Research as potentially apolitical: Possible impossibility or impossible possibility?

T. J. Pitso
Vaal University of Technology
South Africa
e-mail: biki@vut.ac.za

Abstract
This article focuses on the broad problematic of social research as attempts on accessing – for aggregation or gaining new insights – accurate motives and thoughts of research participants as they function within contexts and time. It argues that researchers are handicapped in any research endeavour because they are dependent on what the researched can make publicly available. This is the inherent dilemma in research – the inaccessibility of the other mind and its capability to separate the public self and the inner self such that the capacity to display theatrics to fit expected roles is a constant threat. Furthermore, the article asks whether research can ever be apolitical because of the inherent tension between the researcher and the researched emanating from who is in control of the research process. This backdrop is attempted within the truth representation model and argumentation which are then tested against two recently published articles in SAJHE.

INTRODUCTION
My research readings suggest that research is intended to create new revolutions (Kuhn 1962, Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000; Babbie and Mouton 2001; Blaikie 2003; Creswell 2003) but my experience as an emerging researcher suggests that research is mostly about filling in the gaps of the past revolutions. Some research articles that I have been exposed to through most research journals including the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE) for which I have been encouraged to focus on to establish my research niche have tended towards filling in the gaps of past revolutions in varying degrees. Two research articles in the latest South African Journal of Higher Education have confirmed my suspicions that research can easily be hegemonic and ideological in its epistemic and transformative essence. I offer a truth representation model not as a means of imprisoning but as a way of facilitating my views and analysis of these two articles so that we can decide if they fill in gaps of past revolutions or represent a way forward on attempts on creating new revolutions in research endeavours. It would also contribute meaningfully in dealing with the broad problematic of social research.

ARGUMENTATION: EXPERIENCE, REASONING AND RESEARCH
I consider efforts on understanding the world around us and the means of achieving that comprehension as hugely argumentation projects. Argumentation, generally,
entails systematic exchange of points of view in a largely contestable sense so that its driving force is reasoning. Reasoning attempts to provide explanations about a particular phenomenon in either a priori or a posteriori sense. Research, I argue, is an a posteriori argumentation that is intended to explain phenomena empirically. In this sense, an a posteriori argumentation can only hold when it meets, at least, three critical conditions. Firstly, it has to prove that it is philosophically apodictic so that the knowledge claims it makes can pass the test for validity and soundness. Validity suggests that the assumptions being made in each argumentation can hold in real life and have a good chance of being trusted and relied on. Soundness refers to the high likelihood that the argumentation’s epistemic imperatives can be considered truthful in a broader sense and that its transformative essence can be considered solid enough such that the envisaged outcomes and societal impact can generally benefit most people most of the time. Secondly, argumentation has to demonstrate that its strategies of inquiry to solicit evidence to prove or disprove stated propositions are not in contrast with its philosophical underpinning. It is untenable to use a post-positivistic research framework to make social constructivism or advocacy knowledge claims. Thirdly, the methodological considerations should not contrast both the philosophical grounding and strategies of inquiry when argumentation is conceptualized. It is my contention that any research inquiry that exhibits a contradictory argumentation framework is fundamentally flawed and obfuscates rather than enlightens.

Furthermore, any research publications that validate such flawed frameworks of inquiry exhibits an ideologization of research inquiry to serve narrow interests.

TRUTH REPRESENTATION

Truth in research, that state of being consistent with reality or a verifiable statement, can be represented differently so that its epistemic and transformative capacities can be directed to achieve specific outcomes and impact in life. I see three forms of representing truth in research which, in turn, result in different outcomes and impact. Firstly, truth can be represented narrowly to permit certain forms of reality which are treated as ultimate reality which arbitrates every facet of the lives of those that wish to be ordered in that particular way. For instance and historically, an epistemic belief in the justification of knowledge only if it is based on indubitable foundational assumptions has tended to only permit realist views of reality thus objectifying reality. Reality, in this sense, is considered external to individuals so that knowledge thus generated is capable of being transmitted tangibly to those who lack it. Furthermore, individuals are considered as responding mechanically to their environments (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2001, 9). Language use is often context-free so that the knowledge generated can be transferred largely unharmed to various contexts. The outcomes of the epistemic endeavour, in this truth representation, often lead to usefulness of effort such that a benefit accrues but to few elites so that the societal impact translates into domination and often manipulation. This has, largely, been the
story of humanity since the 18th Century – the use of science to power and justify unsustainable productivist model of development.

Secondly, truth can also be represented broadly to cover an expanded view of reality where most of the various forms of reality are permitted and utility and relevance are the main arbiters of imaginative reality models. There is general freedom of choice for the researcher and decisions relate to what works at a certain point in time. Assumptions are neither dualistic in the sense of separating mind and soul nor strictly monistic in its subjective essence. There is a deeper recognition here that research is a hugely social, historical and political project that is malleable to specific contexts. This truth representation allows for multiplicity of philosophical underpinnings, different strategies of inquiry, multiple worldviews and assumptions. Its epistemic imperatives incline toward both realist and idealist views of reality. The outcome and societal impact of this truth representation often relate to broad-based empowerment with fairer, equitable and just distribution of benefit as well as ecological sensitivity. Truth representation, thirdly, can be distorted to serve a hegemonic and ideological purpose. Epistemic efforts, in this case, are designed to commit scientific fraud through justifying dominance, manipulation and sustaining of unjust models of reality.

In all these representations of truth, it is axiomatic that representing truth entails efforts on fashioning reality in a particular way and that research offers slightly more reliable means of fashioning reality in ways that should lead to greater good. The main advantage of research as a way of ordering reality in a particular way is its unique feature of containing ‘feedback loops’ and self-testing mechanisms for validity and soundness. These feedback loops and self-testing mechanisms are intended to identify and eliminate anomalies in our current thinking and understanding (prevailing paradigm).

Furthermore, these loops and mechanisms can power and structure alternative models of reality (countervailing paradigm) for human progress towards social equitability and ecological sustainability which, I argue, should be the final arbiter of any scientific endeavour whether it has a weak or strong intervention component. In an event where these anomalies are insistent and unavoidable, revolutions are inevitable. Revolutions have a tendency of speeding-up progressive change, spawning new capabilities and new opportunities where existing paradigms are rendered obsolescent by alternative ones. Kuhn (1962) in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions suggests that scientific research is susceptible to human weakness, pride and politics which get in the way of scientific progress and thus is subjected to the limits of human perception and the constraints of personality, society and sociology. In other words, truth representation in this hallowed area called scientific research is quite malleable to the vagaries of historical, spatial and sociological realities. Historically, scientific research has tended towards narrowing reality to exclusively realist assumptions that assumed a particular hegemonic control over all forms of scientific inquiry including social science. This arrangement has been a hugely political project as it intended to secure power and control through rejecting other forms of viewing reality. Spatially,
scientific realist assumptions have shaped, ordered and structured our lives on a planetary scale and in real time in ways that have advantaged the pervasiveness of a narrow way of seeing, thinking and understanding our environment with consequent inequity. The ordering of our lives in realist assumptions has been a hugely political and economic project as it intended to ensure that societies are generally consensus-driven, stable and predictable such that these societies could, presumably, meet the needs of most people most of the time (Runté 1995, 6).

The structuring of societies in this particular way ensured the annexing of scientific inquiry by industry champions to serve narrow epistemic and transformative interests and advantage money replication through pursuance of a productivist model of development. Sociologically, the benefits of scientific endeavour have tended to be distributed in a skewed manner that often get arbitrated in terms of artificial social categorizations such as race, gender, political and geographic affiliation. On the other side of the dichotomous research pole resides the generally marginalized idealist assumptions that can equally lead to narrow representation of truth. While marginalized, it is a scientific inquiry questing for hegemony and political power. It seeks to empower and give control to humans and dispel assumptions that individuals are acted on by their environment thus attempts to restore agency power to humans. Both these extreme ends of the research dichotomy lack real power to solicit monetary gain and contests are often on legimization in the socio-political domain for economic considerations thus serve as lobbying tools. A broad-based truth representation validates both these views of reality and argues that the debate on the supremacy of one view of reality over the other is a wrong one in the face of unfettered and increasingly unsustainable economic regime of inequity, the over-pressured secondary societies by few conglomerates of elites that command world resources and the strained regenerative capacities of our ecosystems. It is in this sense that the safe and comfortable research inquiries that advance nothing new and are based on inadequate examination of presuppositions of outmoded paradigms need to be eschewed and frowned at.

Even further deserving of our greatest and collective frowning are the feedback loops and testing mechanisms that fail to detect anomalies and continue to encourage use of poor models, beliefs in misleading theories and/or pedestrian gibberish shrewdly disguised as scientific inquiry. I critically reflect on two recent research articles to indicate the gap between desiring to create knowledge through prevailing models of reality and falling short of achieving that and thus keeping us in a position of not knowing future possibilities (even impossibilities).

**RESEARCH ARTICLE 1: Learning about the Entrepreneurial University**


When education was annexed to serve business interests about a Century ago, industry images of timeline, efficiency and task management were duly transferred to education. The annexing of education by business was intended to maximize
business hegemonic control over every facet of our lives and we experienced the birth of secondary societies that exist at the behest of big business. We became machined and panic ordered our lives. We chase grades, syllabuses, examinations and tests. We centralize curriculum for efficient enactment as measured in terms of end-products completely oblivious of a simple fact that humans cannot be pre-programmed to a number. We largely encourage annihilation of the other in our assessment. We order, control and manage curriculum topics as industrialists order, control and manage production systems. We alienate, isolate and pathologize those perceived to be unworthy of education and learning especially in higher education.

We measure excellence in terms of education efforts that have surpassed the expectation of industrial masters so that we prepare ‘perfect’ cogs for the benefit of the industrial processes and systems. We do all these things because we, as educationists, have abandoned our responsibility to sober and challenge hegemonic power of business. We conform and accept as ultimate reality the hegemony of big business and employ, rather unashamedly, its models of reality in our own learning and governance structures. We are too afraid to be seen to challenge such power and lose our hollow privileges and special status. We thus get blinded by ‘borrowed robes’ of special status and special knowledge which industry champions use effectively to blind us from challenging its hegemonic control over every aspect of our lives.

**What went wrong?**

It began when the integrated Craft system of meeting human needs was replaced by the mass production systems where planning was separated from operations more than a Century ago. The motive was cheapening labour and maximizing profit margins for industry champions. The overall strategy of industry champions became separating the strategic planning and operations of the production system so that those with ‘specialized’ knowledge took control of strategic planning and less-skilled workers focused on simplified tasks in the production system (Runté 1995, 6–7). The money replication motive of industry champions ensured that fewer experts are concentrated and tasked with simplifying the production operations while the majority of workers complete highly controlled tasks within a strictly stated timeframe to maximize profitability.

Since then, the ‘human resource’ has always been seen as bloated and inimical to profit maximization so that it powered the need to reduce its value in the production system. Central control of production systems ensured that products and services that are produced are generally the same, of the same quality and in large quantities. This could only be achieved through strict timelines, efficient models of operations and strict management of every facet of tasks. This arrangement may have worked well and fine in the industry minus workers exploitation and unfair distribution of benefit but its transfer into academia posed the greatest danger in human survival. Firstly, centralizing curriculum in academia ensured that industry champions are generally fashioning academia around their models of reality that permit only
money replication and unbridled greed. Secondly, timelines in academia have meant that strict timeframes are placed in completion of curriculum topics and fancy nomenclature has been created to imprison and reduce the complexity of learning to empty time measures. ‘Throughput rates’, ‘pass rates’, ‘graduation rates’ have become the new efficiency models where the number of students that pass in record time matter more and, like in industrial production systems, outputs matter more than the quality of outcome. Thirdly, academics as ‘human resource’ have been seen as bloated and deserving of ‘pruning’ to maximize institutional capacity to survive economically. The real underlying issues have been ignored entirely – that academia cannot be industrialized and that the economic growth models to development are fundamentally flawed. Academia through research has a responsibility to shift paradigms of meeting human needs and restore urgency to local people.

Academia through research has equally a responsibility to challenge unbridled greed of a generally unsustainable economic motive which generally ignores the regenerative capacities of our ecosystems and skewed distribution of world resources. The challenge facing research in academia is to remain vigilant to replacing one hegemonic and ideological dispensation with another which would inflict social inequality and lead to ecological unsustainability. We need competitiveness that is not based on resentment logics and annihilation of the other rather, one that pushes human intellectual limits to its fullest extent. Academia cannot, therefore, afford to be further annexed by industrial discourses of entrepreneurship that operate within the largely unsustainable productivist models of development. Entrepreneurship, pushed to its logical conclusion, suggests the huge straining of natural resources, brutish competition and primitive predatory behaviour that is not in line with the divinity of social justness, fairness and equality. Entrepreneurialism, on the other hand, operates within the framework of fairness and equality. It entails placing the provision of service to humanity in terms of their contextual potential above monetary considerations. In order to actualize entrepreneurialism, the logic of economic liberalization needs to be challenged and alternative models of development have to be mooted to chart a way forward in buttressing human needs instead of unfettered economic growth. A sense of history can assist research in contributing to shifting societies away from the productivist models of development and attempting alternative ones. The notion of entrepreneurial Universities consolidates rather than challenge existing models of development and thus permits a perennial modeling of human affairs around unsustainable business models that hinge on social inequality and ecological unsustainability.

It is not clear why this is considered as representing a way forward in research and academic engagement when, in essence, it perpetuates the legacy of Harry White. In May 1942 and reacting to the USA economic depression and crash of 1929 and ensuring USA free access to world resources, Harry White (the United States Treasury) hashed a master-plan that would ensure that US economy does not experience the 1929 economic depression again (Toussaint 2006, 9). The master-plan (Washington Consensus) included free access of foreign markets and their
natural resources to service and sustain mainly USA economy through economic liberalization ideology. This ideology would neuter foreign states and pursue an economic theory of development that is based on external capital flows through loan contracting, foreign investment attraction and increasing exports to secure foreign currency so as to enable these countries to use it to buy foreign commodities, mainly USA ones.

Economic liberalization seeks to achieve free flow of markets (free markets theory) through eliminating state control over its economic activity so that such power should reside with markets (Neo-liberalism), keeping inflation under check, cutting social expenditure, balancing budgets through fiscal austerity, privatizing state assets to ensure complete market hegemonic control and eliminating trade tariffs (Giliomee, Schlemmer and Hauptfleisch 1994, 16–17). The dwindling resource allocations to education and universities need to be understood within the context of social expenditure cuts as propagated by the Neo-liberal discourses and the stubborn commitment to the productivist models of development.

This model of development ignores cultural uniqueness, natural resources sustainability and social equitability of various contexts in the world. This scenario thus leads to the assumption that ‘contexts and people anywhere in the world are the same and can adapt to western standards’ (Pitso 2008, 43). It is this sense of history that assists in illuminating problematic assumptions in existing models of reality and provides impetus for imagining alternative models of reality through research and academic engagement. In a way, an entrepreneurial university is an oxymoron that distorts the true nature of scientific inquiry as occasioned within universities and attempts to legitimize ideologization of scientific inquiry to permit narrow view of reality and inherent interests. Researchers are intellectuals that should stand for and defend vulnerability wherever and whenever it occurs rather than perpetuate it through legitimizing pursuance of narrow epistemic and transformative interests.


Two untenable sociological theories – structural functionalism and trait model – render the concept of ‘profession’ and its extension ‘professional’ invalid thus theoretically unsound. Development suggests deficiency and thus suffers perennially from the deficit model that is premised on realist assumptions that suggest that reality can exist independent of an individual so that it can be acquirable outside the self. The use of qualitative instruments that lead to idealist knowledge claims within an essentially realist framework is not only philosophically silly but suggests a deeper malaise – the tragedy that befall humanity when it fails to cope with its own ignorance and this is the tragedy of knowledge itself from whence other human tragedies ensue. Under these conditions, Socrates counsels epistemological modesty.
to avoid massive error and mistaken inferences and, I add, difficulty in understanding our own predicament in the court of scientific inquiry and its feedback loops and testing mechanisms. As indicated earlier, the separation of planning and operations to service money replication and labour cheapening is largely responsible for the tragedies that befall academia, curriculum and research. Professional is a term that claims superior knowledge and thus special status which, essentially, suggests that some human beings arrogate unto themselves the right to order and structure the lives of other selves in a particular way so that the underlying premise is that of domination and (possible) manipulation. It is what Erving Goffman (1959) in his book *The presentation of self in everyday life* calls the dramaturgical conception of self. Here each person treats otherness as an audience on whom one must make an impression so that the whole thing boils down to stage-managing the situation such that the self is always in charge thus leading to inevitable annihilation of the other. The term professional is even more ridiculous because it is a creation of industry champions to serve narrow interests of exploitation and domination over the majority of the people in the world who slave under the yoke of productivist models of development. Furthermore, it suffers from the logical fallacy of circular reasoning – *what makes teaching a profession? Because of the distinguishing traits of a profession, but what makes these distinguishing traits the defining characteristics of a profession? Because they are found in teaching, but how do you know that teaching is a profession? Because it has these distinguishing traits.*

When research and academia legitimize such misrepresentation of truth in the largely economically-enslaved education arena then Aristotle’s dictum some five hundred years ago remains relevant: *people do desire to know; they are not indifferent to knowledge (especially knowledge of the other) but are necessarily thwarted.* This means that the basic value in human life – that of knowing (especially others) – is unrealizable because of the fundamental inaccessibility of the others minds and this is necessarily our tragedy. We are, therefore, perennially reduced to interpretation, competing hypotheses and perpetual possibility of massive error. Overconfidence in accurately measuring or summing up the motives and thoughts of others is an impossible possibility because of the theatrical abilities of the others who can stage-manage their performance and responses to fit a particular view or position. Researchers can also provide cues, inadvertently or unconsciously, during the fieldwork to a particular conclusion thus trigger the stimulus for the dramaturgical conception of self in research participants.

It is, in this sense, untenable to attempt human understanding as influenced within a particular context because of the inherent concealment of human mind from public scrutiny so that we can only infer from what is publicly available of the other as controlled and stage-managed by the other self. Any research on human understanding as influenced in a particular context is a hugely conjectural endeavour so that such scientific inquiry is an inquiry in the possibility of the impossible – the inaccessibility of the human mind and its theatrical capabilities. It is exactly this interaction of time and the theatricality of the self that renders human understanding
in context impossible with the possibility of futile scientific effort that is hugely susceptible to massive error.

This may sound like apocalyptic despair but it, I argue, provides a reasonable and considered estimate of human life and its operations thus fundamentally questions the philosophical underpinnings of our existing strategies of inquiries and its methodological assumptions as they relate to human inquiry. The reliance on the observable, public self of the research participants as the accurate point of view to arrive at certain conclusions is prone to massive error and is premised on the claimed supremacy of the researcher’s positionality in the scientific inquiry yet it is the research participants that are in control of their inner thoughts and motives thus in control of the scientific inquiry. Research participants are equally in control of their theatrical self so that decisions on data are that of the research participants who stage-manage which data to reveal and which to conceal. It is my contention that any scientific inquiry on humans in their context threaten fundamentally the inner locus of control of the research participants such that the possibility of theatrics is huge as a buffer to the possible loss of control thus can significantly ‘contaminate’ data and the conclusions based on it. The scientific inquiry based on eliciting the views and opinions of the research participants in their contexts suffer similar fate as the observable one except that when significant time is devoted to the research participants and through this longer engagement, they realize some benefit in providing data, the research participants’ theatrical self can be conditioned by self-interest such that some modicum of accuracy – remember, accuracy is unattainable in human inquiry – can be attained so that some conclusions can be better warranted than those inferred from inquiries with shorter lifespan.

The essential challenge in both forms of scientific inquiry is that research participants’ role is equally stage-managed by the researcher whose real motives and thoughts – often those of gaining some recognition as a degree-holder or researcher-of-note – are explicitly stated so that research participants view themselves, most of the time, as necessary tools of the researcher with no real benefit accruing to them. The commitment levels of the research participants would necessarily depend largely on the possible gain from the research inquiry and this is likely to influence their stage-managing the data.

I argue that a research inquiry that fundamentally build-in research participants’ benefit in the inquiry is likely to receive reduced stage-managed data and is likely to make better warranted knowledge claims at that point in time than those with no visible accruable benefit to the research participants. I further argue that any scientific inquiry that takes research participants as equal learning partners with little visible power relations is equally likely to gain slightly less stage-managed data and slightly improved knowledge claims. It is, in this sense, unfortunate that discredited concepts such as ‘professional’ to claim special knowledge and status thus foregrounding realist conceptions of knowledge continue to be used in scientific inquiry to make constructivist knowledge claims. The contradiction in conceptual framing is so palpable that it is not clear how this escaped the feedback loops and
testing mechanisms so essential if scientific inquiry is to be trusted in slightly contributing in satisfying human epistemological desire rather than pathetically becoming subservient to the applause of those who have gained hegemonic power through overstating and exaggerating their epistemological know-how.

THE KEY PROBLEMATIC IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

My considered view is that firstly, research that involves human participants is essentially an exercise in the possibility of the impossible because of the problem of understanding the other mind and accurately predicting its actual motives and thoughts. Secondly, the potentiality of research as an apolitical endeavour is an impossible possibility because of the inherent power relations, self-interest and the inaccessibility of the human mind as influenced contextually in both research participants (the researcher and the researched).

REFERENCES