

## **Do methods produce knowledge? A critical analysis with reference to cognitive social, and discursive perspectives.**

**Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo\*, Jennifar Chikasha**

Zimbabwe Open University, PO Box 1119, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

### **\*Corresponding Author:**

Ignatius Isaac Dambudzo

**Email:** [idambudzo@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:idambudzo@yahoo.co.uk)

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**Abstract:** The study examined different research methods and their role in knowledge creation. Secondary sources were used to obtain information to support the arguments. Results show that no matter what research method or methodology was used knowledge was yielded. Both cognitive social and discursive perspectives yielded knowledge in their own way. Thus researchers should feel free to use any research method for knowledge creation and appreciate that knowledge created by each method was unique.

**Keywords:** cognitive, discursive, hermeneutic traditions, language, subjective, constructive, experiments, knowledge..

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### **DISCUSSION**

*Cognitive social perspective* is one of the four approaches used to study social psychology-theory of the person or ontology. It uses experiments to uncover what is concealed in the mind. *Discursive psychology* is one of the hermeneutic traditions in psychology that seeks to explore and understand people's subjective experiences and meanings particularly the constructive role of language in creating meaning by discourse analysis [1-3].

The two perspectives use different methodologies: so *cognitive social perspective* uses the statistical or quantitative or scientific methodology and while the *discursive* uses the qualitative. Experiments and social psychometric tests were used to study hidden social psychological phenomena. The methods predict outcomes to a research question stated as an hypothesis. *Discursive psychology* uses *discourse analysis* to reveal meanings and inner experiences. Experiments control variables in the natural environment to suit a theoretical position and the researcher's stated objectives thereby introduce subjectivity early in the study. *Discourse analysis* reveals variables in the naturally occurring texts or discourses. Experiments are often conducted in the laboratory and outside while *discursive analysis* focuses on data occurring in natural context in its totality for social significance. Experiments seek to simplify the real world to explain cause and effect and establish relationships. Discourse analysis seeks subjectivity while experiments seek objectivity. The researcher distances himself/herself from the experiment to minimize influence on the research outcome. In discourse analysis, the researcher is central

to the research process hence reflexivity is a very important part of research. In experiments variables are manipulated to minimize influence of known confounding variables. There is no manipulation in discourse analysis since it uses naturally occurring talk or text [1-3]. Objectivity is further achieved by collecting standardized data and reporting it as statistics to provide universal explanations while discourse analysis seeks subjectivity by providing situation specific explanations of texts. Experimental results are interpreted by inference of statistical evidence for consistency with theory. Results inconsistent with theory or minority views are often ignored. Discourse analysis provides interpretations of meanings and language usage in their context and is holistic. Since the focus of study is human beings, ethical issues are crucial in data collection and final results [1-3]. Analysis of discourses is guided by the researcher's interests focusing on what people say, how they say it, and their inner experiences. The approach distances itself from interior processes such as intentions, feelings, cognition, motives and the purpose of experiments [1,3,4]. A discussion of whether the methods described above produce knowledge follows.

According to Hollway [1] 'methods are highly influential in the knowledge that is produced.' For example, experiments seek to establish cause and effect, and relational patterns that are not apparent to the naked eye. Professor Philip Zimbardo's prisoner/guard experiment in the United States of America (USA) after World War 2 clearly demonstrated power relations where prisoners complied with guard's instructions as expected in real life. However, a replication of the

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experiment in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2001 by Professor Alex Haslam produced different outcomes[4]. Prisoners in the UK commanded guards resulting in conflict due unbalanced power relations. The experiment was abandoned 36 hours earlier [5]. The experiment produced knowledge about ethical issues in social psychology experiments. At the same time the experiments revealed that power relations could affect the validity of knowledge produced. The experiment also revealed Haraway's concept of situated knowledges[1]. For example, prisoner/guard relationships were different in the USA and UK due to cultural and historical differences as demonstrated by the way prisoner/guard roles were played. Thus, knowledge produced was situated in different cultures, geographical, social regions and individuals. Observations such as these militated against generalization of experimental results, an objective of quantitative methodology. Observing prisoners/guards in their natural environment (prison) might have yielded different information. Discourse analysis of prisoner/guard interactions demonstrated the importance of language and meanings in social contexts. It revealed the idea of situated meanings where a particular situation could be interpreted differently by different people and in different places and times. This was vital knowledge for researchers and general public when interpreting research reports [1,5].

Methods produce and reveal knowledge about power relations in research. Milgram's experiment[7]:  
*'to find out the effects of punishment on learning,'*  
*Russell Spears on Iraqi woman's response: 'I will always hate you people,'* revealed underlying causes of hate while discourse analysis by Derek Edwards focused on the effect of using the quotation. The two methods yielded different kinds of knowledge.

Learners or participants (Milgram's accomplices) were subjected to electric shocks continuously. By asking researchers to administer electric shocks even if the participants screamed or showed distress it became a test of obedience rather than learning. The experiment raised serious ethical issues. In the sixties ethical issues were less important than the generation of scientific knowledge. The example revealed power relations in knowledge production, that is, superiority of scientific knowledge over ethics, Milgram's experimental power and participants' powerlessness to avoid betraying Milgram's trust if they withdrew. The method produced and revealed knowledge about the appropriateness of experimental designs and how power relations could distort outcomes. There was no reference to learning in the results but the experiment produced and revealed knowledge about how poorly conceived research questions and procedures failed to yield desired results[1]. Knowledge produced was biased and partial

because quantitative methods tend to report the majority (60%) views or significant results only. Power relations in reporting was demonstrated when the researcher chose what to report and what not to.

Discursive analysis of data was open to various interpretations depending on who was analysing and the context. For example, early experiments in the United States of America (USA) used undergraduate male students as participants to generate generalizations. Feminist views were excluded. Female citizens never went to university at the time [1]. Meanings revealed were also knowledge hence discursive analysis produced and revealed knowledge that was situation specific. For example, *'I will always hate you people,'* by an Iraqi mother; Professor Zimbardo and Haslam's prison/guard experiments, being a marijuana user, becoming a mother [1,5].

Weaknesses of the experiments constituted vital knowledge for researchers to improve the way they conducted experiments in future. Discursive analysis produced situated knowledge that enjoyed ecological validity and provided deeper meanings in different contexts. Thus, quantitative and qualitative methodologies could be used to complement each other and produce more comprehensive knowledge and enhance understanding of social phenomena. Case studies commissioned by organizations such as government for specific purposes produced knowledge that was limited in scope. Such knowledge could open up new research questions leading to production of more knowledge [1].

Psychometric tests generated quantitative data to describe attitude or behaviour of an individual. Quantitative data was knowledge. Its interpretation enhanced understanding of people and their behaviour and that is knowledge. Measurement of personality produced and revealed additional knowledge confirming the claim that methods generated knowledge and also revealed the inner qualities of an individual otherwise inaccessible by other methods. Potter and Wetherell [5] argue that individuals were not stable. They changed over time hence the knowledge from psychometric tests soon became irrelevant. Attitude scales such as Likert scales comprised of single statements to which the participant would respond. These statements might be incomplete but produced limited and distorted knowledge [1].

Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter in an analysis of language of racism from people's daily talk enhanced understanding by unveiling hitherto obscure aspects of racism [6]. Thus, not only did discourse analysis reveal knowledge but also produced it [5].

The discussion has highlighted quantitative and qualitative methodologies used by cognitive social

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and discursive psychology perspectives and their role in knowledge production. The experimental method produced objective knowledge about cause and effect, and revealed relationship patterns in the laboratory and sought objectivity. This included statistics and their interpretation. Knowledge produced might lack ecological validity because it was produced in an artificial context and it was affected by serious ethical issues. No knowledge would be produced if ethical issues were attended to fully. Psychometric tests could be used to produce knowledge about personality characteristics but soon becomes irrelevant due to changes in the individual, time and environment. Discursive analysis of conversations generated meanings and understanding in particular contexts: historical, cultural and social and sought subjectivity. Some of the knowledge was also revealed by interpretation of language. It could be seen that methods produced and also revealed knowledge because the aim of research was to extend knowledge boundaries. Power relations and situated knowledge were interrogative themes that emerged from the experiments and discourse analysis. Power relations influenced knowledge production. The two perspectives showed that quantitative and qualitative methodologies were complementary. Experiments generated deep but partial knowledge while discursive provided complete meaning. According to Hollway [1] methods were highly influential in the knowledge that was produced as a holistic picture but could not access the inner thoughts which experiments could do. Thus, experiments complemented discourses by digging beneath discourse. Discourse provided situated social explanations and was not concerned with generalizations, a preoccupation of experiments.

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