

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Symposium statement: Interrogating and Innovating CIE research

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Introduction

I have organized my response into two parts based on the title of our plenary session: (1) *Interrogating CIE research*; and (2) *Innovating CIE research*. In the first section, I focus on the guiding questions provided to us by Dr. Manion regarding critique and transformation of dominant epistemologies and paradigms; in the second section, I home in on examples of research practice “anchored by an ethics of engagement” and the challenges and opportunities such practice affords. Although I am distinguishing between “interrogating” and “innovating” for purposes of clarity in these remarks, my central argument assumes an inextricable connection between the two: I contend that we, as scholars, practitioners, and/or activists, must ask different questions—ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological—to effect a different research ethos in CIE.

Interrogating CIE Research

My starting point is the verb to *interrogate*, which means to ask formal, inquisitive questions. What questions might we ask in CIE if we sought, first and foremost, to direct attention to the “problems of exclusion” that lie at the heart of this symposium? Let me take up each of the four “-ologies” in doing so.

Ontology, the study of existence, underlies research in CIE even though it is rarely given the same degree of scrutiny as epistemology or methodology. However, the question of what it means to be human directs our attention to how we define and demarcate ourselves and our interlocutors. The ontological problem of exclusion is taken up astutely by Robert Aman (2017) in a recent article in the *Comparative Education Review* on interculturality and decolonialization in the Andes. One of the Bolivian students he quotes compares the dominant, Euro-American view of the land to the Andean view: “In the big world... the land is valued as a piece of merchandise. In the Andean world, it isn’t, rather we care for it with respect, as something that gives us life... that is part of, like another person (*como una persona más*)” (p. S114). When the possibility of being human excludes land, excludes water, excludes an ontology of *mtu ni watu* (a Kiswahili proverb meaning that a person is only human in relationship with others), we narrow the range of research questions to those premised on human/nature, self/Other dualisms.

The interrogation of *epistemology* in CIE has long served as the basis for vigorous debate, particularly between positivist/post-positivist and critical/interpretivist researchers. I have been engaged in some of these debates myself (e.g., Vavrus, 2003, 2005); nevertheless, I currently find the most generative interrogation of exclusion in postcolonial scholarship that enables a “re-membering and recalling of the (post-)colonial past” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 8). In exploring the construction of the “Eurocentric narrative of CIE,” postcolonial research draws attention to Euro-American ways of knowing that have become dominant in the field and are treated as though they convey universal

truths (Takayama, Sriprakash, & Connell, 2017, p. 57). The opposing effort, to “provincialize Europe,” as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) puts it, means “to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions” (p. xiii). If we seek to understand exclusion today, then we must examine the vestigial colonial histories that actively sought to exterminate—not merely exclude—certain forms of knowledge and the producers of such knowledge.

Methodology and *axiology*—the study of research methods and of ethics and values—have a particularly close relationship with each other and to exclusion. What constitutes “good” or “better” research methods if we value inclusion and social justice? We will undoubtedly spend much time at the symposium discussing this question, and we are likely to agree that methods fostering multiple voices and perspectives; collaborative design, data collection and analysis; and co-authorship are more closely aligned with an ethics of social justice than other some other approaches to research. However, I urge us to return to the postcolonial critique of Euro-American knowledge production in considering how our methodologies, methods, and values associated with them might still reproduce postcolonial hierarchies despite our best efforts to the contrary. Chakrabarty is again illuminating when he writes of Northern (in Connell’s sense of the term, 2007) theorists: They “do not ask of themselves any questions about the place from where their own thinking comes. They presumably produce their criticisms ‘from nowhere’ or—what is the same thing—[from] ‘everywhere’” (2000, pp. xvi-xvii).

Innovating CIE Research

This point leads me to the second section in my remarks, namely, to innovating CIE research. Unless we interrogate “the place from where [our] own thinking comes” (Chakrabarty, 2000, pp. xvi-xvii), it is difficult to develop radically different ethics of engagement. To explain, I share two brief examples. First, I served as co-principal investigator (co-PI) on a four-year, USAID-funded project in Zambia aimed at supporting Zambian faculty in colleges of education in the development of “policy-relevant research.” During our first meeting with Zambian colleagues at one university, a faculty member astutely noted, “We generate so much research data that goes to sit on shelves.” This senior colleague, who had seen many educational development projects come and go, challenged us to think about the “universal” assumption that more data equates with “better” research and greater impact on policy. Thus, we began to consider how the research might generate compelling cases and stories, narratives interspersed with numbers and not the other way around. More recently, Lesley Bartlett and I have written a piece entitled “Why Academics Need to Learn the Art of Storytelling” (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2017), which argues for real-life scenarios as a means of making educational research more engaging and accessible to academic *and* non-academic audiences, including policymakers. This innovation is also reflected in the CIES 2017 sessions on narrative, storytelling, and radical vulnerability with gender studies scholar Richa Nagar (2014, 2017).

The second example speaks to the challenges and opportunities of ethical engagement in collaborations aimed at innovating CIE research. In another publication with Dr. Bartlett, a co-edited book entitled *Teaching in Tension* (Vavrus & Bartlett, 2013), we worked with a team of Tanzanian and U.S. teacher educators to develop and carry out a multi-year teacher professional development program on learner-centered pedagogy (LCP), and to conduct joint research on the ways that Tanzanian teachers understood and implemented LCP. The research project was aimed at promoting socially-just research by bringing together researchers from the global North and South in the development of research questions, choice of topic within the larger initiative about teachers’ professional lives, joint analysis and writing of the book chapters, and co-presentation of findings at a research conference (see also Baily, Shahrokhi, & Carsillo, 2017). Although many of these goals were achieved and research team members generally pleased with the outcome, there were numerous challenges to enacting socially-just and transformative research ethics. For one, researchers in the global North tend to have greater access to financial resources for research, which means they are likely to be the PIs on projects and responsible for managing the grants that fund projects. They hold the purse strings, so to speak, and have greater power in the research relationship by virtue of the finances they control. This was true in our project, and I have found it so in others. Another matter has to do with differences in access to other scholars’ research through books and journals in university databases, and differences in access to the internet when service is spotty and electricity irregular. These problems are not insurmountable; however, they do point to structural inequalities in the global research architecture that can make

innovation in CIE research challenging.

Nevertheless, there is great potential for innovative research in CIE when one builds long-term relationships with fellow researchers and research participants as we sought to do in this project in Tanzania. My own research and teaching in Tanzania began in 1993, nearly 25 years ago. Some of the initial participants in my doctoral research became co-researchers and “critical friends” in other projects. Their assessments of proposals, questions that matter, and forms of writing have been some of the most transformative. Exclusions of one sort or another will undoubtedly continue in our research because no project can ever be fully inclusive. However, as a field, we can engage in more critical reflexivity and take more concrete measures to change how we study ourselves and others.

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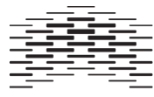
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