Justifying the use of a living theory methodology in the creation of your living educational theory. Responding to Cresswell.

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I am aware of the responses of some supervisors that when they are presented with draft writings for a living theory masters dissertation or doctoral thesis they say that they want a fuller justification of the approach used in relation to narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research or case study research. In my experience this kind of justification is not often useful to the student but is very helpful in revealing the methodological and epistemological assumptions in the supervisor's thinking.

I've found Cresswell's (2007, pp. 53-58) descriptions of five qualitative research approaches to narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies to be one of the best introductory texts. For each of the five approaches Cresswell poses a definition, briefly traces the history of each approach, explores types of studies, introduces procedures involved in conducting a study and indicates potential challenges in using each approach. He also reviews some of the similarities and differences among the five approaches '*so that qualitative researchers can decide which approach is best to use for their particular study'*. I'll emphasise the point below that one can draw insights from each of these approaches without choosing between them in the development of one's own living theory methodology.

Here are the descriptions of the five approaches that you might draw on in explaining why you need to beyond the individual approaches or a combination of approaches in generating your explanations of educational influences in learning in enquiries of the kind, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' and in generating your own methodology.

Dadds and Hart (2001) put the need for methodological inventiveness very clearly and this is the inventiveness that it needed to go beyond the following five approaches while drawing insights from the approaches where appropriate:

" *The importance of methodological inventiveness*

Perhaps the most important new insight for both of us has been awareness that, for some practitioner researchers, creating their own unique way through their research may be as important as their self-chosen research focus. We had understood for many years that substantive choice was fundamental to the motivation and effectiveness of practitioner research (Dadds 1995); that what practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of engagement and purpose. But we had understood far less well that how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes." (Dadds & Hart, p. 166, 2001)

"If our aim is to create conditions that facilitate methodological inventiveness, we need to ensure as far as possible that our pedagogical approaches match the

message that we seek to communicate. More important than adhering to any specific methodological approach, be it that of traditional social science or traditional action research, may be the willingness and courage of practitioners – and those who support them – to create enquiry approaches that enable new, valid understandings to develop; understandings that empower practitioners to improve their work for the beneficiaries in their care. Practitioner research methodologies are with us to serve professional practices. So what genuinely matters are the purposes of practice which the research seeks to serve, and the integrity with which the practitioner researcher makes methodological choices about ways of achieving those purposes. No methodology is, or should, cast in stone, if we accept that professional intention should be informing research processes, not pre-set ideas about methods of techniques…" (Dadds & Hart, p. 169, 2001)

1) Cresswell describes narrative research as follows:

Narrative Research.

*"Narrative research has many forms, uses a variety of analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). 'Narrative' might be the term assigned to any text of discourse, or, it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Chase, 2005), with a specific focus on the stories told by individuals (Polkinghorne, 1995). As Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) suggest, narrative can be both a method and **the phenomenon** of study. As a method, it begins with the experiences as lived and told stories of individuals. Writers have provided ways for analyzing and understanding the stories lived and told. I will define it here as a specific type of qualitative design in which 'narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected' (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17). The procedures for implementing this research consist of focusing on studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences and chronologically ordering (or using life course stages) the meaning of these experiences."* (pp. 53-54)

Creswell describes a biographical study as a form of narrative study in which the researcher writes and records the experiences of another person's life. He says that

"Autobiography is written and recorded by the individuals who are the subject of the study (Ellis, 2004). A life history portrays an individual's entire life, while a personal experience story is a narrative study of an individual's personal experience found in single of multi episodes, private situations, or communal folklore (Denzin, 1989a)" (p.55)

A living theory, as an explanation by an individual of their educational influences in their own learning and in the learning of others can be understood as a form of narrative research in that it begins with the experiences as lived and told by the researcher. Within the narrative what distinguishes the story as a living theory is that it is an explanation of the educational influences of the individual in their own learning and in the learning of others. Not all narratives are living theories, but all living theories are narratives.

2) Cresswell describes phenomenological research as follows:

Phenomenological Research

*"Whereas a narrative study reports the life of a **single individual**, a **phenomenological study** describes the meaning for several individuals of their **lived experiences** of a concept of a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (e.g., grief is universally experienced). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences within a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (a 'grasp of the very nature of the thing,' van Manen, 1990, p. 177). To this end, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon (an 'object' of human experience; van Manen, 1990, p. 163). This human experience may be a phenomenon such as insomnia, being left out, anger, grief, or undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery (Moustakas, 1994). The inquirer then collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon, and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals. This description consists of 'what' they experiences and 'how' they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994)."* (pp. 57-58)

Living theories are phenomenological in that they begin from the experience of the phenomenon the researcher is seeking to understand. The purpose of a living theory differs from the basic purpose of phenomenology in that the purpose of phenomenology is to produce a description of a universal essence whilst the purpose of a living theory is to produce a unique explanation of the individual's educational influences in learning.

3) Cresswell describes grounded theory research as follows:

Grounded Theory Research

*Although a phenomenology emphasizes the meaning of an experience for a number of individuals, the intent of **grounded theory study** is to move beyond description and to **generate or discover a theory**, an abstract analytical scheme of a process (or action or interaction, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Participants in the study would all have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research. A key idea is that this theory-development does not come 'off the shelf,' but rather is generated or 'grounded' in data from participants who have experienced the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquiry generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)* (p. 62-63).

A living theory is similar to a grounded theory in that the intent of a living theory is to move beyond description and to generate a valid explanation for an individual's educational influence in his or her own learning and in the learning of others. Living Theory differs from Grounded Theory in that the theory is not an abstract analytic scheme of a process. A living theory is an explanation for an individual's educational influence in learning where the explanatory principles are not abstract generalizations. The explanatory principles are the energy

flowing values and understandings the individual uses to give meaning and purpose to their life and to explain their educational influences in learning.

4) Cresswell describes ethnographic research as follows:

Ethnographic Research

Although a grounded theory researcher develops a theory from examining many individuals who share in the same process, action, or interaction, the study participants are not likely to be located in the same place or interacting on so frequent a basis that they develop shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and **language.** *An ethnographer is interested in examining these shared patterns, and the unit of analysis is larger than the 20 or so individuals involved in a grounded theory study. An* **ethnography** *focuses on an entire cultural group. Granted, sometimes this cultural group may be small (a few teachers, a few social workers), but typically it is large, involving many people who interact over time (teachers in an entire school, a community social work group). Ethnography is a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values,* **behaviors**, *beliefs and language of a* **culture-sharing group** *(Harris, 1968). As both a process and an outcome of research (Agar, 1980), ethnography is a way of studying a culture-sharing group as well as the final, written product of that research. As a process, ethnography involves extended observations of the group, most often through* **participant observation**, *in which the researcher is* **immersed** *in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants. Ethnographers study the meaning of the behaviour, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group.* (pp. 68-69).

A living theory is similar to ethnographic research in paying attention to the cultural norms within which the researcher is acting and researching. It differs from ethnographic research in that it does not focus on an entire culture group. A living theory is an explanation of an individual's educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the social formations in which the researcher is living and working. In engaging with the cultural influences in the individual's learning, especially in the learning of social formations, living theorists include an understanding of cultural influences in the explanations of their educational influences in learning. These influences can be emphasized in the application of Habermas' (976) four criteria of social validity, especially with the criterion of demonstrating an awareness of the normative background from within which the researcher is speaking and writing.

Cresswell describes case study research as follows:

5) Case Study Research

The entire culture-sharing group in ethnography may be considered a case, but the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration. Thus, **case study** *research involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system (i.e., a setting, a context). Although Stake (2005) states that case study research is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied*

*(i.e., a case within a **bounded system**), others present is as a strategy of inquiry, a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). I choose to view it as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research, or an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry. Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a **case**) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving **multiple sources of information** (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case **description** and case-based themes. For example, several programs (a **multi-site** study) or a single program (a **within-site** study) may be selected for study.* (p.73)

A living theory may sometimes be mistaken as a case study. Stake (2005) refers to case study as a choice of what is to be studied within a bounded system. Living theories generated from a perspective of inclusionality, as a relationally dynamic awareness of space and boundaries, are aware of the experience and expression of a life-affirming and unbounded energy flowing through the cosmos. The main difference between a case study and a living theory is that a case study is a study of a bounded system while the explanatory principles of living theories are not constrained by a bounded system. They articulate explanatory principles in terms of flows of life-affirming energy, values and understandings that are transformatory and not contained within a bounded system.

If you are conducting an enquiry of the kind 'How do I improve what I am doing?' with the intention of improving your practice and generating knowledge in your living educational theory, I think you will need to embrace Dadds' and Hart's (2001) idea of methodological inventiveness in the creation of both your living educational theory and your living theory methodology (Whitehead, 2009).

References

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