

Notes from the Field: Research and the *Indecency of Thinking*

When discussing potential research topics with students and colleagues I have been struck by (and somewhat frustrated by!) how the discussions arrive axiomatically at, “Ok, so who will we interview?” It’s as if to *do* research today one must interview people and collect ‘data’.

In a previous lifetime I did this type of ‘research’. We would always have a research question or questions and a methodology; which amongst other things would involve a method of collecting data, designing data collection tools and a method of analysing the data. Furthermore, it would always include a method of selecting research participants (aka ‘sources’ of data). This type of research may more accurately be referred to as *empirical research*. Research of course can refer to a range of activities and practices that do not include any empirical methods at all. For example, some research simply involves the analysis of existing texts or documents, other research, or different human creations – no interviews required! What research, empirical or otherwise has in common is that it creates and produces new knowledge. In the social sciences empiricism goes back to the influence of Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and others. Durkheim set out to make the study of societies, scientific. This meant adopting some of the principles of the so-called ‘pure sciences’. It seems however, broader research activities have *collapsed* into empirical research. That is to say, that what is considered now as research (read authentic or valued research) must be empirical and other modes of research by implication are not, valued. Much of the research that is supported and funded today is empirical and research funders have a bias towards empirical research. There is an assumption that the presence of a methodology equates to the presence of rigorous thought.

Method, disciplines and the knowledges they produce is something that is discussed by philosopher Lewis Gordon. He argues that there is such an investment by disciplinarians in their disciplines and methods that they lose sight of what they set out to do, that is, to engage in *open-ended* pursuits of knowledge. Further, for Gordon, thinking has become “indecent” in modern times so much so that disciplinarians rely on method, to the point where thought is not required. That is not to say that the development and design of a method does not require some thought, clearly it does. But the presence of a method should not be a default for thinking through matters that we are trying to understand. In part I think the reliance on method demonstrates the power of “institutional structures”, that Tracey MacIntosh discussed in the last edition of *Notes From the Field*, that is exerted on researchers. The allure of method, however, can be seductive and comforting.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that we do away completely with method and science. Gordon is careful to point out that his criticisms “do not exemplify a rejection of science but its limits”. There are clearly sound reasons to use so-called scientific methodologies. Data, as we researchers call it, though need not only be something that is the product of some mechanistic extraction process and rigorous analysis need not only be the result of a complicated, equally mechanistic, manufacturing process.