Article

Reading Antonio Gramsci as a Methodologist

Kaela Jubas, PhD
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Abstract
In this paper the author connects conceptual and methodological development, typically presented as distinct processes. She argues that these processes are—or should be—underpinned by a common philosophical and theoretical stance. Using Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks* (1971), usually considered for its theory of social relations, the author outlines the work's epistemological tenets. She then discusses the methodological ramifications of Gramsci's perspective, relating his ideas to contemporary scholarship, especially by those working from feminist, critical race theory, and other critical perspectives. Because social theory and research methodology tend to be discussed as separate spheres and Gramsci's work generally is taken up for its social theory, much of the methodological work reviewed here is not identified as Gramscian. Nonetheless, Gramsci's ideas can have currency especially for qualitative researchers. An important message to take from *The Prison Notebooks* is to consider epistemology, theory, and methodology together rather than sequentially.

Keywords: methodological theory, critical theory, Gramsci

Introduction

The ideas of Antonio Gramsci (1971) have been taken up by scholars in many disciplines and fields—from sociology and political science to communications, education and cultural studies. Regardless of the arena in which Gramsci's thoughts have been incorporated, scholars typically look to his writing about concepts as inspiration for what is commonly referred to as a theoretical framework. Some scholars have also turned their attention to the implications of Gramsci's concepts for practice. In my field of adult education, for example, Gramsci's ideas on hegemony and ideology, and his understanding of society-at-large and social movements as sites of ongoing learning which can be directed toward social transformation have been influential (see, for example, Brookfield, 2005; Foley, 1999, 2001).

Other theorists dismiss Gramsci's work as irrelevant. They claim that it is too time and place specific to be of use or that the lack of consistency and comprehensiveness of its conceptualizations limits its coherence (see Morton, 1999, for a discussion of this argument). Gramscian scholars counter reservations about this uncertainty, embracing the malleability of work written decades ago (Hall, 1991; Morton, 1999).[1] As Morton (1999) explains, "A crucial caveat that needs to be highlighted is that an explication of Gramsci's method and philosophy can not [sic] objectively reveal a 'true' or 'real' Gramsci and thus no 'correct' reading or 'authentic' version can be produced" (p. 3).

Whether accepted or rejected, Gramsci's work is discussed primarily as social theory, and is much less prominent in discussions of research methodology. This strikes me as curious for two reasons: First, as Guba and Lincoln (2007) and Denzin (2008) establish, methodological decisions reflect epistemological frameworks. Second, Gramsci himself recognized the connection between theory and methodology (and, for that matter, practice). Embedded in his work are suggestions and implications for social inquiry.

Perhaps the inclination to characterize Gramsci as a theorist is due to the fact that his most famous compilation, *The Prison Notebooks*, was written while he was imprisoned. Although it contains historical, social, and cultural analysis, it does not summarize what would be described as empirical research. Moreover, Gramsci drew largely on others who are characterized as theorists or philosophers, including Marx, Engels, Lenin, Hegel and Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce. His thoughts expand the analyses of his predecessors, and move beyond Croce's idealism (Kehoe, 2003). Regardless of the limitations of Gramsci and *The Prison Notebooks*, there is an awareness of the connections between epistemology, theoretical framework, and methodology in this work.

Written during his incarceration as a political prisoner, the *Prison Notebooks* contains Gramsci's ideas developed in response to Italian unification, and his activism with the Italian Communist Party. The incorporation of contemporary scholars into this article gives currency to Gramsci's work, enriches his often sketchy and incomplete conceptualizations, and further explores the epistemological and methodological implications that can be found in his thoughts. Because feminist scholarship is central to much of my work, I draw heavily on feminist scholars in relating Gramsci's ideas to research theories and practices. I also introduce main sections in the remainder of this article with excerpts from *The Prison Notebooks*. These serve as a reminder that this exploration is grounded in and responds to Gramsci's thoughts. I move back and forth from Gramsci's writing to contemporary scholarship to my own analysis, building a kind of conversation about relevant ideas. The following section outlines Gramsci's epistemological position that informs both theoretical and methodological development. After that, I discuss the

contribution that Gramsci can make to research methodology, before concluding with some general remarks. Whether or not they cite Gramsci's work, and despite a diversity in their central concerns, the contemporary scholars whose work I draw on in this paper develop ideas that can be put to work with Gramsci's ideas to inform methodological decisions.

Thinking in a Gramscian way: epistemological underpinnings

> The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned . . . in other words that the intellectual can be an intellectual (and not a pure pedant) if distinct and separate from the nation-people, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated—i.e. knowledge. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 418)

In this excerpt, Gramsci outlines his epistemological stance, which is consistent with qualitative methodologies. "Knowledge," in this view, emerges from the combined endeavors of intellect, emotion and engagement with "the people." Whereas Western traditions emphasize intellect as the producer of knowledge, Gramsci includes feeling and experience in his definition. For Gramsci, knowledge is also based in the concrete rather than the abstract, and is developed in a social context.

This line of thinking about knowledge resonates with the writing of Flyvbjerg (2001), who writes on the Aristotelian concepts of *phronesis*, or contextual, experiential knowledge; *episteme*, or universal knowledge developed through "analytic rationality"; and *techne*, or the "technical knowledge and skills . . . [derived from] pragmatic instrumental rationality" (p. 56). In adopting the sciences' insistence that epistemic knowledge is the most pure and valuable, social scientists have largely abandoned the search for phronetic knowledge in favor of abstract generalizations. Such an approach to building knowledge is mistaken "in the study of human affairs, [where] there exists only context-dependent knowledge, which thus presently rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction" (p. 71). This inevitably leads to the acceptance of multiple constructions of knowledge, something that Gramsci recognizes:

> The idea of "objective" in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists even apart from man [sic]; but when one affirms that a reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 446)

For feminist scholars, epistemological and methodological innovations have been central to political projects. In applying their concern with social relations and oppression to their thinking about research, many feminists reiterate the importance of context in research and knowledge. "Feminist empiricists" continue to maintain the possibility of timeless, objective knowledge garnered through traditional academic research, with the proviso that research practices become more inclusive of female participants and women's issues (Letherby, 2003). From divergent stances, other feminists dispute this claim.

Feminist standpoint theorists, broadly speaking, propose an epistemology which contends that "women's experiences, informed by feminist theory, provide a potential grounding for more complete and less distorted knowledge claims than do men's" (Letherby, 2003, pp. 184–185). Similar to Gramsci, feminist standpoint theorists conceptualize knowledge as subjective and

multiple rather than objective and singular, and assert that a connection between the researcher and marginalized groups yields deeper knowledge. Some feminist standpoint theorists, such as Hartsock (1987), are inspired directly by Marxist thinking, and combine feminism with class analysis. Others have different starting points but retain a Gramscian understanding about the value of centering research on the experiences of marginalized groups. Speaking about the sciences, Harding (1987a) asserts,

> Once we undertake to use women's experience as a resource to generate scientific problems, hypotheses, and evidence, to design research for women, and to place the researcher in the same critical plane as the research subject, traditional epistemological assumptions can no longer be made. (p. 181)

Varied feminist standpoint theorists also share Gramsci's challenge to "authorized" knowledge (Letherby, 2003) as they work to legitimate women's knowledge and validate experiential, disparate knowledges.

Inspired as it was by Marx, Gramsci's work prefigures perspectives which were to come only after his death, notably the postmodern and poststructural insights into the social construction of identity and meaning, and the absence of a predetermined, unitary truth or reality. Despite the gap in time, Gramsci adopted a point of view consistent with later postmodernism and poststructuralism. For example, in moving away from the notion of power as residing in government, toward the notion of power relations, "so that power is diffused throughout civil society as well as being embodied in the coercive apparatuses of the state" (Simon, 1991, p. 28), Gramsci approaches a postmodern theory of power relations. Furthermore, Gramsci's initial education in linguistics and his break with the structuralist theories of language popular at the time indicate a seemingly poststructural sensibility. As Ives (2004) explains,

> Foreshadowing poststructuralism and other critiques of structuralism, Gramsci argues that history and the historical residues within language are fundamental in operations of power, prestige and hegemony. Gramsci emphasizes that meaning is created by language in its metaphorical development with respect to previous meanings. New meanings replace previous ones in a continual process of development. (p. 88)

Still, some scholars who characterize themselves as poststructural or postmodern eschew an attachment to Gramsci, whom they perceive as belonging in a materialist, structuralist tradition. As Kenway (2001) explains,

> Since the mid-1980s we have witnessed the rise of postmodern theorizing in much educational and feminist scholarship . . . and Gramsci is no longer a fashionable theorist. . . . Throughout this period there has been much more interest in. . . . multiple identities rather than political identities . . . discourse rather than the politics of discourse, performance rather than poverty, inscription rather than political mobilization, and deconstruction rather than reconstruction. (p. 60)

Poststructuralists and postmodernists interrogate the notion of the collective, such as that implied by both feminist standpoint theory's ideas of gender-based social divisions and Gramsci's thoughts on class-based divisions. Many poststructuralists argue that both traditional Marxism and feminist standpoint theory effectively essentialize groups and are outdated (Hekman, 1997). They point to intragroup differences and ask who is capable of understanding and speaking for whom. In response, feminist standpoint theorists contend that theirs, like Gramsci's, is a political project. "Knowledge," in this context, is constructed on the basis of experiences of

socioeconomic privilege or marginalization, and valued for its potential to create "accounts of society that can be used to work for more satisfactory social relations" (Hartsock, 1997, p. 370). Intragroup differences are present but do not eliminate the structurally created divisions which continue to operate in social life and influence socially constructed knowledge. Gramsci (1971) himself explains that "even if the facts are always unique and changeable in the flux of movement of history, the concepts can be theorised" (p. 427).

How Gramsci might have actually stretched his ideas to accommodate a now common concern with diversity is an unanswerable question. What is evident is that, through his conceptualizations of hegemony, ideology, and common sense, he developed an extensive theory of the role of civil society as a site of production of ideology and its associated "common sense" through which those in power persuade citizens to consent to hegemony even when it works against their interests, and through which counter-hegemonic forces can articulate challenges and mobilize opposition. Although Gramsci's thoughts must be historically and culturally contextualized, some scholars insist that they are not restricted to their original context and continue to be useful conceptually and analytically (Hall, 1991; Morton, 1999). As Hall advises, "I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci 'has the answers' or 'holds the key' to our present troubles. I do believe that we must 'think' our problems in a Gramscian way—which is different" (p. 114). As my discussion so far suggests, thinking in a Gramscian way requires a certain amount of flexi-bility and open-mindedness. This is not an endorsement of intellectual laziness; rather, it is a call for viewing binary categories such as materiality and culture, structure and discourse, the group and the individual in terms of the tension that unites them rather than the line that divides them.

Doing research, building knowledge, making change: conceptually grounded methodology

First and foremost, researchers attempt to build knowledge by addressing problems or questions. In that aim, the work of the researcher is like that of the journalist, although the protocols of research differ from those of journalism. The central questions of journalism—Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?—must all be considered by researchers when they determine the subject, topic and process of their research projects. Working with an epistemology that values context and acknowledges partiality, qualitative researchers undertake a substantively different project from quantitative researchers, although purposes can be combined in mixed methods research. For critical qualitative researchers exploring "the interplay between meaning and structure, a very different methodological approach to social determination is required: one based on the nature of social relations, not imported from the natural sciences" (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 59). I frame my discussion in this section on journalistic questions, and juxtapose Gramsci's views on them with the views of more contemporary critical methodologists with various intellectual affiliations.

Who is my subject?

> The humanity which is reflected in each individuality is composed of various elements: 1. the individual; 2. other men; 3. the natural world. But the latter two elements are not as simple as they might appear. The individual does not enter into relations with other men by juxtaposition, but organically, in as much, that is, as he belongs to organic entities which range from the simplest to the most complex. . . . Further: these relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious. They correspond to the greater or lesser degree of understanding that each man has of them. So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the

> extent that he changes and modifies the complex relations of which he is the hub. . . .
> If one's own individuality is the *ensemble* of these relations, to create one's
> personality means to acquire consciousness of them to modify one's own personality
> means to modify the *ensemble* of these relations. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 351)

In this excerpt, Gramsci describes the subject of his inquiry as human beings who are indeterminate and changing, according to their social settings and experiences. It is the individual in relation to others, rather than as a manifestation of human nature, which directs Gramsci's inquiry. Human subjects are understood as individuals living in a material, social and cultural context, rather than beings with essential, constant natures and qualities.

This conceptualization of the subject is similar to the later insights associated with feminist scholarship. For feminist standpoint theorists, members of a social group in a given society can come to develop a shared standpoint on social relations, based on their common social identity. Smith (1987, 1999) exemplifies the argument by standpoint theorists that members of a social group such as gender, class and race experience a common type of relationship with one another in the context of the society that they share; through this relationship, they can develop a shared standpoint. Smith contrasts the standpoint of the subaltern subject with that of the "ruling relations" or "ruling apparatus." She clarifies that *standpoint* denotes more than a perspective or a worldview, explaining that it

> does not universalize a particular experience. It is rather a method that…creates the
> space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is filled with the presence
> and spoken experience of actual women speaking of an in the actualities of their
> everyday worlds" (Smith, 1987, p. 107).

Continuing to clarify a materialist standpoint analysis, and rebut a poststructural/postmodern analysis, Hartsock (1997) further explains:

> The constitution of the subject, then, is the result of a complex interplay of
> "individuals" and larger-scale social forces. Groups are not to be understood…as
> aggregates of individuals. Moreover, the constitution of the "collective subject"
> posited by standpoint theories requires an always contingent and fragile
> (re)construction/transformation of these complex subject positions. (p. 372)

Hartsock's (1997) explanation comprises one side of the debate between materialist and poststructuralist/postmodern scholars. In her arguments, Hekman (1997) puts forward three reasons for abandoning the notion of standpoint as a useful tool in research and knowledge production. First, there is the reality that partial, contextual perspective can never be made complete. Second, in specifying the research subject, the researcher intervenes in constructing the group under study. Third, identity is seen as individualized, fluid, and constructed through ever-changing discourse rather than collective, persistent, and constructed through material relations.

In response to these critiques, many feminist materialists struggle to incorporate understandings of the notion of difference, partiality and fluidity into their thinking about the subject. They counter that, by reducing the group to "an accumulation of individuals" (Collins, 1997, p. 376), poststructuralist/ postmodernist scholars miss a key point: Intragroup differences themselves manifest the multiplicity of social divisions and identities, a reality that enriches rather than diminishes a materialist understanding of the very power relations critical theory and research seeks to explicate. Gramsci can be helpful in dealing with these divergent views, presenting them in dialectical tension rather than in opposition to each other. At the same time as Gramsci keeps class relations clearly in his sight, he, too, is aware of the dialectic of materiality and culture and

its implications for understanding the subject. Hartsock (1997) even turns to Gramsci, recognizing his ability to work with the tension between subjectivities which are contextual and identities which remain socially structured. Like Gramsci, critical scholars now commonly acknowledge that identity or subjectivity is contextual and relational, whether they adopt a firmly poststructural/postmodern stance or retain a commitment to materialist analysis.

When does where matter (and vice versa)?

> That "human nature" is the "complex of social relations" is the most satisfactory answer, because it includes the idea of becoming (man [sic.] "becomes," he changes continuously with the changing of social relations) and because it denies "man in general". Indeed social relations are expressed by various groups of men . . . each [of which] presuppose[s] the others and whose unity is dialectical, not formal. Man is aristocratic in so far as man is a serf, etc. One could also say that the nature of man is "history". . . . For this reason "human nature" cannot be located in any particular man but in the entire history of the human species. (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 355–356)

This question extends the previous question about identity and the research subject in asking about the situatedness of both research and the knowledge that it produces. In the excerpt introducing this section, Gramsci clarifies a point that has become central in educational and social sciences scholarship over the past 30 years: how people are linked to one another through social relations matters. This point is made consistently by the feminist standpoint theorists. A central task for standpoint theorists is to balance the reality of subjects' multiple affiliations with the establishment of a group standpoint, a logical impossibility in the minds of poststructural/ postmodern scholars, as I have already outlined. Harding (1987b) has offered this explanation: "Notice that it is 'women's experiences' *in the plural* which provide the new resources for research. . . . Masculine and feminine are always categories within gender, since women's and men's experiences, desires, and interests differ according to class, race, and culture" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Other standpoint theorists view class similarly. Smith (1987) explains that, although capitalism is pervasive throughout society and social relations, the extent to which it structures even the most mundane experiences is often obscured. In her view, the commodification of labor and goods abstracts actual social relations, which become buried in chains of production and consumption. For Hartsock (1987), an analysis grounded in the sexual division of labor

> could form the basis for an analysis of the real structures of women's oppression, an analysis that would not require that one sever biology from society, nature from culture, an analysis which would expose the ways women both participate in and oppose their own subordination. (p. 175)

Other oppressive systems, including racism, operate in conjunction with patriarchy and capitalism to eclipse the constant intervention of ruling relations in everyday life.

Also considered a feminist standpoint theorist, Collins (1997) calls for a distinct standpoint for African American women. She counters both the earlier claim in feminist standpoint theory for one women's standpoint and the poststructuralist dissolution of the group in favor of individuals. Collins (1997) explains,

> What we have now is increasing sophistication about how to discuss group location, not in the singular social class framework proposed by Marx, nor in the early feminist frameworks arguing the primacy of gender, but within constructs of multiplicity residing in social structures themselves and not in individual women (p. 377).

Responding from a critical race theory perspective to the notion of racial standpoint, and to standpoint theory more generally, Twine (2000) raises several cautions. First, she explains that standpoint theory and methodology can lead to the conclusion that racial "insiders"—researchers who are also members of the group being investigated—are best able to understand and elicit information from their participants. Such "racial matching" is problematic because, as Twine notes, "race is not the only relevant 'social signifier'" (p. 9), even in societies where race and racism play a strong role in determining identity. Other important forms of social relations are class, sexuality, or—as the feminist standpoint theorists would argue—gender.

Second, insider status can mislead researchers into bringing their own experientially based preconceptions into their inquiries and analyses. Third, insider researchers "are expected to conform to cultural norms that can restrict them as researchers" (Twine, 2000, p. 12). Fourth, participants might actually withhold, rather than share, important information with insider researchers, assuming that they are already privy to it. Fifth, as even some of the feminist standpoint theorists acknowledge, "[a] standpoint is a project, not an inheritance; it is achieved, not given" (Weeks, 1996, cited in Hartsock, 1997, p. 372). What is problematic is the simplistic expectation that "whites, as members of the dominant racial group . . . [are not] knowledgeable about race and racism. In contrast, racial subalterns are assumed to possess a sophisticated understanding of racism" (Twine, 2000, p. 21). Furthermore, even research participants who share a racial identification do not necessarily attach the same meaning to that identification, and social divisions such as race (and gender and class etc.) are constructed differently in different times and places. These facts have implications for the determination of who is capable of representing which racial or social group and of "one's authority to make certain knowledge claims" (Twine, 2000, p. 22).

Poststructuralists and postmodernists offer their own thoughts on the importance of location and temporality for both researchers and participants. Richardson (2000) issues one additional reminder about the limitations of research to produce knowledge and the unavoidable implication of the researcher in research: "Postmodernism claims that writing is always partial, local, and situational, and that our Self is always present, no matter how much we try to suppress it" (p. 930). Researchers are themselves the subjects of an unending attempt to understand their Selves. Reflecting on this insight, Fine (1998) suggests "that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations" (p. 135). By "working the hyphens" between insiders and outsiders, Self and Other, critical scholars have discarded the traditional positioning of researcher-as-neutral and "construct texts collaboratively, self-consciously examining our relations with/for/despite those who have been contained as Others, we move against, we enable resistance to, Othering" (Fine, 1998, p. 139). Fine (1998) presents three possible strategies for working the hyphens: inserting "uppity voices" that challenge researchers' privilege and social anonymity; "probing the consciousness of dominant others" (p. 146); and engaging in research for social change and with social change activists. Returning to the later iterations of feminist standpoint theory, I see indications that this is an increasingly shared goal. Inserting these poststructural, postmodern, and critical race insights into her own feminist work, Harding (1997) states, "We need to avoid the 'objectivist' stance that attempts to make the researcher's cultural beliefs and practices invisible while simultaneously skewering the research objects beliefs and practices to the display board" (p. 9).

Continuing to bring together materialism and poststructuralism/postmodernism, Naples (2003) views hers as a "materialist feminist standpoint theory that incorporates important insights of postmodern analyses of power, subjectivity, and language as a powerful framework for exploring the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, region, and culture in different geographic and historical contexts" (p. 5). As Naples notes, social location is characterized by space and place as well as by time. Gramsci (1971), too, recognizes this temporality. In his words,

> It is not enough to know the *ensemble* of relations as they exist at any given time as a given system. They must be known genetically, in the movement of their formation. For each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations, but of the history of these relations. He is a précis of the past. (p. 353)

Put simply, one's social, geographic, and temporal location and the development of that location in a system of social relations are always important in critical research, which attempts to understand and change the status quo.

Why do I do research?

> Critical activity is the only kind possible, particularly in the sense of posing and resolving critically the problems that present themselves as an expression of historical development. But the first problem which has to be formulated and understood is this: that the new philosophy cannot coincide with any past system, under whatever name. Identity of terms does not mean identity of concepts . . . There may be different heads under the same hats. (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 455–456)

For Gramsci, the central purpose of praxis is to build understanding of social relations and the capacity to change them among the working class. Research is one part of this process. It helps people in the working class or other subaltern groups comprehend the social ideologies and the structures that characterize their society. As Flyvbjerg (2001) later summarizes this connection, "research is simply a form of learning" (p. 83); critical research and learning is directed toward social change.

In a similar vein, Smith's (1987, 1999) sociology aims to articulate women's everyday experiences lacking in mainstream academic and broader social discourses. That articulation, juxtaposed with traditional sociological knowledge, can expose the "opacity" (Smith, 1987, p. 110) of what Smith has referred to as "the ruling apparatus" and how its institutions, discourses and structures construct and maintain particular experiences within a particular social order. Her research retains the spirit of the 1960s' and 1970s' women's movement, serving as "something comparable to consciousness-raising" (Smith, 1987, p. 154) for participants. In Smith's (1999) words, feminist standpoint theory emerged because

> we needed a sociology able to create an account or accounts, analysis or analyses, of how societies were put together so that the worlds of our everyday/everynight experience happened to us as they did. Then we would have a knowledge from our standpoint. . . . We would be capable of analyses and of developing knowledge relevant to women's struggles. (p. 31)

Other feminist standpoint theorists (Collins, 1987; Harding, 1987a, 1987b, 1997; Hartsock, 1987, 1997) similarly outline how even research about women has traditionally been done to satisfy the

needs or beliefs of men rather than the welfare of women. Feminist research is inherently connected to the politics of gender and other social relations, and proposes not just to understand society but to change it.

Within my field of adult education, Foley (1999, 2001) researches sites of community formation, such as neighborhood houses or environmental organizations. His research illuminates the incidental, politically charged learning that often goes unnoticed in the course of collective action. Recalling Smith's (1999) attention to the "everyday/everynight," Foley ties community-based learning to critical awareness and, approaching Gramsci even more, to collective learning and action.

This critical, materially minded approach suggests a primary point of contention between materialist and poststructuralist researchers: How can a critical, counter-hegemonic purpose be retained if groups dissolve into collections of individuals? What unites peoples in action? If there is no objective truth, only discursively constructed ideas and subjectivities, is there any potential for meaningful social change? In Hekman's (1997) words, "If there are multiple feminist standpoints, then there must be multiple truths and multiple realities. This is a difficult position for those who want to change the world according to a new image" (p. 351).

Despite this question, some poststructural/postmodern scholars maintain that political resistance remains possible. For Richardson (2000), "Not only is the personal political, the personal is the grounding for theory" (p. 927). Within that process, political resistance is newly "defined as challenging the hegemonic discourse that writes a particular script for a certain category of subjects. Resistance is effected by employing other discursive formations to oppose that script, not by appealing to universal subjectivity or absolute principles" (Hekman, 1997, p. 357). Adopting "a postmodern position does allow us to know 'something' without claiming to know everything" (Richardson, 2000, p. 928). Knowledge and resistance are possible, but only in a tentative manner, restricted by a limited understanding of both problems and solutions.

Again, Gramsci's ideas can be used by researchers adopting a more poststructural/postmodern stance or a more materialist stance. Like Naples (2003), I too respect the tension between materialism (and social structures) and poststructuralism (and language). For this, Gramsci's writing seems uniquely helpful because of his emphasis on dialectic. He never loses sight of the role of culture in both informal learning and the politics of social life; nor does he abandon an analysis of social and material structures.

How do I design my study?

> To think that one can advance the progress of a work of scientific research by applying to it a standard method, chosen because it has given good results in another field of research to which it was naturally suited, is a strange delusion which has little to do with science. There do however exist certain general criteria which could be held to constitute the critical consciousness of every man [sic] of science whatever his "specialization", criteria which should always be spontaneously vigilant in his work. Thus one can say someone is not a scientist if he displays a lack of sureness of the concepts he is using, if he has scant information on an understanding of the previous state of the problems he is dealing with, if he is not very cautious in his assertions, if he does not proceed in a necessary but in an arbitrary and disconnected fashion, if he cannot take account of the gaps that exist in

knowledge acquired but covers them over and contents himself with purely verbal
solutions and connections instead of stating that one is dealing with provisional
positions which may have to be gone over again and developed, etc. (Gramsci, 1971,
pp. 438–439)

As Gramsci acknowledges here, certain methodologies are better suited to critical inquiry than
others. Given the range of disciplines and topics of research as well as critical research's
particular reliance on context and social change purpose, a single methodological standard is
impossible. Within the social sciences, case study is often proposed as a sound option. Beyond
the agreement that case study places real life context in the foreground of the inquiry, however,
"there are virtually no specific requirements guiding case research" (Meyer, 2001, p. 329).
Morrow and Brown (1994) have included within their understanding of this methodology the
approaches of historical analysis, ethnography, participant action research, and discourse analysis.
Although qualitative methodologists concur that case study research can make use of a range of
methods, some list ethnography and action research as "styles" of case study (Sturman, 1999),
and others discuss case study, ethnography, and action research as distinct methodologies (Meyer,
2001). Characteristics that are regarded as common to case study research include use of multiple
ways of gathering information, a holistic concern with relationships between elements of the case,
its usefulness in investigating new or little understood phenomena, and its basis in the concrete
(Meyer, 2001; Sturman, 1999). Critical research also values self-reflection or reflexivity, and is
"not only distinctive in its concern with reflexive methods but also dialectical in its use of
empirical techniques" (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 245).

Continuing from his contention that the social sciences are best able to explore phronetic,
experiential learning, Flyvbjerg (2001) also insists that a methodology such as case study
(including ethnography) is most adept at framing social science research. He identifies and rebuts
five "misunderstandings" about case study methodology: that it produces less valuable
knowledge than positivist research; that its lack of generalizability means that it "cannot
contribute to scientific development" (p. 66); that it is most useful for developing broad,
preliminary theories about new or understudied phenomena; that its subjective nature makes it
easy for researchers to verify their own assumptions; and that it is difficult to develop concise
summaries and general theories from case studies. I have already addressed the first
misunderstanding, and briefly address the remaining four misunderstandings now.

Flyvbjerg (2001) draws on the argument of Popper to illustrate how a single case study can yield
information about an entire population or society: Even one exception to a generally accepted
understanding "would falsify this proposition and in this way have general significance and
stimulate further investigations and theory-building" (p. 77). This indicates the potential for case
study methodology to contribute to theoretical scientific development. The fourth
misunderstanding is disputed by the explanation that all methodologies and methods involve bias,
as the researcher identifies objects and forms of measurement. Finally, Flyvbjerg sees the
"irreducible quality of good case narratives" (p. 84) as a reflection of the complexity of the case
studied, rather than a fault of the methodology employed. Summarizing the clash between
qualitative and quantitative methodologies he says, "The advantage of large samples is breadth,
while their problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse. Both
approaches are necessary for a sound development of social science" (p. 87). Here Flyvbjerg is in
certain agreement with Gramsci's derision of social research that overlook qualitative research:

It is . . . an attempt to derive "experimentally" the laws of evolution of human
society in such a way as to 'predict' that the oak tree will develop out of the acorn.
Vulgar evolutionism is at the root of [such] sociology, and sociology cannot know

the dialectical principle with its passage from quantity to quality. But this passage disturbs any form of evolution and any law of uniformity understood in a vulgar evolutionist sense. In any case, any sociology presupposes a philosophy, a conception of the world, of which it is but a subordinate part. (pp. 426–427)

Like Flyvbjerg (2001) and Gramsci, feminist standpoint theorists look to qualitative research to support their agenda of social analysis and concrete change. Among the standpoint theorists discussed in this paper, Smith (1987) has provided the most detailed "methodological guidepost for investigation" (Naples, 2003, p. 198). In outlining her approach, Smith relates her institutional ethnography to case study research, arguing that, although experiences and cases are not generalizable to universal truths, their significance lies in their ability to shed light on how society operates beyond the specificity of the case and its participants.

Smith (1987) joins Hartsock (1987) and Gramsci in proposing workplaces as model research sites. They bring individuals into contact with institutional discourses and texts, and allow explorations of the dialectic between ruling relations and experience. Smith's (1987) research involves three central considerations: analysis of the ideologies and their operation in justifying the organization, including the gendered structures, of work life; a broad understanding of work, which encompasses the women's traditional, unpaid work supporting family and maintaining the home; and "the concept of social relations [which] analyzes the concerting of these work processes as social courses of action" (pp. 166–167). Creating a map of how participants embody and are embedded within social relations can help start an institutional ethnography (see Smith, 1987, pp. 170–171). Textual analysis and interviews continue to deepen analysis of participants' experiences and practices. The exposure "of institutional relations brings to light not only common bases of experience but also bases of experience that are not common but are grounded in the same set of social relations" (p. 176). Inequitable social relations are illuminated by institutional ethnography's careful study of everyday experiences and the connection of those experiences to ideological discourses of gender, class, race, and occupation.

Integrating materialist and poststructural perspectives, Naples (2003) offers additional comments for critical researchers, regardless of the methodology or techniques that they use. Just as study participants embody social locations, so too do researchers, and these positions "influence what questions we ask, whom we approach in the field, how we make sense of our fieldwork experience, and how we analyze and report our findings" (p. 197). Naples has also noted that, as agents, research participants can be engaged in interpreting their own experiences and, especially in participant action research, can be involved in collaborative analysis and report-writing. Finally, Naples draws on Collins' (1997) thoughts about the value of emotions (for both researchers and participants) and empathy in producing and interpreting data.

Continuing Naples' (2003) attempt to combine perspectives, Kincheloe (2001) outlines a new methodological option: bricolage. This approach recognizes

the limitations of a single method, the discursive strictures of one disciplinary approach, what is missed by traditional practices of validation, the historicity of certified modes of knowledge production, the inseparability of knower and known, and the complexity and heterogeneity of all human experience. (p. 681).

Although the design technicalities and ramifications of bricolage remain unclear—Kincheloe (2005) himself recognizes that bricolage is still being conceptualized—the call to interdisciplinarity opens new possibilities for critical researchers, even as it implies the limitations of disciplinary research.

Much before Kincheloe (2001, 2005) began conceptualizing the bricolage, Gramsci seemed to embrace this spirit of interdisciplinarity, drawing on his studies and knowledge of linguistics, philosophy, politics, sociology, history, and the arts (Ives, 2004). Despite the lack of a single methodological approach or set of rules, Gramsci, too, provides some suggestions for researchers. As the excerpt which introduces this section articulates, Gramsci's version of historical materialism insists on systematic, rigorous procedures, conceptual clarity, attention to the historical development of material relations and to the cultural ideologies which maintain and reflect those relations, and an appreciation of the limits of any methodology or study.

What are the limitations of my research?

> We know reality only in relation to man [sic], and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also a becoming and so is objectivity, etc. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 446)

All research is limited in its scope and ability to produce knowledge. Some of the innate limitations of contextualized, qualitative methodologies have already been raised. The potential to create only tentative, partial knowledge, and the influence of the researcher in constructing qualitative data and knowledge are two of the key limitations. One suggestion is for researchers to employ "triangulation" by collecting multiple forms of data. These different forms bolster the contextual validity of a study, which is considered especially important in case study research (Meyer, 2001; Sturman, 1999) and helps overcome the concern about "the credibility of what is seen as subjective research techniques" (Sturman, 1999, p. 109). "'Disciplined subjectivity'" (Wilson, 1977, cited in Sturman, 1999) can also enhance credibility by opening evidence to scrutiny and reporting analysis "in a way capable of 'conveying credibility' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) and subjected to standards of 'trustworthiness', that is, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1985)" (Sturman, 1999, p. 109).

These suggestions reflect a traditional view of qualitative research. More radical materialist and poststructural/postmodern scholars have their own responses to limitations. Feminist standpoint theorists have begun to qualify the usefulness of the concept of standpoint: "Like the stick-bent-in-water example, although all knowledge claims are determinately situated, not all such social situations are equally good ones from which to be able see how the social order works" (Harding, 1997, p. 384). Some claims are more valid or stronger than others not because they are objectively truthful; rather, they originate in socially marginalized groups whose voices and experiences are necessary to effect social change (Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997). From her postmodern perspective, Richardson (2000) expands the idea of triangulation into "crystallization," which recognizes that there are more than the three ways of viewing phenomena that the term triangulation suggests. Recognizing the multiplicity of possible understandings, crystallization offers an alternative understanding of validity, as researchers aim to illuminate the complexity of a phenomenon by producing different findings and analyses. Rather than bringing multiple forms of data together to solidify one analysis, crystallization leaves open the potential for new ways of seeing and understanding. It is always possible to find something helpful in research, even if it initially goes unrecognized or seems irrelevant. In this limitation, Richardson finds the hope that remains after the possibility of a singular, certain standpoint is gone.

Conclusion

This paper began with a simple, but important premise: Conceptual and methodological debates and choices are examples of how theories of truth, knowledge and social life are present in the discourse and practice of research. In articulating this premise throughout his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) makes an important contribution to critical and qualitative research. In this imagined conversation between Gramsci and contemporary feminist and other critical scholars, I have attempted to explicate some of the tensions inherent in contemporary scholarship which—if it is of lasting meaning—is both located in and transcends time and place. A careful reading of Gramsci's work can provide a theoretical framework to inform not only the anchoring concepts of an inquiry, but also its methodology. His theoretical conceptualization of democratic societies, which emphasizes both/and tensions rather than either/or binaries between cultural, economic, and political arenas, have certainly helped many scholars investigate a wide range of concerns and questions. For the qualitative researcher, Gramsci's writing illuminates the connections between theories and practices of social life and social research. Moreover, Gramsci's elastic, rather than wooden, frame can contribute to the development of an inquiry which is conceptually, methodologically, and analytically coherent.

Notes

1. Although the *Prison Notebooks* was written between 1929 and 1935, its first publication, in Italian, was not underway until 1948 and its first English translation followed more than a decade later (Hoare & Nowell Smith, in Gramsci, 1971). By the time many scholars encountered Gramsci's work, they were engaged in conceptual debates influenced by other events and perspectives, including postmodernism, and disillusionment with Marxism (for many left-leaning scholars) and rhetoric of the Cold War (for many right-wing scholars). Gramsci's work was inserted into debates which had their own process of development and momentum.

References

Brookfield, S. (2005). *The power of critical thinking: Liberating adult learning and teaching*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Collins, P. H. (1997). Comment on Hekman's "Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited": Where's the power? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *22*(2), 375–381.

Denzin, N. K. (2008). The new paradigm dialogs and qualitative inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *21*(4), 315–325.

Fine, M. (1998). Working the hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (pp. 130–155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, G. (1999). Ideology, discourse and learning. In G. Foley (Ed.), *Learning in social action: A contribution to understanding informal education* (pp. 14–26). London: Zed.

Foley, G. (2001). Radical adult education and learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *20*(1/2), 71–88.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Ed. and Trans.). New York: International.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2007). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 255–286). Los Angeles: Sage.

Hall, S. (1991). Postscript: Gramsci and us. In R. Simon (Ed.), *Gramsci's political thought: An introduction* (revised ed., pp. 114–130). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Harding, S. (1987a). Conclusion: Epistemological questions. In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and methodology* (pp. 181–190). Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Harding, S. (1987b). Introduction: Is there a feminist method? In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and methodology* (pp. 1–14). Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Harding, S. (1997). Comment on Hekman's "Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited": Whose standpoint needs the regimes of truth and reality? *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *22*(2), 382–391.

Hartsock, N. C. M. (1987). The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism. In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and methodology* (pp. 157–180). Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Hartsock, N. C. M. (1997). Comment on Hekman's "Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited": Truth or justice? *Signs: Journal of Culture and Society*, *22*(21), 367–374.

Hekman, S. (1997). Truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *22*(2), 341–365.

Ives, P. (2004). *Language and hegemony in Gramsci*. London: Pluto.

Kehoe, K. (2003). The whole picture: Gramscian epistemology through the praxis prism. *Cork Online Law Review*, *2*. Retrieved from http://www.mercuryfrost.net/colr/editions/2003/2003ix.pdf

Kenway, J. (2001). Remembering and regenerating Gramsci. In K. Weiler (Ed.), *Feminist engagement: Reading, resisting and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies* (pp. 47–65). New York: Routledge.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2001). Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *7*(6), 679–692.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2005). On to the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *11*(3), 323–350.

Letherby, G. (2003). *Feminist research in theory and practice*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Meyer, C. B. (2001). A case in case study methodology. *Field Methods*, *13*(4), 329–352.

Morrow, R. A., & Brown, D. D. (1994). *Critical theory and methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA, London: Sage.

Morton, A. D. (1999). On Gramsci. *Politics*, *19*(1), 1–8.

Naples, N. A. (2003). *Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research*. New York & London: Routledge.

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923–948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Simon, R. (1991). *Gramsci's political thought: An introduction* (revised ed.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, D. E. (1999). *Writing the social: Critique, theory, and investigations*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Sturman, A. (1999). Case study methods. In J. P. Keeves & G. Lakomski (Eds.), *Issues in educational research*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Pergamon.

Twine, F. W. (2000). Racial ideologies and racial methodologies. In F. W. Twine & J. W. Warren (Eds.), *Racing research, researching race: Methodological dilemmas in critical race studies* (pp. 1–34). New York: New York University Press.