

"Symposium on re-structuring science and research at Stellenbosch University on the basis of justice, inclusion and ethical integrity"

Stellenbosch University Library Auditorium, Rooiplein, Tuesday, 21 May 2019, 9:00 to 13:10

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Research, Ethics and Reflexive Practice: Why Knowing yourself and context matters

"I do not mind if you think slowly, but I do object when you publish more quickly than you think"

Research is a process of knowledge construction, deemed to be value free. Research claims to be value free because data is gathered in an objective manner. Research aims to produce "truths" about the world and the subjects that inhabit it. These truths shape the world we are living in. South Africa's history is scattered with examples of so called "objective" research which was used as a political tool and claimed to have proven the inferiority of indigenous and mixed race populations. Science served the apartheid regime professing to be value free. Research which professes to be value free silences people. It is very difficult to argue against facts claimed to have been objectively obtained. One's arguments are often received with shock, which just silence, enrage and drive divisions further.

Knowledge construction is not as value free as it claims to be. Researches do not merely report the facts, they give meaning to them as well. When one gives meaning to or interprets, consciously or subconsciously one's own values are imparted on the data, so that the end result reflects at least some of one's own values, one's assumptions about the world and about what we deem normal and abnormal. These are often assumptions that we take for granted, because they are based on our worldview. As a result we do not challenge them and our subjectivity contaminates our so called objectivity. Yet, we seem to struggle to separate objective data from our interpretations of it, which are anything but objective. Researchers thus have a responsibility to ensure that their interpretation of supposedly objective data is not contaminated by their own prejudices. Objectivity is an ethical responsibility. One way of improving objectivity is through reflexive practice.

Reflexive practice is distinguished from reflective practice. Reflective practice is passive, as one author puts, it "it is like looking at a relational episode through a mirror." Reflective practice is looking to a past event and evaluating it from the present with the aim of informing future practice. You explore what you observed and the feelings invoked by what you saw. In some limited way you are able to identify your role and your limits within the scenario reflected upon. Reflective practice permits the challenging of culture and assumptions about others, also questions how one's behaviour marginalises and silences them. It allows for enquiry into one's own knowledge- what do I know but do not know that I know; what do I not know but want to know. And also how your actions link with your beliefs. Reflection includes re-experiencing and re-rendering an event. Reflexivity, places you in the picture. You are now a participant in the present so that you are influencing and changing the present. Reflexivity is about noticing patterns in the moment and asking how one's own world view,

values, socialisation, ideology, biases, etc create this current social reality. Reflexivity aims to find strategies to question our own processes, values and assumptions and also aims to understand the complexity of our roles in relation to others. Reflexivity allows for the examination of how we are unwittingly involved in creating social and professional structures which goes against our own values. In the moment this skill enables us to prevent instances where we prejudice others.

Reflective practice means that questions like what are the mental, emotional and value structures which allowed me to lose attention and make this mistake- and then also how can I do better next time. Reflexivity allows us not to make a huge error in judgement in the first instance. Reflexivity is an awareness of how our thinking, our underlying epistemologies, can cause harm and oppression if they go unexplored and unquestioned. It allows for transformative actions in the moment. For an institution to be transformative, reflexivity is imperative, especially an institution which is steeped in history as a co-creator of knowledge which continues to denigrate and dehumanize.

How does reflexive practice translate to the research setting?

It is about a constant awareness and questioning of values and how we perpetuate it **from the moment research is conceptualised**. In order to get a richer reflexive institution, diversity of views is key. This means that research groups within the institution cannot be homogenous in terms of culture, race or ethnicity, language etc. This diminishes the richness of the reflexive practice and makes the group unable to avoid blind spots.

Diversity is also required in terms of multi-professional expertise. It is an ethical requirement as well as a transformative imperative. When looking at the article which brought us all into this room, it is glaringly obvious that the addition of professionals with the expertise to understand psychometry and its pitfalls would have led to a vastly different outcome. We use parts of intelligence assessments to draw conclusions about cognitive function, the authors of the article used "cognitive functioning" to draw conclusions about education, is it such a leap to think that the article speaks to intelligence?

In conclusion, reflexive practice brings us closer to our aim of transformation. Transformation starts in acknowledging our value bias and then being open to have these biases challenged through reflexive conversations within a context of diverse values systems. Due to the legacy of our past, these conversations are going to be painful, but not having them is even more painful as evidenced by this unfortunate article.