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Midgley, Mark A.; Taylor, Patrick; Danaher, Alan & Mander, Alison. (Eds.) (2011) *Beyond Binaries in Education*. NY: Routledge.

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Reviewed by Catherine Scott
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The divisions that plague educational research as an enterprise have long caused me concern. The most obvious and most debated 'binary' is the quantitative-qualitative 'divide'. As a researcher who uses whatever tools are best for the job at hand and certainly has great respect for qualitative work well done I was baffled by the significance that people place on this dichotomy of methods and learned to dread that part of the job interview when someone would lean forward and ask 'What theory [singular] do you use?'

I come from a psychology background and had not encountered the ferocious antipathy expressed towards those who include quantitative methods in their tool kit until I strayed across the border into education. There I found that, for a subset of educational researchers, research methods were not mere tools for

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garnering understanding but either badges of belonging or black marks of infamy. The value judgments came not from the supposedly rigid and intolerant quantitative methods people, but from the self-styled victims of their oppression, the vociferously 'qualitative'[1] researchers. I was bemused to be apparently regarded as misogynist, homophobic, racist, classist and generally biased against the meek and humble because I could run a decent sort of multivariate analysis.

Worse than all of the above I was a *positivist*, apparently.

So intrigued was I by the wailing about their own oppression from the card-carrying 'qualitative' researchers and their adoption of the mantle of the champions of the oppressed that I did the only sensible thing and studied some anthropology in an attempt to understand the culture of educational research. The superb work of Mary Douglas (1998) provided me with the lens to investigate the behaviour of those who style themselves the only righteous educational researchers in town.

I have written at length about the culture of educational research (Scott, 2010) and will not reprise my arguments here. The short version is that education as a human activity has been driven to the social margins and deprived of power and status. When any human institution suffers this fate its members begin to think like the denizens of a sect. They draw the boundaries tight around their enterprise and identity becomes a key issue because it defines who is 'in' (virtuous) and who is 'out' (evil). The world view of the sect member is very black and white and their moral judgements are similarly lacking in shades of grey.

It is a great irony, then, that card carrying members of the 'qualitative' sect have written a book in which they 'deconstruct' the perfidy of the rest of the world's division of everything into 'binaries' or as I would prefer, dichotomies. The justification, which I leave to the reader to evaluate as he or she will, is thus (p. 1)

The book [is] founded on the proposition that binaries are alive and well in contemporary social life and hence in education in the early 21st century. This is because we see education research as

[1] I shall use 'qualitative' in commas to distinguish between qualitative methods as a tool and as a badge of identity.

inextricably linked with that social life and therefore centrally positioned to replicate and/or transform it.

These binaries, so influential in life and research, the editors and their contributors maintain, have a good/well regarded/normal category and an opposing stigmatised defective one. They seek out examples of the ways on which these dichotomies cause mischief in educational research and how they have striven to overcome these. It has been said, perhaps in the Bible, that your sins will be known by what you accuse others of. This book is a prime example.

As just one of many examples of the seizing of the high moral ground so beloved of cults and evident in this book, Hawkins describes her research team's discovering during their 'orientation' phase of their 'feminist communitarian' research that they were characterised by '*caring, empathy, trust, honesty and solidarity*' (p. 155, emphasis in original).

I see. As opposed to the rest of us, I expect. I doubt the authors entertained the prospect that such proclamations might open them to charges of self-righteousness.

Naturally enough statistics has no place in the book under review, as a glance at the 'S' section of the index reveals. 'Social justice' - predictably – has several entries, as do 'sustainability', 'synergy/ies' and something called 'sedentarism' which apparently is the bad sibling of yet another binary, which styles staying in the one place for long periods of time as 'normal' and which is thus oppressive of people who move around a lot. I have changed addresses several times in the last decade and was relieved to discover that at least in this case I belonged on the correct side of the binary.

I have a different explanation for the avoidance of statistical methods in educational research, other than its being a badge of moral infirmity. I taught research methods for 20 years to students from a variety of disciplines. Most found it challenging because it is. Statistics requires not only the accumulation of facts but the acquisition of a whole new language and with it a new way of looking at the world, one which is in many ways at odds with common sense models. People, for instance, are notoriously poor at probabilistic reasoning and statistics requires that in spades. However, like anything difficult it can be learned by application and serious study. That requires motivation, however.

People without a taste for statistics can find solace in the embrace of post modernism, or choose your own term for this phenomenon. Post-modernist writing is satisfyingly convoluted, and it is possible to sound very brainy just by picking up the dialect (although Alan Sokal demonstrated that this can open one to parody. See Sokal, 1996). This perhaps provides a salve for the wounds endured doing battle with the intellectually demanding discipline of statistics.

Having carefully avoided actually learning any statistics when it came to choosing research topics and methods, I found that students generally chose something they could tackle by using what they usually called 'phenomenology' (that sounds brainy too). What usually ensued was a research project in which half a dozen people were interviewed about what they thought about some topic or other, the transcripts analysed in a perfunctory way and a description of the results produced. I do mean 'description'. Not a lot of analysis or synthesis to be found usually. This is a prime example of 'what' research, as opposed to 'why' or 'how' research (S. Dinham, pers. Comm.., 07/12/2012).

If the research project was part of doctoral study, then a pass earned the holder the right to obtain an academic post and to supervise research students. Under the guidance of a supervisor with only one piece of research and a thin knowledge of a very small set of research methods, students of these novice researchers had very few options for their own research and a downward spiral ensured.

The obvious effect in Australia at least, from whence come most contributors to the book, has been a steady decline in the quality of much educational research. AARE, Australia's main educational research organisation and its equivalent to AERA, has been taken over by the 'qualitative' push and many researchers who do not belong to that particular sect and prefer to take a more inclusive approach to research methods, have departed the organisation. This has left the remaining members to continue their occupation of the moral high ground, from whence they hurl verbal rocks at those who have sullied themselves by acquisition of a broad range of research tools and methods and to mutter darkly about 'gender', 'racism', 'ethnicity', 'indigeneity', and other worthy topics worn as badges of belonging to the blessed.

A pity, really.

From my experiences in educational schools Australia-wide another source, apart from maths phobia, of educational researchers' gravitating to topics that are peripheral to education's central business, namely learning and teaching, is the lack of a foundation discipline in many education researchers' study portfolios. Lacking the sort of deep study of a subject that helps people get a proper grasp of how knowledge works, novice educational researchers are frequently thrown back on pretending to be sociologists. Sociology is sufficiently broad and allows for the taking up of virtuous fields of study, such as the 'social aspects' of health-related issues - eating disorders and obesity are popular – or gender or other topics that license both throwing rocks at 'oppressive mainstream' researchers and research that does not go beyond interviewing people about their 'experiences of' some hot topic or other.

A wag of my acquaintance from an education school who shall not be named is given to observing that his fellow faculty avoid anything to do with schooling and conduct instead research into 'fat boys and drunken youths'.

The sort of research that emanates from some schools of education – that is, not all Australian schools of education - dominated by these tendencies further entrenches the view that educators don't know much and that the profession should be 'guided' from without, by politicians, opinion leaders and policy makers, with advice from people who do "know something," generally economists.

A pity, again.

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