Epistemology as a compass

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Abstract

What should we do then when we do not feel comfortable with the dominant way of considering the construction of knowledge? When one has the feeling that epistemic injustices are emerging, that neutrality produces violence? I propose to answer these questions by tracing the construction of the posture I adopt today in my research and teaching of female students in education sciences at the University of Geneva as well as at the Doctoral School in Education Sciences (EDSE). In line with the title of this paper, I consider the notion of epistemological posture as a "space for ethical reflection", i.e. a "space for reflection on how to 'direct one's conduct' as a researcher" (Matthey, 2005). The construction of this space is a journey of encounters and links. It requires audacity and authorisation, often confronts researchers with adversity and sometimes plunges them into solitude. Seeking alternatives to positivism places researchers in minority positions that force them to constantly justify themselves in relation to the dominant scientific norms.

Keywords: Scientific norms, comprehensive epistemology, epistemic injustices, cognitive justice

1 Introduction

I am taking the opportunity of publishing in this first issue of this important journal Open Education to talk about epistemology. This term often puts off students, even when one goes to great lengths to show its interest, scope, relevance and, I would add, necessity. And few researchers pay attention to it, since what dominates is self-evident and does not need to be thought through. This dominant attitude is positivism, even if it is not named. What is the point of exposing one's epistemological position if we all share the same one? What should we do then when we do not feel comfortable with this way of considering the construction of knowledge? When one has the feeling that epistemic injustices are emerging, that neutrality produces violence?

In this contribution, I propose to answer these questions by tracing the construction of the posture I adopt today in my research and teaching of female students in education sciences at the University of Geneva as well as at the Doctoral School in Education Sciences (EDSE). In line with the title of this paper, I consider the notion of epistemological posture as a "space for ethical reflection", i.e. a "space for reflection on how to 'direct one's conduct' as a researcher" (Matthey, 2005). The construction of this space is a journey of encounters and links. It requires audacity and authorisation, often confronts researchers with adversity and sometimes plunges them into solitude. Seeking alternatives to positivism places researchers in minority positions that force them to constantly justify themselves in relation to the dominant scientific norms.

2 Epistemological necessity

At the time of my very first research, as part of my Bachelor's thesis in educational sciences, the notion of epistemology was unknown to me. It was the mid-1990s and the curriculum of the education sciences courses at the University of Geneva did not include any teaching of epistemology (it was introduced in 1997[1]). Nevertheless, at that time, I took a seminar-course to accompany my dissertation, which raised in me the first questions about the notions of responsibility and the meaning of research, questions that would never leave me: "In which direction does my research work go, towards a reduction in inequalities and social injustices? A capacity to steer action? An increase in actoriality through the unveiling of determinisms' (Schurmans, 2006, pp. 82-83). I spent three months in Burkina Faso in 1994 conducting research interviews with women on the social representations of their children's illnesses as part of my dissertation entitled *Les savoirs de la maladie. De l'éducation à la santé en contexte africain* (Charmillot, 1997). At the same time, I worked on the educational activities of a Franco-Swiss non-governmental organisation (NGO) present on the spot[2] and I discovered in the library the publication by Florence Piron and Félicité Ringtoumda (1991) entitled *Les savoirs des femmes au Sahel, vers une revalorisation des compétences locales*. This booklet, published by the 'Groupe de recherche femmes-Sahel' of the Sahel Centre of Laval University, was to profoundly affect my very early career as an apprentice researcher. I discovered how anthropologists, probably without realising it, systematically disqualified the knowledge of Sahelian women by establishing an implicit hierarchy between their 'traditional' knowledge and modern knowledge. I will therefore pay closer attention to this phenomenon of the hierarchisation of knowledge, starting with Michel Serres who, in 1993, already noted that the most worrying phenomenon in the world was the ever-increasing inequalities. The rich/poor divide, he asserted, was being joined by the science/non-science divide. In his book *The Legend of the Angels*, he wrote: 'What price do we put on the flying angels, the gods or the highest inhabitants of the hyper-technicalised vertical city, compared to the value of the men lying down in the horizontal, low, sunken city?' (pp. 72-75).

When I started my doctorate, in the spring of 1997, a course on the epistemology of research was offered by my thesis supervisor, Marie-Noëlle Schurmans, as part of the core curriculum of the bachelor's degree in education in Geneva. From that moment on, I will be trained in epistemology and my thesis will partly reflect this, as I write in its preamble:

> The knowledge acquired and the questions raised during the preparation of the seminars, the discussions with my colleagues and the exchanges with the students have obviously enriched my expertise in research construction. These experiences have also led me to question and challenge principles that are taken for granted in research manuals. This phase of deconstructing the 'classic' research procedures allowed me to envisage another way of thinking about the construction of knowledge and this thesis bears witness to this process. (Charmillot, 2002, p. 5).

The doctoral research will thus mark, in my career as a researcher, the passage from training in epistemology to the construction of my own epistemological posture, which I will refine thereafter through critical reflections on qualitative research, scientific writing, restitution, neutrality, as well as on the differential value of illnesses taken as an object of research in the social sciences and humanities, or doctoral support. These developments were forged in conjunction with my teaching of epistemology and methodology of education and training, and with the input of doctoral students, who confronted me with the observation that many of them do not feel authorized to "think outside the box", in other words to develop a critical perspective, nor to integrate into their questioning the existential or biographical dimension from which it stems. Trying to understand the conceptions of scientific activity that prevent students from answering the questions they ask themselves has contributed greatly to the development of my epistemological reflections. The transition between the positivist unthinking and the need to build an epistemological posture thus runs through my academic activity.

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[1] The course was given by Schurmans and is entitled 'Epistemology of Research'. It should be noted that all teaching of epistemology was abolished in the educational sciences in Geneva in 2018.
[2] https://www.grad-s.net/

3   Comprehensive epistemology

Tracing the path taken allows us to link the construction of knowledge to multiple spheres, biographical, institutional, social and political, and to highlight the dimension of the relationship to knowledge that is both situated and dynamic. Currently, social changes and crises (environmental, health, geopolitical) are challenging more and more researchers who question the principle of scientific neutrality and the subordination of science to capitalism. A posture is therefore never given but constructed, it is consolidated and enriched and can be the subject of conversions, as Caroline Dayer (2010) has shown in her analysis of the tensions that researchers experience in their professional context and the transactions they develop to overcome them. These transactions involve epistemological conversions and sometimes even 'epistemological coming out'.

The conception of comprehensive epistemology that I wish to share in this contribution refers, on the one hand, to the distinction that Jean-Michel Berthelot (2001) makes between 'experimental reason' and 'interpretative reason'. Experimental reason refers to explanatory, causal, objectivist research approaches. Interpretive reason refers to comprehensive, interpretive, constructivist and hermeneutic research approaches. On the other hand, this comprehensive epistemology is rooted in the critical-reconstructive sciences defined by Karl Oto Apel (2000), in other words, sciences that assume an emancipatory interest and refer to an ethical rationality. This ethical rationality presupposes a thought of solidarity and interdependence between people and finds its framework of application in the ethics of responsibility, in the sense of Max Weber (1963). An ethics that is concerned with the consequences of its actions. This initial theoretical anchoring immediately directs the epistemological question towards the relationship with others. When I carry out research, what place do the people concerned by my research objects occupy: do I give them a voice or do I take it from them? Do I assign them an identity pre-constructed by my categories, concepts, interview grids, etc., or do I offer them the space and time for their own identity narrative? Does my research serve a managerial logic or is its purpose emancipatory? Based on my work with Raquel Fernandez-Iglesias (2018), I start from the premise that engaging in research activity, at whatever level, implies 'contributing to shaping the course of the world' (Lagasnerie, 2017, p. 12). And in support of my research in the field of health and illness (Charmillot, 2019), I express this contribution with the title of Walter Hesbeen's (2000) book, Taking Care in the World. In other words, doing comprehensive research in the educational sciences is, in my view, an activity related to care insofar as it proposes "another model for the humanities and social sciences: as a set of theorisations, care studies justify distancing themselves from a narrow rationalism and formalism, they defend the integration of feminist and gender studies issues in order to build new critical representations of the social and political world" (Brugère and Gautier, n.d.).

4   The epistemology of the link

The centrality of the relationship to others in my path and research is rooted in the epistemology of the link as developed by Florence Piron. Throughout her career as a professor of ethics and communication, Piron has been committed to the accessibility of knowledge, research and education, and to Open Science. In this contribution, I limit myself to outlining her main epistemological proposals for restoring or strengthening cognitive justice and restoring morality to scientific activity, but I invite readers to immerse themselves in her texts and discover what she calls the 'violence of neoliberal science' (Piron, 2017, p. 45) or the 'separating violence of positivist epistemology' (p. 42). For her, positivism is an epistemology with hegemonic pretensions that does not recognise the plurality of knowledge. She writes:

> This epistemology constantly tries to erase the fact that it is one way of knowing among others, that it results from history and social relations. One of the great challenges of modernity was the (colonial) universalisation of an epistemology that was originally localised in Northern Europe, among men. It was necessary to erase the trace of any 'local' in scholarly thought, a condition deemed necessary for its prestige and its power of veracity (Foucault, 2001). The science of the North thus became 'science' tout court (p. 9).

This science carries with it a 'powerful injunction of separation between mind and body, feeling and thought, engagement and knowledge, and science and society' (Piron, 2017, p. 45). For Piron, this separating violence is a call for indifference to others. It is from this perspective that she speaks of the amorality of positivism. And the strength of her analysis is that she has coined the concept of 'institutional

positivism', the name she gives to the hegemonic normative framework of the globalised regime of science and knowledge in the world today, which she describes as follows:

> It is found in all the institutional devices that orient not only the epistemological thinking of researchers towards 'positivism', but in the innumerable micro-practices of the profession: from the automatic word processors that flag the plural of the word 'epistemology' as a fault, in French as well as in English, to the grant application or ethics approval forms that presuppose that every research project has 'hypotheses' and 'variables' or produces 'results'. (Piron, 2018, para. 25).

This brief contextualisation of Piron's thought allows us to grasp the ethical horizon of the epistemology of the link, which "attempts to preserve and make visible, in a social science text, all the human links that make the creation of knowledge possible" (Piron, 2017, p. 33). Such an epistemology is fruitful insofar as it allows for the recognition of the plurality of knowledge and its contexts of creation, without hierarchy or privilege. This epistemology serves the development of cognitive justice, namely

> an epistemological, ethical and political ideal aiming at the emergence of socially relevant knowledge everywhere on the planet and not only in the countries of the North, within a science practicing an inclusive universalism, open to all knowledge (p. 37).

Inspired by the epistemology of connection proposed by Edgar Morin (1995), the epistemology of connection is indeed envisaged in particular as the valorisation of an 'awareness of material and epistemological cognitive injustices' (p. 46) caused by processes of ignorance and/or indifference towards knowledge that does not benefit from the epistemological privilege of neoliberal science. According to Piron (2017), any process of knowledge creation is traversed by 'signifying layers' such as, for example, memories of particular moments, encounters or discussions that are more or less traceable in time and space, texts that freeze them and archive them as 'data', interlocutors who challenge, sensitivity to various cognitive configurations, etc. And all these layers are made up of "links between humans who speak to each other, listen to each other, try to understand each other" (p. 54).

> Without these links, [she writes], and without my properly human capacity to imagine the possibility of a world other than the one I am in, I would be unable to write and produce knowledge. An epistemology of connection not only rejects distancing as a violent condition of scientificity of knowledge, but it integrates into the thread of scientific writing the condition of proximity without which no authentically human knowledge can be created (pp. 54-55).

5 Epistemology as an emancipatory act for oneself and others

I have found, with the epistemology of connection, a way of doing my work as a teacher-researcher that feels like I belong. The Indian thinker Vish Visvanathan (2016, p. 23), who coined the concept of cognitive justice, argues that 'knowledge is a dwelling, a way of life' and not just a 'system or formal set of disembodied properties'. The epistemology of linkage as forged by Piron is an invitation to think in linkage, by oneself and in dialogue, an invitation to bring out the voices usually assigned to silence. It is an invitation to allow oneself to lead a life of ethical authorship, with the fight against all forms of cognitive or social injustice as a horizon. The authorisation, in other words, to be epistemologically in one's place. Jeanne-Marie Rugira, a professor of psychosociology at the University of Quebec who has worked intensely with Piron, talks about the audacity of questioning our knowledge production processes. In her view, to be in one's place intellectually is to 'feel at home'. She advocates research approaches rooted in an individual and collective historical consciousness: how are the questions I ask myself relevant to this moment in my history and our collective history? It is a question of grasping the socio-historical and socio-political contexts that produce the thoughts that drive us in our research activities in education and training. The ethical issue of the epistemology of the link is deployed here from the situated point of view of the researcher: where am I, when am I, where am I at? From the theory of situated points of view, Rugira argues for taking research out of a simple knowledge production exercise and making it a motor for profound personal and social change, from the joint positions of the oppressed and the researcher. I keep this horizon in mind as I continue my journey, always listening to researchers in search of other ways of thinking about science. Raquel Fernandez-Iglesias (2016), in the conclusions of her thesis, takes up Henri Bergson's invitation to walk, who writes: "I see only one way to know how far one can go. It is to set out

and walk". To walk, to think, to allow oneself to produce knowledge and to break with the reproduction of the dominant model. This is how I see the emancipatory horizon of the EOL review.

It is by adding a perspective to this horizon that I wish to respond to the pertinent questions posed by the reviewers of this article. The first concerns the association of positivism with neoliberalism, or more precisely the characterisation of positivism as neoliberal science or scientific neoliberalism. Is this description not anachronistic insofar as Auguste Comte introduced his theory between 1830 and 1842, with the aim of replacing theological beliefs and metaphysical explanations with a nomological system? The idea was to analyse human facts by formulating natural laws. As already emphasised in this article, the central points of positivism are the application of the causal schema, the exteriority of the observer and the independence between the object of study and the epistemic subject. Piron (2005) highlights the managerial logic in which this scientific approach has developed, and, referring to Foucault (1994) in his book Dits et écrits, she speaks of "government by individualisation". This configuration of power involves "grouping individuals according to certain criteria derived from their bureaucratic identity: welfare recipients, the unemployed, those unfit for work, young people, immigrants, etc., regardless of their actual social relationships or aspirations" (p. 4). In line with the positivist aim of social control, the experts are "on the lookout for any problem that needs solving, any deviation from the norm" (p. 4). This perspective, moreover, is not the subject of any public debate. In fact, where is there any discussion of "the standardisation of research in the form of standardised protocols" (p. 4)? To anchor his critical perspective in contemporary time and space, Piron has coined the concept of 'institutional positivism'. It is this concept, it seems to me, that removes the anachronistic risk and allows us never to forget that science is a social construct and that it is therefore also political. The association with neoliberalism is also linked to the financial stakes of the dominant scientific model. In 2020, at a meeting of the Hack Your Research Association, Piron spoke of this model in the following terms: "money is the cardinal value by which the importance and excellence of a programme are judged", and this model evaluates "researchers' careers on the basis of quantitative indices (number of publications, impact factors, money, colleagues, networks, length of CV, etc.) rather than their social impact".

The second question posed by the reviewers of this article concerns the impact of epistemological reflection outside academic boundaries and the implications for the training of young researchers. With regard to the training of young researchers, I would like to refer you to a chapter written with Raquel Fernandez-Iglesias entitled *Journey to insolence. Unmasking scientific neutrality in research training*, in which we propose insolent acts to counter certain positivist injunctions and in which we develop five premises for thinking differently about research training. The central core of our proposals is the experience of those involved. Starting from these experiences and the social, economic, political and ecological conditions of life that they reflect, we are immediately inviting you to break down academic boundaries by considering the construction of knowledge through participatory approaches[3].

6 References

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[3] Lire à ce sujet : Godrie Baptiste, Juan Maïté, Carrell Marion (2022) « Recherches participatives et épistémologies radicales : un état des lieux », *Participations*, *1*/32, p. 11-50. DOI : 10.3917/parti.032.0011. URL : https://www.cairn.info/revue-participations-2022-1-page-11.htm

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