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11. RESEARCHING IN THE FACE OF THE OTHER:

Doing Decent Research

In Chapter 8 Joy Higgs and I argued that researchers cannot view the world from an objective position. All research is conducted through multiple lenses. The downside of this is the spectre of relativism. If every lens reveals a truth, what makes one description of the world better than another? Why should we give more credence to one researcher's ideas over another's? All findings are truths and thus anything or, perhaps nothing, goes. At the end of our chapter we pointed to a way out of this conundrum. The truths that survive will be those that, if convincingly presented by the researcher, are accepted by the researcher's peers and his or her broader audience as one of the possible truths about a phenomenon. Such truths will have longevity to the extent that they remain convincing and to the extent that they are pragmatically useful.

In this chapter I expand on this idea, but do so as a way to suggest that in some situations morality must come before the pursuit of truth in any research project. That is, I argue that morality is not an external constraint on research, but an imperative that may be more important than the pursuit of truth itself. I make this claim because the perspectival nature of research, for me, suggests that every means possible is not justified by the pursuit of truth as an end in itself. I make this claim because I believe that sometimes as researchers we are called upon to go even further than required by the means–ends formula. Sometimes we must care for the other, not just respect their autonomy. In these situations morality stands before epistemology and it is to ethics¹ that we must sometimes turn for guidance on how best to conduct research.

In making this move I can be accused of simply shifting the shadow that relativism casts to questions about what counts as decent moral research conduct. I acknowledge this, but argue that the moral imperative should be seen as, if not less subjective, at least more important than the imperative to uncover a truth.

THE WORK OF AGNES HELLER AS A PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNING OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

What follows draws on the arguments of the social and moral philosopher Agnes Heller. She argued (1990b) that when seeking to understand the social world we are seeking true knowledge. Yet in doing so we must accept that this knowledge is situated and that social researchers' understandings of the people they study will

always be relative and incomplete. Despite this, social researchers cannot, without risking irrelevance, renounce all claims to true knowledge about modern society. As Heller explained, we get around this as social researchers by following sets of social conventions that point us towards “norms of verisimilitude”, the quality of “seeming true”, as guides for giving theories or findings weight. This can be done, Heller suggested, by drawing a distinction between “true” knowledge and (the) “Truth”. Researchers can give weight to their arguments by avoiding the claim that they correspond to a transcendent “Truth”. Instead our task is to argue that where our work accords with the norm of verisimilitude it should be seen as contributing to true knowledge.

As to what constitutes the norms of verisimilitude, Heller argued that pursuing true knowledge is about, *inter alia*, reconstructing, depicting, narrating, and interpreting how things happen and work, what they mean and how to understand them in a *plausible* way. She suggested that the norms of verisimilitude in social research amount to “norms of plausibility”. And turning to these norms, she suggested that while social scientists must accept that there may be many equally plausible theories on an issue, a plausible piece of work will contain a core of knowledge that we would expect anyone to arrive at if they thoroughly studied the issues. Quoting Heller, if the researcher:

studied all the available sources, thoroughly observed the relevant phenomena and entered into discussion with relevant members of the social science community familiar with the matter under scrutiny. (1990b, p. 19)

Being objective is another norm of plausibility in social research – “one must be objective to obtain true knowledge” (1990b, p. 26). But by this, Heller did not mean value free research. Instead, given that social research extracts meaning from the spoken or written, present or past testimonies of participants in events, objectivity involves giving all relevant witnesses a fair hearing. Giving a fair hearing is about obtaining testimonies in conversations on equal terms rather than through interrogation. Expanding here, Heller summarised her “fundamental criteria of objective (just) interpretation in social science”:

If someone has questioned the available and relevant witnesses and has tried hard to discover what they have really meant, irrespective of whether this testimony is reliable or unreliable; if the social scientist has given hearing to those witnesses whose testimonies are unfriendly to this scientist’s initial position, value commitments, theory, and the like; if this social scientist has entered into communication in the form of symmetric reciprocity with every witness who was ready to enter into a communication of this kind – if all these things have been done, then the interpretation will have exhausted every criterion of objectivity and thus scientificity. (1990b, p. 28)

Flowing from this, “being objective” for Heller is about not using the addressees of research purely as means to achieve a researcher’s goals (ends). That is, social researchers must not manipulate the people they are studying into confirming their ideas or theories by, for example, mobilising emotional responses or playing on