

# Research Paradigms in Adult Education: A Dialectical Account

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**Abstract:** This paper suggests that adult educators can employ the notion of “dialectic” introduced by Hegel and employed extensively by Marx in his materialist critique of modernity to construct a schema that allows the relations among positivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodern modes of analysis to be examined.

**Résumé:** Cet papier suggère que les enseignants d'adultes peuvent se servir de la notion dialectique, introduit par Hegel et se servi beaucoup par Marx dans sa critique matérialiste de modernité, afin de proposer un schéma qui permet l'examen des relations qui existent parmi les modes positives, interprétifs, critiques, et postmodernes.

## Introduction

While the vast majority of adult education graduate programs continue to promote positivist research programs that garner empirical-analytic knowledge,<sup>1</sup> a growing number of graduate students are becoming interested in the knowledge forms of interpretive, critical, and postmodern modes of inquiry. The task of judging the merits and failings of these competing perspectives can be a daunting one, however. How, after all, does one compare modes of inquiry that proceed from fundamentally different suppositions? The central contention of this paper is that adult educators can develop a sensitivity to and an understanding of these competing research paradigms if they consider them as logically related “moments” in a dialectical progression, such as that first described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and developed in his *Science of Logic*. This should not, however, be taken as an unconditional endorsement of Hegel’s philosophical system, for as Bernstein (1971) notes: “what Hegel sometimes seems to have taken as an established truth is better understood as a heuristic principle” (p. 8). Marx, in fact, strongly opposed Hegel’s idealist philosophy but clearly endorsed the dialectical method. Ollman (1990), for instance, notes that Marx was convinced that “where Hegel goes wrong is in believing that the interconnections he sees in the material world are mere copies of relations existing between ideas. By turning Hegel, who was ‘standing on his head,’ right side up, Marx corrects this error” (p. 54).

In his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1970) contends that if there is a disagreement about the worth of a particular mode of inquiry within a community of researchers, “there is no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual... to the same decision” (p. 200). Consequently, “in the controversies that arise when new and rival paradigms are proposed..., there are no criteria of logical proof or any straightforward appeals to evidence that are *sufficient* to resolve the dispute” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 22).<sup>2</sup> Kuhn is adamant on this point, insisting that

like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life. Because it has that character, the choice cannot be determined merely by the evaluative procedures of normal science, for these depend in part upon a particular paradigm, and that paradigm is at issues. When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm’s defense. (p. 94).

How, then, are adult educators to understand or ascertain the worth of fundamentally different modes of inquiry if there is no common standard on which to base their judgement? This is where Hegel’s notion of dialectic proves especially fruitful, for it allows paradigms to be judged not in terms of some *external*, meta-standard but in terms of their own *internal* standards. However, we need to be clear upon what the notion of

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<sup>1</sup> In an insightful analysis of the adult education handbooks published between 1934 and 1989, Wilson (1991) reveals that (1) “empirical-analytic knowledge is the dominant form of knowledge in adult education, (2) “university researchers in the field of adult education have relied on empirical-analytic knowledge to develop the knowledge base of adult education in order to control the development of the field as a profession,” and (3) “this professionalization process depends on using empirical-analytic knowledge to standardize professional practice in order to develop a market share in a service economy, to systematize both the practice and training of practitioners, and to use science as a solution to social problems” (p. i).

<sup>2</sup> Patton (1975) describes a paradigm as “a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners telling them what is important, what is legitimate, what is reasonable. Paradigms are normative; they tell the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological considerations” (p. 9).

dialectic entails. While Hegel's dialectic is often summarily described as a mechanical movement from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, such accounts fail to recognize that the dialectic is a dynamic and organic process. It is, Bernstein (1971) argues, a progression in which

one "moment" of a dialectical process, when it is fully developed or understood gives rise to its own negation; it is not mechanically confronted by an antithesis. The process here is more like that of a tragedy where the "fall" of the tragic hero emerges from the dynamics of the development of his own character.... [Subsequently,] a serious struggle takes place between the two "moments." Out of this conflict and struggle, out of this negativity, emerges a "moment" which at once negates, affirms, and transcends the "moments" involved in the struggle. (p. 20)

A useful way of comparing and understanding the positivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodern modes of inquiry, I want to suggest, is as related moments in a dialectical progression: the interpretive paradigm as the antithesis of the positivist, and the critical as the synthesis of the positivist and interpretive, since it embraces aspects of each paradigm while negating others, only to transcend both. Only with the emergence of postmodernism does the notion of a dialectical progression become problematic, for while postmodernism can be construed as the antithesis of the critical paradigm, its critique calls into question the very idea of *progress*, "the superiority of the present over the past, the modern over the pre-modern" (Rosenau, 1992, p. 6).<sup>3</sup> This does not, however, detract from the value of employing the notion of a dialectical progression as a heuristic to help adult educators develop a general understanding of the various modes of inquiry that can be employed to inform adult education practice and research.

### Positivism

While many accounts of positivism portray it as an unreflective, ingenuous world view, such accounts fail to explain its axiomatic grip on the modern mind. Positivism, in fact, is an amalgam of ideas that articulate together, lending strength to and drawing strength from one another. These "positive" ideas can be envisaged as the nodal points of a geodesic sphere that radiate from one central idea at the sphere's core—the idea that knowledge is the internal *representation* of an outer reality. To refute one aspect of positivism, then, does little to disturb the structure as a whole. Keat (1981) contends that "we can identify at least four doctrines, each of which may not unreasonably be termed 'positivist' ...: 'scientism,' 'the positivist conception of science,' 'scientific politics,' and 'value-freedom'" (p. 15). All of these "positive" doctrines hinge on the representational view of knowledge and articulate together to constitute a hegemonic bloc, a positivist alliance that further consolidates its power by constructing a notion of the human subject that is amenable to the forms of moral and intellectual leadership positivism can provide.

The first, *scientism*, holds that scientific knowledge is the only genuine form of knowledge, deeming all other forms of knowledge—religion, metaphysics, law, politics, and ethics, for example—inferior or meaningless. The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle were scientism's most memorable supporters, formulating a Verifiability Principle that proved so stringent that their own doctrine could not meet the requirements of "legitimate" knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, "in the knowledge hierarchies of postfeudal societies, modern scientific rationality is the privileged discourse, and all others are relegated to the margins. As a result, institutions of the state as well as the economy—education systems, government bureaus, the law and criminal justice systems—emulate scientific procedures within the constraints imposed by their own traditions and exigencies" (Aronowitz, 1988, pp. 8–9).

The second, *the positivist conception of science*, considers the aim of science to be that of the explanation and prediction of observable phenomena, in terms of universal, atemporal, and aspatial laws. While the truth of statements intended to express such laws is determined *solely* by their logical relationship to other nonuniversal statements that describe particular observable "data" or "facts," statements of scientific laws may contain "theoretical" terms that do not refer to observables, *but* such referents must, in principle, be observable, that is, "falsifiable."

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<sup>3</sup> There are those who contest this claim, however. Langford (1992), for instance, contends that "Rather than being a challenge to the Enlightenment, ... postmodernism is necessitated by it and exists not as an external critique but as a product of the ongoing dialectic that Enlightenment thought maintains with itself" (p. 26).

<sup>4</sup> This is the aspect of positivism that Popper—often referred to as a proponent of positivism—rejected out-of-hand, arguing that while science must be distinguished from nonscience, that which is not scientific is not without meaning. Frisby (1972), however, notes that Popper "did share their [the logical positivists'] interest in the foundation of an empiricist philosophy" (p. 106).

The third, *scientific politics*, demands that political decisions be made according to the technical application of social scientific knowledge, as opposed to wishes, opinions, values, power, or persuasion. "Here," Keat (1981) notes, "the ideal is the use of scientific knowledge to provide rational solutions to all problems concerning the organization of society, and to free such decisions from influences of a non-scientific (and thus supposedly non-rational) kind" (p. 18).

The fourth, *value-freedom*, denies the possibility of scientific politics, maintaining that it is essential to isolate the scientific realm from the political or moral realm of values. In the scientific realm, criteria that determine the validity of scientific theories, it is argued, must not refer to a moral or political position: truth or falsity must not be determined from a normative position. Furthermore, in the moral or political realm, scientific knowledge cannot be used to justify claims, for science is about what *is* the case, not what *ought* to be; consequently, people can justifiably disagree about the desirability of claims, even when such claims are established scientifically.

From this "positive" alliance, three connected but purportedly "objective" and "value-free" ideas emerge, ideas that serve to constitute the modern "positive" or "natural" subject and further consolidate the positivist world view:

The first is the picture of the subject as ideally disengaged, that is, as free and rational to the extent that he has fully distinguished himself from his natural and social worlds, so that his identity is no longer to be defined in terms of what lies outside him in these worlds. The second, which flows from this, is a punctual view of the self, ideally ready *qua* free and rational to treat these worlds—and even some of the features of his own character—instrumentally, as subject to change and reordering in order the better to secure the welfare of himself and other like subjects. The third is the social consequence of the first two: an atomistic construal of society constituted by, or ultimately to be explained in terms of, individual purposes. (Taylor, 1987, pp. 471–472)

It is this denatured conception of human beings, of a passive, "natural" subject who "is a *spectator* and *listener* who has been placed before the great visual and acoustic spectacle that is life" (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 240–241), of a timeless, placeless being whose meaningful experience is limited to the tangible and measurable, of a sensuous, sentient being reduced to a rule-governed, self-interested automaton, that has prompted the strongest critiques of positivism.

### The Interpretive Critique

Hans-Georg Gadamer offers one of the most forceful interpretive critiques of positivism, developing the perspective of *Philosophical Hermeneutics* as the negation of not only positivism's "beliefs in the disengaged subject, the punctual self, and described atomism" (Taylor, 1987, p. 476) but also the representational understanding of knowledge that lies at the very core of the positivist world view. By drawing upon the work of Heidegger and reintroducing the traditional German distinction between the natural sciences, the *Naturwissenschaften*, and the human sciences, the *Geisteswissenschaften*,<sup>5</sup> Gadamer reveals (1) that the methodology of the former is totally inappropriate for the latter, undermining scientism's aspirations of universality; (2) that prejudices are, in fact, the condition for the possibility of knowledge and not something we can ever rid ourselves of, calling into question the notion of objectivity that informs the positivist conception of science; (3) that "man always finds himself in an 'acting situation' and he is always obliged to use ethical knowledge and apply it according to the exigencies of his concrete situation" (Gadamer, 1979, p. 140), denying the possibility of a scientific politics or a value-free human science; and (4) that our disengaged representations of the world are only possible on condition that we are already "engaged in coping with our world, dealing with the things in it, at grips with them" (Taylor, 1987, p. 476), undermining the notion that knowledge, first and foremost, is comprised of our inner representations of an external reality. In demonstrating that in the human sciences, "the fact that in the

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<sup>5</sup> "In the Anglo-American tradition, intellectual disciplines fall into the trichotomy of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, but on the Continent they are categorized according to the dichotomy between the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the expression that was introduced into German as a translation for what Mill called the 'moral sciences'). In the main tradition of Anglo-American thought—at least until recently—the overwhelming bias has been to think of the social sciences as *natural sciences* concerning individuals in their social relations. The assumption has been that the social sciences differ in the degree and not in kind from the natural sciences and that ideally the methods and standards appropriate to the natural sciences can be extended by analogy to the social sciences. But in the German tradition there has been a much greater tendency to think of the social disciplines as forms of *Geisteswissenschaften* sharing essential characteristics with the humanistic disciplines" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 35).

knowing involved in them the knower's own being is involved marks, certainly, the limitation of 'method' " (pp. 446–447), Gadamer (1975) anticipates the concerns of adult educators, such as Briton and Plumb (1992, 1992b), Collard and Law (1989), Collins (1991), Cunningham (1989), Hart (1990), and Welton (1990), who share the concern that

the problem of our society is that the longing of the citizenry for orientation and normative patterns invests the expert with an exaggerated authority. Modern society expects [her or] him to provide a substitute for past moral and political orientations. Consequently, the concept of '*praxis*' which was developed in the last two centuries is an awful deformation of what practice really is. In all the debates of the last century practice was understood as application of science to technical tasks.... *It degrades practical reason to technical control.* (Gadamer, 1975b, p. 312, emphasis added)

### The Critical Perspective

Jürgen Habermas has developed what is arguably the most comprehensive account of a critical social theory. Habermas's theory of *Communicative Action* can be considered the synthesis of positivism and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* because it incorporates aspects of each perspective in an attempt to transcend both. With Gadamer, Habermas (1972) argues against scientism: "science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we can no longer understand science as one form of possible knowledge, but rather must identify knowledge with science" (p. 4); but he rejects Gadamer's contention that the subordination of technical knowledge to practical knowledge is sufficient, in itself, to free human beings from the distortive and oppressive elements of tradition and authority. In accordance with the tradition of historical materialism, Habermas holds that because the very concepts we employ to investigate our understanding arise from concrete lived experiences that are *always already* shaped by asymmetrical power relations, such oppressive structures cannot be grasped or transformed by thinking about them, but only by transforming them—recall Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Consequently, Habermas introduces a third form of knowledge that articulates with, rather than displaces, positivism's control-oriented, technical, empirical-analytic knowledge and Gadamer's understanding-oriented, practical, hermeneutic knowledge: a freedom-oriented, emancipatory, critical form of knowledge. While Habermas denies the emancipatory potential of both scientific and practical reason, he fully endorses the belief that liberty can be realized through the application of a universal reason, proposing his own *Universal Pragmatics* as the means to realize the Enlightenment ideal of Freedom.

### The Postmodern Perspective

Postmodern modes of inquiry can be considered the antithesis of the critical perspective proposed by Habermas because they seek to negate all attempts to "liberate" humanity according to a universal form of reason. Postmodernists argue that all attempts to formulate an "objective" form of reason "inevitably turn into vulgar or sophisticated forms of ethnocentrism in which some privileged understanding of rationality is falsely legitimated by claiming for it an unwarranted universality" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 19). As Rosenau (1992) notes:

post-modernism challenges global, all-encompassing world views, be they political, religious or social.... reduces Marxism, Christianity, fascism, Stalinism, capitalism, liberal democracy, secular humanism, feminism, Islam, and modern science to the same order and dismisses them all as logocentric, transcendental totalizing meta-narratives that anticipate all questions and provide pre-determined answers. All such systems of thought rest on assumptions no more or no less certain than those of witchcraft, astrology, or primitive cults.... The post-modern goal is not to formulate an alternative set of assumptions but to register the impossibility of establishing any such underpinning for knowledge...., to "delegitimize all mastercodes." (p. 6)

Many of those who recognize the legitimacy of the postmodern critique argue that "there is no room here for disappointment," pointing out to those who are intimidated by the uncertainty of the postmodern condition that

we are living... one of the most exhilarating moments of the twentieth century: a moment in which new generations, without the prejudices of the past, without theories presenting themselves as "absolute truths" of history, are constructing new emancipatory discourses, more human, diversified and democratic. The eschatological and epistemological ambitions are more modest, but the liberating aspirations are wider and deeper. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1990, p. 98)

## Conclusion

In this synopsis of positivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodern modes of inquiry, I have argued that adult educators can employ Hegel's notion of dialectic to construct a schema that allows the relations among these four prospective research paradigms to be explored. This schema, I hope, will provide adult educators with an understanding of these perspectives that is sufficient to invoke an interest in pursuing them further.

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