

11-26-2012

## Contextualizing Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research

Matt Rogers

University of New Brunswick, [matt.rogers@unb.ca](mailto:matt.rogers@unb.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Rogers, M. (2012). Contextualizing Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(48), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2012.1704>

This Teaching and Learning is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



## Contextualizing Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research

### Abstract

Within the last decade, bricolage, as an approach to qualitative inquiry, has gained popularity in academic circles. However, while conceptual and concrete precedents exist, the approach has remained relatively misunderstood, and unpopular, in broader research communities. This may be because the complexity of the approach has stymied widespread discussions and commentary. This article means to address this concern by providing a thick, yet accessible, introduction to bricolage as an approach to qualitative inquiry. While researchers and scholars have conceptualized bricolage, few have attempted to provide an overview of how the concept emerged in relation to qualitative research. Further, while the literature on bricolage offers invaluable conceptual insights, lacking is a survey that provides clear examples of how bricolage has been implemented in research contexts. Therefore, while greatest attention in this article is devoted to contextualizing bricolage and introducing influential theorists, it also provides key examples of research that adopts the bricolage approach. In drawing on a plurality of sources, the article provides a thick discussion of the complex bricolage project; one that can be beneficial to both novice and seasoned researchers who pursue alternative methodological approaches.

### Keywords

Bricolage, Claude Levi-Strauss, Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, Joe Kincheloe, Kathy Berry, Complexity, Multiplicity, Critical Research, Praxis, Eclecticism, Emergent Design, Flexibility, Plurality

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



## Contextualizing Theories and Practices of Bricolage Research

Matt Rogers

University of New Brunswick, Canada

---

*Within the last decade, bricolage, as an approach to qualitative inquiry, has gained popularity in academic circles. However, while conceptual and concrete precedents exist, the approach has remained relatively misunderstood, and unpopular, in broader research communities. This may be because the complexity of the approach has stymied widespread discussions and commentary. This article means to address this concern by providing a thick, yet accessible, introduction to bricolage as an approach to qualitative inquiry. While researchers and scholars have conceptualized bricolage, few have attempted to provide an overview of how the concept emerged in relation to qualitative research. Further, while the literature on bricolage offers invaluable conceptual insights, lacking is a survey that provides clear examples of how bricolage has been implemented in research contexts. Therefore, while greatest attention in this article is devoted to contextualizing bricolage and introducing influential theorists, it also provides key examples of research that adopts the bricolage approach. In drawing on a plurality of sources, the article provides a thick discussion of the complex bricolage project; one that can be beneficial to both novice and seasoned researchers who pursue alternative methodological approaches. Keywords: Bricolage, Claude Levi-Strauss, Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, Joe Kincheloe, Kathy Berry, Complexity, Multiplicity, Critical Research, Praxis, Eclecticism, Emergent Design, Flexibility, Plurality*

---

### Bricolage Research

Bricolage research, as conceptualized by Denzin and Lincoln (1999) and further theorized by Kincheloe (2001; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2004d; 2005a) and Berry (2004a; 2004b; 2006; 2011), can be considered a critical, multi-perspectival, multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approach to inquiry. However, the theories that underlie bricolage make it far more complex than a simple eclectic approach. The etymological foundation of bricolage comes from a traditional French expression which denotes crafts-people who creatively use materials left over from other projects to construct new artifacts. To fashion their bricolage projects, bricoleurs use only the tools and materials “at-hand” (Levi-Strauss, 1966). This mode of construction is in direct contrast to the work of engineers, who follow set procedures and have a list of specific tools to carry out their work. Generally speaking, when the metaphor is used within the domain of qualitative research it denotes methodological practices explicitly based on notions of eclecticism, emergent design, flexibility and plurality. Further, it signifies approaches that examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing, theoretical and methodological perspectives. Advocates, like Berry (2004a) explain that the approach enables researchers to embrace a multiplicity of epistemological and political dimensions through their

inquiry. Methodological approaches based on multiplicity, Kellner (1999) explains, not only provide unique possibilities for knowledge construction they also create opportunities for informed political action. He suggests, “the more perspectives one can bring to their analysis and critique, the better grasp of the phenomena one will have and the better one will be at developing alternative readings and oppositional practices” (p. xii).

While my greatest attention in the following sections is devoted to Denzin and Lincoln’s discussion of bricolage as an eclectic and political approach to inquiry, and Kincheloe’s and Berry’s articulation of bricolage as a critical research praxis, I first explain the origins of bricolage research in the works of Levi-Strauss (1966).

### **Claude Levi-Strauss: The Metaphor of Meaning-making Bricoleurs**

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’s use of the bricolage metaphor influenced Denzin and Lincoln, and Kincheloe and Berry, to conceptualize the concept as an eclectic approach to social inquiry. However, while the latter evoke the metaphor in relation to research, Levi-Strauss’s use refers to meaning-making more generally. Furthermore, while the later scholars use the metaphor within a post-structuralist frame, Levi-Strauss’s use was a part of the structuralist project (Lincoln, 2001). I therefore continue this discussion by highlighting how Levi-Strauss used the metaphor within the context of structuralism. Later, however, I articulate dimensions of the metaphor that proved so influential for his contemporaries.

Structuralism, as a method of inquiry, originated in linguistics of the 20th century. Early structuralist practices focused on the configuration of language (i.e., the structural foundational rules which govern the sharing of meaning through verbal and textual communication). For example, linguist de Saussure (1974) employed structuralist-linguistic methods to explain how languages are composed of various signs, and how the structural foundations of all signs consist of both signifiers (e.g., words) and the signified (i.e., concepts to which the words refer). In the 1950’s, however, structuralist practices moved beyond the borders of linguistics to be applied more broadly within the social sciences (Sturrock, 1979, 2003). When applied to human activity, structuralist practices aim to uncover the underlying framework that govern phenomena like intelligence, social interaction, and human culture (e.g., Althusser, 2006; Piaget, 1970). This project led Levi-Strauss to evoke the metaphor of bricolage in his work, *The Savage Mind*.

Levi-Strauss employed the bricolage metaphor in his search for underlying structures that govern human meaning-making. More specifically, however, he used the metaphor in the context of his challenge to the, then-dominant, thinking within anthropology which bifurcated mythical and scientific rationality. Disrupting the structuralist binary, he suggests that all forms of rationality stem from an innate structure of the mind that drives humans to seek understanding:

The thought we call primitive is founded on [the] demand for order. This is equally true of all thought but it is through the properties common to all thought that we can most easily begin to understand forms of thought which seem very strange to us. (p. 10)

In societies adopting mythical rationalities, Levi-Strauss explains, meaning-making processes mirror a bricolage process. Like an “intellectual bricolage,” he explains, mythical-knowers piece together their life-history with artifacts (e.g., texts, discourses, social practices) of their given cultural context to construct meaning. In this way, mythical meaning-making contrasts a scientific meaning-making process; the latter more mirrors the stricter approaches taken up by engineers. Meaning-making bricoleurs (inversely to engineers) do not approach knowledge-production activities with concrete plans, methods, tools, or checklists of criterion. Rather, their processes are much more flexible, fluid, and open-ended. As Levi-Strauss explains, a meaning-making bricoleur is “adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he (sic) does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project” (p. 17). For Levi-Strauss, mythical meaning-making bricoleurs combine their imagination with whatever knowledge tools they have at-hand in their repertoire (e.g., ritual, observation, social practices) and with whatever artifacts are available in their given context (i.e., discourses, institutions, and dominant knowledges) to meet diverse knowledge-production tasks.

While Levi-Strauss’s use of the bricolage metaphor was part of a structuralist project, his articulation has been influential beyond structuralist circles. As I continue, I show how the metaphor has moved away from structuralism to be adopted by post-structuralist researchers and scholars. In this new context, bricolage becomes an approach to meaning-making that challenges the basis of structural rationality. Specifically, it challenges the epistemological and ontological assumptions that the world has universal structures that exist independently of human rationalities. However, in my discussions of this move, I pay close attention to how bricolage as a form of inquiry has continued to be influenced by Levi-Strauss’s use of the metaphor.

### **Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln: The Qualitative Researcher as a Bricoleur**

In the introductory chapter of the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1999) borrow Levi-Strauss’s bricolage metaphor to describe trends emerging in qualitative research. Using the metaphor they describe how post-colonial (Smith, 1999) and post-positivist/post-modernist/post-structuralist paradigms (Butler, 1990; Giroux, 1981; Guba, 1990; Lather, 1991) have driven researchers to develop eclectic multi-theoretical and multi-methodological approaches to meaning-making in research. In this section, I contextualize their use of the metaphor and explain its meaning and implications for qualitative research.

Denzin and Lincoln’s chapter has two major elements: first, it defines qualitative research; and, second, it sketches a timeline of historical moments that influenced researchers throughout the 20th century. The bricolage metaphor surfaces in the latter of these two tasks where, focused on North America, the scholars chronicle eras of qualitative research from the 1900’s until present day. Their account tracks significant ruptures in epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political underpinnings that influenced researchers at particular times. Their record shows that, while traditional qualitative research was based on positivist rationalities, successive generations adopted more interpretive, post-positivist, post-colonial, post-modern, constructivist, and post-structuralist approaches. For Denzin and Lincoln, these shifts to “post” discourses drove

researchers to engage in the complex dimensions of inquiry and, as a result, take up practices that mirror the eclectic work of a bricoleur. In this context, the scholars use the bricolage metaphor to articulate how researchers embraced flexibility and plurality by amalgamating multiple disciplines (e.g., humanities, social sciences), multiple methodologies (e.g., ethnography, discourse analysis, deconstruction, Foucauldian genealogy), and varying theoretical perspectives (e.g., feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism) in their inquiry. They also denote the period as a time when “the boundaries between the social sciences and the humanities [were] . . . blurred. Social scientists were now turning to the humanities for models, theories, and methods of analysis, (semiotics, hermeneutics). A form of genre diaspora was occurring” (pp.17-18).

For Denzin and Lincoln, adopting a bricolage approach helped researchers respect the complexity of meaning-making processes and the contradictions of the lived world. As they suggest: “the combination of multiple methodological practices, and empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (p. 6). For Denzin and Lincoln there are five types of bricoleurs who embrace this rigor and complexity: the interpretive bricoleur, the methodological bricoleur, the theoretical bricoleur, the political bricoleur, and the narrative bricoleur. Because these distinctions were influential (Kincheloe, 2001) for subsequent articulation of the critical bricolage, before moving forward I provide a brief description of each.

Adopting an interpretive bricolage approach, for Denzin and Lincoln (1999), means embracing the belief that “there is no one correct telling [of an] . . . event. Each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective on [an] . . . incident” (p. 6). An interpretive bricoleur is therefore a researcher who “understands that research is an interactive process, shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (p. 6). Adopting post-positivist epistemologies, interpretive bricoleurs recognize that knowledge is never free from subjective positioning or political interpretations.

For Denzin and Lincoln, interpretive bricoleurs are tasked to reflexively piece together their research (i.e., they not only examine an object of inquiry, but also scrutinize how their positioning affects their research processes). Citing Hertz (1997) Finlay (2002), suggests that qualitative researchers who engage in reflexive interpretation appreciate the complexity of the inquiry process. For Finlay,

reflexivity can be defined as thoughtful, conscious self-awareness. Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself. It involves a shift in our understanding of data collection from something objective that is accomplished through detached scrutiny of “what I know and how I know it”, to recognizing how we actively construct our knowledge. (p. 532)

Reflexivity not only highlights how human positioning influences the research processes, it exposes how an object of inquiry can be interpreted from multiple vantage points. In this way, reflexivity adds depth and plurality to the inquiry process. While a researcher’s

positioning is embraced, a phenomenon's intertextuality, interconnectedness, and relationships with other phenomena can be explored.

Borrowing from Levi-Strauss, Denzin and Lincoln's methodological bricoleur is a researcher who combines multiple research tools to accomplish a meaning-making task. This means that a methodological bricoleur engages in fluid, eclectic, and creative approaches to inquiry. The methodological bricolage approach is appropriated by Wickens (2011), who draws on multiple analytical methods "to explore power networks and broad ideological perspectives" (p. 151) evident in a series of novels on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning (LGBTQ) themes. She explains that her work:

draws upon multiple analytic frameworks based in three different disciplines . . . constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), discursive textual analysis (Fairclough 2003), and traditional literary analysis (Vandergrift 1990) – to explore intersecting forms of power exhibited in written texts. (p. 151)

For Wickens, the combination of the three methods "allowed for a deep, rich, yet fluid analysis of and critical interpretive connections between textual excerpts within [the] young adult novels and ongoing discourses around LGBTQ issues" (p. 159). She, therefore, uses a bricolage of methods to expose how power operates discursively within the texts.

While Wickens' multi-methodological approach offers an exemplar of how bricolage approaches can provide a "deep, rich, yet fluid analysis" (p. 159), the methodological bricolage is more than just an eclectic approach. Borrowing from Levi-Strauss, Denzin and Lincoln explain that a methodological bricoleur respects the complexity of the meaning-making process by allowing contextual contingencies to dictate which data-gathering and analytical methods to use. Furthermore, the methodological bricoleur uses only the tools and means "at hand" to accomplish their knowledge work.

Drawing on Becker (1998), Denzin and Lincoln (1999) explain that: "the qualitative researcher as bricoleur, or maker of quilts, uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, developing whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand" (p. 4). For example, a methodological bricoleur could be a researcher who begins an inquiry process with an action-research approach and then realizes that discourse analysis could help develop a more complex portrait of a phenomenon. However, the bricoleur would not necessarily stop there. Denzin and Lincoln explain this by showing how bricolage is based on an emergent design:

The solution (bricolage) which is the result of the bricoleur's method is based on an [emergent] construction (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991, p. 161) that changes and takes new forms as the bricoleur adds different tools, methods, and techniques of representation and interpretation to the puzzle. (p. 4)

For Denzin and Lincoln, bricolage necessitates a "making do. . . [the] choices regarding which interpretive practice to employ are not necessarily made in advance" (p. 4).

Bricoleurs allow for dynamics and contexts to dictate which questions get asked, which methods to employ and which interpretive perspectives to use. This means bricoleurs have an aptness for creativity -- they know how to artistically combine theories, techniques, and methods. Furthermore, they are able to create their own methodological tools when needed. Reiterated by Denzin and Lincoln, "if a researcher needs to invent, or piece together new tools or techniques, he or she will do so" (p. 4).

Theoretical bricoleurs, for Denzin and Lincoln, work through, and between, multiple theoretical paradigms: "the theoretical bricoleur reads widely and is knowledgeable about the many interpretive paradigms (e.g., feminism, marxism, cultural studies, constructivism, queer theory) that can be brought to any particular problem" (p. 8). From varied, sometimes conflicting, perspectives, a theoretical bricoleur performs multiple readings on an artifact, text, or phenomenon. This process allows bricoleurs to understand the different theoretical contexts in which an object can be interpreted -- providing a multi-perspectival, post-structuralist perspective, showing the plurality of complexities that influence a phenomenon.

For example, a researcher examining workplace bullying from a feminist perspective might examine how the construction of gender hierarchies and norms, and patriarchy, impact bullying. However, a theoretical bricoleur would not stop their analysis at this plateau. Rather, they might begin with a feminist reading, and then loop their analysis through another theoretical perspective. Perhaps she/he may find insights from neo-Marxist analysis appropriate. If so, the theoretical bricoleur may examine how neo-liberal capitalist contexts enforce ideals of competition in the workplace. Additionally, the theoretical bricoleur may notice heterosexist discourses operating within a given context, and therefore draws from queer theories to examine how notions of heteronormativity underpin the concept of bullying. A multi-perspectival description, though not "more correct" than any one interpretation on its own, adds depth, rigour and multiplicity to inquiry. In the case of research that focuses on workplace bullying, it is easy to see that no one theoretical position can provide a holistic image of the complexity of the issue. The bricolage, as Kincheloe and Berry (2004) explain, exists out of an appreciation of the complexity of the lived world. Further, it exists for questions that don't lend themselves to easy answers.

For Denzin and Lincoln, political bricoleurs are researchers who are aware of how knowledge and power are connected. They explain: "The political bricoleur is aware that science is power, for all research findings have political implications. There is no value free science" (p. 6). Embracing this understanding, like those educators who adopt critical pedagogies, political bricoleurs develop counter-hegemonic forms of inquiry that rally against oppressive social constructs and injustices. As their aim, political bricoleurs produce knowledge that benefits those who are disenfranchised by everyday taken-for-granted workings of neoliberal, capitalist, white, patriarchal, and heterosexist social structures. The notion of the political bricoleur influenced Kincheloe's articulation of the critical bricoleur. Therefore, later, I return to this discussion by connecting Kincheloe's critical bricolage project to the notion of political bricoleurs.

For Denzin and Lincoln (1999), narrative bricoleurs appreciate that inquiry is a representation (i.e., a narrative). Because objective reality can never be "captured" (p. 5), research texts can only represent specific interpretations of a phenomenon. As such, texts



are always positioned from specific contextual perspectives. In this context, Denzin and Lincoln suggest:

The gendered, narrative bricoleur also knows that researchers all tell stories about the world they have studied. Thus the narratives, or stories, scientists tell are accounts coached and framed within specific storytelling traditions, often defined as paradigms (e.g., positivists, post-positivist, constructivism). (p. 6)

Narrative bricoleurs appreciate how ideologies and discourses shape how knowledge is produced. Instead of taking these ideologies and discourses for granted, they seek to understand their influence on research processes and texts.

Narrative bricoleurs therefore attempt to trouble and avoid univocal research representations. This means that narrative bricoleurs draw their techniques from multiple perspectives, voices, and sources. A narrative bricolage is exemplified in Markham's (2005) study of the meaning and consequences of a sexist phrase popular in her local community: "Go ugly early." She explains that the phrase is understood as "a mission statement for a particular subculture of college life: Men who idealize the image of the stereo-typical American male whose primary goal in life is to have sex with as many women as possible, using whatever means available" (p. 2). Rather than assuming a univocal positioning within her study, Markham uses a narrative bricolage approach to employ multiple fragmented voices to interpret (and disrupt) the function, socio-political dimensions, and violent ramifications of the phrase in her broader university community. She explains that her complex narrative is "derived from research journals, field notes, actual transcripts of interviews and recorded conversations, fiction, and scholarly literature [to] present a bricolage of ideas and images" (p. 25). In this way, she uses multiple voices to show the demeaning and violent implications of the "go ugly early" discourse. She also explains how the use of "bricolage can function politically to encourage multiple perspectives" (p. 2). In this way, she may not only be a narrative bricoleur, but a political bricoleur as well.

Clearly, Denzin and Lincoln (1999) consider bricolage to be more than multi-methods research. They see it as an approach that enables researchers to respect the complexity of the meaning-making and inquiry process. In this way, it challenges the basis of traditional multi-methods research. For example, a bricoleur challenges the traditional principle that researchers should remain neutral observants in a research context. Rather than idolizing the perceived ability of detached neutrality, bricoleurs engage the political dimension of inquiry. I believe this recognition may have attracted Joe Kincheloe to bricolage. It is, therefore, to a discussion of his vision of bricolage as a critical research praxis that I turn next.

### **Joe Kincheloe: Onto the Critical Bricolage**

Kincheloe's bricolage project, as described by Steinberg (2011), "criticalize[s] and rigourize[s] the traditional ways in which to do multi-methodological research" (p. 176). In his criticalization, Kincheloe (2005b) moves Denzin and Lincoln's (1999)

articulation of bricolage “onto the next level” (p. 323), by adopting and extending the five categories of bricoleurs. For Kincheloe, the criticalization of inquiry includes:

1. A move away from positivist and monological research approaches that reinforce oppressive, marginalizing, and violent social structures;
2. An embrace of research pursuits that appreciate the complexity of the lived world (this includes inquiry processes that do not study objects as detached “things-in-themselves,” but rather as connected “objects-in-the-world”); and finally,
3. A move toward emancipatory research approaches based on critical theories, and interdisciplinary/postmodernist/poststructuralist epistemological rationalities. (Kincheloe, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c)

Whereas Levi-Strauss’ evocation of the bricolage metaphor is based on structuralist foundations, Kincheloe’s theories are grounded in post-structuralist critical philosophies. Specifically, Kincheloe’s methodological approach holistically explore’s the role of discourses, ideologies and power in shaping phenomena. In such a context, bricoleurs not only seek to develop complex understandings of a phenomenon (e.g., an understanding of the multiplicity of ways phenomena can be interpreted), they aim to disrupt imbalances of power, social injustice, marginalization, and oppression perpetrated through traditional meaning-making practices.

In the following discussion, I draw on various works to contextualize and articulate Kincheloe’s conceptualization of bricolage as a critical research praxis. While my focus is on Kincheloe’s texts, I continue to draw on the scholarship and research of others, (e.g., Berry, 2004a; 2004b; 2006; 2011; McLean, 2008; Watt, 2008; 2011), who theorize or adopt bricolage approaches (or similar processes) in their works. This intersection enables me to theoretically situate Kincheloe’s bricolage while also exploring concrete examples of what the approach looks like in research contexts.

### **Challenging Positivist Paradigms**

Kincheloe’s bricolage exists as a critical response to positivist research. The epistemological basis of positivism suggests that knowledge of the world is obtainable only through the objective scientific examination of empirical facts. Positivism proceeds on an assumption that scientific research will lead to the development of an understanding of world, and human interaction, in “concrete and universal terms” (Hyslop-Margison & Naseem, 2007, p. 15). Berry (2006) refers to positivist research as being highly formalized. She explains that, like a medical procedure, “positivistic and other traditional research designs tend to work with the singular, linear, step-by-step structure” (p. 89). These strict positivist methods, like those of a metaphorical meaning-making “engineer” in Levi-Strauss’s *Savage Mind* (1966), uncover “truths” about the social universe that exist independently of humans. However, for Kincheloe, human knowledge construction does not lead to universal “truths” nor can it be considered a linear or tidy process.

Knowledge production in a positivist paradigm is only possible if researchers use the “correct” methods to collect information and observe the world. Kincheloe sees these approaches as monologic -- the knowledge is produced through singular methods and

mono-disciplinary approaches that refuse to account for alternative rationalities, multiple knowledges, or complexities inherent in the inquiry process. Kincheloe sees monological research as problematic for two reasons: first, it puts constraints around knowledge production; and second, it overlooks dynamics of power.

For Kincheloe (2008), monological research problematically examines objects as things-in-themselves, detached from the socio-historical contexts of which they are constituted. This means, for him, that monological methods are inadequate for studying educational phenomena. In education, he explains, contexts, relationships, and politics all play complex mediating roles. Similarly, Hyslop-Margison and Naseen (2007) describe positivist research in the following terms:

some logical positivists argue that since the logic and processes of scientific inquiry are virtually identical regardless of the studied phenomena, no distinction is necessary between the methodological rules of natural and social science. Logical positivism focuses primarily on the observation and analysis of behaviour as if such analysis could occur in the absence of extraneous normative or contextual considerations. By adopting such an approach, it attempts to detach human behaviour from the individual or social circumstance in which it occurred. (p. 21)

For Kincheloe (2004c) this is problematic. In monological research contexts, he explains, “entities are often removed from the context that shaped them, the processes of which they are a part, the relationships and connections that structure their being in the world” (p. 74). While a complete understanding of the factors which constitute a phenomenon is impossible, removing a phenomenon from its context stymies recognition of the multiplicity of factors by which it is constituted.

This criticism can be applied to various forms of positivist social/educational research. For example, empirical best-practice educational research focused on proving that specific teaching strategies have a positive/negative effects on students’ academic performance can sometimes be monological. To reach a conclusion that a pedagogical practice is effective or non-effective, some traditional positivist pedagogical methodologies involve engaging students with a new pedagogical practice and having them take part in standardized testing procedures before and after pedagogical intervention. The standardized testing is then used to judge and analyze whether or not students’ results reflect improvement toward a particular standard. From Kincheloe’s perspective this form of research is monological and problematic. Researchers’ reliance on standardized testing procedures treats objects of inquiry (i.e., the students, and the intervention practices) as things-in-themselves. This means that these studies consider both the students, and the practitioners’ pedagogical intervention strategies, detached from their socio-historical and political contexts. Using only a one standardized testing procedure, the research does not appreciate the complex dynamics, beyond pedagogical intervention, that mediate school performance. As Berry (2004a) explains, “the empiricism of using one methodology or even one single theory presents only a partial answer to the original research question” (p. 105). Although post-structuralist scholars would argue that all knowledge is partial, in this instance, multi-methodological and theoretical approaches could inform researchers of the dynamics (e.g., economic, social,

or institutional contexts), beyond intervention methods, that affect academic performance.

To engage in inquiry that avoids monologism, Kincheloe adopts a critical constructivist position that all knowledge is crafted in a contextualized space. This means that, for him, knowledge is temporal and culturally situated (Kincheloe, 2005a). To respect this complexity, he suggests that bricoleurs adopt a process he calls symbiotic hermeneutics. This process is designed to help bricoleurs explore how contexts and relationships constitute phenomena; it “demands that relationships at all levels be respected and engaged in . . . [ways] that produce justice and new levels of understanding” (Kincheloe, 2004c, p. 69). This allows bricoleurs to examine phenomena not as detached things-in-themselves, but as connected things-in-the-world. For Kincheloe (2004b) symbiotic hermeneutics entails the development of a complex ontological and epistemological awareness of objects of inquiry. This means that bricoleurs seek out ways that phenomena are interconnected with other phenomena, and socially constructed in a dialogue between culture, institutions, and historical contexts.

Ontologically, bricoleurs examine how socio-historical dynamics influence and shape an object of inquiry. For Kincheloe (2005b), an

object of inquiry is ontologically complex in that it cannot be described as an encapsulated entity. In this more open view of the object of inquiry, it is always a part of many contexts and processes, it is culturally inscribed and historically situated. (p. 333)

Epistemologically, bricoleurs explore how the foundations of knowledge of a given context surround an object of inquiry. For example, bricoleurs examine, through processes like Foucauldian genealogies, the histories of thought that shape a phenomenon. Or, as Kincheloe (2004a) puts it, “the complex view of the object of inquiry accounts for the historical effort to interpret its meanings in the world and how such efforts continue to define its social, cultural, psychological, and educational effects” (p. 7). In this way, epistemological analysis helps bricoleurs understand how dominant rationalities influence understandings of a phenomenon.

Kincheloe explores symbiotic hermeneutics in his text *The Sign of the Burger: McDonald's and the Culture of Power* (2002). Employing a multi-theoretical and methodological framework, his bricolage analyzes the McDonald's corporation's “sociocultural, political, and economic power” (p. 9). Employing ontological and epistemological analyses, Kincheloe shows how McDonald's' cultural, semiotic, and pedagogical power is symptomatic of much broader ideological contexts that make up Western societies. His text “employs a mutually informative, synergistic bricolage of research methods . . . [that includes] ethnography, content analysis, historiography, cultural studies analysis, rhetorical analysis, semiotics, and critical hermeneutics” (p. 11). Ontologically, he explores how free-market capitalist contexts, social histories, and dominant neo-liberal discourses/ideologies contribute to the predominance of capitalist world views which maintain the corporation's power. Epistemologically, he shows how dominant knowledges, ideologies and discourses facilitate the continuation of corporation's powerful place in the world. Further, he shows how McDonald's has capitalized on these discourses in ways to increase their power. Convincingly, he

provides an example of how McDonald's has engaged in actions like "the corporate intrusion in the classroom" (p. 10). He explains that this "educative or 'cultural pedagogical' aspect [of McDonald's] involves its capacity to produce and transmit knowledge, shape values, influence identity, and construct consciousness" (p. 9).

Bricoleurs, for Kincheloe, do not embrace symbiotic hermeneutics as a way to develop certainty about a phenomenon, nor do they do so to create a more accurate representation. For him (2004a), "there is no final, transhistorical, non-ideological meaning that bricoleurs strive to achieve" (p. 5). Rather, a representation based on symbiotic analysis appreciates how a multiplicity of complex ontological and epistemological factors shape phenomena.

For Kincheloe, the positivist quest for objective certainty is problematic for another important reason. Specifically, he believes that the trek disregards Foucault's arguments about the connection between knowledge and power. For Foucault:

Truth is a thing of this world . . . And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault & Gordon, 1980, p. 133)

Clearly, Foucault's perspective differs from positivist traditions. For him, truth does not exist to be discovered, it is negotiated culturally based on a set of epistemological and discursive rules. Adopting this position means believing, to a certain extent, the rules that a society uses for distinguishing true or false statements is arbitrary (i.e., societies can adopt different truth making practices). Foucault called these foundational socio-historical rules the *epistémé* (i.e., the grammatological foundations of truth) of a given society. As Foucault explains, *epistémés* are negotiated politically; being tied to the dominant power relationships in an historical epoch. This means, in societies, only certain groups and institutions can gain prominence and become sanctioned as the proprietors of knowledge. This is because the rules for knowledge production in a given *epistémé* could include: who is sanctioned to be a knowledge producer (e.g., experts, scientists, the able-bodied, men); what methods must be followed to produce truth (e.g., scientific, quantitative or qualitative); or, what institutions are sanctioned as knowledge producers (e.g., church, governments, schools, business). For Foucault, powerful groups maintain their knowledge construction legitimacy by continuously undermining alternative knowledges. In this way, discursive rules lead to the exclusion of the knowledges of those who are not in positions of power. As such, power shapes and constrains knowledge -- limiting what can be said, and thought, in a given context.

Kincheloe and Berry (2004) trouble the positivist *epistémé* adopted in contemporary Western societies. For Berry (2004a), positivist approaches have quietly fortified oppressive conditions for groups who have little power to produce knowledge. And, as Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) argue, positivist logocentric foundations and "mainstream research practices are generally, although most often

unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression" (p. 164). In such contexts, Kincheloe's critical bricoleurs work to dismantle the positivist hegemony in research which, most often unknowingly, supports oppressive, marginalizing, and violent social conditions. For this, Kincheloe suggests that critical hermeneutics, knowledges from the margins, and political action be infused in all bricolage projects.

Critical hermeneutics is an interpretive process used to explore how power tacitly forms phenomena, texts, knowledges, and subjects (Kincheloe, 2005b). Moving beyond symbiotic hermeneutics to critical hermeneutics "alerts [bricoleurs] to the ways power [in a given contextual setting] helps construct the social, cultural, and economic conditions under which meaning is made" (p. 338). Like Denzin and Lincoln's (1999) interpretive bricoleur, Kincheloe's critical bricoleurs draw from a range of critical theories (e.g., feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism), to explore the taken-for-granted ways power shapes knowledge and objects of inquiry.

Watt's (2008, 2011) work, which investigates representations of Muslim women in Western media, mirrors Kincheloe's critical hermeneutic approach. She employs multiple theoretical lenses (e.g., feminist, anti-racist) and multiple methodological tools (e.g., semiological analysis, discursive analysis) to engage in multiple readings of Muslim women's representations in various news, magazine, and television texts. Each reading shows how dominant Western contexts (saturated with power dynamics of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia) shape Muslim women's representations. As Kincheloe (2004a) explains, "critical hermeneutics is employed by bricoleurs to understand the historical and social ways that power operates to shape meaning and its lived consequences" (p. 11). Watt's (2008, 2011) study exemplifies this critical hermeneutic approach. Her interest in how racialization shapes media texts shows her understanding that an object of inquiry can never be quarantined from dominant powers.

For Kincheloe, critical bricoleurs are "dedicated to questioning and learning from the excluded" (Kincheloe, 2004b, p. 48); they seek knowledges that are usually silenced in dominant research narratives. These actions relate to Foucault's conceptualization of subjugated knowledges (Foucault, Bertani, Fontana, Ewald, & Macey, 2003). Subjugated knowledges, for Foucault, are the "series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity" (p. 7). For example, the knowledges constructed by institutions like asylums, hospitals, and schools shape dominant knowledges, while the knowledges constructed by groups like the "psychiatrized, the patient . . . the delinquent" (Foucault et al., 2003, p. 7), and the student, constitute subjugated knowledges. For Foucault and Kincheloe, the culturally elite's control over the means of knowledge production has meant that insights from the margins of societies have been subjugated.

As Kincheloe (2005b) argues, critical bricoleurs are politically capable of disrupting this authoritative control over knowledge production. He suggests:

to contribute to social transformation, bricoleurs seek to better understand both the forces of domination that affect the lives of individuals from race, class, gender, sexual, ethnic, and religious backgrounds outside of dominant culture(s) and the worldviews of such diverse peoples. In this

context, bricoleurs attempt to remove knowledge production and its benefits from the control of elite groups. (p. 344)

Although they may not identify their work as bricolage, Wishart-Leard and Lashua's (2006) ethnographic study parallels this dimension of Kincheloe's bricolage. Their work uses the arts, specifically participatory theatre and rap, to disseminate inner city youth's critical perspectives on schooling. Explicitly, their work focuses on the potential of arts-based approaches in helping youth to express critical perspectives. Not only does their work represent a bricolage of methods (drawing from narrative, arts-based, and performance practices), its critical aspirations are revealed in its embrace of young peoples' subjugated knowledges. In particular, their approach "explore[s] ways youth, traditionally silenced, engaged with popular culture to voice experiences and challenge dominant narratives of public schools and daily lives" (p. 244). For Kincheloe (2005b), an embrace of subjugated knowledges like this is an important step in creating more democratic forms of knowledge production. For him, the "confrontation with difference, so basic to the concept of the bricolage, enables researchers to produce new forms of knowledge that informs policy decisions and political action in general" (p. 344). However, approaches claiming the title of bricolage still require careful analysis and scrutiny. Power does not cease to operate just because practices are intended to be critical or for resistance. Therefore, any claims that such works generate more democratic or empowering forms of inquiry must be tempered and constantly troubled.

For some critical theorists, for example McLaren (2001), developing an awareness of power and embracing subjugated knowledges might not be enough for bricolage to be considered a political research praxis. If bricoleurs do not disrupt the broader social structures, discourses, and institutions that are responsible for inequitable social conditions, then how can the process be considered political? Because of this, Kincheloe (2004a) extends bricolage to activist levels. For him, "the criticality of the bricolage is dedicated to engaging political action" (p. 12).

This manner of informed political action was adopted in McLean's (2008) bricolage work. Her study examines the political implications of integrating critical literacies in a high school classroom in a rural community. For her project, McLean designed a high school critical literacies course, Women, Media and Culture (WMC), using a bricolage of critical theories (e.g., post-structural feminist, post-colonialist, neo-marxist). The course was intended to develop students' understanding of critical literacy and engage them in actions to disrupt local cultures of marginalization, oppression, and violence. For example, over a four year period, students in her course engaged in critically informed actions to challenge the patriarchal and objectifying discourses and practices of schooling. Some of their actions included infiltrating a (longstanding and popular) local beauty pageant, verbally resisting demeaning practices, and, in solidarity, attending a preliminary meeting for the pageant and confronting organizers with critically informed questions. McLean explains that, while these actions did not dismantle the pageant altogether, they did disrupt the discourses that constructed the pageant as unproblematic. This was exemplified at the 2005 pageant,

when a local town councilor addressed the audience about feminist concerns with female objectification and the ways in which pageants

contribute to the practice . . . she did urge people to recognize the concerns and keep attempting to change the focus of the pageant from the superficial celebration of beauty to a meaningful recognition of individual worth. (p. 198)

For McLean, the councilor's speech was significant, as it signified a shift in discourses surrounding the pageant. She explains that "her speech represented a negotiation that might not have happened without the critical discursive examination initiated by the WMC critical literacies' community" (p. 198).

### Conclusion

This article intended to concisely, yet thoroughly, introduce the concept of bricolage in relation to qualitative research. More generally, however it showed how scholars and researchers who adopt bricolage do so with a recognition that the approach pushes the borders of traditional multi-methods qualitative research. Bricolage addresses the plurality and complex political dimensions of knowledge work. While I hope my text provides a thick description of bricolage, I also hope that it generates critical dialogue -- dialogue that entices others to continue to push and disrupt other constraining, and potentially oppressive, borders in qualitative research.

### References

- Althusser, L. (2006). Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In A. Sharma & A. Gupta (Eds.), *The anthropology of the state: A reader* (pp. 86-111). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Becker, H. S. (1998). *Tricks of the trade*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Berry, K. S. (2004a) Structures of bricolage and complexity. In J. L. Kincheloe & Berry, K. S. (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 103-127). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Berry, K. S. (2004b) Feedback looping for increasing complexity. In J. L. Kincheloe & Berry, K. S. (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 128-146). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Berry, K. S. (2006). Research as bricolage: Embracing relationality, multiplicity and complexity. In K. Tobin & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Doing educational research: A handbook* (pp. 87-116). Rotterdam: The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Berry, K. S. (2011). Embracing radical research: A commentary on 'To the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage'. In J. L. Kincheloe, k. hayes, S. Steinberg, & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Key works in critical pedagogy* (pp. 279-284). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- de Saussure, F. (1974). *Course in general linguistics*. London: Peter Owen.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (1999). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.



- Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531-545.
- Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M., Bertani, M., Fontana, A., Ewald, F., & Macey, D. (2003). *Society must be defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Giroux, H. A. (1981). *Ideology, culture & the process of schooling*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Guba, E. G. (Ed.). (1990). *The paradigm dialog*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hertz, R. (Ed.). (1997). *Reflexivity and voice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hyslop-Margison, E. J., & Naseem, M. A. (2008). *Scientism and education: Empirical research as neo-liberal ideology*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kellner, D. (1999). Theorizing McDonaldization: A multiperspectivist approach. In B. Smart (Ed.), *Resisting McDonaldization* (pp. 186-206). London: Sage.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2001). Describing the bricolage: Conceptualizing a new rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 679-672.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2002). *The sign of the burger: McDonald's and the culture of power*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004a). Introduction: The power of the bricolage: Expanding research methods. In J. L. Kincheloe & K. S. Berry (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 1-22). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004b). Redefining rigour and complexity in research. In J. L. Kincheloe & K. S. Berry (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 23-49). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004c). Questions of disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity in a changing world. In J.L. Kincheloe & K. S. Berry (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 50-81). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004d). Redefining and interpreting the object of study. In J. L. Kincheloe & K. S. Berry (Eds.), *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage* (pp. 82-102). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2005a). On to the next level: Continuing the conceptualization of the bricolage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(3), 323-350.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2005b). *Critical constructivism primer*. New York, NY: P. Lang.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Knowledge and critical pedagogy: An introduction*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kincheloe, J. L. & Berry, K. S. (Eds.). (2004). *Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing the bricolage*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L., McLaren, P., & Steinberg, S. (2011). Critical pedagogy and qualitative research: Moving to the bricolage. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 163-178). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Lincoln, Y. (2001). An emerging new bricoleur: Promises and possibilities—A reaction to Joe Kincheloe's "Describing the Bricoleur". *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 693-705.
- Markham, A. (2005). "Go ugly early": Fragmented narrative and bricolage as interpretive method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(6), 813-839.
- McLean, T. J., & University of New Brunswick. (2008). *Journey through the bricolage: Multiplicity and complexity in critical pedagogy* (Unpublished Dissertation). Fredericton, NB: University of New Brunswick.
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Structuralism*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Radford, M. (2007). Action research and the challenge of complexity. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 37(2), 263-278.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Steinberg, S. (2011). Introduction to "Describing the bricolage". In J. L. Kincheloe, k. hayes, S. Steinberg, and K. Tobin (Eds.), *Key works in critical pedagogy* (pp. 177). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Sturrock, J. (1979). *Structuralism and since: From Lévi Strauss to Derrida*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sturrock, J. (2003). *Structuralism* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Trifonas, P. P. (2003). *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Watt, D. (2008). Challenging Islamophobia through visual media studies: Inquiring into a photograph of Muslim women on the cover of Canada's national news magazine. *Simile: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 8(2), 1-14.
- Watt, D. (2011, May). *Negotiating identities in-between schooling and media discourses: Muslim female students' experiences of the Ontario high school curriculum*. Multi-paper presentation at the annual Social Science and Humanities Congress, Fredericton, NB.
- Weinstein, D., & Weinstein, M. A. (1991). Georg Simmel: Sociological flaneur bricoleur. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8(3), 151-168.
- Wickens, C. M. (2011). The investigation of power in written texts through the use of multiple textual analytic frames. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24(2) 151-164.
- Wishart-Leard, D. W., & Lashua, B. (2006). Popular media, critical pedagogy, and inner city youth. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(1), 244-264.

### Author Note

Matt Rogers is a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, Canada. His research focuses on critical filmmaking pedagogies and the intersection of participatory video, arts-based inquiry, critical pedagogy and social justice education. He may be contacted at [matt.rogers@unb.ca](mailto:matt.rogers@unb.ca); UNB Faculty of Education, C/O Matt Rogers, 10 MacKay Drive, Fredericton New Brunswick, E3B 5A3.

### Article Citation

Rogers, M. (2012). Contextualizing theories and practices of bricolage research. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(T&L Art, 7), 1-17. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/rogers.pdf>

---