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# **Beyond Binaries in Education Research**

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Mark A. Tyler, Patrick Alan Danaher,  
and Alison Mander**

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For those who have helped us move  
beyond the binary of me/you with love.

ever thine  
ever mine  
ever ours

*Ludwig van Beethoven, "Immortal Beloved" letter 3*



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## Foreword

# Renewing the Critical Function of Education Research

*Michael Singh*

The either/or logic of binaries means that one part of a binary is positioned as being normal, while the other part of the binary is constructed as deviant or deficient. There is a hierarchical relationship in a binary where one part of the either/or pair is superior and powerful, while the other part is weak and submissive. For instance, those in the powerless position are seen as having all the faults, rather than the dominant interests being questioned because they render the former's claims to intellectual equality invisible. The challenge is in understanding and questioning the role educational research plays in reproducing such a position, despite claims to the contrary. Such binaries impact on the ways in which education researchers perceive relationships, such as between the hierarchical ordering of inequitable power relations and people's acting as equals. They also impact on how we relate to other people, mostly by forestalling conceptual advances in education research and thus being complicit in sociocultural marginalization. For example, the focus on the theory/practice binary privileges education researchers as theorists and teachers as practitioners, forestalling any prospects of engaging the divisions in different forms of knowledge produced by researchers and teachers under different conditions of labor. The theory/practice binary ignores the different time frames driving the knowledge of education researchers and teachers, and the divisions this creates in the types of knowledge they engage. Engaging the theory/practice binary means understanding the difference associated with the transfer, translation, and transformation of knowledge arising from the expectation of short-term effectiveness and influence as opposed to operating within a longer time perspective.

There are multiple ways of conceptualizing binaries as suggested by the range of terms that resonate with this concept: bifurcation, dichotomy, dualism, opposition, polarization, and schism. This terminological complexity points to the challenges of providing a widely acceptable, unambiguous, or canonical definition of ways of moving beyond binaries in and through education research. However, binaries provide an important focus for critique in education research, even while such research is implicated in perpetuating binaries. An important contribution of the education research

in this book is in the identification, construction, and analysis of binaries, and, in some instances, in their disruption rather than reproduction.

Education researchers have various strategies for critiquing the hierarchical power relations evident in binaries in order to engage and perhaps move beyond them. A familiar strategy entails rendering binaries as necessarily and inescapably persistent—reproducing them in spite of an expressed desire to do otherwise. Education research can propagate an affirmative disposition toward the existing hierarchical ordering of binaries: justifying rather than challenging the binaries. Much education research is conservative and immunizes against possibilities for changing binaries, neutralizing alternative ways of conceptualizing education and research. An alternative strategy is to reverse the binary oppositions, for instance, by education researchers creating spaces for worker-intellectuals to make their knowledge claims known. At least where binary categories are contested by being inverted they are shown not to be innocent.

The accounts in this book provide variegated insights into the divergent and even contradictory strategies education researchers use to trouble particular binaries. Indicating a multiplicity of strategies, these studies consider the contradictions, possibilities, and limitations of moving beyond binaries.

Through deconstruction it is possible to shake loose the static positioning of the either/or logic that constrains thought and action. The critical analysis and interrogation of binaries can lead to efforts to disrupt the marginalization of what is presumed to be the weaker member of the pair. Analyses of constructions of otherness provide the potential for disrupting binaries. Redefining the relationship between the pairs that constitute the binary can see them as being in contact rather than oppositional, thereby enlarging understanding of both as mutually constituted. This brings to light the complexity and contingency of the binary relationships, showing that the two entities are more interdependent and mutually influential than oppositional and antithetical. Detecting similarities, in spite of striking differences, between binaries enables the rejection of binary ways of thinking and the foreclosing of understanding. This opens up spaces for new interests, understandings, and translations, catalyzing the potential for rediscovery. The emphasis here is on the fluidity and permeability of the boundaries beyond both halves of the binary so as to reconstruct these relations positively.

Education researchers have another strategy for engaging and moving beyond binaries, namely whereby the subjects are positioned as knowing agents confronting the ways in which normal/deficient are researched, and reshape the ways in which the superior/submissive are studied. Education research that seeks to undo binaries is not concerned with the dominated being given fair treatment by dominant interests, because this encourages them to focus passively on what they can expect from the dominant. The undoing of the binaries is attempted through acting together based on the presupposition that the dominated are as intelligent

as the dominant, even if the latter do not recognize or acknowledge that intellectual equality.

The accounts in this book pose insightful new questions about the complicated task of moving beyond binaries in and through education research. The focus can be on developing unambiguous prescriptions for use of the terms involved in binaries by arguing for conceptual clarity. The emphasis here is on conceptual abstractions that tend to be vague and lack any empirical reference. A shift to emphasize consistency in reasoning through the logical analysis of binaries offers insights into the contradictory framing of education researchers' thinking. The irony in the strategy of questioning the uses of binaries by authoritative sources carries with it a necessary presumption of an authoritative stance on the part of education researchers, opening such critiques to being domesticated or neutralized. Critiques of the binaries built into the educational structures they uphold have proven precarious strategies, offering few convincing procedures for transcending these binaries.

The efforts at moving beyond binaries in education research represented by the accounts in this book reaffirm and review the critical function of education research through reexamining the concepts and methods for challenging binaries. Together they point to the scope and limits of efforts to move beyond binaries as an objective and a method of education research that takes as its aims the rejection of subservience to sociopolitical domination or unquestioning acquiescence to intellectual authority, and creating new modes of education research and knowledge production.

## Preface

*Bruce Muirhead and Samantha Dean*

The intellectual and academic structuralist movement swept through France and Europe during the mid twentieth century, knocking existentialism off its avant-garde pedestal and radically redefining theoretical approaches and critiques of culture, research, and philosophy. Frequently cited as the founder of the movement is French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who grounded his work in a view of myths as a record of the true history of the principal philosophical endeavor of mankind.

According to Lévi-Strauss, there existed major oppositions among the mythical archetypes of certain animals. Each mythic creature represented a particular meaning and set of associations and from this Lévi-Strauss argued for a general rule: that a pair of antagonists was the primary element of all mythical narratives and, further, that this was a broader symptom of the way in which the human mind operates.

Structuralism thus positions human behavior as guided by an unconscious gravitation toward organizing concepts into binary opposites (male/female, public/private, good/evil, academia/pop culture). Conceptualizations of binary opposites have proved an enduring feature of critical analysis, weathering poststructuralist and postmodernist deconstruction and assault, to the point where poststructuralism is often described as a mere 'theoretical hangover' following the structural revolution. In an academic sense, the intellectual marshlands of postmodernism (difficult to emerge from, once one begins to struggle and resist) have widened the goal posts on the playing field in an analysis of binary opposites within a wide range of academic contexts.

*Beyond Binaries in Education Research* goes one step further, examining the prevalence of binary opposites within the research process itself, focusing its lenses on education research in recognition of existing and prevalent dualisms within the sector: ability/disability, academic/vocational, adult/child, West-East. It is logical that the contributors to this collection have found ample subject matter on which to reflect and contribute given that education and teaching represent the transference of knowledge in its purest and most direct form.



The most basic cultural binary opposition, the male/female gender divide, is a dualism which is drummed into us at an early age (Blue nursery walls or pink? Tea-parties or trucks?). Sherilyn Lennon discusses this in Chapter 14, *Exposing Bush Binaries: Using the Media to Problematize Gender*, providing a mode for disrupting gender beliefs and practices that can work to inhibit students' schooling and life performances. Similarly, Patrick Alan Danaher and Robyn Henderson speak of constructive ways of disrupting sedentarism (the binary in the Western world which positions fixed residence as the sociocultural norm against which mobility is positioned as a pathology) in formal education in Chapter 6, *Moving Beyond Sedentarism: Conceptual and Empirical Developments*.

Constructive disruption may seem like a paradox, but it is an important concept in terms of moving beyond narrow conceptions of education, teaching, and learning patterns at all stages of development, early-years through to early-years career researcher. In the coming decades our emerging knowledge economy will position research, learning, and education as a commodity of escalating value and importance.

During the 1970s author, poet, and inventor Jacob Bronowski spoke of students approaching their studies with a certain "ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence", the point of learning not being to worship what is known, but to question it.

*Beyond Binaries in Education Research* skillfully adheres to this worthy ideal, questioning why binaries continue to operate in education research and the ways in which this conceptual, physical, and/or methodological space can be maneuvered to obtain positive synergies rather than positive-negative binaries.



## Robyn Henderson

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West Street  
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Queensland  
Australia

that will be very much appreciated indeed!

Thanks again and all the best, Patrick

# Beyond Binaries in Education Research

Edited by [Warren Midgley](#), [Mark A. Tyler](#), [Patrick Alan Danaher](#), [Alison Mander](#)

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*Beyond Binaries in Education Research* explores the ethical, methodological, and social justice issues relating to conceptualizations of binary opposites in education research, particularly where one side of the dualism is perceived to be positive and the other negative. In education research these may include ability-disability, academic-vocational, adult-child, formal-informal learning, male-female, research-practice, researcher-participant, sedentary-mobile, and West-East. Chapters in this book explore the resilience of binary constructions and present conceptual models for moving beyond them and/or reconceptualizing them to facilitate more productive approaches to education provision. With contributors from authors working in a multitude of educational fields and countries, this book provides a significant contribution to the ongoing challenge to seek new ways to move beyond binaries in education research.

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### Abstract

This book seeks to explore the ethical, methodological, and social justice questions that arise in education research that is founded on conceptualizations of binary opposites. In education research these dualisms may include ability-disability, academic-vocational, adult-child, domestic-foreign, formal and informal learning, health-illness, majority-minority, male-female, practitioner-educator, public-private, qualitative-quantitative research, research-practice, researcher-participant, sedentary-itinerant, West-East, and young-old.

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