

Worldviews Of Research – Wise
Methods of Qualitative Inquiry
May 28, 2009
The Worldviews of Research (Part 1)

All of us see the world through a particular lens. Our particular “slant” on life can be the result of our cultural history, political views, economic status or level of education. Any number of things can contribute to our world-view but that lens is woven into our identity like threads in a intricate tapestry.

There are also “slants” that influence the practice of qualitative research. These worldviews include Social Constructivism, Advocacy/Participatory, Pragmatism, Interpretive Communities, Postmodern Perspectives, Feminist Theories, Critical (Race) Theory, Queer Theory, and Disability Theories. Some of these lenses are self-explanatory and rather than explain all of them, I will concentrate on the worldviews that I expect to influence my research.

The first worldview that impacts what I do is that of Social Constructivism. Creswell (2007:20) states that in this worldview, “Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views, rather than to narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas.”

I have always been the type of person who needed to make sense of the world. Even when I was young, I used to take apart watches with my mother’s eyebrow tweezers in a effort to understand how the watch worked (that was in the days of the mighty Timex, which could “take a lickin’ and keep on tickin’”). I would like to think that makes me curious but some have called me way too analytical for my own good. Suffice to say I have a need to understand the “why” of the world around me and that is what draws me to qualitative, rather than quantitative research.

Another reason I am drawn to a Social Constructivism lens is because my research in identity supports the idea that our social identity is always being affirmed (or not) by others through interaction. In this way, our social identity is dynamic and how interactions affect us depends on 1) The amount of the feedback given, and 2) The value we place on the person giving the feedback. In other words, the meaning we personally place on the feedback we are given in social situations has an effect on how we perceive ourselves and that perception is in constant motion.

This has a lot to do with my research because crafting a virtual identity is complex work. There are too many details to go into here (although, trust me, you will hear about them) but suffice to say we create that first avatar identity based on some real-life desire. For example, let’s take Tom, who in real life is a busy father, husband, coach of the Pee Wee soccer team, etc. All these different roles create identities that embody Tom. But what if there is also a role that Tom has not been able to exercise—something that is highly valued but gets no airtime in his real world. What if Tom is secretly a closet guitar player, who had one time hoped to be the next Eric Clapton? His real life doesn’t enable him to “play out” this identity but

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in a virtual world, where it is his crafted experience and whatever time he can spend within its border is his and his alone—what identity is he likely to assume?

This is only an assumption on my part, and will be something I address in my research, but it explains why I have a Social Constructivism lens.

The Worldviews of Research (Part 2)

The other world-view that impacts my research is that of Postmodern Perspectives. The term “postmodern” is something we have all heard, but a lot of us have no idea what it really means. Creswell (2007:25) says, “The conditions (of postmodernism) include the importance of different discourses, the importance of marginalized people and groups (the “other”), and the presence of “meta-narratives” or universals that hold true regardless of the social conditions. Creswell goes on to quote Thomas (1993) saying, “Postmodern-influenced ethnography studies might confront the centrality of media-created realities and the influence of information technologies.”

That all sounds academic – what does it really mean? For another view, let’s look at Wikipedia, a place where we should be able to find answers to anything:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>

What do we find there?

“Postmodernism was originally a reaction to modernism. Largely influenced by the Western European “disillusionment” induced by World War II, postmodernism refers to a cultural, intellectual, or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, interconnectedness or interreferentiality,[4] in a way that is often indistinguishable from a parody of itself. It has given rise to charges of fraudulence.”

Hmmm...not much better an explanation. Perhaps another reference. This time, I looked at the book, *The Souls of Cyberfolk* (Foster, 2005). In this book, which leans more toward cyberpunk, he explains the concept of postmodernism as a place where our current confines can no longer contain our expanding thought. In essence, we have “crafted ourselves” past the place where we are in society. If you think about it, we have seen this happen in many areas--mainly in the arts. Did anyone get Andy Warhol’s soup can the first time they saw it? What about techno music? These came from ideas that were beyond the scope of where the general population dwelled. I don’t know about anyone else’s experience, but when I am asked what I do and I tell people I have a virtual life, I get a lot of eye-rolling in response. I remember the time I approached a live musician at a club in an effort to tell them about my virtual music streaming efforts. When I mentioned Second Life the performer was convinced I was trying to convert him to a religious experience. I never saw my virtual existence as a “post-modern” experience but the more I think

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about it, it seems to fit the classic definition. Those of us who are in virtual spaces (and thriving, thank you) are thinking outside of the confines of our physical existence. I guess I do have a Postmodern Perspective, after all.