REFLECTIONS ON USING ANALOGY TO TEACH CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY: THE HIPPO IN THE ROOM
Social Science Research involves ‘Positionality’

- Your feelings
- Your values
- Your place in the research
- Your beliefs
- Your approach
- Your preconceptions
- Your benefits
- Your attitudes

It’s not what you’re looking at. It’s where you’re looking from that matters.
An Important Concept for Today

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Dealing with Bias

You can:

• **Try to plan it out** using positivism or scientific approaches
• **Minimise it** through careful planning
• **Use Blind Analysis to assess results** (Macoun and Perimutter, 2015)
• **Ignore it** (but it will damage your research)

OR you can accept it, identify it and reflect on it’s effects

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Critical Reflexivity

• A method of identifying and reflecting critically on how personal bias affects research findings (Cunliffe, 2004)

• ‘... the perspective of the knower, and how it influences what is known and how it is known (reflexivity)’ (Fook, 2002, p. 34)

• The only way to conduct social science research (Greenbank, 2002)
BUT: It is difficult to teach/learn

Common Approaches

• Part of the self discovery of epistemology
• An ‘after the event’ occurrence
• Structured lessons
• Reflect on the reflections!
• “Can’t be done without results to reflect on”
Why? My Experiences

Context: Students, drawn from professional backgrounds on postgraduate study in Africa and teaching on an educational doctorate in the UK.

• Education
• Health
• Engineering
• Government
An unwillingness to be critically reflexive

Because

• They felt **personally threatened** by attempting self-criticism. (Borochowitz, 2005)

• They **distanced themselves from research** rather than seeing themselves as an active participant in it. (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995)

• They felt they could **isolate bias**

• They **did not understand the implications of bias in the search for truth**

• **Professionals know best** and are rarely questioned

• It weakened their research
An approach was found here in **AFRICA!**
A Class in Africa

Context: Research Methods for Professional Management Students on Postgraduate Programmes

- Teaching critical reflexivity was typically difficult
- Dealing with bias in writing up was typically difficult
- Aforementioned issues all evident
- Conversation turned to ??
Why a Hippopotamus?

Why not an Elephant?

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Unlike Elephants

You can’t tame Hippo’s!
Why is Bias Like a Hippo?

- Hippo’s are difficult to tame
- They are very dangerous
- They are difficult to deal with (avoid, higher ground or shoot)
- They can remain hidden for a long time
- They appear unexpectedly
- They need to be dealt with

A key part of human subject research methodology is the ability to plan and deal with personal bias.
But you have to deal with it...
Lessons: Hippo/Bias - Africa

• You should begin reflecting on your position very early in your research—possibly as early as research questions design (Lay and McGuire, 2010).

• Then write it up to advise and reflect on possible affects.

• This analogy seemed to help understanding and facilitated early critical reflection.

• Dissertations appeared to show it had helped them begin reflecting early in their research.
Current Research

• More **formal investigation**
• This year’s session for the DEd.
• **Focus group** questions before and after session
• Concentrating on **early use of critical reflexivity**
• Measured changes in student feelings on bias and reflexivity
Researched in the UK
Bias, Hippo’s and Critical Reflexivity

The UK experience

• I based my next DEd. Research Methods class on bias ‘The Hippo in the Room.

• By focus group feedback and discussion of the analogy for personal bias of a ‘hippo in the room,’ an untamable animal, students overall felt the hippos analogy was ‘very useful’ understood the need to begin personal reflexivity early in their social science research.

• I advocated the use of Rokeach’s four instrumental values (1994) to reflect on and deal with bias (Greenbank, 2002, Lodico et al., 2010).
Summary: You can’t tame the Hippo!

Rokeach

Competency Values:

Moral Values

Terminal Values

Social Values:

But you can accept it, identify it is there, advise the community and maybe just sometimes work with it
References