

Graduate Research in a “Post-Truth” Era

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The following is adapted from a keynote address delivered by Dr. Ellen Rose to the 2017 Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference at the University of New Brunswick.

I’m pleased to be here today as your keynote speaker, and want to begin by thanking the conference organizers for giving me the opportunity and honour of helping to kick off this important event.

My topic today is truth—and, in particular, what it means to be a researcher in an era that is described as “post-truth.” Truth, of course, bears an intrinsic connection to research, in that how we think about what truth is and how (or even whether) it can be discovered shape how we think about the nature and purpose of research; and this connection between truth and research is amplified for educational researchers, who are particularly concerned with the nature of knowing and learning. Given this profound connection, I believe it’s imperative that we come to terms with the implications of the fairly new phenomenon of “post-truth.” So, in the next 20 minutes or so, I will talk about what truth means, explore the relationship between truth and research, and discuss what the emergence of a post-truth society might mean for you as graduate researchers.

Truth has, in fact, been a topic of discussion for millennia. I’m not a philosopher, and I don’t pretend to understand the complexities of this long-standing dialogue, nor do I have the time to do more than fast-forward through it, greatly oversimplifying as I pause for a

few seconds at some of what seem to me to be the more important moments.

What quickly becomes clear is that there is no agreed-upon truth about truth. The Greek philosophers regarded truth as the correspondence between ideas or language and an external reality; and working from this conception of truth, Plato, Aristotle, and others sought to identify what they believed to be universal truths. While Aristotle believed that we could discover these truths through sensory experiences, such as observation and experiment, René Descartes argued, in the 1600s, that truth and knowledge are discoverable through pure reason, independent of sensory evidence. Cartesian science was challenged a century later by Giambattista Vico, who insisted that we can only have insight into the truths we have constructed; and these human-made truths are available not through reasoning or sensory experience but what he called “poetic wisdom,” a combination of imaginative thinking and rhetoric, that uncovers new ways of looking at things.

Despite their very different ideas about truth, these and other thinkers shared a common foundational premise: that there are universal truths that can be discovered by human beings. But this premise did not go unchallenged. For example, in the 1800s, Friedrich Nietzsche not only contended that there are no universal truths but also rejected the possibility of an objective, truth-seeking self. Nietzsche argued that all human thought is tied up with subjectivity; therefore, rather than a single truth, there are multiple truths, because each of us, with our different bodies, experiences, passions, sociocultural positions, and so forth, sees the world differently, and what’s more, our perspectives are constantly changing. But Nietzsche went even further, arguing that what we understand to be true at any given time is always a function of

power—the power of some people to dominate how others think about and perceive the world. In other words, declarations of truth—to give a very contemporary example, competing views of climate change—are always motivated by a “will to power.” He wasn’t talking about political power, although it can certainly take this form, but about a general life force—in fact, a creative force—that compels human beings to assert themselves and their interests.

It’s not a great stretch to move from Nietzsche’s fundamental skepticism toward truth claims to the “post” ways of thinking that arose in the 1960s: post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-colonialism. Led by such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, scholars, researchers, and philosophers in these camps generally share a view of truth as highly subjective and continually negotiated. They strive to illuminate how ideas become constructed and accepted as indisputable truths, and they advocate and enact, in their work, a fundamental skepticism toward truths, or what Jean Lyotard called “metanarratives.” In fact, one of the main targets of postmodern thinkers is the purported objectivity and neutrality of science. Postmodernists argue that, like all knowledge, scientific knowledge is constructed, and therefore is necessarily shaped by the researchers’ personal interests and agendas as well as by paradigms of thought which periodically arise to displace old “truths.”

Even after this whirlwind tour of changing perspectives about truth and knowledge, I think it’s quite clear that these diverse views have strong implications for how people conceptualize the purpose and nature of research. Does research entail empirical investigation, methodological reasoning, imaginative inquiry, or gaining insight into diverse individual perspectives? Is its purpose to seek an absolute, independent truth; to embrace multiple, socially

constructed truths; or to reveal and challenge the will to power inherent in all assertions of truth?⁹ In fact, today, it can be all of these things and more: fascinatingly, these contradictions co-exist within contemporary research discourses and practices, making this a rather interesting time to be a researcher.

But we've all heard the expression, often represented as an ancient Chinese curse, "may you live in interesting times." These are interesting times indeed for researchers, because we now find ourselves facing a new attitude to truth and knowledge that has been labelled "post-truth." As defined by the Oxford dictionary, which declared "post-truth" to be the word of the year in 2016, the term describes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The Oxford dictionary adds that the prefix "post" denotes "belonging to a time in which the specified concept [in this case, truth] has become unimportant or irrelevant."

We've seen that truth has been under attack for some time, but that doesn't mean that we can simply draw a direct line of continuity from post-modernism, and other posts that skeptically challenge truth claims, to post-truth. While the latter term has been around since at least the early 2000s, the spike in its usage during the United Kingdom's European Union referendum and the last US presidential election—and its use in the term "post-truth politics"—suggests that its source lies, at least in part, in a growing disaffection with political regimes that are supposed to represent the interests of their constituents but which are increasingly perceived as self-serving, elitist, and dishonest. During both Brexit and the Trump campaign, the public witnessed time and again politicians denying evidence, as well as making use of data and research findings in manipulative ways that served their own

agendas. As distrust in the “facts” offered up by the establishment grows, we move toward a post-truth reality in which truth is less important in shaping public opinion than attitude and belief.

Perhaps, like me, you watched in growing disbelief last year, as—even as he was caught time after time in blatant lies, or “alternative facts”—Donald Trump’s popularity soared. That’s because, for many Americans, as it seems for Trump himself, truth, fact, and evidence had clearly become irrelevant. In fact, to really understand post-truth, you have to understand that Trump’s very disregard of truth was a large part of his appeal for thousands of Americans who felt that scholarly and scientific knowledge were tools that a wealthy elite use to manipulate, disenfranchise, and silence them. Trump’s words may have played fast and loose with the truth, but they were exactly what a disaffected populace wanted to hear. Because in the era of post-truth, emotional resonance becomes much more important than evidence. As Trump’s daughter Ivanka tellingly wrote in her book, *The Trump Card: Playing to Win in Work and in Life* (2010), “If someone perceives something to be true, it is more important than if it is in fact true.”

While post-truth is in part a product of political disaffection, it also undoubtedly has something to do with the Internet, which, in placing endless data at our fingertips, makes serious inroads into previously held monopolies of knowledge and truth. Academic journals, encyclopedias, and other peer-reviewed sources now contend with blogs and Wikipedia, diluting the concept of expertise, making it hard to distinguish between information and misinformation, real news and “fake news,” and making it easy, as the Oxford dictionary says, “to cherry-pick data and come to whatever conclusion you desire.” The situation is amplified by a phenomenon called “the echo chamber effect.” The idea is that, as

people increasingly seek information online, they tend to turn repeatedly to information sources—for example, particular online social communities—that “echo” or reinforce their own beliefs, while misrepresenting or omitting other perspectives, and that thus make their own opinions seem more widely accepted than they really are.

An interesting example of post-truth in action is the controversy over vaccinations. The controversy arose with the 1998 publication in *The Lancet* of a paper by Andrew Wakefield and 12 colleagues, who claimed that there was a link between autism and the combined vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella. Within a few years, Wakefield had been totally discredited: it was shown that he had manipulated his findings and that he had some serious undeclared conflicts of interest, including a patent submitted for an alternative vaccine. By 2010, the editor of *The Lancet* had come out with a complete retraction of the paper, describing it as “utterly false”—but by then it was too late. Thanks to widespread and often highly emotional coverage in the press and social media, the connection between the vaccine and autism had become widely accepted, and efforts to debunk it actually tended to exacerbate the hold the story had on the popular imagination by pitting scientific evidence against people’s personal experiences and emotions. For example, model Jenny McCarthy, whose son Evan is autistic, is an outspoken and passionate advocate of Wakefield’s views. McCarthy has countered the evidence of researchers, published in prestigious scholarly venues such as the *British Medical Journal*, with the appeal to emotion over reason that is the hallmark of the post-truth era: “My science is named Evan,” she asserted in an appearance on Oprah, “and he’s at home. That’s my science.”

I've suggested that, over the centuries, changing ideas about the nature of truth have actually enriched the palette of possibilities for researchers. But what are the consequences of post-truth for research? The vaccination controversy is an interesting example because it shows how, in a post-truth era, falsified research can assume the mantle of truth. But perhaps even more concerning is that, in a post-truth era, defined as a time in which truth becomes essentially what people want to believe, regardless of evidence, the opposite can also happen: that is, a researcher can do everything in his or her power to ensure that his or her research results are trustworthy—and find that the results are still not accepted as true, or are somehow misrepresented or misused. This, of course, has strong implications for researchers, including all of us here, so I want to spend the last few minutes of this talk sharing with you what I believe to be four of the most important implications.

First, it's important to recognize that all research is political. Research findings relate in powerful ways to people's lives—to their health, their social well-being, the ways in which they are governed; and those findings do go out into the world, where they may be used in unanticipated ways: to sway opinion, to create policy, to shape practice, and so forth. I would suggest that, as researchers in a post-truth era, we need to become more aware of the politics of knowledge. Indeed, I would even go so far as to say that we have an ethical responsibility to think about how our research might be used and to conduct and present our research in a way that minimizes the possibility of misuse—for example, to be cautious about claiming a greater degree of certainty or generalizability than the findings warrant.

Second, I would advocate that we begin to think differently about what it means to ensure that one's research is trustworthy.

Typically, considerations of the trustworthiness of research are framed within the terms of validity and reliability: we ask questions such as, Does the data collection instrument measure what it is meant to measure? Has the data been triangulated? In attending scrupulously to such issues, the researcher ensures that the academic community will accept the research findings. However, if we as researchers in an era of post-truth are interested in having our findings speak to a wider public—and we should be—then we need to begin also asking different kinds of questions, such as, Who will benefit from this research? Whose life might be diminished? And how is this research likely to be interpreted and received by different stakeholder groups?

This leads to the third implication. Such questions can be answered more easily if we open up the research process to dialogues with stakeholders, particularly those who feel marginalized and unheard. We need to listen carefully and try to understand why individuals, groups, organizations, and communities hold the positions they do, and how they might receive and be affected by our research findings. But, equally important, ongoing dialogue and engagement with stakeholders can help to alter the positioning of the research itself from a perceived elitist practice, in which inquiries are done *to* participants, to a democratic practice enacted *with* stakeholders, whose differences of perspective are acknowledged and valued. In fact, I would advocate that we strive to make this dialogue a fundamental part of the research process and that we share the insights it provides in publications and presentations about the research.

Which leads to my final implication: that, when it comes to communicating our research findings, we acknowledge our role as

storytellers. It seems to me that, as we follow the standard formats for academic writing—for example, the well-known literature review-methodology-findings-conclusions format—we lose sight of our role as makers of narrative. But, as Neil Postman (1999) insists, the “truthfulness” of research resides not in its validity or reliability but in its ability to offer people a useful narrative—that is, a story with explanatory power that also gives meaning and purpose to their lives—and that’s particularly the case in the era of post-truth, when resonance increasingly takes precedence over evidence as the touchstone of truthfulness. But it is also important that, like all stories, each narrative be offered not as the final word, not as the truth, but as a partial rendering of the messy reality of teaching and learning, opening up a new perspective, offering a new lens.

In short, I’m suggesting that, rather than regarding post-truth as diminishing our research efforts, we seize the challenge and opportunity that the post-truth era offers to reimagine the nature and purpose of research. And I’ll conclude by adding that no one is in a better position to lead the way in that effort than you, graduate researchers beginning your research careers, poised to become “creative, critical...intellectual risk-takers” (Scholz & Bogle, 2016, n.p.) and ground-breakers.

Thank you.

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