

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Making the “invisible” visible in CIE research: Ontology, temporality and affective economies

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I am intrigued by the overriding question of this whole CIES symposium, "how we know what we know?" My MSU Colleague Lynn Fendler in a recent CIES talk (Fendler, 2017), notes that the classification systems we employ in our work in many ways strive to maintain an "illusion of coherence" and excludes what we may be actually experiencing. In this position statement, I will argue that "how we know" cannot be separated from questions of ontology, temporality and affective economies. Interrogating these modes of being and knowing would complicate our 'illusions of coherence' in current comparative and international education (CIE) research.

Underlying CIE research agendas are important questions of ontology, which are unexamined. In line with Robert Cowen (2014), I would argue that in many ways a lot of our work in comparative education in some sense, whether explicitly or implicitly stated, aims to "make a difference" by improving educational outcomes (whether we explicitly/implicitly define outcomes). Yet, underlying questions of outcomes is an onto-epistemic grammar—a *grammar that defines what is real, ideal, desirable and knowable* (see Stein et al., 2017; Shahjahan, Ramirez & Andreotti, 2017). While there are many discourses surrounding questions of 'Education for All', 'Millennium Development Goals', 'Knowledge Society', and 'World Class', they all assume or imagine certain ways of being human and/or human interrelationships with other beings. In other words, we need to keep asking ontological questions such as: what kind of human being, or our relationships with the non-human world (i.e. this planet, or rest of the universe), are being imagined, desired, and/or excluded, through such educational outcomes (Shahjahan, 2005)? Are human beings simply constituted as socio-material beings that only consider their social mobility? What kind of *human being* (rather than *doing*) are being imagined/reproduced/excluded through international assessment tools like PISA, and or global university rankings, and how (Shahjahan et al, 2017)? What kinds of *being human* are being reproduced or excluded through the questions, epistemes, methods, analytical strategies, and representational tools we use for our CIE research (see Shahjahan, 2005)? How does the dominant onto-epistemic grammar operate to prevent us as individual researchers from realizing alternatives forms of being? In line with these ontological questions, we also need to raise epistemic questions: Can we really know? How does our arrogance with 'knowing' the world in CIE interconnect with coloniality (see Sobe, 2017; Takayama, Sripakash & Connell, 2017; Shahjahan, 2011)? In other words, while I appreciate this symposium's efforts to innovate CIE research, as we argued recently (Shahjahan et al., 2017):

This movement toward a “possible way forward” in terms of the adoption of different epistemologies tends to remain within the same ontological parameters that we are trying to transcend because it relies on the

same investment needs, reproducing again the circular dance of distraction: we try to change knowing without changing our own ways of being. (p. S66)

The question remains, what particular structured ways of being underpin our CIE work? Would it be possible for us to redirect our desire toward something outside our realm of intelligibility and, hence, deemed “impossible” (when we disrupt our satisfaction with securities) (Shahjahan et al., 2017)? This is the moment when we start to disinvest in the structures of being (not just of “knowing”) that are sustained by the economies (social, material, affective and spiritual), that depend on and reproduce the (false/broken) promises themselves (Ibid.). As such, I would suggest certain structured ways of being that are often ignored in CIE may be important to make ‘visible’ to acknowledge alternative ways of being.

One such exclusionary episteme working against alternative ways of being, I would argue, is dominant temporality and anticipatory regimes. As Rappleye and Komatsu (2016) suggest in relation to CIE, we need to “provocatively” meditate on the “epistemological and ontological depths” of time and “what implications it may have for educational research” (p. 2). One of the inherent temporal assumptions underlying modernity/coloniality is a promise of the “future” (Adams et al., 2009; Mignolo, 2011). As Adams et al. (2009) stated: “The ‘future’ as a conceptual possibility...plays an important role in this [modernity] episteme. The future is always knowable in new ways, even as the grasping for certainty about it remains persistent” (p. 247). Often global policy discourses mobilize hypothetical “future disasters into the present in order to know how to organize ourselves for the inevitable disasters they present” (Adams et al., 2009, p. 248). Anticipatory regimes and speculative forecasts inform many policy and research enterprises (including methodologies) in CIE. For instance, in my own work on international organizations (IOs) and HE policy discourse, I note how the OECD justifies policy interventions by forecasting and anticipating futures of education (see Shahjahan, 2016). Similarly, social justice and equity research also fall into these anticipatory regimes (where we're striving to create a utopia in some future). To put it differently, we are obsessed with ‘present future’, aiming to colonize (predict, transform and control) the future for the benefit of the present (Adam, 2004), which in turn stifles the questions we ask, the paradigms of knowledge we use, and/or taking epistemic risks (Müller, 2014). As such, Adams et al. (2009, p.) asks us to consider the following, and I paraphrase: what would it mean to non-anticipate in CIE research? What strategies of refusal might be imagined? What is at stake in disrupting or refusing anticipation? What is disrupted by taking away certainty? Can we elevate Unknown to a ‘unit idea’ of the field (see Rappleye, 2012)?

Tied to questions of temporality and anticipation are also assumed temporal resources (i.e. time availability, time frames and/or material resources) in policy circles. There seems to be a growing obsession with research “impact” on policy circles, communities, etc. that often assume a linear and causal relationship between research dissemination and application. As such, we may assume that our research or policy audiences have the temporal resources at their disposal to implement so called “recommendations”. To put it differently, I am suggesting that we need to focus on the various educational rhythms in various settings and scales to understand temporal constraints and autonomous spaces (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). These assumed temporal resources also assume that we're indeed disembodied human beings who will simply reproduce what policy prescribes, as if we don't have other timescapes shaping our lives (i.e. body time, sleep time, family time, and so on). This ties to another ontological point, human agency/subjectivity underpinning CIE agendas, are simply assumed as being socio-culturally- materially constituted, as such ignoring that human beings' social and cultural lives are embedded in physical and living environments (whether natural or artificial) that cannot be reduced to sociological, anthropological, economical, or psychological perspectives--but are impacted--by changes that are beyond human agency--i.e. nature, one's health, body, etc.--which are ruled by physical, chemical, and biological principles/rhythms--whose cause and effect escape human agency (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017).

Another exclusionary episteme working against alternative ways of being, and thus providing an “illusion of coherence”, is that we're also emotional beings that often gets ignored in CIE agendas. The affective states in global education remain unacknowledged and undertheorized. How do affective economies of fear, pain, hate, hope, shame, pride, salvation, precariousness, humiliation and/or belonging (Ahmed, 2004) shape “how we know what we

know"? As Sara Ahmed eloquently put it (2004), "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produces the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and social to be delineated as if they are objects" (p. 10). To put it differently, how do our emotions and those of others delineate our objects of study? For instance, in a recent study on the role of global spaces of equivalence in global competition of higher education (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016), we illuminate how the nature of global competition is not simply tied to market-based economic or political rationalities, but also operates under psychosocial dimensions interlinked with belonging in the international community. Similarly, Sam Sellar (2015) suggests that performance data used within accountability systems in education are linked to sanctions and rewards, and their effects are partially due to affective economies implicated. Hence, the connection between affect and data are important in the mobility of policy ideas. As such, how do these affective economies shape or shaped by policy uptakes, transfers, learning, and/or responses to global competition in international education agendas? How do we consider and center affective subjectivity in international education agendas and CIE research? How do current onto-epistemic grammars preclude such emotive ways of being?

In summary, we need to be wary of CIE research and agendas falling into illusions of coherence, and instead I would suggest being open to incoherence, incongruences and the messiness that surround us (Carney, 2017), but are 'invisible' to us given the classification systems we employ, and their underpinning structured ways of being. The questions of ontology, temporality and affective economies would merit further discussion in the CIE field to help us reclaim alternative ways of being.

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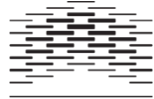
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