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Letters to the Editor

Relief for the exhausted post-positivist: New epistemological choices transcend positivism, relativism, and even post-positivism

Un soulagement pour le post-positiviste épuisé : les nouveaux choix épistémologiques transcendent le positivisme, le relativisme, et même le post-positivisme

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In this article, I take up Editor D'Eon's collegial and generous invitation to respond to articles published in this journal—in this case, his own editorial on the difficulties of being a post-positivist.^{1*} Post-positivism as an epistemology is committed to the pursuit of truth while at the same time acknowledging the difficulty of ever getting there. In line with Dr. D'Eon's argument, I agree that this is the most rational response to the extremes of postmodern relativism and positivism's overly optimistic assertion that certain and universal truths can be definitively established.

Where I differ, however, is in accepting that this continuum is our only choice, epistemologically speaking. In recent decades, new theories of learning and knowing have proposed more complex yet pragmatic ways of understanding the relationship between knowers and the world. If you are looking for labels, this new way of thinking is often associated with pragmatism, enactivism, complexity science,

sociomaterial, inter-objectivity, and post-human thinking.²

These theories describe human knowing as relating to the world in a similar way to how organisms relate to their environment, how lungs relate to the atmosphere, or how people relate to their workplace: They fit their current context. Whether embodied in individuals or in professions, then, human knowing is about adapting our mental and behavioural networks to cope with our physical and social environments.³ Coherence with current, practical, local situations—rather than correspondence with universal and eternal truths—is what “grounds” this new approach to knowing.

To say that people *know* something means that they can interact effectively with something else. Knowing is thus an evolving relation, influenced by both the knowers and the things in the world that they interact with. It is NOT an objective fact divorced from human

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knowers, NOR a purely subjective social construction divorced from the world, NOR even some kind of post-positivist negotiation between these two positions.

I realize that this argument invites readers to let go of many entrenched and comforting notions of objectivity, subjectivity, truth and research. But this new participatory, relational epistemological position offers several benefits. First, it fits the actual history of science quite well. For instance, it accommodates Kuhn's description of how scientific paradigms undergo regular and fundamental reformations, rather than closing in on a singular and unchanging objective truth.⁴

Second, it allows us to meet the postmodern critique that research and knowledge are always political. They are, but that does not mean that our research is merely a relativistic social construction, since the things we study (for example, atoms or organs) also play a big role in what counts as knowledge. For example, our knowledge of how to carry out an immunization campaign will depend not only on political factors, but also the relationship between vaccines and pathogens.

Third, this new epistemological position leads us to reconsider what we do in education. We need to recognize that the curricula we teach are not objective and unchanging facts but rather valuable tools and practices that help us to interact with the world in (hopefully) ever-more effective, nuanced and ethical ways. Our job as educators is to engage students in the collective human enterprise of exploring, expanding, critiquing and improving these tools. As professionals, we certainly need working models to do our jobs, but we need to understand that these models will continue to evolve.

To summarize, I do not think we need anchor our epistemology, research, and teaching in the (elusive) goal of pursuing final, certain and universal truths. I think we now have more productive and practical ways to understand human knowing and the job it does for us. The world may be "out there," but our knowledge is not. Knowing is a relationship that we continually negotiate and re-negotiate with our world, including other objects, organisms, ecosystems, people and professional or social norms. Such knowledge is incredibly valuable; we don't need dreams of eternal truths to justify our pursuit of it.

**Editor's note: From the moment that I contemplated my open invitation to critique the articles in issue 11(5) until I received this letter, never once did it enter my mind that someone would actually comment on or even critique my editorial. I'm not a very good post-positivist.*

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