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Reflections on methodological issues: lessons learned from the Life Activity projects

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Chapter 14

Reflections on methodological issues: lessons learned from the Life Activity

Projects

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In this concluding chapter we offer some reflections on the conduct of our research that we believe have relevance across most qualitative studies that involve young people, particularly young people from diverse social and cultural groups. In the case of the Life Activity Project and related studies, we also needed to attend to the added sensitivity associated with researching young people's meanings of health and, inevitably, their feelings and thoughts about their bodies and body weight. What follows are some stories, dilemmas and reflections 'from the field'. The contributors to the book share issues around: recruiting participants to the research process and maintaining

participants' involvement; developing respectful relationships; and, the dilemmas of researching Others and representing their voices. These reflections come from fieldnotes, thesis manuscripts and contributors' input into our closing discussions on methodological issues. In many cases these have been included as verbatim quotes.

The Life Activity Project was motivated by questions such as: how have family, community and school-based experiences shaped, and continue to shape, young people's current understandings and choices of physical activity; how have physical activity and physical culture provided resources for the ways in which young people constitute their identities; on what sources of meanings do they draw to construct their notions of health; and, how do their understandings of health, in turn, influence the choices they make in relation to physical activity? Projects that budded off from, or were influenced by, the original project took all or some of these questions as their focus in relation to particular groups of young people, circumscribed by a common social or cultural location such as those defined by place (e.g., rural and remote; urban), socio-economic status, or ethnicity (Indigenous; Hong Kong Chinese; African American).

In a social context in which young people are often positioned as a 'problem', all contributors to this book were keen to reflect on what we as individual researchers bring to the research process, how we position ourselves within it and how we understand and speak about our research participants. As others such as Stephen and Squires (2003) and McLeod and Malone (2000) point out, significant effort is needed to represent the meanings, constructions, values and imperatives that each individual young person works with, without further problematizing young people's engagements.

It is clearly incumbent on us all as youth researchers neither to portray so-called 'deviant' young people as victims or dupes to structure or to erroneously celebrate them as completely free actors for our own ideological ends. We must simply listen to what young people themselves have to say when making sense of their own lives.

(Stephen and Squires 2003: 161)

All of the authors in this collection were very much aware of the researcher/researched relationship and issues with subsequent representations. In all of the chapters in the book we have, we hope, acknowledged that as researchers we:

cannot hide behind the mask of objectivity and pretend that [we] are not intimately involved in the research that [we] do If researchers continually remove reference to the realities of the research process from their writings, the difficulties associated with doing research, particularly on sensitive topics, are likely to remain hidden.

(Dickson-Swift, James and Laimputtong 2008: 22-3)

Much has been written about these ethical issues, much of it in instructional terms. In this chapter through sharing researchers' reflections on their experiences we attempt to take up this challenge and make visible at least some of the 'realities' of doing research with young people.

Recruiting participants

Recruitment of participants to the various studies was not always easy. For the Life Activity Project in Australia the original cohort was recruited via the demographic information and responses to questions about participation in physical activity and physical education in the survey (see Chapter 1). The intention was to thereby obtain a diverse cohort of young people across a range of geographical, social and cultural locations and with differing orientations to physical activity. In addition, this first cohort was limited by those for whom their parents had consented, in the first place to the survey (positive consent was required in most states) and then to an initial interview. This was a significant limiting factor, which already moved the cohort towards young people whose parents responded to such requests and to young people who were willing to speak to those who, at this stage, were a relatively anonymous group of researchers. Arguably, and on the evidence of the cohort that we interviewed for the first biographical interview, this tended to mean that young people from more marginalized groups, from ethnic minorities and young Indigenous people did not volunteer. We suspect that we also were more likely to recruit those who were more confident about their activity participation and perhaps their bodies, than those who were not.

The recruitment of the longitudinal cohort from these first biographical interviews was more straightforward, since the researchers had already established contact, and hopefully established some kind of positive relationship. We were also able to select on the basis of an interview that provided us with substantially more information about the young people's life patterns of physical activity, attitudes and interests, and social and cultural contexts. The young people recruited by these means have in the main stayed with us throughout the six years of the project. The role of doctoral students has been

crucial to the sustainability of the project, establishing close relationships with the participants (see below for some issues associated with this), and recruiting amongst those groups that might otherwise have been absent from the project. This is not to say that our recruitment covered all groups, nor that the young people we interviewed were representative of any social or cultural group – rather they provided ‘windows’ to the possible lives of young people who have particular social and cultural characteristics. Their everyday lives demonstrate the dangers of generalizing or making inferences from population statistics that homogenize and universalize the experiences of young people and attempt to explain their participation in physical activity simply in relation to social determinants.

In other countries, different ethics requirements, different ways of organizing the data collection and different modes of recruitment shaped the directions of the projects and the issues that were faced. For example Amy Ha and Bonnie Pang suggest that recruitment in Hong Kong was relatively straightforward. This was for a number of reasons including: ready access to schools based upon longstanding relationships with senior staff in the schools; and, the preparedness of parents and their children to support research projects initiated by the university as a show of respect. In this case and in the case of Lisette Burrows’ study of young people in New Zealand, the schools’ co-operation also extended to the teachers selecting children and young people to participate in the research from those who volunteered. This prompted questions about how which students were selected and for what reasons. Below Lisette and Bonnie respond to this dilemma:

I guess [the teacher's] intimate knowledge of the students and their families allowed her to choose students for whom consent could be readily gained and also those who may have something to say. Inevitably this means that access to 'hard to reach' young people was effectively chopped, but given the exigencies of time, money etc. seemed like a good idea at the time. The students she selected were from different kinds of families in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic index. Was happy with her choice.

(Lisette Burrows)

This process of sampling students may result in teachers selecting those students who seem to be more cooperative and whose parents are not easily offended. This might have created a narrower representation of voice, in which the student might be the 'better' ones at schools. One suggestion for further research is that we could also interview the teachers to understand their reasons of their choice of particular students.

(Bonnie Pang)

In hoping to work with urban, Indigenous young people, Alison Nelson also found her longstanding professional relationship with the school with which she worked critical to her initial access.

Throughout the research project, Alison continued a dual role as researcher and practitioner within the school context, although her professional practice was with younger children in the school. This was important for three reasons. Firstly, she was

able to use the connections with other family members (younger siblings, parents and grandparents working in the school), established through her professional role, to develop relationships with the young people in her research. She felt it often put young people at ease if she mentioned having seen a younger sibling that morning or a conversation she had with 'Nan'. Secondly, the relationships she developed with staff members and family members working in the school enabled her to follow through with interviews with young people when they left the school as 'someone would usually know someone who knew where he/she had gone'. These connections also enabled her to 'verify' certain information provided in interviews when family situations appeared complex or content was 'far-fetched'. Of course care needed to be taken in these instances to keep interview information confidential. Finally, it was important to Alison and to the school community that she continued to 'give something back' by way of a professional service rather than just 'taking' in the form of recruiting research participants. In the time that Alison was researching in the school, another research project took place and staff frequently pointed out the lack of ongoing input or contact from this researcher once he had his data.

The socio-political climate during which Kelly Knez's research was conducted had a significant impact upon the recruitment of young people to her project. The world had recently witnessed the September 11 bombings, the Bali Bombings in which a number of Australians were killed, the invasion of Iraq by the 'coalition of the willing' and a number of home raids on Muslim families by Australian secret service police. After an unsuccessful attempt to recruit participants from a local Islamic school, she was able to speak with a group of young Muslim women from a local state high school. When

talking to the group about their potential participation, she stressed that they would remain anonymous, the irrelevance of whether they liked or disliked physical activity, and the importance of having young Muslim women from different cultural and family backgrounds in the study.

Developing relationships

After several interviews, relationships with the young people also became important, with some young people commenting that they enjoyed spending time talking with me (e.g. 'You're nice. I get a long, I enjoy coming here, I don't mind you recording me or nothing. It's nothing big to me' (Jacinta)) and, as trust and familiarity were developed, some young people began to speak more freely and offer more information. I tended towards also offering information about myself and my family and I think this helped build that relationship.

(Alison Nelson)

Many of the projects relied on speaking with the young people over an extended period of time, up to five years in some instances. This commitment from the participants often rested on a good relationship with the researchers conducting the interviews. At the same time the level of rapport developed between the researcher and participant had an impact on their self-thinking, their reflexivity about their lives and their desire, it could be said, to become 'better' (more active) citizens. It is not surprising that the following excerpts comes from Faye, a student from the elite girls school, where a high degree of

reflexivity was evident in much of their talk about their lives (see also Chapters 5, 10).

When asked how she felt about participating in the research, Faye replied:

I thought it was a different idea when I first heard about it, it's not something I've actually heard of being done. No, I think it's interesting, I think it's an interesting thing to look at, not necessarily easy though because there's so many aspects that you have to look at and I think it's actually a pretty hard thing to look at. It's funny I think it's been a pretty good experience because I think when I first started out it was like doing things like the journal ... I think that actually made me want to do more physical activity; yeah so I think during that year, or two years, yeah, we felt like just doing more physical activity because of the fact that you were being like monitored. It was a good thing I think, I mean it was partly the reason why we did it, yeah. So I thought that was pretty funny.

(Faye, interview 2003)

A number of young people interviewed in the Life Activity Project (and the associated Lavery study as well) talked about the interview process as something they looked forward to. For example Tomiko (from Bloomsbury High School) described how she felt able to discuss aspects of her life that she had not, and would not necessarily, share with others, including close friends etc. Gabrielle writes in her fieldnotes how Tomiko 'described how she would make a mental note about an event or involvement that she wanted to share as part of the next interview'.

Gabrielle: How have you felt about participating in general?

Tomiko: Good, yes; I don't know if it's making an impact. I really like doing it. In a way it's good to talk to someone - like not my family and not like my usual friends - but I can just tell you about my life at the moment and I find it good to talk about that. But I don't know whether I'm a really good person for your research because I don't know whether you pick lots of sporty people but I'm like one of the non-sporting people and I'm doing your research, so I feel like

Gabrielle: No, why do you feel like that? Do you feel a bit guilty or something?

Tomiko: I don't know whether I'm giving you any information because I'm not doing much at all. I don't know, it's nice to do something else, like this is another one of my, something else apart from the Con [Conservatorium], yeah, I like it.

(Tomiko, interview 2002)

In Judy Laverty's study, each young person indicated it was helpful having someone who listened to them and gave them the opportunity to reflect on their lives and their various achievements and issues at regular intervals. For example, Katrina in her third interview with Judy stated: 'I wouldn't really think about things I've done, it feels good to look back over the last year or so'. This seems to respond to Scheurich's (1997) comment that the interview process is a form of chaos/freedom, where people's emotional needs or desire to communicate are being satisfied through these interactions. And young people are not powerless in the data collection process. As suggested by Scheurich (1997: 71):

Interviewees do not simply go along with the researcher's program, even if it is a structured rather than open one. I find that interviewees carve out space of their own, that they can often control some or part of the interview, that they push against or resist my goals, my intentions, my questions, my meanings.

In relation to this, Kelly writes of the young women in her study:

forgetting interviews, wanting to be interviewed in pairs with a friend rather in individually, purposefully talking at length to each question so the interview would run overtime and into the next lesson, not wanting to talk about physical activity... and sometimes their resistance was silence.

(Kelly Knez)

And at times, the young people withdrew from the research:

One of these students disengaged from formal schooling during the project and, despite informal contact (she lived in my local area), she appeared reluctant to continue interviews. If I had pursued this she probably would have agreed to be interviewed but I sensed a reluctance and needed to trust my "reading" of the situation.

(Alison Nelson)

In another example, Gabrielle, writes about the ways she felt distinctly uncomfortable when Karin began questioning her, including asking her questions about her own eating

habits and asked her ‘how she stayed skinny?’ In the following quote from a paper Gabrielle wrote on the power relation in the interview process she reflects on this phenomenon.

In addition to this, Karin, on occasions, asked me questions. In doing so, and often to my surprise, she challenged the interviewer/interviewee power relations. Some of these questions involved Karin asking me about the sports I played and if I had a “boy friend.” Other times, she threw me off guard and asked about my ‘health’ practices and body. During the health interview, for example, after talking about why she wouldn’t want to put anymore weight on, Karin asked me – “How do you stay so skinny?” – a question which shifted the interview dynamic and which was permitted by discourses around femininity and health. It seems that, through reading my body shape and size, Karin made an assumption about my position in relation to the weight loss and ‘ideal’ thin feminine body discourse. She seems to assume that I share her position in relation to these discourses. I recall feeling uncomfortable in taking up this shared position both because of my position as the interviewer and as a young woman who is invested in taking a critical position in relation to such discourses around femininity, health and the body. I was completely baffled as to how to answer her question, and resorted to, what I thought could only be an ‘impartial’ answer, shyly stating: “It must be my metabolism”. At the time, this answer seemed ‘impartial’ because it rested on a rationality of genetics and so, positioned my body and practices as being outside of Karin’s strict investment into weight loss practices. It was also an answer which Karin was not looking

for. She wanted me to share my ‘secrets’ with her. So, by resorting to an answer which explained my body in terms of biology, I quickly shut down the conversation. Interestingly, if I was asked the same question, by some one outside of the interview context, I would probably resort to a modest reply and say: “I’m not skinny.”

(O’Flynn 2004: 131)

Gabrielle also wrote about how her interviews (and the same could be said for all of the researchers) became a potential site encouraging the very ‘practices for engaging with the self, including self-examination and self-monitoring’ that we were concerned to critique in relation to dominant discourses of health.

My concern for seeing the interviews in this way emerged through my observations of the young women engaging with the interviews as a site through which they monitored their practices and lives. This was most prominent when I telephoned the young women to arrange an interview time. Some of the young women, for example, responded with comments, such as “But I haven’t done much physical activity lately;” or “But, I’ve been so lazy.” I also became aware of the ways in which the interviews were a site through which the young women and myself engaged in a particular kind of ‘talk’ as young women. These ways of talking and engaging seem to be located in a discourse of friendship and resulted in the interviewee/interviewer relations being inseparable from relations of trust, laughter and solidarity. My concerns do not lie with the development of ‘biasing’ friendships with participations. My concerns, instead, stem from my

ability to draw upon a discourse of friendship to create an interview context which encouraged the young women to talk at length about themselves. This was, and remains, problematic for me because the more the young women talked about their meanings of health and physical activity, the more they examined their lives in relation to what I view as problematic meanings of health.

(O'Flynn 2004: 123)

Such dilemmas have been flagged by Foucault in his writings related to the 'pastoral power' of the interview act and the potential harmful impact on the participant (Toll and Crumpler 2004). Foucault maintained that particular types of power circulate in the caring for others, a relationship that can be generated through the interview process as the interviewer seeks to save, look after, and come to know the interviewee. However, argued by Dickson-Swift et al. (2008), relatively little attention has been paid to the emotional and physical safety of the researcher. For example, Judy Lavery wrote in her fieldnotes:

I hadn't really thought through how affected I would be by these conversations [with young participants]. I've worked in many different communities and seen some tough stuff, but this was different. I felt rattled by the trauma [who wouldn't be], guilty about how good my life was, angry about a care system that had failed these young people and yet blown away by each person's resourcefulness in getting by so far. While roles and responsibilities of researchers can be drilled into you, you can never be fully prepared for what will happen in an interview and how you will process this. This group of young

people had seen many, many professionals come and go in their lives – social workers, care workers, foster carers etc. While I tortured myself about being another one, I realised the best I could do as a researcher was to stay honest, be up front (for example, about how long I would be around), always turn up when I said I would and genuinely listen to what they were saying. Listening seemed to be the way I could ‘give back’.

(Lavery, fieldnotes May 2006)

Researching Others

The delimiting of the number of participants whom the researchers sought to ‘know’ often involved identifying a group of young people based upon a perceived shared characteristic such as geographical location, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. In doing so, it may have been that our ‘practices of naming and knowledge construction den(ied) all autonomy to those so named and imagined, extending power, control, authority, and domination over them’ (Goldberg 2009: 227). Those researchers working with young people from ‘minority’ ethnicities were particularly sensitive to working with Others with the concomitant ‘traps’ of claiming to ‘know what is best for the Other... existentially, politically, economically, culturally’ (Goldberg 2009: 227). Alison Nelson reflects on this issue in relation to her study with Indigenous young people.

One of the observations I have made in this project has been the importance of identifying Indigenous people as a group to work with precisely to identify the intra-group diversity and the ways in which this group of young people are the same and different to myself, non-Indigenous young people and other

Indigenous young people. In other words it highlights the tenuous nature of identifying a group of people based on “race” or “ethnicity” or “culture” in an urban Australian context. It also helped to highlight my taken-for-granted assumptions about being a non-Indigenous Australian but also ideas I had about Indigenous people although I had worked with Indigenous people for over 10 years. This included discovering the ways in which I (and much of policy and media around Indigenous young people) can use ‘culture’ as a disciplining concept (see Nakata 2007).

Ultimately this project became an opportunity to explore the ways in which the young people engaged with, disrupted, resisted and re-created discourses about both health and physical activity and about Indigenous people. As Nakata (2007: 178) notes, ‘the imposition of disciplinary and disciplining standards calls in the Islander (and Aboriginal person) to measure herself/himself against the new public knowledge’. This project aimed to give an opportunity for Indigenous young people to resist this form of measurement and to offer new presentations of themselves. However, it was not without its tensions. Even bringing these assumptions to the fore of discussions was awkward and unsettling at times.

(Nelson 2009: ms)

As Alison noted in her fieldnotes:

I felt so racist bringing up race in these questions today. I felt I needed to ask them but there just doesn’t seem to be a “right” way to ask about race or cultural

heritage without feeling like I'm needing to make a disclaimer at the same time: "Oh I'm not asking because I'm racist – I'm really a nice person" I feel like saying. Perhaps this discomfort is because I feel like I'm being mis-read. No wonder Aboriginal people resist the potential to be mis-read as well.

(Nelson, fieldnotes 4 November 2008)

Matthew Atencio had also to negotiate issues of race – his own and those of his participants in his study of young people in an urban neighbourhood in the United States. Matthew describes himself as an 'athlete from a minority background' ('mixed' Korean-American and Hispanic-American). The young men in his study however, despite his living in the neighbourhood for much of the time of the study, came to view him as an 'outsider'. In his reflection for this chapter he writes:

For instance, during the interviews about basketball with the African-American young men, my semi-professional football background seemed to garner a certain degree of respect and friendship since they mutually understood training regimens and competition. Yet, I often came away from the interviews feeling as if their responses were indicative of boredom or even outright disinterest. It was as if my 'mixed' background provided them with a sense of uncertainty, even though we both shared an understanding of minority 'ethnic' sport cultures. I came away from the interviews with these young men feeling like they had enacted behaviors such as acting 'cool' and disinterested (Majors and Bilson 1992). In comparison, I felt that the young 'black' women were more open and reflective. My Asian and Latino identity was quite distinct from theirs; however,

my presence seemed to be read as ‘non-threatening’ and was conducive to their discussions about their personal lives. In these talks the young women often commented that it was their ‘black’ male peers who most often othered and harassed them in public spaces. Like the young women in Gabe’s study, they sometimes asked me questions about my own personal relationships. Two Haitian young women, in particular, would often talk about ‘fixing’ me up with one of their friends and even suggested that I needed to call *them* on a more regular basis.

(Matthew Atencio)

Representation – what can we claim to know?

We are very appreciative of the time and insights given to us by the young people who participated in the projects introduced in this book. The authors attempted to tell the young people’s stories in ways that are engaging. As Woolcott (1994: 17) suggests:

Qualitative researchers need to be storytellers... When we cannot engage others to read our stories – our completed and complete accounts - then our efforts at descriptive research are for naught.

Presenting the stories of others, however, is not simply about telling a good story. The authors who have contributed to this book have tried not to take the stance of those who present the ‘truth’; rather, in their writing and publishing, they have often struggled with issues of presentation. Their research journeys, and eventuating stories, have been enriched (and perhaps at times burdened) by such self-reflection.

Self-reflection has been an important process both in my reflection on my interpretation of data and reflection on anti-racist/ postcolonial writings and how my analysis is influenced by my own context. It has also been vital to have Indigenous and non-Indigenous mentors who have questioned my assumptions and challenged me to wrestle with my discomforts as a white, western woman. Often these people have been a source of reassurance that my methods and approach are 'trusted' by them.

(Alison Nelson)

As Alison wrote in her fieldnotes:

This week has been a big week of dilemma regarding my role as a white researcher/representative of colonising people. I needed to contact Vern to both ask for advice and appease my guilt to some extent...It strikes me that he and Pat are a reference point in all of this. So long as I feel they think it's OK, then I'm relatively confident in what I'm doing. I'm so grateful for their trust in me.

(Nelson, fieldnotes 19 November 2008).

In working with young Muslim women, Kelly Knez recounts that she is still unsettled around questions of representation:

I still haven't resolved this one in my mind, even now that I am living in the Middle East. It is hard to look beyond my 31 years of living in a western culture

which has constructed Muslim women as oppressed and western ways of knowing superior, although my daily interactions with Muslim women are providing me with alternative storylines which are able to stand up against those told in the 'West'.

During my PhD I was acutely aware of this from the onset. During interviews I was cognizant of my position and made efforts to be inquisitive rather than judgmental in my questioning. During write up I included, where ever possible, long sets of data, so the reader could understand how questions were asked, answers received, and stories developed. I also purposefully avoided positioning the women as either 'oppressed' or 'free'. Did I avoid judgment? I hope so, but if not, then the way in which the data has been presented allows the reader to make their own understandings. It also allows the young women's voices to stand alone from my own interpretations.

(Kelly Knez)

Lisette Burrows recalls the 'catch 22' in the interpretation and representation of data when working with Maori and Pacifica young people:

We had one Maori young person in the small cohort – his testimony indicated a significant privileging of family relationships over 'self' in terms of his interests in physical activity, sport etc. He demonstrated a reluctance to talk about his *own* interests, proclivities, dispositions but was more visibly animated when talking about things his family did together – sociality – the collective – were

paramount for him. It is easy (as I did) to presume these inclinations are a matter of cultural preference as multiple academic treatises on Maoridom emphasise this tendency to put family first, celebrate the 'group' rather than the 'individual', reluctance to talk about self -- the danger in analysis is presuming this young boys' testimony *is* influenced by cultural preference when, in reality, I know nothing about the intricacies of his home life, whether or not he and his family live with Maori values and so on... that is, it is easy to universalise the experience of ethnic groups when it could be that this young boy, like others, presumably, just 'happened' to like hanging out with his family regardless of cultural context.

(Lisette Burrows)

The issues around representation in qualitative research are not new and much debated (for example, Tierney and Lincoln 1997). For the moment we can only say that we are still grappling with these issues. A major motivation for the research was to provide the space for young people's talk about their ideas and experience of physical activity in ways that were rarely represented in the literature on youth and physical activity, which has tended, in the main, to take a deficit view of young people. A laudable aim, but we were still left with the difficult issue of how to do this: how as adults we were to represent the voices of the young people we interviewed in ways which were respectful and acknowledged their interpretations of their lives? On the other hand, inevitably and appropriately, our research voice is the one that interprets, displays the meanings derived from what the young people say to us. Whether or not the young people would recognize themselves, or their testimony in our 'tales', is another matter.

There are a number of approaches to the presentation of participants' 'voices' suggested in the literature, some of which have been taken up in the chapters in this book and some described above. For example, where possible we tend to provide lengthy verbatim quotes, we have tried to situate these quotes in the context of young people's lives and in the context of the interviews. In Lavery's (2008) study young people's perspectives were given a central place in the research discussion, with the research reporting focused on young people's negotiation of difficult economic and social circumstances, rather than seeking to define each young person by their disadvantage.

Other possibilities as yet not taken up are dual representations of researcher voice alongside young person's voice where different 'readings' or interpretations are provided of their testimony within an article or chapter or the co-construction of narratives (Garrett 2004). Neither of these were strategies that we had the time or resources to do for these projects. At the same time, we are also aware that no matter what strategies we adopted in the telling of tales, the fictions/truths, we or our participants tell on any one day, are not necessarily those of tomorrow; thus locating the 'authentic' young person's voice will be a perennial (impossible) challenge. An important starting point, however, is recognizing our responsibilities as researchers and being constantly sensitive to these in the practice of our research and its presentation.

As Diane Wood write in her review of Tierney and Lincoln's (1997) book,

Representation and the Text:

For the postmodern researcher there is no longer a place to hide. The researcher can hide behind neither the mystification of official knowledge, the aura of the expert, the illusion of objective distance, the wordplay of language, nor the formulas of analytic logic. Not only must researchers doubt, they must do so in public by disclosing the ambiguities, contradictions, partialities, and uncertainties in their work.

(Wood 1999: 390)

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