhilarating. They are confusing because each philosophy presents a laudable case for its own existence, leaving difficult choices for students seeking to legitimate their own interests; and exhilarating because the creative tension between different ways of knowing engenders passion amongst adherents. And passion is always stimulating.”

So, there are no easy answers ... but it is worth spending some time thinking about this as you start your own research.

We can’t avoid our own situatedness in the history of scholarship, our training and the context in which we work – but the best scholarship is aware of this, and works with it, to try and move on debate/action.

**Ontology, epistemology and research**

Our understanding – our ontology – is shaped by our culture/social norms/place.

**Ontology** is about what is understood to exist.

Norman Blaikie (2000, 8, cited in Grix, 2002, 177) argues that ontological claims are “claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality.”

“Ontology concerns the ideas about the existence of and relationship between people, society, and the world in general. Ontological assumptions embrace all theories and methodological positions” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 13).

**So, what does constitute social reality? What kind of world do we live in?**

As researchers, can we answer the question: What is our position on ontology?

  Objectivism/Materialism – the world is independent from actors/experience

  Realism/Interpretivism – there is an independent world but it is dialectially related to human action (structures and agency).

  Subjectivism/Idealism/Social Constructivism – social phenomena are produced by actors

3 positions: There is an external reality or truth and the researcher should maintain a detached, objective position (objectivism); reality should be interpreted through the meaning that research participants give to their life-world (interpretive); there is no fixed reality or truth, reality can only be socially and personally constructed and the subject should be actively involved (constructivism).

As John Law (2004) writes: “Method is not, I have argued, a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is **performative**. It helps to produce realities.” (2004, 143)

**Epistemology** refers to the different ways of knowing the (ontologically determined) world around us. It is “the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality,… how what is *assumed* *to exist* can be known” (Blaikie, 2000, 8, cited in Grix, 2002, 177 [my emphasis]).

As researchers, can we answer the question: What is our position on epistemology?

  **Positivism** – positivists seek to apply the methods of the natural sciences to the social world – they use direct observations to make sense of the underlying “laws” of the social world and aims to identify laws that explain behaviour and effects. Much of the 70s turn in Geography was about this.

  **Interpretivism** – distinguishes between the world and the people who experience it – often practised via ‘critical realism’ (Bhaskar) where the focus is on exploring underlying structures that shape action – called ‘tendencies’. “The task of social research ... is not simply to collect observations on the social world, but to explain these within theoretical frameworks which examine the underlying mechanisms which inform people’s actions and prevent their choices from reaching fruition” (May, 2001, 12). This accounts for much of what Geography was trying to do post-1970s, beginning with Marxist and Feminist approaches.

  **Social constructivism** – claims that the researcher can’t maintain a detached, objective position; researcher and subject should be actively involved in the meaning- making process and should be constructors of knowledge and not conveyers and receivers of it. Focus has to be on people’s production of social life – the intersubjectivity of the social world. Poststructuralism and postmodernism are in many ways more extreme versions of this account of knowledge production.

Finally, “**Methodology** is concerned with **the logic of scientific inquiry**; in particular with investigating the potentialities and limitations of particular techniques of procedures. The term pertains to the science and study of methods and the assumptions about the ways in which knowledge is produced.” (Grix, 2002, 179). It is not to be confused with methods “the techniques or procedures used to collate and analyse data” (Blaikie, 2000 quoted in Grix, 2002, 179).

The choice of methods should reflect the research questions but there is no necessary connection between particular methods and ontological/epistemological understandings ... although there are clearly strong patterns of association here (objectivism, positivism and survey methods for example).

Hope this helps as a brief reminder/overview!

SRH Nov 02.