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Human rights and the construction of identities in South African education

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Chapter 9

Research Interventionism, Language and Polyangulation

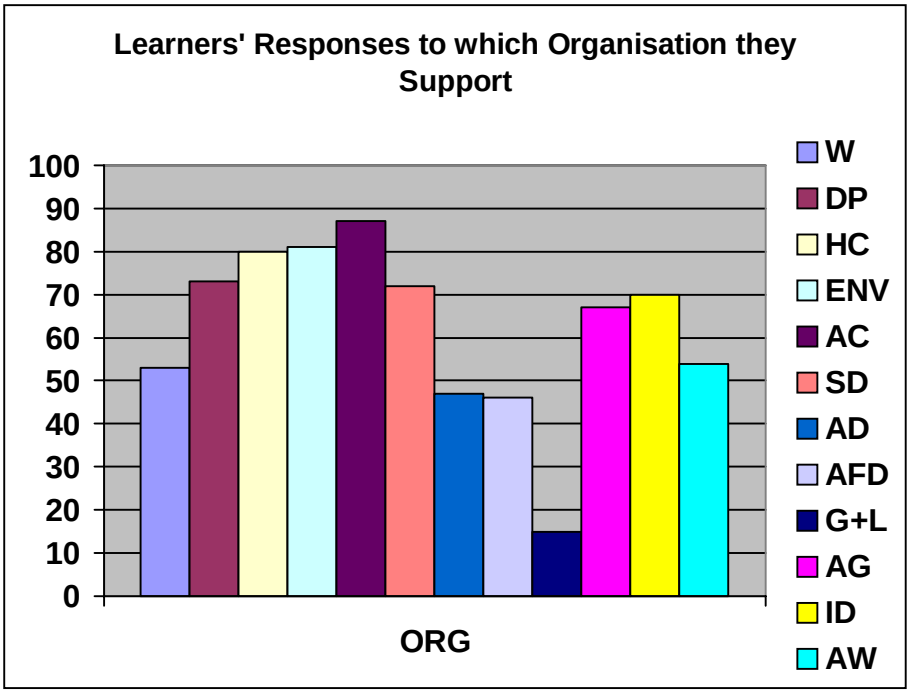
In this chapter I explore the issue of the objectivity of research, distance of the researcher, and interventionism in and through research. My entry into this discussion is via my reflection on the different results obtained in the empirical research with regard to learners' perceptions of human rights. In this chapter, the learners' views of issues related to sexual orientation are discussed in particular, since the differences in their responses in the questionnaires and interviews are most stark in this regard. Throughout, I develop the argument: All research is in itself interventionist. However, rather than suggesting that this interventionism is dependent upon the nature of the particular researcher involved, his/her values, aims or motives of and for doing a particular piece of research, I contend that the interventionism in research is a function of language itself. In line with this, I then suggest that interviews are far more interventionist because there is far more use of and immersion in language within them. Questionnaires, I argue, are also interventionist but less so than interviews. If this is the case, then I conclude the distinctions between objectivity and interventionism is inherently flawed and unhelpful. But this does not mean that research cannot, and should not, be reliable. In this regard, I argue for the importance of what may be seen as a notion of "polyangulation".

A section was included in the learner questionnaire that looked at which civil society organisations learners would support. The purpose of this question was two-fold: first, it sought to elicit where learners saw the practices of democracy to be located; and, second, to see which type of civil society organisations they would support. In response to this question, learners were only asked to indicate their choices in terms of "will support", "neutral" and "will not support". No other comments were necessary. This question provided a means to elicit the

priorisation of the learners' values and cross-checked the degree of their inclusivity. For example, one could claim to respect "everybody's human rights", but still not support groups for the empowerment of women. The table and chart below indicate the responses that were received from learners to this question.

ORGANISATION TYPE	**WILL SUPPORT (%)**	**NEUTRAL (%)**	**WILL NOT SUPPORT (%)**
For Women	53	38	9
For Disabled People	73	21	6
For Homeless Children	80	15	5
For the Environment	82	15	4
Anti-crime	87	8	4
For Sports Development	72	22	5
For Arts and Culture Development	47	40	12
For the Development of African Culture	46	38	16
For Gays and Lesbians	15	27	58
For the Aged	67	24	9
For the People with Incurable Diseases	70	22	8
Anti-war	54	25	21

Table 8: Learners' Responses to which Organisations they Support



Key: ORG = Organisation; W = Women's; DP =Disabled People's; HC = Homeless Children; ENV = Environment; AC =Anti-Crime; SD = Sports Development; AD = Development of Arts and Culture; AFD = Development of African Culture; G+L = Gay and Lesbian; AG = Aged; ID = People with Incurable Diseases; AW =.Anti-War

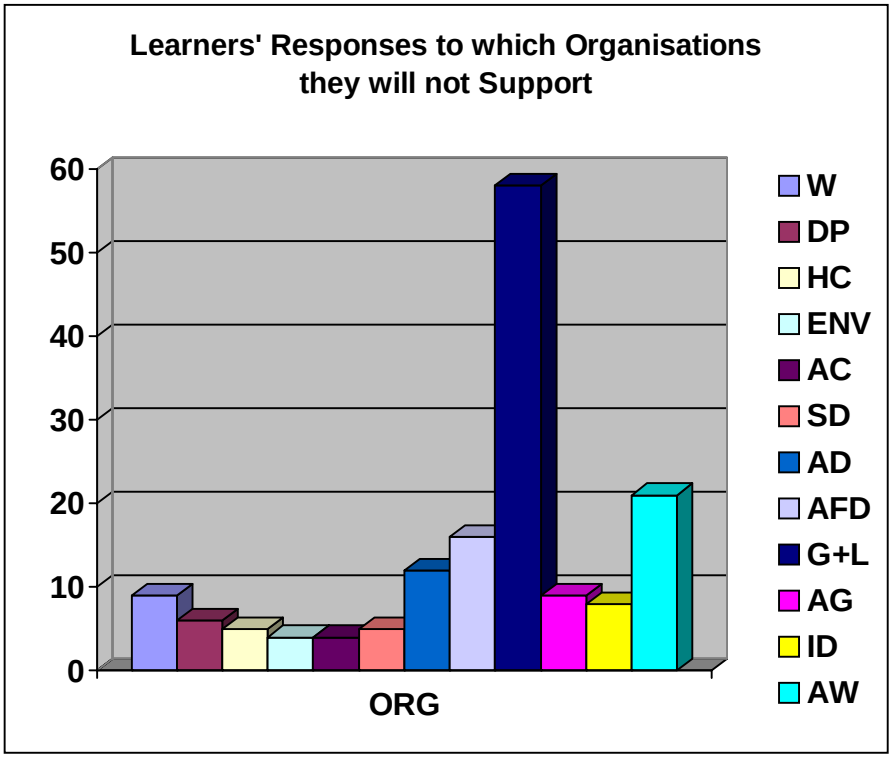


Chart 8: Learners' Responses to which Organisations they will not Support

In relation to Table 5 and the above charts, gay and lesbian groups receive the least of support from the Grade 9 learners. As pointed out above, answers to the question only required a choice to be made from three options: “will support”, “neutral” and “will not support”. No other comments were necessary. However, in their response to this question in the questionnaire, many learners found it necessary to add a comment. Their comments range from statements like, “kill the suckers”, “nuke the bastards” “agh sis” (a South African slang meaning something ‘gross’, ugly and/or dirty) to “this is not God’s way”. As such, not only did the questionnaire responses indicate that gay and lesbian groups receive the least support from the respondents, it also brought to the surface strong sentiments of repulsion and opposition these learners had towards gays and lesbians. I probed these kinds of responses to the question in the group interviews with learners. A detailed discussion on this is provided in Chapter 10.

I expected the interviews to yield more information about the learners' strong oppositional views concerning gays and lesbians. To my amazement, these learners’ positions on gays and lesbians shifted during the course of the interviews. They shifted from not wanting to have anything to do with gays and lesbians, let alone support them, to acknowledging gays and lesbians as human beings who have equal rights as everybody else and have the right to be who they are. The following extracts from interviews conducted indicate these shifts:

> **I**: In the questionnaire, you indicated that you would not support gay and lesbian groups. Could you tell me, why?
> (*Laughter among the group*)
> **Learner 1**: That’s just not the way we are, you know.
> **I**: Yes, but the question is whether you would support gay and lesbian groups. You don’t have to be gay or lesbian to support the group, just like you are not disabled but you could still support disabled people’s groups.
> **Learner 2**: Yes, look, eh, I don’t mind if they do what they want to do, as long as they don’t try their stuff with me.
> **Learner 3**: But, I think that gays and lesbians are also human and also

have human rights.

Learner 4: It's okay if you are gay or lesbian.

Learner 1: They really can't help being what they are.

I: So, you now seem to be saying that gays and lesbians also have human rights and they should be protected in this way.

(*General agreement*) (Group Interview with Learners, School 3, 1999).

In the above extract two issues come up. First, these learners seem to have assumed that if they indicated support for gay and lesbian groups it would identify them as being gay or lesbian. Yet, this was not the reasoning they used when it came to other groups such as groups for the support of disabled, HIV+ people or the aged. My intervention in the interview was to highlight this somewhat contradictory use of logic in the different instances. Second, there is a consistent distancing language that the learners use, "We are not like them" being a typical depiction of the "othering" processes in their use of language. Learners seem prepared to accept gays and lesbians as human beings with equal human rights, provided it does not alter their senses of self or influence or affect them in their own spaces. Again, a keeping of gays and lesbians "at a distance", as a marginalised, even possibly invisible, "other". Nonetheless, the above extract shows that in the context of the interview, learners eventually came to the position of accepting gay and lesbian rights as human rights.

The following is an extract from another interview.

I: What do you think of gays and lesbians?

Learner 1: I think that it is unnatural.

Learner 2: And it is also against religion.

I: Do you think that gays and lesbians have human rights?

Learner 3: Yes, they should be treated like everybody else.

I: Even if you think that they are unnatural and against religion?

Learner 1: Look, they can be what they want to be but they mustn't try to do their things with me.

I: So, they have the right to be what they want to be?
Learner 2: Oh, yes that's cool. But I don't have to be what they are.
(*General agreement*) (Group Interview with learners, School 5, 1997)

The above extract also indicates the learners "othering" of gays and lesbians in their use of language indicated by an "us" and a "them" and being prepared to accept gay and lesbian rights as human rights provided "they" are kept in distant, marginalised, invisibilised spaces. In this extract, though, there is also an indication of the influence of religious discourses on the learners' views of gays' and lesbians' human rights, as well as their naturalising tendencies when confronted with questions of sexuality. But, they acknowledge gay and lesbian rights as human rights.

In these interviews there is a discernable shift in these learners' attitudes: from being antagonistically positioned in relation to gays and lesbians to agreeing that gays and lesbians have a right to be what they want to. The question I wish to address is how do we explain this shift? What status do we give to their responses to the questionnaire on the same issue? How much of their shift was actually due to my intervention as a researcher in the interview?

Questionnaires and Interviews

The first point to make is to acknowledge the differences between the questionnaire and the interview. The questionnaire was administered to 1582 Grade 9 learners (the response rate of which was 63.28%). It was designed mainly within a quantitative vein. The results of the questionnaire were analysed using statistical packages for the social sciences and were calculated quantitatively. In contrast, the interviews were more qualitative. The interviews were carried out on a small scale and were analysed discursively in order to explore the meanings in qualitative terms of what learners were articulating.

At the same time, the question in the questionnaire only asked whether learners

would support gay and lesbian groups, it did not probe why they would or would not. It was not clear on the basis of the questionnaire whether learners felt that their own sexualities were implicated in the way in which they responded to this question. This became clearer in the interview, where it was also discussed directly with the learners. The questionnaire also did not have the means to access what influenced learners perceptions of sexuality. Although their uncalled for comments on the questionnaire seem to have hinted at this, it was only in the interviews that the tendency to naturalise ("it is not natural") sexual orientation and bring to bear theological arguments ("this is not God's way") about it were highlighted. As such, in terms of design, the questionnaire and the interview are not the same. On this basis alone, one can easily say that the interview allows the researcher far more leverage for intervention than the questionnaire.

However, there is a question about what status one gives to the data from the questionnaire, given that the interview findings contradict those? One way around this is to suggest that the questionnaire and interview findings are consistent in that they point to the fact that the Grade 9 learners do not support gay and lesbian groups, but recognise gay and lesbian rights as human rights. However, in the context of the wider project, the perceptions study was intended to gauge whether learners were positively inclined to upholding human rights for everybody, no matter who they may be. In this respect, it does matter whether learners think gays and lesbians should be “nuked” or whether they would allow gays and lesbians the freedom to exist as they want to. The questionnaires point more to the former attitude, whereas the interviews tend to point to the latter. Which data is more reliable? The status given to the data is, thus, important.

It could be argued that given that the interview probed the findings of the questionnaire and that in the interviews learners were able to articulate their views more and get exposure to other views, the interview data are more reliable because they are more informed. This would imply that the more interventionist the researcher is, the more educative the research process is, the more reliable the data. This turns around traditional views about the objectivity of research and

researchers and claims about reliability.

Notwithstanding, there are certain important differences that need to be noted between the questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire allowed learners to respond to questions individually, privately and anonymously. The interview is more social, public and learners' actual presence is visible. The questionnaire also uses less language, whereas the interview allows for the use of more language, given the discussions that happen within them. On these bases, it is possible to argue that differences in responses may be due to the different contexts established in the questionnaires and interviews. However, in this regard it would seem that the data from the questionnaires are more reliable because the context of the questionnaire is one where the respondents are not subject to the pressures of being in social relations, in a public space and where their own presences are visibly positioned. Also, in this regard it could also be argued that the questionnaire data are more reliable because of the use of less language. Here the argument would be that through the use of more language, one immerses people into particular discourses, and rather than getting people's actual views on matters, once they are immersed in discourses their views become "tainted", albeit in more informed ways. It is to this issue of the use of language in questionnaires and interviews that I now want to turn attention.

Language and Discursive foci.

It is a moot point to indicate that questionnaires use less language than interviews. Taking that as given, I want to argue that it is not so much the amount of language that is used that is at issue here. Rather, it is the use of language itself that is the issue.

Drawing on the contributions of Wittgenstein on "language as acts" (1978), de Sassure's (1983) structuralist analysis of the social contexts of meaning and Foucault's (1972, 1973) work on the use of language in constituting discursive objects and discursive practices, it is the use of language itself, as opposed to the

amount of language, that establishes discursive foci. Within a theory of articulation this would refer to the act of "languaging". It is language that names objects. It is language that draws people's attention to certain things as opposed to others. Whether in the questionnaire or the interview, the mere mentioning of "gays and lesbians", in itself, alerts people to questions of sexual orientation. In so doing, it simultaneously brings to the fore people's positionings in relation to questions of sexual orientations: their fears, prejudices, values, assumptions and influences. Whether in an interview or questionnaire, I contend, the effect is the same. The sameness of the effect that I am referring to here is about immersing people into discursive spaces and focusing their attention on particular discursive objects. As pointed out above, the questionnaire operates within a more private space, and allows for less mediation, and thereby researcher intervention, than is the case in interviews, which assume a more social, public space. However, whether in private or public spaces, with less or more mediation and intervention, researchers always draw respondents' attention to particular discourses and objects.

If the above is accepted to be the case, then it would suggest that both 'questionnaire' and 'interview' are equally interventionists, and by extrapolation all research is. This would be the case because all research uses language. All research names objects. All research draws people's attention to some or the other object. In this sense, the distinction between objectivity and interventionism appears to be flawed. It is flawed because it does not recognise that even the most supposedly objective of research will still use language, and its interventionism lies in the use of language. In this respect, it also does not matter what are the researcher's ambitions, motivations or what aims the researcher wants to achieve through the research. This is not what determines interventionism. It is the use of language. So, whether the researcher sees him/herself as having an interventionist political project in his/her research or as a clinically distant, academic piece of work, does not matter. The interventionism is not due to the intentions of the researcher but in the use of language itself. It is the kind of language used that would determine what the nature of the interventionism would be, i.e. which

discursive objects would be brought into focus and how.

These points are by no means new. They have been raised about the debates on applying the research methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences in the development of what has become known as positivism (see Cohen and Manion, 1998). What I am merely adding here is our increased understanding today of the ways in which discourses are constructed and the powerful role language actually plays, as instances of "languaging".

But, what does this then imply for the reliability of research? I want to suggest that conditions of reliability still need to be ensured. I suggest that a way to ensure this, a point made by many others as well (cf. Cohen and Manion, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), is by combining different methodologies and via "triangulation". However, given that in this study there has been many "triangulations", I put forward the idea of "polyangulation" to capture the use of multiple triangulations.

This study needed to access data that were both of a micro and macro nature. It also needed to explore the interrelations between these levels. In addition, the contextual experiences at institutional and individual levels needed to be incorporated. In order to do all of these the study had to use a multiple approach methodologically. The value of this is that it at once yielded richer data than would have been the case if only one approach or instrument was used. It also allowed for cross-checking of claims made, because the different approaches and instruments used enabled more possibilities for "triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) and thereby reinforcing the validity and reliability of the claims that are made about what the data reveal. In this study, there is what Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) called "technique triangulation", where different techniques are used to produce data and “to relate different sorts of data … so as to counteract various possible threats to the validity” (p. 199). In this study, questionnaires for a national survey with teachers and learners were used. Individual and group interviews were also conducted and classroom observations

were also done. It is this "technique triangulation" that enabled me to decide what status to give to what the learners say. If in these triangulations, learners' views are shown to be inclusivist, then their homophobic responses would be seen in the light of them being inclusivist, rather than viewing them as necessarily discriminating against gays and lesbians. The "technique triangulation" allows for a "portrait" to be constructed and as an "aesthetic whole", if learners are inclusivist then their homophobic views remain a "stroke on the canvas", a "shade of colour" but does not make up the "portrait". "Polyangulation" allows for a fuller picture to be painted, and increases the reliability of the claims made. But, "polyangulation" does not mean that "everything goes" but a method where the researcher checks her/his own interventions and ensures that the representations are reliable and justifiable. The representations are not constructions without following any research procedure and/or protocol. I could only balance the learners' views about sexual orientation by checking their views in interviews, questionnaires, what others like the teachers, said of the learners, what gays and lesbians themselves said about 'the other' learners and what the observations revealed. The "polyangulation" allowed me to construct the portrait of these learners rather than re-present their views devoid of context and as fragmented. This has allowed for greater reliability in this study. This study employs various levels and forms of "triangulation", which suggests a kind of "polyangulation":

The diagram below attempts to capture the multiple triangulations used in this study. It denotes the triangulation of context (national-local-individual), research teams (cross-country-South African-supervisor), instruments (interviews-questionnaires-observations) and actors (organisations-teachers-learners) who were the respondents in this study.

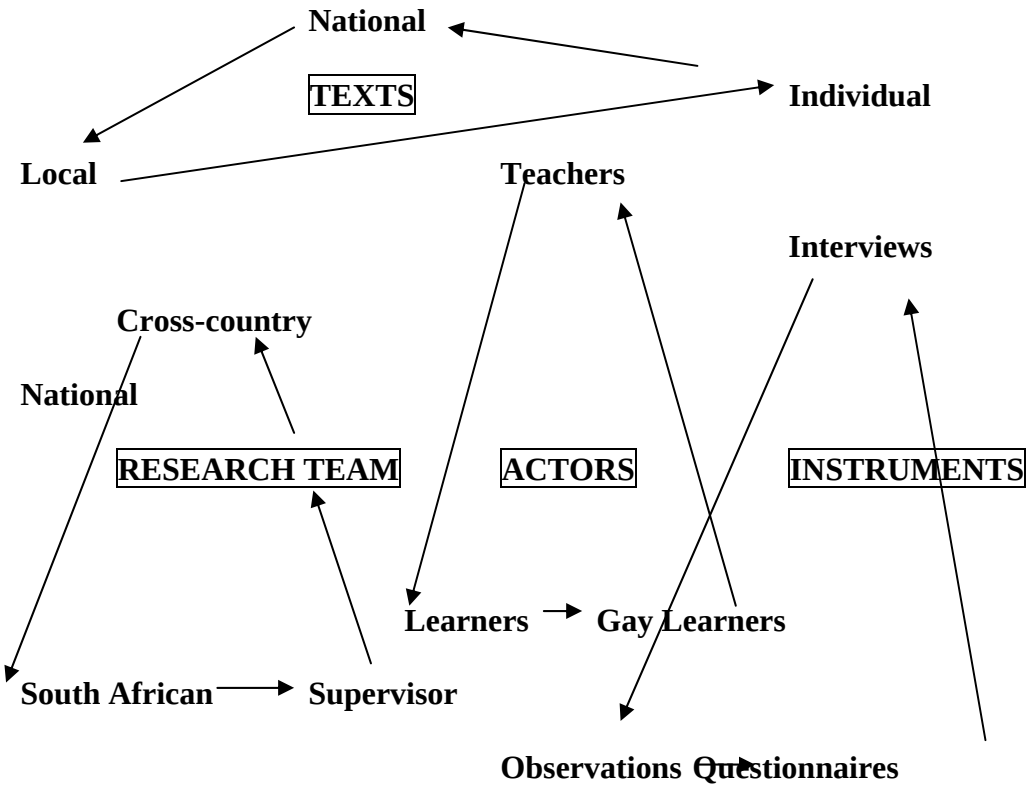


Diagram 1: Polyangulation

The above diagram also attempts to capture the methodological constituents of doing "portraiture". As discussed in Chapter 3, Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) elaboration of "portraiture", and which informs this study, points out that "portraiture" entails showing the complexity of phenomena. "Polyangulation" is useful in capturing this complexity and allows for different levels, contexts, actors and forces to be held together. In this way it also allows for "articulations" across to be noted and interconnections between micro and macro, background and foreground, individual and contexts to be represented.

Denzin (1978) refers to ‘theoretical triangulation’ which draws on multiple perspectives and to which the data is subjected for analysis. In this study such ‘theoretical triangulation’ is operative. The theoretical framework of this study traverses across theories of human rights, human identities, education, human

rights education and meta-theoretical perspectives of articulation and portraiture. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) also note that "triangulation" may be achieved through the use of a team of researchers, who through their different positions, perspectives and observations, and in conversation with each other, in and as a research team, establish "researcher triangulation". This "researcher triangulation" was also present in parts of the study. The structure of the Democracy Project enables interactions between the South African research team and the corresponding ones in Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mozambique and Sweden, and within each of the teams. In addition, through my relation with my supervisor, I added a dimension of cross checking to the research team.

Given that this study used all of these forms of "triangulation", and on different levels, it would be fair to say that "polyangulation" characterised the research in this study, and not a Feyeraband methodological eclecticism of the sort where "everything goes" (see Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Indeed the idea of "polyangulation" does shift the original meaning of "triangulation" which was “loosely based on an analogy with navigation and surveying” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983: 198). However, noting the development of technology and the use of satellite systems for navigation and surveying currently, and given the emphasis here on modes of research, the notion of "polyangulation" can be argued to be justifiable. Multiple "triangulations", "polyangulations", facilitate the capturing of the complexity of phenomena and allows "portraiture" to articulate the nuances and contradictions in the texture of the portrait.