

Epistemological Considerations for Student Affairs

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The past few years have seen a number of assessment professionals begin to delve more deeply into the intersections of inclusion, equity, social justice and assessment. The recent paper *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* (Montenegro and Jankowski, 2017) and subsequent responses (e.g., Henning & Lundquist, 2018) call on assessment professionals to think critically about their approaches to and goals of assessment, specifically encouraging assessment professionals to incorporate social justice as we design assessments, collect and analyze data, and generate and share our findings. As a field we do need to spend more time thinking critically about our methods, whose voices are included and heard, and how our biases influence our selection of questions and analytical methods to reify or challenge power and oppression on our campuses and in the larger field. There are many dimensions to these conversations, or perhaps, multiple conversations to be had, in part because there are multiple ways of defining ‘social justice’. In this response, however, I want to emphasize the importance of identifying the question of interest and how the goals of the assessment might drive methodological choices, including the epistemological orientation.

More often than not, assessment professionals do not explicitly articulate the epistemological stance from which they are operating. Often times in learning outcomes assessment, the unspoken assumption is that of constructivism, which positions knowledge as being developed through interaction and highlights “truth” as being held within each individual. This is in contrast to positivism and post-positivism, which assumes reality is a universal experience and easily measurable, and subjectivism, which argues that interpretation is not possible and understanding can only be generated by engaging in discourse with others (Jones, Torres, and Arminio, 2006).

As a student affairs assessment professional, I am committed to using my position to advance social justice and challenge systems of power and oppression. As Henning and Lundquist (2018) state in their response, the “positivist paradigm is flawed, as true objectivity is not possible.” I agree with the authors that true objectivity is not possible. However, I’d argue that some aspects of a positivist approach are useful in advancing social justice through assessment. A few years ago, a colleague shared with me an article titled *Strategic Positivism* (Wyly, 2009) which discusses one of the shortcomings of many conversations around critical approaches to research: the

implicit linking of method, epistemology, and what we might term the (political) purpose or orientation of the work. In particular, this article prompted me to question whether conducting a quantitative, positivist exploration of student attainment of learning outcomes necessarily precludes that work from advancing social justice. By rethinking assumptions about how method, epistemology, and orientation are intertwined, we may begin to consider that there is more than one way of approaching assessment for social justice.

Assessment professionals are often engaged in data collection and analysis for a localized purpose. Data are collected to prompt action, to advocate for policy change, and to improve, create, or sunset programs. Some administrations will require quantification, to show the scope of the need, issue, or challenge to ensure findings are generalizable, actionable, and warrant the financial and human resources to be addressed. This approach emphasizes an economic rationalization for action makes many of us uncomfortable. However, the localized purpose of assessment has influenced my decision to focus on the actions that are taken as a result of my analyses – that is, the impact. If our collective goal is to advance change and promote social justice, there may be a variety of ways in which this can be achieved. On some campuses, being strategic in our choice of methods and epistemology will be an important decision in the process of using assessment to prompt a desired institutional action promoting equity and social justice. For instance, using a method and/or epistemological frame that someone is more familiar with, but in a way that reframes or poses a problem in a way that they had not previously considered might in some instances be more effective in prompting change than presenting an entirely new method, epistemological framework, *and* perspective.

Sometimes there are things we may want to hold up as “fact” (in the positivist sense) in order to advance change in some way. For example, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) argue in their paper that higher education has been designed such that “while learners may take multiple paths to and through learning, they must demonstrate their knowledge and skills the same way (p. 5).” They go on to state “we need to ask ourselves, is it that we want students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills or attainment of learning outcomes in a particular way, or that they demonstrate their learning? What is needed is ... to empower students for success through intentional efforts to address inequality within our structures, create clear transparent pathways, and ensure that credits and credentials are awarded by demonstration of learning, in whatever form that may take” (p. 16). A quantitative, positivist approach could be used to demonstrate how, using a different method to measure learning, more or different students are able to demonstrate competency of the material. This type of exploration may be effective in encouraging administrators and/or faculty to adapt their learning outcome measurement systems to include multiple methods. Indeed, with this argument the authors are pointing out a critical flaw in the way we assess student learning; without the use of multiple methods, concerns around construct validity stemming from mono-method bias, the concept that when a single method is used to measure a construct part of what is being measured is the method itself not the construct of interest, have been introduced. To improve construct validity, quantitative methodologists would suggest using multiple methods (Shaddish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Positivist reasoning can be used to achieve an outcome in line with a critical approach advancing social justice and equity in learning outcomes attainment. This hardly solves deep issues of epistemic hegemony in higher education, but it might take us one step closer toward doing so, or at the very least, move us toward opening up different, previously unconsidered possibilities.

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As we move forward using assessment to advance social justice, promising practices will evolve, methodological researchers will continue to develop advanced methods, and voices included or excluded from the conversation will continue to change. What needs to be kept in the forefront of our minds as we engage in this work, is the understanding that “assessment is inherently a political activity” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 253). It is our assessment **questions** and our transparency in the design, collection, and analysis of data that will ensure that we are using assessment to advance social justice. In particular, we should be transparent about our choice of method, epistemological framework, orientation, and our presumed relationship between them, so that we can begin to have deeper and more complex conversations about where we are, where we would like to go, and how we might get there. By asking questions that are focused on promoting social justice and equity on our campuses and providing transparency in terms of our methodological decision-making, including who was involved in the project and the biases of this group, we will continue to make strides in creating more equitable campuses and communities.

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