

Epistemology & Beyond (1)

How do I know?

A. Ka Tat Tsang

Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto

Sunday, August 16, 2009

1. What do you think we are going to do in this course (on epistemology)?
2. What do you expect to learn or accomplish in this course?
3. How do you see this connected to your own personal and/or professional goals?

My first lecture as an undergraduate

- October 1973
- #726 Knowles Building, University of Hong Kong
 - Introduction to Psychology
 - The late Dr. Erik Kvan

Opening Question

Do you believe that the sun will rise
in the East tomorrow morning?

Do you believe that the sun will rise in the East tomorrow morning?

- Limited observation $365 \times 24 \times 6 / 4.55$ billion years
- Confirmation and refutation, the assumption of order/lawfulness
- All observed As are B, does not imply that the next A will be B
- Geocentric (earth-centered) language to describe heliocentric (sun-centered) reality
- Movement as relative
- “East” as socially constructed



Plate Tectonics

The Earth's crust is divided into several large blocks called tectonic plates. These plates are constantly moving, and their interactions create most of the Earth's geological features, including mountains, earthquakes, and volcanoes.

There are three main types of plate boundaries:

- Divergent boundaries:** Where two plates move apart, creating rift valleys and mid-ocean ridges.
- Convergent boundaries:** Where two plates move towards each other, creating mountains, trenches, and subduction zones.
- Transform boundaries:** Where two plates slide past each other horizontally.

The theory of plate tectonics explains how these plates move and interact, and how they have shaped the Earth's surface over time.

The Common-Sense World (Phenomenology)

- The Natural Attitude: Take for granted, unquestioning
- Universalist imagination: Difference as deviant and dangerous
- Need for order, coherence and structure – but ironically embraces tremendous contradictions
- Resistant to change – denial, exclusion, suppression of threatening/subversive views
- Psychic economy
- Assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, Structuralism)

Everyday Life: Reality Taken for Granted

- “Natural,” unquestioned experience, invisible (unaware)
- Sequence of (non)events (random and/or determined)
- Socially organized: common-sense, community
- Socialization: from routinization to naturalization, culture
- Storied, scripted – the unwritten and unspoken
- Disciplinary practices and dominant discourse
- Inevitability of resistance: Reciprocal determination, reproduction and structuration
- Events/Happenings: Disruption/trespass/deviance/resistance – entrance point for social work

Challenging the Common-Sense World: Social Science Theories and Everyday Life

Examples

- The Freudian slip: Politics of the unconscious
- Phenomenology and the critique of the natural attitude
- Marxist articulations: Ideology, historical analysis, class-struggle, Engels on family
- Feminism, patriarchy, resistance, identity, agency, being, and body
- Discourse analysis, cultural studies: Celine Dion as political agent, colonialism & imperialism
- Aboriginal worldview
- Critical Geography and the politics of space
- Queer theory, critique of heteronormality

Everyday Life & Theoretical Knowledge

- The obvious can be routinized and naturalized, and can then become “invisible”
- Theories seek to reach beyond the manifest, and try to dis/un-cover the invisible/latent/hidden
- Theories take us beyond the common-sense world, but the common-sense world is the ultimate reality to which everyone of us returns
- Theory as elite discourse
 - Theoretical imperialism
 - Assimilation, resistance, and transformation by the common-sense world

Do You Know?

- Which is the best Korean restaurant in Toronto?
- What is the best thing to say if your client ask if you're gay/lesbian/married/Aboriginal or not?
- The role of race in healthcare service access?
- If the use of condoms increases or decreases incidence of HIV/AIDS?
- Who are more dangerous to children, family members or strangers?
- What treatment would you seek if you had liver cancer?
- If your partner loves you?
- How much profit did CIBC make last year?
- Which method is more reliable in detecting breast cancer, mammography or self examination?
- If poverty increases crime?

Questions about Knowledge

- What is knowledge?
- Is certainty a condition of knowledge?
- How do we come to know?
- What is reality?
- Is there a reality independent of our knowledge?
- How does our knowing process affect knowledge, and the reality we access?
- How are these related to social work?
- What do these mean to you, personally?

Preparing for Next Class

1. Choose one of the following, and prepare a brief (3 minute) description of the position. It is OK to work in small groups.
 - Positivism
 - Post-Positivism
 - Critical Theory
 - Constructionism
2. Alternatively, you can choose to present on the epistemological position based on a particular theory (e.g., phenomenology, feminism, Marxism, Daoism)

Email

k.tsang@utoronto.ca

Websites

<http://kttsang.com>

<http://www.socialwork.utoronto.ca/faculty/bios/tsang.htm>

A. Ka Tat Tsang

Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work

University of Toronto

246 Bloor Street West

Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A1

Phone: +1-416-978-5817