

## Ideology and health professional education scholarship

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As health professional education scholars we place great store in objectivity, rigour, and accountability in all aspects of scholarly activity. However, the field of health professional education marks the intersection of many scientific and social paradigms, and as a result, the theoretical and procedural basis for scholarship in this field is often contested (Regehr 2010). The irrepressible and divisive categorization of scholarship as ‘quantitative’ or ‘qualitative’ is perhaps the most overt expression of this intersection; it is far from being the only one. Quite what expressions of objectivity, rigour, and accountability mean to scholars in the field often differ according to their individual and collective values and beliefs. It is no wonder then that the many values and beliefs of healthcare and health professional education are also to be found infusing the studies and publications of scholars in our field. An ideology is a system of values and beliefs. How then do we (or should we) respond to the presence of different ideologies in scholarship in our field? This is not a simple matter of linguistics; scholarly ideologies may (and often do) lead to disputes over how research is framed and conducted as well as what is being investigated and the significance and value of any findings it might generate. This is a very real and ongoing challenge for scholarly journals that do not subscribe to a particular ideology to the exclusion of any others. This editorial briefly explores ideology and its implications for scholarship in the field of health professional education.

Ideologies reflect the beliefs and values that shape the acts of health professional education scholarship. If they are our own or they reflect our own, they tend to be invisible to us, but ideologies that differ from our own can, by degrees, both intrigue and trouble us, not least because they challenge the legitimacy of our own approaches to scholarship. In its most benign form ideology involves the study of ideas and beliefs. Given that both health professional education and scholarly inquiry into and around it are rather full of ideas, ideology would seem to be a legitimate form and focus of scholarly meta-inquiry. Indeed,

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much of the work in areas such as phenomenology, ethnography, and discourse analysis explores exactly these kinds of issues, although the focus tends to be on the subject of inquiry rather than on the means of inquiry.

Ideology has a more specific and more widely used meaning that encompasses individual and collective beliefs about society and politics and the ways in which they do (or should) shape the way we perceive the world and act within it. Indeed, Žižek has argued that it is only by accepting certain concepts and principles as absolute and incontestable that ideology is generated (Žižek 2008). Despite the shortcomings of the post-modern project (spectacularly highlighted by Sokal 1994), its core thesis of identifying and challenging the grand (incontestable) narratives and ideologies of science and society remains an important one (Lyotard 1979). The critical stance required of scholars (Glassick 2000) should include a reflexive scepticism to their own ideologies as well as to others they encounter. Not only does this situate ideology as a legitimate concern, it also renders it in terms of something that can be addressed in an academic frame.

We might for instance observe parallels between ideology and the idea of ‘God terms’ that Lingard previously explored in this journal (Lingard 2009). However, while a ‘God term’ is a single unit of ideological expression, an ideology is a whole system of values and beliefs that may be expressed in many ways. As a system of beliefs and values regarding what we should do, ideology is about what constitutes legitimate, necessary, and moral acts, including those that shape and direct acts of scholarship. Although it is possible to imagine a scholar able to be truly and utterly neutral about such things, in the absence of values and beliefs they would also be bereft of purpose and morality. In reality we all have ideologies; we hold certain beliefs and values as axiomatic to the way we are and the ways in which we act in the world.

Even those with little interest in ideology would, I think, hesitate to argue that education and educational scholarship are value-neutral; clearly we value certain things over others, we hold certain assumptions as to what is or is not desirable or important. Ideologies from this perspective tend to be either about the way things are and should remain or they are about the way things should be changed (Meighan and Harber 2007). ‘Way things are’ ideologies tend to be expressed in terms of reinforcing familiar, even conservative, selection of subjects, methods, techniques, and styles of writing. I might cite the ongoing (yet still inconclusive) effort invested in problem-based learning research as an example of this. ‘Way things should be’ ideologies on the other hand tend to be expressed in terms of manifestos and calls for sweeping reforms to address the shortcomings and deficiencies of current practice. The pursuit of social accountability in medical education scholarship is an example of this (Ellaway 2016).

The relationship between ideology and inquiry bears further scrutiny. We might for instance draw parallels between ideology and paradigms of inquiry. I would argue that ideology is a precursor to inquiry as it frames the *Weltanschauung* that values some research paradigms more than others. It is, for instance, an ideological position to believe that there is only one true methodology or frame of inquiry, whatever it might be. As much as ideology is at play in the genesis of academic acts, we can also find it at the end. Scholarly acts should be disseminated (Glassick 2000) and in doing so academic writing necessarily takes a rhetorical stance; authors seeks to make their ideas and arguments accessible, plausible, and authoritative (Lingard 2007). To do so they must be situated within legitimate academic value and belief systems, even if they are also challenging these systems. Ideology is therefore a precondition of scholarship, a constant thread through scholarly acts, and an inescapable fellow traveller of scholarly communications.

So, if we cannot escape ideology, what as health professional education scholars should our responses to ideology in our field look like? First and foremost I would argue that we have a responsibility to acknowledge ideological positioning in our own work and that of our peers. We should also recognize that ideology in scholarship shapes what is worth pursuing and how it should be pursued. This provides a compelling opportunity to position the ‘paradigm wars’ of our field as one of its principal strengths and not an inherent weakness. If, on the other hand, we do not acknowledge the ways in which ideology shapes our work then we are acceding to the tendency to present our subjects, questions, methods, and findings as inevitable and intrinsically valuable. Such essentialism (from any quarter) is not simply divisive; it diminishes the very values and beliefs that we do hold in common. Science is not a fixed and immutable frame of inquiry; it is an intrinsically dynamic and contested way of thinking about and exploring the world, and about guiding the ways in which we act within it.

We have long positioned and challenged scholarly work in terms of its ontological basis (what exists) and its epistemological basis (how we know). In acknowledging and confronting ideological positioning we also need to consider the *axiological* basis of our work; what values have shaped it and what values it expresses. Given the ubiquity of ideology in scholarly acts there is, I hope, a compelling argument for it to be rigorously acknowledged and challenged. However, in doing so, we should be quite clear that it is not a matter of avoiding ideology; it would be a dull world if we did. Rather we should be deliberate, mindful, and clear about the ideological framing of all acts of scholarship. I opened with the proposition that ‘as health professional education scholars we place great store in objectivity, rigour, and accountability’. This in itself reflects aspects of my own ideology about science, inquiry, and the moral and professional duties of educational scientists. Although my beliefs and values are unlikely to be identical to yours, I hope we have common cause in the exploration of all our values and beliefs and how they collectively generate and shape the heady field of health professional education scholarship.

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