

# Judgements without rules: towards a postmodern ironist concept of research validity

Gary Rolfe

School of Health Science, University of Wales, Swansea, Wales

Accepted for publication 27 July 2004

ROLFE G. *Nursing Inquiry* 2006; 13: 7–15

## Judgements without rules: towards a postmodern ironist concept of research validity

The past decade has seen the gradual emergence of what might be called a postmodern perspective on nursing research. However, the development of a coherent postmodern critique of the modernist position has been hampered by some misunderstandings and misrepresentations of postmodern epistemology by a number of writers, leading to a fractured and distorted view of postmodern nursing research. This paper seeks to distinguish between judgemental relativist and epistemic relativist or ironist positions, and regards the latter as offering the most coherent critique of modernist/(post)positivist nursing research. The writings of poststructuralist philosophers, including Barthes, Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Rorty are examined, and a number of criteria for a postmodern ironist concept of research validity or trustworthiness are suggested. Whilst these writers reject the idea of Method as a guarantee of valid research, they nevertheless believe that value judgements can and must be made, and turn to notions of ironism, *différance*, and the *differend*. Ultimately, the postmodern ironist reader of the research report must make a judgement without criteria, based on her own practical wisdom or 'prudence'.

**Key words:** ironism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, research, trustworthiness, validity.

The past two decades have seen the gradual emergence of what might be called a postmodern sensibility in the arts, media and (to a lesser extent) science (Lister 1997). More recently, a number of writers have begun with some success to explore and apply a postmodern perspective to nursing research (for example, Parsons 1995; Fahy 1997; Traynor 1997; Holmes 1998; Cheek 2000; Holmes and Warelow 2000). However, other attempts have been hampered by an inadequate consideration of the philosophical (and in particular, the epistemological) underpinnings of postmodernism, portraying it simply as a more or less complete relaxation of the rules and methods of modernist science. Watson (1999), for example, seems to suggest that postmodernism is a branch of new age philosophy, making reference in her book *Postmodernism and beyond* to 'the body as a sacred mirror'

(159), Chinese Taoism (236), yogic Chakras (75), and 'the Zen of bedmaking' (237). Others, such as O'Callaghan and Jordan (2003), equate postmodernism with 'natural remedies, antiscience sentiments, holism, rejection of authority, individual responsibility and consumerist attitudes to health care' (29). Indeed, for some, postmodernism is regarded not so much as *post* modern, but as *pre* modern or *anti* modern.

This distortion of what is actually a well-developed critique of the modernist position leads to particular problems when it comes to postmodern considerations of validity in nursing research. If we take this naïve antimodernist 'anything goes' view, then validity is simply not an issue. While this rejection of validity as a consideration for nursing research might be acceptable to those researchers who are already sympathetic to the postmodern position, it is unlikely to win any new converts, because it portrays postmodernism as intellectually and philosophically lacking. Furthermore, it portrays it as a theoretical black hole in which decisions about research can be reached idiosyncratically without any appeal to reason or logic. As Traynor (1997)

Correspondence: Professor Gary Rolfe, School of Health Science, Glyndwr Building, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK.  
E-mail: <g.rolfe@swan.ac.uk>

memorably put it: 'no grounding or privilege, just free-floating trouble making'.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to sketch out some of the reasoning and beliefs that underpin a postmodern view of research and, in particular, its position on validity. The term 'validity' is highly contested in nursing research (see Graneheim and Lundman (2004) for a recent review of the literature), and its relation to concepts such as 'truth' has generated a great deal of debate in the wider research community (Sparkes 2001; Flaherty et al. 2002). However, for the purpose of this paper, I will employ the term 'validity' in its most widely used sense of the 'truth value' of the study. In other words, this paper explores the question of the criteria (or lack of them) that the postmodern reader might employ in deciding whether or not to accept the findings and conclusions of a research report. (For a rather different approach to the postmodern position on validity see Kvale 1996.) It has already been suggested that part of the problem lies in a sweeping and very loose definition of the term 'postmodernism' to describe a broad alliance of philosophers, writers, artists, architects, critical theorists and literary critics who have moved beyond or reacted against the modernist movement. Before we can progress any further, it is therefore necessary to explore and clarify some of the confusing and contradictory terminology surrounding the subject.

### A SHORT NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

A great deal of paper and ink have been consumed in futile attempts to define postmodernism, and we might almost say that part of its definition is its resistance to definition (Simons and Billig 1994). Perhaps the best we can do, then, is to say what it is not. Postmodernism is *not* modernism, although there is debate about whether it is the successor to modernism or merely a critique of it (see, for example, Lyotard 1992). Modernism (what postmodernism is *not*) is generally associated with the Enlightenment project which began in the eighteenth century and which 'emphasised a belief in human progress towards some ideal state through rationality and the methods of science' (Rolfe 2001, 39).

Modernism is undoubtedly the dominant paradigm in nursing at the present time, and is closely associated with the research paradigms of positivism and/or postpositivism. Positivists believe that there is a single and potentially knowable reality, which exists completely separately, and independently from ourselves, about which we are able to make more or less objective judgements, and which can be accessed through the application of the scientific method. This 'naïve realist' position gives rise to the correspondence theory of truth, in which a statement is true if and only if it

corresponds to an object or event in the 'real world' (Austin 1950). Many writers now accept that positivism in its pure form is untenable, and suggest that most 'hard' scientific researchers are postpositivists. The postpositivists generally adopt a 'critical realist' position which, while also admitting to an objective and independent reality, is more sceptical of our ability to access it first-hand in any kind of accurate fashion. Both of these positions can be seen as variations on the doctrine of 'scientific realism' (Okasha 2002).

In opposition to this modernist/realist/(post)positivist stance is a broad grouping of what might loosely be referred to as postmodernist thinkers. As this paper is concerned with the issue of validity, it will be useful to distinguish between those who advocate an extreme relativist position (usually the postmodern artists, architects and cultural theorists) and those who believe that we can and must continue to make judgements and distinctions, but who reject the modernist criteria on which they are made (usually the writers, literary critics and some of the philosophers).

Bhaskar (1979) referred to these two positions as judgemental and epistemic relativism, while Denzin and Lincoln (1998) termed them postmodernist and poststructuralist. While both positions are largely antirealist in believing that reality is constructed by (and to some extent dependent on) people, there are nevertheless important differences between them. The poststructuralists, who include Derrida (1974), Deleuze (1994), Foucault (1980) and the later Barthes (1977), as well as self-styled postmodernists such as Lyotard (1984), are epistemic relativists insofar as they adopt a questioning stance towards taken-for-granted assumptions about truth and its origins. In particular, they reject the structuralist claims that there are underlying structures or patterns linking the phenomena of human life (and especially language), which obey predictable and determinable laws.

However, these writers are not out-and-out relativists in the sense of believing that there is no independent and objective reality. But, whilst they accept the notion of an objective world 'out there', the idea of a single objective truth which describes that world is simply untenable, because truth is dependent on language and language has no logical relation to reality. As Rorty puts it:

To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages and that human languages are human creations (Rorty 1989, 5).

Denzin and Lincoln's postmodernists go much further in questioning not only the notion of a single truth, but also the idea of a single reality 'out there' in the world, claiming rather that reality is constructed separately by each individual. As we have seen, this judgemental relativist position stands in

contrast to the former poststructuralist or epistemic relativist position in which judgements are still possible. In my discussion of research validity, I am naturally more interested in the epistemic relativists, because for the judgemental relativists the notion of any form of collective agreement on validity is virtually meaningless, and judgements, if they are made at all, are subjective and unique.

For the remainder of this paper, holders of this post-structuralist/epistemic relativist position will be referred to as 'postmodern ironists' (after Rorty 1989). Ironists accept that they can never fully justify their judgements to others or to themselves, but nevertheless maintain them in the belief that they are the best that are available at the present time. As Rolfe (2000b) argues, the ironist 'simply *believes* her project to be the best, at the same time knowing that there is no epistemological substance to her belief' (64).

## VALIDITY AND THE IRONIST RESEARCHER

For the judgemental relativists, truth is subjective, multiple and fractured, and the concept of validity as an indicator of truth-value therefore has little meaning. For the epistemic relativist or ironist, however, it is not the issue of truth that is at stake, but rather our access to it. The ironist, unlike the judgemental relativist, does not question the existence of an external reality 'out there' (as Rorty would say), nor even the existence of an external 'truth', but is concerned rather with how we might come to know that reality and be able to verify the truth-value of such knowledge. As Rolfe (2000b) has pointed out:

Unlike the out-and-out relativist, then, the ironist is not denying the existence of a real(ist) world, nor is she necessarily claiming that we can never 'know' that world, simply that we can never know that we know it (173).

The truth might well be out there, and our research study might well have uncovered it, but the ironist would argue that we can never really know whether we have uncovered the truth or not.

### *Against method*

For the positivists and postpositivists, validity is guaranteed by a close adherence to method. For example, valid findings from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) depend on the researcher conforming to the rules of sample selection, double blinding, correct administration of data collection tools, and so on. Judgements about the validity of these modernist methodologies therefore focus on the methods section of the research report, rather than on the findings themselves. The findings are assumed to be valid if and only

if there are no flaws in the design and implementation of the method. This notion of validity presupposes either that there is one and only one 'gold standard' methodology for any particular type of research question (for example, the RCT is usually considered to be the gold standard for research that addresses issues of treatment effectiveness) or that if there is more than one valid (ated) methodology, each will produce broadly similar findings.

This notion of a single scientific method (*the Method*) which is superior to all others has already been challenged from within the scientific community itself in both the 'hard' sciences (Kuhn 1962; Feyerabend 1970) and the social sciences (Phillips 1973). In putting forward his idea of 'methodological anarchism', Feyerabend (1970) noted that:

The idea of a method that contains firm, unchanging, and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science gets into considerable difficulty when confronted with the results of historical research. We find, then, that there is not a single rule, however plausible, and however firmly grounded in epistemology, that is not violated at some time or other (21–2).

The idea that validity can be guaranteed by method is also challenged by postmodern ironists. First, they believe that research (that is, knowledge generation) is a creative process and that rigorous adherence to method tends to stifle creativity:

The invariable fact is that a piece of work which ceaselessly proclaims its determination for method is ultimately sterile: everything has been put into the method, nothing is left for writing; the researcher repeatedly asserts that his text will be methodological but the text never comes. No surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method (Barthes 1977, 201).

For Barthes, the 'truth' or meaning of the text is in the 'writing' rather than in the method (or, as Barthes prefers, Method). Writing is the creative process in research: 'writing teaches us what we know, and in what way we know what we know [ ... ] not until we had written this down did we quite know what we know' (van Manen 1997, 127). As Barthes warned us, if all our effort is put into Method, nothing is left for writing, and the creative process is stifled. And as Feyerabend (1970) added, rigid and rigorous application of the scientific method results in 'the inhibition of intuitions' such that '[the researcher's] imagination is restrained and even his language will cease to be his own' (20).

Second, and more importantly, the postmodern ironists argue that the idea of a single 'gold standard' methodology makes no sense. Not only do different methods produce different findings, but the same method employed on different occasions in different situations will also have a different outcome. Furthermore, there is no objective way of making

validity judgements between these different data sets. Thus, the replies given to interview questions will depend on the setting, the occasion, the events immediately preceding the interview, as well as the age, gender, social class and ethnic origin of the interviewer. For example, Clark, Scott et al. (1999) found that mental health service users responded differently when interviewed by other service users to when interviewed by professional researchers, even though the interviews were all conducted in a rigorous fashion. One explanation for the discrepancy might be that the respondents gave more accurate or more truthful answers to other service users, perhaps because they felt able to speak more freely or were less likely to feel judged (Faulkner and Morris 2003).

This, of course, has important implications for the modernist researcher. As a realist, she will believe that the truth exists independently of the interviewer and the research setting, and she will therefore wish to conduct the interview at the time, place and with the interviewer who will generate data that most closely resemble that truth. The questions she would therefore ask of herself are 'which is the more valid method?'; 'who is the more reliable interviewer?'; and 'which is the more accurate response?'. The ironist researcher, on the other hand, would regard such questions as meaningless, arguing that the responses are merely *different*, and that none is more or less accurate or valid than any other.

### *The elusive self*

Modernist researchers aim to neutralise the effects of person and place. Quantitative researchers test for interrater reliability and attempt to decontextualise and depopulate the setting in which the research is taking place (see Billig 1994). Even qualitative modernists such as phenomenologists require the interviewer to 'bracket off' her own attitudes towards the research issues in order to get at the 'true' lived experience of the respondent. Debate continues about the extent to which bracketing is possible, and in any case, it is quite impossible for the researcher to control for the effects of her age, gender and so on.

Despite this, phenomenologists often talk as though they are bringing to light the 'true' lived experiences of their interviewees, and invoke the notion of 'trustworthiness' in support of their claim (Sandelowski 1993). Trustworthiness is usually regarded as an assurance that the researcher has adhered to the rules and method dictated by the paradigm she is following. Thus:

Research findings should be as trustworthy as possible and every research study must be evaluated *in relation to the procedures used to generate the findings* (Graneheim and Lundman 2004, 109, italics added).

So, for example, the trustworthy phenomenologist is one who has bracketed off her own views about the phenomenon under investigation and conducted the research according to the rules of phenomenological interviewing. For the ironist researcher, however, such a reassurance is not only illusory; it is an indication that the study actually *lacks* validity. The researcher who presents her method as though it was conducted 'by the book' in a trustworthy fashion is not to be trusted. The researcher who claims to have successfully bracketed off her own views so that they do not influence the data is deluding herself and her readers. The researcher who claims to have accessed the 'lived experiences' of her subjects is to be regarded with suspicion.

Ironist researchers argue that there can be no 'true' or 'core' lived experience because there is no true or core self that has the experience and that can accurately reflect and report on it. Rather, they argue that self is relational or dialogical (Bhaktin 1986). In other words, it only makes sense to talk about self in relation to other selves, whether internal or external. I only become aware of my self when I am in dialogue with others or with myself, and this self will respond differently depending on my perception of those other selves. I create and reveal my own self through dialogue as I go along, and what I create and reveal varies from moment to moment and from person to person. The interviewee will therefore create and reveal different selves to different interviewers on different occasions and in different circumstances, although none of these could be said to be the 'true' self.

This is equally the case for internal dialogue or reflection. Depending on the circumstances, different selves (or aspects of the self) within the same person will engage in reflective dialogues with different outcomes. I will come to different conclusions about the same issue depending on whether I am angry, tired, elated, and so on. The modernist might argue that a reflection made whilst I am angry is not a 'good' or 'true' reflection, but the postmodern ironist would claim that there is no 'neutral' or quiescent state of mind that produces better or more accurate reflections than at other times. If we accept this position, then there is no core 'lived experience', which I can reliably access and accurately express to another person. There is no authoritative version of any research data.

### *The death of the author*

If there is no authoritative or 'true' version of research data, if the data are relative to the conditions under which they are collected, then the findings reported in the research report cannot be said to be valid in the sense usually understood by the modernists. However, ironist researchers question

the authority of the report in a far more fundamental way. If there is no stable and unchanging self, then the self of the author of the report is also called into question. For example, the report is likely to be written differently depending on which self is writing it and with which other internal selves it is in dialogue with as it writes. Furthermore, the self of the author that later re-reads or reviews her earlier writing is likely to regard it differently from the self that wrote it. Thus, the author of the text has no more authority with regard to its 'true' meaning than any other reader, leading Barthes (1977) to proclaim the 'death of the author', (142). Barthes took this observation to its obvious conclusion, and argued that we therefore have no way of discovering the 'authorial' or authorised interpretation of the text, that is, the meaning originally intended by the writer. Thus, the authorial voice is no more privileged than the interpretations given to the text by its many and varied readers. (For an ongoing debate on this issue from a nursing perspective, see Rolfe 1997; Closs and Draper 1998; Rolfe 1999; Burnard 1999; Rolfe 2000a.) Meaning is therefore created by the reader rather than the writer of a text and, in this sense, the author as the creative force in literature is dead:

Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give the text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing [ ... ] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author (Barthes 1977, 147–8).

Although Barthes was concerned primarily with Literature (with a capital L) and the novel, Jacques Derrida broadened out Barthes' thesis to apply to *all* writing. Furthermore, 'the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language' (Derrida 1974), so that the impact of the death of the author extends well beyond the written word and applies to all forms of expression and all attempts at communication. From Derrida's perspective, then, there is no authorial/authoritative central position from which to judge the meaning of a text (in its broadest sense), and there are as many valid readings as there are readers. We live therefore in a 'decentred universe' (Derrida 1974) in which all attempts at validation are personal and subjective.

### *Knowledge and power*

Jean-Francois Lyotard made a similar point when he defined the postmodern as 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984, (xxiv)). Metanarratives are narratives or stories with a legitimising function, that is, stories that define the rules by which other stories can legitimately be told. So for example, science can be seen as a metanarrative that sets the rules according to which research can be designed,

funded, carried out and disseminated: science (and scientists) determines what does and does not count as valid research. Science is therefore a game comparable to other games such as chess. The rules of chess are, to a large extent, arbitrary. There is no natural law that says that the bishop must only move diagonally; rather, it is an agreed rule that has no meaning outside the overall rules of the game. Similarly, Lyotard would argue that there is no natural law that says the RCT is the gold standard for evaluating treatment outcomes; rather, it is an arbitrary agreement between scientists that has no meaning outside of the game of science.

If Lyotard is right, then self-proclaimed metanarratives such as science have no natural authority to make validity claims. Science has achieved its position as a metanarrative not because it somehow reflects the laws of the natural world, but because influential scientists have awarded themselves rule-making powers, and have agreed to abide by their own rules. The authority of science derives not from epistemology, but from power and politics. Thus:

Knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, *the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government* (Lyotard 1984, 8–9, italics added).

Foucault (1980) concurred with this view when he observed that 'we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (93). Science is essentially authoritarian rather than authoritative. When poststructuralists express their incredulity towards science, they are not dismissing it or refuting its claims; they are simply acknowledging that other competing narratives such as reflection or fictional literature have (or should have) equal status as ways of generating and disseminating knowledge. The author is dead, and the validity of the research text should be judged by each individual reader.

### **JUDGEMENTS WITHOUT RULES: TOWARDS A POSTMODERN IRONIST VIEW OF VALIDITY**

For the ironist researchers, the validity of research texts is subjective and the truth claims made by the writer have no more authority than those of the many readers. But if this is the case, then according to what criteria are judgements to be made? At first sight, this looks very much like a recipe for an extreme relativist position in which anything goes and all judgements are equally valid. This is the position taken by some postmodernist writers, but the ironists do not argue that all judgements are equally *valid*, but rather that all have an *equal right to be heard*. In other words, we should not

automatically discount certain narratives simply because they disagree with, or do not conform to the rules of, the dominant metanarrative of science. There are two questions to be addressed here. First, how are we to judge *between* the truth claims of the various paradigms; between, say, science and reflection? And, second, if validity judgements are made by the readers of the research report rather than by the writer, then what of competing judgements *within* the same paradigm?

### Validity judgements between paradigms

Lyotard was particularly interested in the first of these questions. In his early work he distinguished between knowledge generated and disseminated through the method of science, and knowledge generated and disseminated through narrative forms such as story telling, pointing out that 'it is ... impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa: the relevant criteria are different' (Lyotard 1984, 26). He later extended this critique to all competing paradigms, referring to the impossibility of judgement as a *differend* (Lyotard 1988).

For example, a RCT and an ethnography might generate conflicting data and arrive at different conclusions about the same phenomenon. If we attempt to settle the dispute between them by appealing to criteria such as sample size or test-retest validity, we will clearly favour the RCT. If, on the other hand, we employ criteria of subjectivity and verisimilitude, we will favour the ethnography. There is no neutral position from which to make a judgement, and 'a wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse' (Lyotard 1988, xi). The notion of the *differend*, in which one paradigm asserts its power over another, is exemplified by Gournay and Ritter's statement about nursing research that, 'there is of course a place for qualitative methods, but such research needs to use a rigorous approach *and should be linked to quantitative methodologies ... for it to have any meaning*' (Gournay and Ritter 1997, 442, italics added).

There is no rule-based solution to this impasse that does not disadvantage one of the parties to the dispute. However, that is not to say that a judgement cannot be made, only that it will necessarily be a judgement without rules. Lyotard invokes Aristotle:

insofar as he recognises ... that a judge worthy of the name has no true model to guide his judgements, and that the true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgements, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria. This is, after all, what Aristotle calls prudence. It consists in

dispensing justice without models (Lyotard and Thebaud 1979, 25–6).

Judgements between the truth claims of different paradigms or discourses can only be made on an individual basis through the application of prudence or practical wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Judgements of research reports are made by individual readers based on their own individual experiences. Different readers will judge differently, but that is only to be expected, as each will have her own ideas about the 'truth' of the matter.

This might appear at first sight to be a judgemental relativist doctrine in which any one judgement is as valid as any other, but paradoxically, the most important implication of this position is that *not all* judges are equally equipped to make claims about the validity or truth of the research. For the modernists, judgements about validity can be made by *anyone* who can read and understand the relevant criteria. We can see this, for example, in many undergraduate research assignments, where the student with little or no experience of conducting research is nevertheless expected to be able to produce a critique of a research paper simply by following a set of criteria related to sample selection, methodological rigor, and so on.

For the ironist researcher, however, a degree of experience or even practical expertise (prudence) is required both in the research process and in the substantive content of the topic being researched. For the ironist, then, research is a *practice* with all that this implies (see, for example, Schon 1983), rather than merely a procedure. Just as nursing practice can only be evaluated and critiqued by experienced nurses, so research practice can only be evaluated and critiqued by experienced researchers. Furthermore, these evaluations are always contingent, and we can never offer any hard justification to support the choices we make, either to ourselves or to others. We therefore choose ironically, recognising that our judgements cannot be logically defended, nor that they are necessarily right for everyone. They are merely the best judgements we can make at the time.

### Validity judgements within paradigms

This general principle applies equally to validity disputes *within* paradigms. Two ethnographic research projects might arrive at very different findings, each claiming that theirs is the 'truth' of the matter. For Derrida (1982) there is no contradiction here. What is required is not an agreement

<sup>1</sup> Although prudence is nowadays most often associated with caution or discretion, its root lies in the word 'providence', meaning divine guidance. It is in that sense of intuitive or experiential knowledge without recourse to the intellect (what Dreyfus (2001) referred to as expertise or practical wisdom) that it is used here.

about what is the 'real' truth, but an agreement to differ, what he refers to as an attitude of *différance*. The word *différance* is a neologism that combines the meanings of the French verbs 'to differ' and 'to defer'. To approach a dispute with an attitude of *différance* is to accept the differences between the two sides but to defer indefinitely any attempt to choose between them. This entails stepping outside of the traditional western Aristotelian logic of 'either-or': to hold an attitude of *différance* entails holding two contradictory meanings in your mind at the same time.

For example, the English word 'cleave' means both to cut in two and to join together. Although the two meanings are contradictory, this does not usually present us with a problem, because when the word is used in a sentence it always takes one meaning or the other, and the correct meaning can usually be determined by the context. As Wittgenstein (1953) tells us, meaning is not fixed, but is derived from the way the word is used. When we read the sentence 'the carpenter cleaved the wood', we understand it to mean *either* that she cut it in two, *or* that she joined two pieces together, depending on the context; we cannot assign both meanings at the same time. Similarly, when faced with two contradictory research reports, the modernist researcher would accept either one or the other (or neither), but not both. However, an attitude of *différance* requires us to do exactly that. As the architect Robert Venturi (1966) put it, the postmodernist prefers 'both-and' to 'either-or'.

This might appear to be a profoundly antiscientific attitude, but in fact scientists are regularly required to adopt this 'both-and' attitude. For example, in certain physics experiments light behaves as a wave, whereas in other experiments it behaves as a stream of particles. A modernist 'either-or' attitude is of little help in understanding these contradictory properties of light. We know that the findings from the different experiments are contradictory, that logically light cannot be *both* a wave *and* a stream of particles, and yet that is how it behaves. The physicist must therefore adopt an attitude similar to Derrida's *différance* by accepting the findings from both studies, by holding two contradictory ideas in her head at the same time and forever deferring judgement between them.

## CONCLUSION

It should be clear by now that, for the postmodern ironists, there can be no checklists of rules or criteria to determine the validity of a research study. That is not to say that they reject the concept of validity outright as having no meaning for researchers. However, unlike the modernists, they do not accept that the rigorous application of Method to the

research process will provide any guarantee that the findings will be either valid or reliable. On the contrary, rigour stifles creative research, and to paraphrase Sandelowski (1993), rigor mortis quickly sets in.

One of the problems with challenging the concept of rigour is that it has become a term of praise synonymous with scholarship and good research practice. However, for the ironist, this is merely another example of an arbitrary rule being imposed on the 'game' of research. There is no natural law that equates rigour with validity, and we have seen that the keynote of ironist research is, in fact, the very opposite of rigour. Whereas a rigorous approach suggests a close and rigid adherence to Method, the ironists promote flexibility and reflexivity. Rather than tying themselves to a predetermined method, they will attempt to respond to the ongoing challenges presented by the messy reality of the research project in what Schön (1983) called the 'swampy lowlands' of practice.

Such deviation from the rigours of Method does not, however, compromise the validity or trustworthiness of the study, as the data are *already* fatally compromised. No matter how rigorously the method for producing the research data was conducted, the data themselves will vary according to a myriad of other criteria that can never be controlled for. Postmodernists believe that knowledge is socially and situationally constructed, and that the same situation never occurs twice. However, this is of little consequence, as they also argue that the validity/trustworthiness of the study is in the writing rather than in the method. It is in writing more so than in data collection or data analysis that knowledge is constructed from data. Thus, trustworthiness is concerned *not* with whether the data have been rigorously collected, but with their interpretation and presentation. Paradoxically, any attempt to present the research findings as objective or 'truthful' (that is, as the best or only interpretation of reality) will be seen as untrustworthy. However, if knowledge is created by the researcher through writing the report, then it is *recreated* anew in each reading. Furthermore, each reading results in a rewriting (even if it is only in the head of the reader), and the published text has no greater claim to authority than any of the many rewritings of that text.

Such a statement should not be seen as making any claims about the relative truth of these readings/rewritings, but rather about their right to be heard. Postmodern ironism is not a judgemental relativist doctrine; it is not arguing that all readings of a text are equally valid, but rather that each has an equal right to a fair hearing. This is a political point rather than an epistemological one, and supports the poststructuralist belief that science has achieved its dominant position through the exercise of power rather than

through rational argument. Ultimately, we *have* to make validity judgements about the competing claims of different research paradigms and individual studies. In the absence of any objective criteria, all we have are prudence, our subjective experience and our practical wisdom. Perhaps the best we can do is to judge ironically and without rules, to keep an open mind, and to agree to differ and defer, both with each other and with ourselves.

## REFERENCES

- Austin J. 1950. Truth. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* 24 (supp.): 111–28.
- Barthes R. 1977. The death of the author. *Image, music, text*. London: Fontana.
- Bhaktin MM. 1986. *Speech genres and other late essays*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Bhaskar R. 1979. *The possibility of naturalism*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Billig M. 1994. Sod Baudrillard! Or ideology critique in Disney World. In *After postmodernism*, eds H Simons and M Billig, 150–171. London: Sage.
- Burnard P. 1999. A response to Rolfe's reply to Closs & Draper. *Nurse Education Today* 19: 598.
- Cheek J. 2000. *Postmodern and poststructural approaches to nursing research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clark C, A Scott, KM Boydell and RN Goering 1999. Effects of client interviews on client reported satisfaction with mental health services. *Psychiatric Services* 50: 961–3.
- Closs S and P Draper. 1998. Commentary: Writing ourselves. *Nurse Education Today* 18: 337–41.
- Deleuze G. 1994. *Difference and repetition*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Denzin NK and YS Lincoln, eds. 1998. *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Derrida J. 1974. *Of grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida J. 1982. *Margins of philosophy*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Dreyfus HL. 2001. *On the internet*. London: Routledge.
- Fahy K. 1997. Postmodern feminist emancipatory research: Is it an oxymoron? *Nursing Inquiry* 4: 27–33.
- Faulkner A and B Morris. 2003. Expert paper: User involvement in forensic mental health research and development. *NHS national programme on forensic mental health research and development*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool.
- Feyerabend PK. 1970. Against method: Outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 4: 17–130.
- Flaherty M, N Denzin, P Manning and D Snow. 2002. Review symposium: Crisis in representation. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31: 478–516.
- Foucault M. 1980. *Power/knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Gournay K and S Ritter. 1997. What future for research in mental health nursing? *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing* 4: 441–6.
- Graneheim U and B Lundman. 2004. Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: Concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. *Nurse Education Today* 24: 105–112.
- Holmes C. 1998. Postmodernist science in the origins of the theories of Watson and Newman. *Asian Journal of Nursing Studies* 4: 1–9.
- Holmes C and P Warelow. 2000. Some implications of postmodernism for nursing theory, research and practice. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 32: 89–101.
- Kuhn TS. 1962. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kvale S. 1996. *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lister P. 1997. The art of nursing in a 'postmodern' context. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 25: 38–44.
- Liotard J-F. 1984. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press.
- Liotard J-F. 1988. *The differend: Phrases in dispute*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Liotard J-F. 1992. *The postmodern explained to children*. London: Turnaround.
- Liotard J-F and J-L Thebaud. 1979. *Just gaming*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- van Manen M. 1997. *Researching lived experience*. Ontario: Athlone Press.
- O'Callaghan F and N Jordan. 2003. Postmodern values, attitudes and the use of complementary medicine. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 11: 28–32.
- Okasha S. 2002. *Philosophy of science: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parsons C. 1995. The impact of postmodernism on research methodology: Implications for nursing. *Nursing Inquiry* 2: 22–8.
- Phillips DL. 1973. *Abandoning method*. London: Jossey-Bass.
- Rolfe G. 1997. Writing ourselves: Creating knowledge in a postmodern world. *Nurse Education Today* 17: 442–8.
- Rolfe G. 1999. Rewriting myself. *Nurse Education Today* 19: 295–8.
- Rolfe G. 2000a. On not being clear: A response to Burnard. *Nurse Education Today* 20: 449–52.
- Rolfe G. 2000b. *Research, truth and authority: Postmodern perspectives on nursing*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.



- Rolfe G. 2001. Postmodernism for healthcare workers in 13 easy steps. *Nurse Education Today* 21: 38–47.
- Rorty R. 1989. *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandelowski M. 1993. Rigor or rigor mortis: The problem of rigor in qualitative research revisited. *Advances in Nursing Science* 16: 1–8.
- Schon D. 1983. *The reflective practitioner*. London: Temple Smith.
- Simons H and M Billig. 1994. *After postmodernism*. London: Sage.
- Sparkes AC. 2001. Myth 94: Qualitative health researchers will agree about validity. *Qualitative Health Research* 11: 538–52.
- Traynor M. 1997. Postmodern research: No grounding or privilege, just free-floating trouble making. *Nursing Inquiry* 4: 99–107.
- Venturi R. 1966. *Complexity and contradiction in architecture*. New York: Museum of modern art.
- Watson J. 1999. *Postmodern nursing and beyond*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone.
- Wittgenstein L. 1953. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.