

Starting with political ideas and grasping the idea of a 'research paradigm'



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There are different concepts in the research process that university students struggle to understand and one of them is the term 'paradigm'. Finding the right example to illustrate the idea of a research paradigm is not easy. In the qualitative research methods modules that I have been teaching in undergraduate and postgraduate education programmes, I always felt anxious when presenting a lecture about 'paradigms'. I ask myself the same question again and again: How can I translate an abstract concept that is key to understand students' own beliefs when researching the social world?

A few years ago, I decided to introduce the concept of 'paradigm' with an example of how political parties operate in society. I got this idea when I was reading Morison's book (1986, p.15) and found a diagram illustrating the links between 'microsociology and macrosociology' and research. The conceptual and methodological relationships in the graphic explained how sociologists 'make sense of society'. It captured the role of 'theories' and more specifically how the two key paradigms (interpretivism and positivism) represented different world views and values when doing macro-sociological and micro-sociological research. Inspired by these complex relationships in sociological research, I created a simple graphic to teach the differences between positivism and interpretivism. I soon realised that this graphical explanation of paradigms had a resemblance with how right and left-wing political ideologies shape people's views of the social world. It was a light bulb moment, and I decided to use this example as a pedagogical strategy in my research methods teaching.

Right and left-wing political parties are universal terms that are familiar to students from any continent. In the educational and social research methods classes, I ask students to imagine that they are politicians. Then I go through a logical sequencing of simple concepts helping them to make sense of how political ideologies turn into action in government policies. I discuss with students the following questions: 1) What is a political party? 2) What are the different values, beliefs and ideas of left and right parties? 3) How are these ideas reflected in a

manifesto? 4) Why is the manifesto of an elected political party the basis for action? Moving to the social research world, I follow the same structure. I ask students to imagine that they are researchers and ask them to think about the starting point when thinking about and studying the social world: 1) What is a paradigm? 2) What are the beliefs and assumptions of the positivist and interpretivist paradigms? 3) How are researchers influenced by these worldviews and values when designing and developing their research?

Students are asked to put on two different hats, one of a politician and one of a social researcher. As politicians, they reflect on how left or right ideological ideas influence the development of government social policies. As novice researchers, they reflect on their own values and assumptions about the social world and how these ideas influence the way they do research. Starting with simple questions about political ideas and government policies, students engage in conversations that enable them to grasp the complex concept of a research 'paradigm'.

I teach the term 'paradigm', drawing on Guba's and Lincoln's definition (1994, p.105), 'as the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of methods but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways'. I have followed Guba's and Lincoln's 'researcher-defined paradigm model' since my days as a doctoral student doing qualitative research. Their conception of paradigm is not 'limited or defined in relation to any specific subject area' (Chafe, 2024, p. 6). Although researchers' beliefs and assumptions might be influenced by the dominant paradigm in their discipline, when teaching 'paradigms' my main purpose is twofold: to make students reflect on their own philosophical position of the world, and to (re) socialise them into the wide range of possibilities that qualitative research holds for understanding the social world.

Part of the reason that paradigms are difficult to grasp is because as methods teachers we draw students towards a particular paradigm. My students go through a process of 'quantitative therapy' in which they are pushed to confront 'a fixed [positivistic/quantitative] mind-set around the creation of knowledge (Collins and Stockton, 2018, p, 6). They come into higher education with the assumption that causal relations and established measurement are the basis of authentic knowledge. The scientific discourse is embedded in students' perceptions of research but at the end of their courses they come to appreciate that qualitative non-statistical knowledge

is valuable and worthwhile. The road to this intellectual transformation takes time and is an emotional and painful journey (Perez del Aguila, Allison and Kazmi, 2023).

We have come a long way since the days of the 'paradigm war' (Gage 1989). There is now a 'paradigm proliferation' and paradigms have changed and are complex. In this context, 'pedagogy becomes critical' (Denzin et al., 2024, pp.13, 25). Teaching students the idea of paradigm position in research is best done through critical reflection of the philosophical basis of the two traditional paradigms. I start with political ideas to help students to engage students with difficult questions about particular worldviews.

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