Thinking about Research in Continuing Education: A Meta-theoretical Primer

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Abstract

Every approach to conducting research in continuing education involves background assumptions about the nature of what is being studied, the means through which one can acquire knowledge, and the purpose of the research process itself. Although often not explicitly declared, these assumptions have a significant bearing on the choice of research questions, the methods employed to investigate those questions, the relationship between researchers and the subjects of their investigation, and the integration of research findings into communities of scholars and practitioners.

The goal of this article is to promote awareness of the range of alternative possible approaches to conducting research in continuing education. It pursues this goal in three stages. First, it compares and contrasts the three predominant world-views in which modern social scientific research has typically been grounded in Canada:

Résumé

Toute approche pour effectuer des recherches en éducation permanente comprend des suppositions d'arrière-plan sur la nature de ce qui est étudié, sur les moyens par lesquels on acquiert des connaissances ainsi que sur le but de la recherche elle-même. Bien que ce ne soit pas souvent explicitement déclaré, ces suppositions ont une incidence importante sur le choix des questions de recherche, sur les méthodes utilisées pour examiner ces questions, sur la relation entre les chercheurs et les sujets de leurs études ainsi que sur l'intégration des résultats de recherche dans les communautés de chercheurs et de praticiens.

Le but de cet article est de favoriser la connaissance du nombre d'approches alternatives possibles pour effectuer des recherches en éducation permanente. Afin de réaliser ce but, l'auteur passe par trois

positivism, interpretive humanism, and radical structuralism. Each world-view is explored through ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical questions. Second, the article outlines recent challenges, largely from postmodern and feminist researchers, to the background assumptions and political implications of these three established orientations to research. Third, the article poses a number of questions in order to encourage critical reflection about continuing education research.

étapes. D'abord, il y fait la comparaison et le contraste des trois visions prédominantes du monde dans lesquelles la recherche moderne en sciences sociales est typiquement basée au Canada: le positivisme, l'humanisme interprétatif et le structuralisme radical. L'auteur explore chaque vision du monde par l'intermédiaire de questions ontologiques, épistémologiques, méthodologiques et éthiques. Ensuite, il indique les grandes lignes des défis récents, venant en grande partie de recherches postmodernes et féministes, jusq'aux suppositions d'arrière-plan et aux implications politiques de ces trois orientations établies en recherche. Finalement, l'auteur y pose un certain nombre de questions pour encourager la réflection critique sur la recherche en éducation permanente.

INTRODUCTION

The Prairie Symposium on Research on University Continuing Education was designed to assess the current state, future directions and challenges of research on university continuing education, and to strengthen continuing education (CE) research networks and collaboration by identifying possibilities for joint research projects. This paper was presented at the beginning of the Symposium, in order to encourage its participants to critically assess their assumptions about research and its role in the world.

Every approach to conducting CE research involves background assumptions about the nature of what is being studied, the means to

acquire knowledge, and the purpose of the research process itself. Although often not explicitly declared, these assumptions have a significant bearing on the choice of research questions, the methods employed to investigate those questions, the relationship between researchers and their subjects, and the integration of research findings into scholarly and practitioner communities.

The objective in this paper is to promote awareness of the range of alternative possible approaches to conducting research in CE. First, it compares and contrasts the three predominant world views in which modern social-scientific research has typically been grounded in Canada: positivism, interpretive humanism, and radical structuralism.[2] Second, it outlines recent challenges, largely from post-modern and feminist researchers, to the background assumptions and political implications of these three established orientations to research. Third, it poses a number of questions in order to encourage critical reflection upon CE research.

SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC WORLD VIEWS

Morrow and Torres (1995) understand "meta-theory" as a set of assumptions underlying explicit processes of theory building and research in the social sciences (p. 19). Meta-theory includes philosophical orientations towards metaphysical questions, methodological assumptions about appropriate means to gather evidence for theories, and ethical commitments about the preferred nature of the world. Understanding meta-theoretical issues is important, because the theories and methods used in CE research have been structured by different sets of assumptions. As Wilson (1983) argues, empirical research and theory are always embedded in a research tradition that has been given intellectual validity by a community of scholars (p. 7). Each research tradition, in turn, is rooted in a more general world view, which defines the appropriate rules and procedures for doing social science. To assess and promote research, it is necessary to understand the philosophical, methodological, and political implications of different approaches to doing research.

Three world views have dominated Western social science for most of this century.[3] *Positivism*, in many ways the orthodox approach to social science, views social life as resembling the natural world, and suggests that the social sciences should resemble the natural sciences. *Interpretive humanism*, associated with research traditions such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, views social life as resembling a work

of art or a literary text, and suggests that social scientists must work to understand the thoughts and feelings of the actors who create that world. *Radical structuralism*, associated mainly with Marxian and Freudian traditions, views the appearances of social life as the product of largely unseen, but real, underlying structures, and suggests that social scientists must uncover these structures and demonstrate their impacts.

In order to compare these world views, the basic response of each tradition to four categories of meta-theoretical questions is presented.

- Ontology: What is real? What is the nature of reality?
- Epistemology: What is truth? What is the source of valid knowledge about reality?
- Methodology: What strategies and practices can lead to valid knowledge of reality?
- Ethics: What ought to be? What are the appropriate goals of knowing reality?

Ontology

Although undoubtedly removed from the daily concerns of CE practitioners, assumptions concerning the nature of reality have an important impact on the field's research processes. Table One presents three responses to the question: What is the nature of social reality?

Table 1
Ontological Assumptions of Modern Social Science

	Positivism	*Interpretive Humanism*	*Radical Structuralism*
What exists?	objects	ideas	relations
Key metaphor	nature	work of art	mirage
Human agency	determinism	voluntarism	ambivalence

From the positivist perspective, social reality objectively exists, in a manner parallel to the objects and processes of the natural or physical worlds. Human consciousness and creativity make the objects of social reality different from those of nature, but these objects have an equivalent ontological status. Individual human consciousness and creativity only appear to be free, since culture, socialization, and norms actually determine

an individual's thoughts and actions. The positivist world view would conceive of CE as an identifiable field of social reality, composed of individuals and organizations related to one another through specific events and processes. Only some components of this field, such as individuals, can be directly observed, although all components, even processes such as learning, exist objectively.

In contrast, the interpretive humanist perspective suggests that social reality is fundamentally a world of ideas and meaning, which cannot exist independently of the human subjects who create and interpret such meaning. The social world exists in a manner parallel to literary texts or artistic creations: the ontological status of social life is produced and given meaning by individual actors. In effect, human beings are active creators of their worlds, rather than being passively shaped by social processes. The interpretive humanist world view would conceive of CE as a series of negotiated encounters between human beings with processes such as "program development," "courses," or "learning" existing only as the inter-subjective constructions of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of those involved in them.

The radical structuralist perspective accepts neither the objectivity of social reality nor the innate subjective capacity of individuals independent of that social reality. Radical structuralists make an ontological distinction between the appearance of social life (its "phenomenal forms") and the reality ("essential relations") that structures such appearances. Social reality is understood as a web of relations between individuals, and between individuals and the natural world; this reality is observable only as patterns of such relationships emerge over time (Frisby & Sayer, 1986, p.109). Neither individuals nor society are given ontological priority, as both are historical products of relations between inherently social beings. Human beings do actively create and interpret the world, but only in circumstances given by, and with patterns of subjectivity defined by, historical social relations. The radical structuralist world view would conceive of CE at two levels. As a phenomenal form, CE appears much like either positivists or interpretive humanists would suggest, that is, a field of social life with objective characteristics mediated by its participants' subjective interpretations. At the same time, the essential relations underlying CE in contemporary Canada would be understood in terms of the historical patterns of social relations and identity being reproduced or challenged by the discipline.

Epistemology

Differing positions on the nature of social reality are logically associated with alternative views on how valid knowledge about such reality can be obtained. Table Two presents three responses to the question: What is the source of knowledge about social reality?

Table 2

Epistemological Assumptions of Modern Social Science

	Positivism	*Interpretive Humanism*	*Radical Structuralism*
Source of knowing	empiricism	hermeneutics	critique
Parallel discipline	biology physics	literary criticism	depth psychology
Validation	falsification/ replication	consensus	praxis

Positivists hold empiricist epistemological views: the only valid source of knowledge about social reality is experience. Because the social world objectively exists outside of the researcher's subjectivity, observation through direct sensory experience is the means to know that world. The natural sciences provide a model for knowing social life. Social phenomena, such as individual "beliefs" or social "classes," that do not seem to be directly observable can be operationalized, observed, and measured through scientific procedures such as experiments, attitudinal scales, and social surveys. The adequacy of this knowledge is determined by other scientists' replication of the experience, and by the construction and testing of theories that explain the experience and that can be falsified through repeated observations.

Positivist epistemology would direct researchers to know CE through objective observation. Rigorous research methods, to be discussed below, have been developed to guide such observation. The accumulation of valid knowledge would be accomplished by building theories about CE's characteristics, structure, and function, and then by testing those theories against empirical observations. For example, theories about how adults learn can be developed and tested against empirical observations of how well adults perform on tests before and after being exposed to different educational experiences.[4]

Interpretive humanists deny the validity of empiricism as a source of knowledge about the social world; rather, subjective meanings inhere to human life. Because the social world does not exist outside its actors' inter-subjective interpretations, researchers must use a hermeneutic approach to interpreting the meaning of people's actions, the model for which is provided by the humanities' methods for interpreting written texts or artistic expressions. Interpretive humanists claim that all research reflects the inherent subjectivity of the researcher, and suggest that valid knowledge of the social world is derived from the construction of interpretive understandings of the meaning of social interaction for its participants. The adequacy of this derived knowledge is determined by the degree to which it makes sense both to the participants directly involved in the social action being interpreted, and to a community of scholars engaged in the interpretation of like actions.

Interpretive humanist epistemology would direct researchers to know CE through interpreting the meaning of interactions between those engaged in CE processes. The accumulation of valid knowledge would be accomplished through developing interpretive schemes that enable researchers not only to better understand what CE means to its participants, but also and to locate this meaning in a broader context of meanings in the social world. For example, the understanding of how adults learn can be challenged and improved through observing, interpreting, and interacting with individuals engaged in CE processes.

Radical structuralists suggest that empiricism and hermeneutics yield a knowledge of the surface appearances of social reality, but are inadequate for knowing the underlying structures, that cause social life to have such appearances. The essential relations that structure human life are not directly observable; thus, empirical observation alone merely reproduces the often deceptive appearances of the social world. To acquire valid knowledge about social reality, researchers must subject their empirical observations and interpretive understandings to a process of analytical critique and historical analysis. The process of critique involves abstracting, from the observable details of a given, historically specific pattern of human activity, the essential relations that explain that activity. The process of historical analysis involves applying the abstract, essential relations to the concrete interpretation of human activity over time. In other words, the radical structuralist epistemology suggests that the concrete appearances of social life can be analytically deconstructed into abstract generalizations, which then can be used to inform a critical reconstruction of those

appearances. These reconstructions are considered epistemologically valid, because they are not trapped by the naïve ideologies in which concrete human activity exists. The adequacy of knowledge gained through this critique is determined by the degree to which it enables critical scholars, political activists, and citizens to become aware of the structures constraining their lives, and to take action to transform these structures.

Radical structuralist epistemology would direct researchers to know CE through deconstructing its relationships with broader social and historical patterns of social life. For example, the practical concern with how adults learn would be analyzed not as a technical question whose resolution would simply improve CE practice, but as a political issue embedded in the struggle of post-industrial capitalists to create workers and consumers with identities and capacities consistent with "flexible" patterns of labour relations. Rather than study "learning" at its face value, radical structuralists would try to connect the structured experiences of learning processes with the production, or reproduction, of certain patterns of identity or social structure.

Methodology

Clearly, the divergent assumptions outlined above lead to different assertions about the most appropriate research methodologies for social scientists. Although a range of methods are used by researchers from all of the world views being described here, the following chart presents the basic tendencies of each tradition in its response to the question: What strategies and practices can lead to valid knowledge of social reality?

Table 3
Methodological Assertions of Modern Social Science

	Positivism Humanism	*Interpretive Structuralism*	*Radical*
Research process	objective	subjective	abstraction/ analysis
Parallel model	natural sciences	humanities, fine arts	psycho- analysis
Tendency	quantitative	qualitative	historical/ comparative

Positivist research methods were developed to gather the most objective possible data about the social world. As in the natural sciences, the goal is to further the theory-building process by enabling researchers to use observations to test hypotheses and make empirical generalizations. Distinctively "social" research methods have been developed to objectively document the seemingly subjective dimensions of social life. Common positivist research methods include attitudinal or behavioural surveys, experiments, content analysis, and the review of existing or historical data. These methods tend to be quantitative, requiring rigorous conceptualization and operationalization of variables, observations based upon accepted sampling techniques, and data analysis based on statistical manipulation and generalization.

Positivism would direct CE research towards the use of experiments, surveys, and other means for gathering objective and generalizable data. For example, adult learning processes could be measured by evaluating test results among students who either possessed different characteristics or were being taught with different pedagogical approaches.

Interpretive humanist research methods were developed to facilitate the richest possible subjective interpretation of human activity. As in the humanities or fine arts, the goal is to enable researchers to fully understand the intentions, meanings, and contexts of those engaged in social interaction. Common interpretive humanist research methods include participant observation, in-depth interviews, life histories, and other means for gaining insight into the meaning of human activity. These methods tend to be qualitative, requiring researchers to carefully observe and understand the ethnographic details of social life. Such methods claim a specificity of all social life to particular settings and contexts, and endeavour to understand such particularities rather than to generalize to other settings.

Interpretive humanism would direct CE research towards ethnographic and social-psychological methods of building subjective interpretations of people engaged in encounters. For example, adult learning processes could be interpreted by having participants keep a journal of their educational experiences, or by involving a researcher as participant-observer in a CE course.

Radical structuralist methods for gathering data do not differ from those of positivism or interpretive humanism. The distinctiveness of radical structuralist methods lies in the use of empirical observations and subjective interpretations to generate new explanations and understandings

of social life, which may not be consistent either with the initial appearance of that reality or with the initial self-understandings of its participants. The most famous parallel in the social sciences is psychoanalysis, in which the therapist tries to identify the roots of people's behaviour in sub-conscious, but real, personality structures.

In the social sciences, radical structuralist research methods tend to be historical and comparative. In order to gain insight into the essential relations that structure the patterns of social life in any given point in space and time, researchers need to know how such patterns evolved within a given area, and then compare how they appear in other cultures or societies. These observations enable the critical analyst to create an abstract explanation of why social life takes on certain patterns, which is then used to re-interpret the details of social life in a given point in space and time.

Radical structuralism would direct CE research towards this analytical movement from the concrete, local experience of CE, to abstract generalizations about the relationship between CE and broader historical processes, and then back again to a new understanding of the concrete, local experience of continuing education. For example, research into adult learning processes in CE might be redirected away from the explicit content of what is being taught and towards the learning impact of the authority structure that is being reproduced in classroom environments.

Ethics

No strict correlation between ontological and epistemological assumptions and the ethical commitments that inform research exist. However, each social-scientific world view tends to promote a distinct form of engagement between research and society. Table Four represents three basic responses to the question: What are the appropriate goals of knowing social reality?

Table 4
Ethical Assumptions of Modern Social Science

	Positivism Humanism	*Interpretive Structuralism*	*Radical*
Purpose [5]	explain, predict, control	interpret, understand, converse	uncover, critique, change
Role of Values	value-neutral	value-neutral	value-explicit
Political position	mainstream	alternative	opposition

Positivist social science explicitly endeavours to explain and predict the social world by improving the scientific explanation of social life. The ability to explain and predict human behaviours and thoughts creates a greater potential for their control, although this control is not conceptualized by positivists in a negative manner. Historically, positivism developed with its protagonists viewing it as a progressive force, improving society by replacing traditional dogmas and superstitions with rational and scientific truth. Positivists suggest that the researcher's values should have no impact on the research process itself, apart perhaps from influencing the researcher's initial decision of what to study. Positivism is currently the dominant tradition in modern social science, and as will be noted below, its claims to progressivism and value-neutrality have been vigorously contested.

Positivists would encourage researchers in CE to use research to improve the discipline as a field of practice. For example, better models of the adult learning process could be used to improve the pedagogical techniques of adult educators.

Rather than promoting a scientific explanation of the social world, interpretive humanist researchers seek to understand human beings and social life by promoting an inter-subjective conversation with the actors of that social world. Although interpretive humanists recognize the significance of researcher subjectivity, they share with positivists a largely value-neutral assumption about the role of the researcher's role in the research process. Interpretive humanism is an alternative world view for the conduct of social science, but it does not explicitly oppose the mainstream.

Interpretive humanists would encourage researchers in CE to use research to help those involved in CE encounters more fully understand their involvement. For example, teaching and learning exchanges might become more satisfying if both teachers and learners understood and could speak to one another about their interpretation of "learning."

Radical structuralist social science takes an explicitly oppositionist ethical stance to that of positivism. Whereas positivists generally suggest that the social world is either good or not amenable to ethical judgement, radical structuralists argue that it is inherently conflictual, with systematic inequalities limiting the capacity of marginalized populations to achieve their full human potential. Radical structuralist researchers make these value assumptions explicit, and their research goal is to first uncover the

structures that marginalize such populations, and then change such structures. Rather than merely explaining or understanding social life, radical structuralists strive to enable people to understand the structures that constrain their lives, and by doing so, empower them to change these structures.

Radical structuralists would encourage researchers in CE to use research to transform the discipline's social impact from that of domination to one of emancipation. They would suggest that merely "improving" or "understanding" the practice of CE, without transforming the exploitative social structures within which it takes place, only contributes to the reproduction of systematic inequality.

Diversity and Commonality

The presentation of three world views is obviously a simplistic representation of modern social science. Clearly, a tremendous amount of diversity and disagreement is possible within each. Although positivist, interpretive humanist ,and radical structuralist assumptions lead social scientists towards certain patterns of theory and research, each set of assumptions is compatible with a range of substantive theories and research practices. For example, both behaviourist and cognitive psychologists would take a positivist approach to studying the adult learning process, but their theories and research methods would be substantially different. In fact, debates are often more actively contested between researchers sharing similar assumptions, since those holding different sets of assumptions have trouble understanding, or at least recognizing the legitimacy of, each other's work.

Positivism, interpretive humanism and radical structuralism are concepts used to understand patterns in social science theory and research, but they are not paradigms that enforce a strict logical discipline on those who would draw upon them. Actual social scientists commonly blur the rather neat categories that have been drawn in this paper. For example, many feminist writers take an interpretive humanist approach to conducting research (i.e., using qualitative methods to understand women's experience), but embrace a radical structuralist set of ethical commitments (i.e., doing research to uncover and transform the oppression of women). Within CE, this could be exemplified by research that endeavours to understand how women learn in order to shift existing pedagogical theories and practices.

Finally, the characterizations presented here should not obscure the

substantial commonality between the three perspectives. Positivism, interpretive humanism, and radical structuralism share much more than their Western, male, intellectual heritage or their promotion of certain forms of theory and research about social reality. Each asserts that the social world is real, and that the progressive accumulation of knowledge about that reality is possible. Each encourages a rational set of research methods in which researchers enjoy a privileged status in comparison to their research subjects. Finally, each ascribes a positive ethical purpose to the process of social research. As the following section indicates, all of these meta-theoretical assumptions have been contested in recent times.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Over the past 40 years, there have been many debates about the most appropriate form of social science. Debates for and against positivism have been the most common, but interpretive humanism and radical structuralism have also been subject to critique. As adult educators, it is important to be aware of the fundamental challenges being made to social-scientific world views. In recent years, authors variously characterized as post-modern, feminist, post-colonial, or action-oriented have challenged the meta-theoretical assumptions of (modern, male, Western, academic) social science. The following discussion identifies the challenges that seem most pertinent to thinking about CE research.

Metaphysical Challenges

Interpretive humanists and radical structuralists propose fundamental challenges to the positivist faith in the objective existence of social reality. Recent post-modernist writers have extended this critique. The first extension radicalizes the interpretive humanist contention that reality is not independent of the subjectivity of those who interpret it. Whereas interpretive humanists argue that inter-subjective consensus on the nature of reality is possible, some post-modernists such as Baudrillard (as cited in Hassard, 1994, pp. 308–309; Smart, 1993, pp. 51–52; Usher & Edwards, 1994, pp. 11–15) deny the ontological status of social "reality" altogether. Because the human world is a constant series of symbolic representations of reality, ideas about reality, and reality itself, cannot possibly be disentangled. From this perspective, realities are constructed through a shifting and contested series of subjectivities, localities, and times.

The second post-modern extension of the critique of positivist ontology

adds a level of reflexivity to the radical structuralist contention that reality presents itself in systematically deceptive ways. Although radical structuralists suggest that the essential relations underlying the appearance of social reality can be analyzed, some post-modernists such as Foucault (as cited in McLean, 1996, pp. 13–15; Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 16) and Derrida (as cited in Hassard, 1994, pp. 313–316) suggest that the structures of human subjectivity are inextricably tied to historical relations of language and power. Because the "self" is a decentred product of social relations, the ontological status of the rational intellectual, able to objectively perceive and describe the social world, is undermined. Rather than discovering, or describing in some detached manner, social reality, researchers actually engage in a process of producing and shaping that reality (Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997, pp. 204–206).

The ontological challenge to the unity and reason of human subjects is connected to epistemological doubts about the possibility of human beings rationally accumulating authoritative knowledge about social reality. Both feminist and post-modern writers argue that all knowledge of social reality, whether empirical, hermeneutic, or critical, is partial, subjective, and embedded in relations of power (Griffiths, 1995, pp. 220-221). Foucault (1980) asserted that "truth is a thing of this world" (p. 131), and this assertion has cast doubt about science, rationality, and the accumulation of universally valid knowledge about social reality. A decentred view of knowledge does not imply that truth is impossible; it simply insists that claims to universal or totalizing truths must be deconstructed against competing claims, and against the localized power relations within which such claims are made. Knowledge must be recognized as partial, local, specific, and tied to power and normative interests (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 10). Post-modernists such as Lyotard assert that the "grand narratives" of modern social science have been discredited and displaced by an analysis of unstable, local, and diverse stories (as cited in Hassard, 1994, pp. 309–311).

Methodological Challenges

A radically pluralist epistemology has important implications for the strategies and practices to be used to gain knowledge about social reality. Although many alternative methodologies exist, the movement that holds the most obvious interest for CE research is that towards participatory, or collaborative, research. The assertions that knowledge is embedded in local and particular experiences of the world and that social scientists have no

general claim to objectivity in the representation of those local experiences promote methods that involve research "subjects" as full participants in the research process. This epistemological and methodological movement is most strongly developed in feminist literature (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992; Cook & Fonow, 1986; Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Stanley & Wise, 1990).

Kirby and McKenna (1989) summarize their alternative view of the researcher-subject relationship with the statement: "research from the margins is not research *on* people from the margins, but research *by, for* and *with* them" (p. 28; emphasis in original). From the selection of research questions to the collection, analysis, and production of information, research subjects are active collaborators, rather than passive units of analysis, in the process. The researcher becomes a facilitator of a collective process, rather than an expert in charge of his or her project. The actual data-gathering practices in participatory research tend to parallel those of interpretive humanism, except that the researcher's engagement with his or her subjects is active throughout the process. Research subjects are seen to have as much capacity for valid knowledge as researchers, and methodological practices such as life histories enable research subjects to give voice to their experiences and knowledge.

Ethical Challenges

In addition to identifying the philosophical and methodological shortcomings of modern social science, many contemporary observers assert that social science has been politically oppressive, enabling Western, male, and bourgeois forms of knowledge to serve both instrumental and symbolic functions. Instrumentally, understanding and explaining social life have facilitated the exploitation and domination of workers and citizens by capitalist and state elites. Symbolically, the celebration of these forms of knowledge through social science has marginalized the different experiences of reality lived by women, people of colour, and working classes.

This political equation of modern social science with oppression has led to two divergent responses to the continued ethical basis for social-scientific practice. The first response, associated with terms such as "ludic postmodernism" (Usher & Edwards, 1994), "apolitical postmodernism" (Villmoare, 1990), or "the postmodernism of reaction" (Lather, 1991), denies an ethical basis for such practice. Research can be conducted without ethical commitment, simply for instrumental reasons (it pays the bills) or aesthetic pleasure (it's fun).

The second response, associated with feminism (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Ristock & Pennell, 1996) and the "postmodernism of resistance" (Lather, 1991; Usher & Edwards, 1994), transforms the practice of social science into an emancipatory endeavour. The essence of this ethical position was associated, earlier in this paper, with radical structuralism. However, contemporary critics assert that classical radical structuralism undervalues human beings' capacity to understand and transform their own social worlds and the extent to which their experiences of oppression are differentiated according to local and particular circumstances. The basis of action-oriented research is the ethical commitment to work with groups of people to identify the issues and challenges in their lives and, through a process of research, take action to confront those issues and challenges. Because oppression takes many forms, recognizing the politics of difference and the need for plural strategies of resistance takes precedence over the construction of grand strategies for the emancipation of abstract categories, such as the working class (Gunew & Yeatman, 1993; McLean, 1996).

Conclusions: Thinking about CE Research

The Symposium was designed to assess the current state, future directions, and challenges facing research on university continuing education, and to strengthen CE research networks and collaboration by identifying possibilities for joint research projects. Embedded within these goals are several assumptions about research and its role in the world. This paper has underlined the importance of making such assumptions explicit. In order to assess and promote CE research, the range of potential approaches to doing research, and the potential impacts of each approach, must be understood.

Assuming that research is conducted for a reason, what is the purpose of doing research in CE? Should research be oriented towards the technical improvement of CE practices? Is applied research good enough, if we do not necessarily understand either the meaning of our practices or their social impacts? Do we need to interpret (or at least question our interpretations of) what these practices actually mean for adult learners, practitioners, or other stakeholders in CE processes? Should research be oriented towards the critique of the relationships between CE and broader sets of power relations? If CE research is about deconstructing the social and political roots and impacts of CE practices, should this deconstruction be aimed at local or global levels?

Assuming that rationally organizing our strategies and practices to

gather or construct knowledge about continuing education is still desirable, what methods are most appropriate to our research? In spite of the criticism of positivist methods, how might they still be useful to CE? How might qualitative and historical-comparative methods be best incorporated into a discipline whose focus tends to marginalize approaches without direct policy or practice implications? How can the best use be made of the emerging knowledge about, and legitimacy of, participatory and action-oriented methods? Should we, and how could we, promote the idea of reflective practitioners or practitioner-researchers? How might learners, funding agencies, or other stakeholders in CE be mobilized as active collaborators in research processes?

Assuming our continued faith in the possibility of accumulating valid knowledge about CE (whether conceptualized as an objective entity, an inter-subjective construction, or a set of relations), how do we understand the process for doing so? What contributions can empiricism, hermeneutics, and the critical cycle of abstraction and historical analysis make to our quest? What possibilities for practitioner-based or collaborative research are opened up by the epistemological critique of modern social science, and the resulting legitimation of everyday, local knowledges?

Finally, and most generally, has CE research kept pace with changes taking place in the social sciences? Do we want it to? Are we making the best use of contemporary epistemological and methodological innovations in various social sciences and humanities? Are there characteristics of our field that make any of these innovations irrelevant or ethically disturbing?

NOTES

1. The author gratefully acknowledges the useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper received from colleagues Glenis Joyce, Gwenna Moss, Dirk Morrison, Melissa Spore, and Angie Wong.

2. In the literature on the philosophy of science, the terms "idealism" and "realism" are frequently used for the world views that I have titled "interpretive humanism" and "radical structuralism" (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1984). I believe that the conventional terms of idealism and realism have such strong vernacular connotations that their use here would distract attention from their intended meanings. Interpretive humanism and radical structuralism are both very descriptive terms, as will be seen

throughout the paper.

3. Several important intellectual sources must be acknowledged in this account of modern social-scientific world views. First, the overall understanding of the social sciences described here reflects the author's undergraduate and graduate study. Specifically, the contributions of professors Derek Sayer, Raymond Morrow, and Derek Smith are gratefully acknowledged. Second, this categorization of social-scientific world views is based on the work of Wilson (1983) and Frisby and Sayer (1986). Third, Babbie (1986) and Singleton et al. (1988) provided additional insights into the positivist world view; Sayer (1987, 1989) provided insights into the radical structuralist world view. In-text references are limited to those instances where a source has made unique contribution to the understanding of a particular issue.

4. Throughout the remainder of this section, the concept of "adult learning" is used to exemplify different potential approaches to conducting research in CE. Although hypothetical illustrations are used, researchers from all three social-scientific world views have studied adult learning. For an overview of different positivist research studies on adult learning, see Knox (1977) or Merriam and Caffarella (1999). Candy (1991) includes many interpretive humanist studies in his book on self-directed adult learning. Relatively few studies of adult learning from a radical structuralist perspective exist. McLean (1997) provides an empirical case study of adult education in the Canadian Arctic; Curtis (1988) provides a radical structuralist study of children's schooling in Canada.

5. This characterization of the "purpose" of social research is based on Jurgen Habermas' concept of "knowledge interests" (Morrow & Torres, 1995, pp. 22–24).

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Biography

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