The “Postmodern” Heresy in Special Education: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

The special education profession has witnessed a recent struggle between researchers who defend a positivistic approach to knowledge and practice and “postmodern” special educators who challenge that approach. In this analysis I utilize a sociological theory of heresy to examine the conflict between postmodern heresy and positivist orthodoxy. I also investigate the cultural model of the special education profession, a discursive definition of ideology and heresy, characteristics of heresy in an organization, and the presence of deep contradiction within agreement between orthodoxy and heresy. I conclude with an examination of the limitations of heresy theory and the democratic challenge facing the multiparadigmatic field of special education.

We have always had quacks and we will have them in perpetuity. But PD [postmodern/deconstructivist] notions of the invalidity of science and the arbitrary construction of truth have great potential for diverting us from progress and into perfidy.—Kauffman (1999, p. 250)

There is now a clear movement in special education “that questions the perception, widespread in our field, that empirical knowing constitutes a privileged or singular truth”—Reid, Robinson, and Bunsen (1995, p. 12).

... and that, consequently, questions the validity of the knowledge base in special education.—Mostert and Kavale (2001, p. 55)

Heresy is a fight for the heart and soul of a profession.—Wolpe (1994, p. 1136)

According to some recent accounts, there is an “academic cult” (Sasso, 2001, p. 188) called “postmodernists” in special education who are “not concerned with the central premise and promise of special education (Sasso, 2001, p. 188). “Reportedly, postmodern special educators have decided that teaching competency skills to children with disabilities is too difficult” (Sasso, 2001, p. 188). Having given up on teaching skills to students, this group is described as espousing a wide range of bad educational reforms and ineffective professional practices, including inclusive education (Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Sasso, 2001), whole language literacy instruction (Heward, 2003; Sasso, 2001), and constructivist instructional practices (Heward, 2003; Kauffman, 1999). According to numerous published descriptions, these postmodernists are more than unreasonable or incompetent. They are dangerous. Kauffman provided a strong warning about the dire implications of believing postmodernists: “If we accept such notions we will be left with little or nothing but cognitive demolition debris. Guess who will be buried deepest in the rubble? Children with disabilities, of course” (p. 249).

As one of the special educators who has been described as a dangerous postmodernist (e.g., Danforth, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997), I understandably became interested in both the content and of the sense of alarm that seemed to fill these accounts. To have someone disagree with something that I had written seemed very reasonable to me. Disagreement is a healthy part of professional dialogue; however, when I noticed that my work and the writings of other special educators were described as hazardous to the well-being of students with disabilities, when I saw that I was described as a member of a group of “charlatans,” “scam artists,” and “quacks” (Kauffman, 1999, p. 249–250), my curiosity was piqued. What is going on in the field of special education? What is this battle between “positivism” and “postmodernism” all about?

Over the last 2 decades, numerous challenges to the positivistic social science of disability in the
field of special education have appeared in the professional literature (Heshusius, 1982, 1984, 1988, 1989; Iano, 1986, 1987; Poplin, 1987, 1988; Skrtic, 1986). Although the criticism of the positivistic science of disability was heated and thorough in the 1980s, drawing forth a defense of positivism (e.g., Dixon & Carnine, 1992; Forness & Kavale, 1987), only recently has the response of the defenders of that positivistic science labeled, defined, and castigated a heresy and a heretical group. Only recently has the critique of the positivist social science been viewed as dangerous. The heresy, as described by those who defend a positivistic science of disability defense, is “postmodernism” (Crockett, 2001; Dammann & Vaughn, 2001; Gerber, 2001; Greenwood, 2001; Heward, 2003; Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Mostert & Kavale, 2001; Sasso, 2001; Strain, 2001; Walker et al., 1998).

The conflict between positivism and postmodernism in special education erupted after a recent series of articles (Brantlinger, 1997; Danforth, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Gallagher; 1998; Skrtic, 1991; Skrtic & Sailor, 1996; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996) in which the value and validity of the positivistic science of disability were questioned, raising not merely methodological issues that might be corrected by a refined positivism but claiming to find deep philosophical and ethical deficiencies in the positivistic science of disability. Despite tremendous differences in the theoretical dispositions of the various critics of postmodernism, the overall effect was one of claiming that the emperor had no clothes. These authors argued that the positivistic science of disability does not produce uniquely correct or useful knowledge about persons with disabilities or professional practices. They believe that it rests on false philosophical grounds; contributes to unjust political arrangements; and fails to facilitate practical dialogues, analyses, and practices that can potentially benefit persons with disabilities and their families. This sweeping critique was highlighted by a defensive movement by self-proclaimed positivists consisting of a barrage of writings clustering critical perspectives under the banner of “postmodernism,” defining that group and its writings as not just wrong but deviant and dangerous, and articulating a plea to special educators to remain faithful to a positivistic brand of disability science (Crockett, 2001; Dammann & Vaughn, 2001; Gerber, 2001; Greenwood, 2001; Heward, 2003; Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Mostert & Kavale, 2001; Sasso, 2001; Strain, 2001; Walker et al., 1998).

The banner headings “positivism” and “postmodernism” are simultaneously meaningful and misleading to any reader attempting to understand this conflict. Each term denotes a particular philosophical tradition holding to an orientation toward knowledge and politics in relation to social services and professional activity. The positivistic tradition in special education espouses value-free research methods leading to objective analyses. The primary research methods within this tradition are statistical or behavioral. A central goal of positivistic researchers is the identification of effective professional practices. Professional practices should be scientifically validated before widespread distribution. From this perspective, although the knowledge about individuals with disabilities and their families is often helpful, the most valuable knowledge about disability issues resides within the social science based professions (Crockett, 2001; Dammann & Vaughn, 2001; Gerber, 2001; Greenwood, 2001; Heward, 2003; Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Mostert & Kavale, 2001; Sasso, 2001; Strain, 2001; Walker et al., 1998).

Perhaps more confusing are the range of views captured under the heading postmodernism, for it includes both postmodern thought and a hodge-podge of other philosophical traditions. Educational philosophers would probably describe the works gathered under this heading by the orthodox as examples of critical theory, hermeneutics, pragmatism, and phenomenology. To complicate matters further, these philosophical traditions both critique positivism and conflict fully with postmodern thought.

What unites these disparate philosophies under the miscast moniker postmodernism is simply the fact that they provide conceptual means to critique the basic positivistic positions on professional knowledge and practice. These philosophies do not support the notion that a value-free research methodology is possible or that professional practices can be scientifically validated or invalidated. They do not support the idea that statistical or behavioral forms of research are superior to interpretive social science, historical research, or humanities scholarship. Finally, these perspectives do not support the assumption that professional knowledge is more accurate or useful than the knowledge of persons with disabilities or their family members (Brantlinger, 1997; Danforth, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Gallagher; 1998; Skrtic, 1991; Skrtic & Sailor, 1996). If we were to attempt the very dangerous task
of describing the kinds of professional practices supported by the positivists and the so-called postmodernists, it might look like this: The positivistic camp generally touts educational practices that have been supported by empirical (primarily quantitative and/or behavioral) research. These practices usually include (but are not limited to) direct instruction, various forms of behavior modification, and functional assessment. The primary emphasis is on the requirement that practices receive the approval of positivistic research prior to widespread utilization by classroom teachers. For this reason, the positivists are often skeptical of inclusive education because of the idea that inclusion is based on political goals rather than empirical research.

Although the special educators called “postmodernists” operate from a variety of philosophical positions, they tend to support educational practices that are typically described as progressive and have a social justice orientation. Generally speaking, these authors support constructivist and activity learning approaches to teaching. They tend to see teaching and learning as a relational activity, an experience occurring within the social space shared by teacher and student(s). Also, they tend to view this experience as occurring within a cultural context marked by complex social dynamics and political arrangements. They generally think of inclusive education not so much as an end met by changing individual students with disabilities to fit within general education but as a school reform effort that increases the variety of instructional and social supports available to all students (with and without disabilities) within general education settings. They often view inclusive education as central to schooling in a democratic society.

In this paper I rely on a sociological concept of heresy, “a useful concept for the study of the relation between belief systems and social organization” (Kurtz, 1983, p. 1087). Heresy has been theorized as a social process, consisting of both heresy and orthodoxy. Heresy occurs within a dynamic interplay of two groups, the orthodox who defend and define a belief system known as orthodoxy and the heretics who put forth a belief system that challenges some vital aspects of the orthodoxy. Heresy and orthodoxy operate in dependent interaction, each system of belief relying on the other as a contrasting foil for the purposes of defining its own values and purposes (Kurtz, 1983; Lessl, 1988; Wolpe, 1990, 1994; Zito, 1983).

My two-fold purpose in this paper is to provide a sociological analysis of the “postmodern” heresy within the field of special education and to examine the limitations of heresy theory in application to this profession. I will operate under the assumption that an analysis of this social and political conflict can provide useful insight and understanding about the field as a complex, social organization. Sociological research on heresy has shifted from a historical focus on theological error within religions to a modern excavation of opposition to secular forms of authoritative knowledge in professions and sciences. Drawing from this pertinent work, I will utilize a sociological theory of heresy developed by Kurtz (1983), Lessl (1988), Wolpe (1990, 1994), and Zito (1983). In the conclusion, I will propose insights that move beyond the limited bounds of heresy theory and challenge the field to engage in a more democratic, inclusive professional conversation.

### The Cultural Model of a Profession

A profession consists of a wide variety of actors in a range of different roles who share what Wolpe (1994) called a “cultural model”; an active framework of language, practices, and beliefs that guide both what professionals “profess” and do. The profession’s cultural model “is dominated by the profession’s ideology, but also includes its unique combination of myths, research findings, prophecies, techniques, organizational forms, standard political affiliations, and so on” (Wolpe, 1994, p. 1136).

The cultural model consists of both formal and informal features that operate in dynamic exchange and interaction over time and place. The formal features of special education consist of general components and products of authoritative sources of knowledge, such as the positivistic science of disability, laws, and government policies that invest the profession with specific purposes and obligations as well as the professional standards of licensure and conduct set by state educational agencies and professional organizations. The formal features tend to rely on external, overarching sources of authority for the generation of knowledge and belief.

The informal features of the model include the greatly varied dispositions, attitudes, stories, values, beliefs, and practices that professionals espouse and enact. These informal features are more local and idiosyncratic in content than formal features, expressing the thinking and values of individuals and
small groups working within local settings of practice, administration, or research.

The central ideology of special education is a dominant, formal feature that is played out through the informal aspects of the model, interpreted and augmented with some degree of variation by professionals at the local level. This ideology is demonstrated and inculcated through professional organizations (e.g., the Council for Exceptional Children), teacher education, and doctoral education programs carried out in university settings, and research that appears in recognized professional journals.

In Wolpe’s (1990, 1994) research on the medical profession, he located the ideology of that field in a particular form of science called biomedicine, an orientation to human health and illness that views the body as a biochemical organism to be physically altered and functionally improved through professional medical practice. The ideology of the field is framed around a specific biological science of the body but also includes instructions and proper attitudes concerning how to view that science and apply its products in professional practice.

Unlike medicine, special education does rely on a single ideology. The dominant ideology in the history of the field of special education, however, is the positivistic science of disability, including a deficit model that defines disability as a diminishment of physical or psychological functioning and frames the professional practitioner as a knowledgeable interventionist who utilizes practices that increase functioning levels. This ideology primarily unites two forms of positivistic social science, a psychology of measurement and a behavioral theory of learning or change. The measurement psychology is used to separate disorder from normality and to gauge levels of individual ability and functioning. The behavioral approach to learning and instruction is used to develop skills and behaviors in incremental fashion.

**Professional Ideology as Discourse**

“A profession is defined by what it professes.” — Wolpe (1994, p. 1136)

Sociologists have theorized professional ideology as a form of discourse (Wolpe, 1990, 1994; Zito, 1983), defined as “any collective activity that orders its concerns through language” (Zito, 1983, p. 124). Discourse is a wide array of social activity involving language and other cultural symbols in making sense of human experience (Gee, 1990).

Wolpe (1990, pp. 913–914) explained that it is helpful to view a profession as a “language community, bounded by common ways of expressing problems and, therefore, common ways of thinking about them.” These commonalities of language extend beyond the spoken and written word to include the purposes, values, and social arrangements ordered by that way of viewing and describing the world. Special educators generally share a common language of disability and professional action that includes the profession’s ways of framing problems and possible solutions. This discourse is developed and displayed in the articles and books written primarily by special education researchers and distributed to practitioners through university teacher education programs and the activities of professional associations.

Zito (1983) described an ideology as “a discourse seeking to monopolize ways of speaking about the world” (p. 124). Gee (1990) emphasized the active dimension of ideology in terms of the connection between language, thought, and action. In this broadened sense, an ideology is a discourse that attempts to monopolize ways of speaking and acting in the world, a discourse seeking uniformity within the cultural model of the profession.

Within a profession, a number of ideologies compete for favor. “Competing ideologies try to win the right to determine how people will speak (and therefore think) about things” (Wolpe, 1990, p. 914). Within academic circles, ideologies conflict as various theories of human activity and research paradigms battle for supremacy. In the field of psychiatry, for instance, psychotherapy has competed with psychopharmacology, resulting in university psychiatry departments where discussions of Freudian psychoanalysis and biochemistry of the brain oddly exist side-by-side (Wolpe, 1994). In psychology, the famous debates between B. F. Skinner and Carl Rogers pitted behaviorism against humanistic psychology. In public school reading instruction, there has been a heated competition between proponents of whole language and phonics-based instruction. In medicine, there has been an ideological contest between traditional biomedicine and the new holistic medicine (Wolpe, 1990). Because special education researchers and professors are the authors of the series of journal articles that have been involved in the conflict between heresy and orthodoxy, this portion of the analysis focuses on that social group.
An orthodoxy, according to Zito (1983), is “an institutionalized ideology” (p. 124), a system of language, thought, and action that becomes standard and customary within the social order. In professions such as special education, there is a tendency to adopt an orthodoxy, taking that framework on as vital to the identity and purpose of the profession.

I ideologies become entrenched in institutions, become identified with them, and are eventually perceived to be indistinguishable from them. . . . Professions are applied discourses with control over definitions within their areas of jurisdiction. The professional orthodoxy maintains unity by control over educational and professional transfers of knowledge (i.e., professional schools and journals) and tries to prevent competing ideologies from obtaining an institutional foothold. (Wolpe, 1990, p. 914)

Unity, coherence, direction, and political power are purposes achieved for the profession through the maintenance of the orthodoxy, through the continued proliferation of orthodox writings and the conforming inculcation of the practitioner ranks into the institutional order (Wolpe, 1990, 1994).

Within this discursive approach, heresy is “an attack, veiled or quite open, upon an institutionalized way of speaking about the world” (Zito, 1983, p. 125). Heresy within a profession is a challenge to the ideology of the institutional order by a less powerful subgroup within that profession (Wolpe, 1994). Therefore, heresy as statements or actions is not inherently heretical. It only becomes heresy through the response of an orthodox group who label a statement and a group as heretical (Kurtz, 1983; Lessl, 1988; Wolpe, 1990, 1994; Zito, 1983). The orthodox label a statement and often a group as heretical in an effort to defend the profession itself by safeguarding the sacrosanct, standard ideology of the profession. The difference between heresy and a simple difference of opinion resides in the degree and nature of the response of the orthodox.

Sociological Characteristics of Heresy

In this section, I provide a social anatomy of heresy consisting of five specific characteristics (Kurtz, 1983; Lessl, 1988), applying each in turn to the postmodern heresy in special education. Through this application, I will explore the current heretical situation in order to illuminate the social processes at work in the field of special education as the positivistic orthodoxy and the postmodern heresy have become highlighted, delineated, and polarized.

Geography of Heresy

The first characteristic of heresy is the way in which it is simultaneously near and remote. It consists of a combination of social proximity and ideational distance from orthodoxy, thereby making it seem morally toxic to the orthodoxy. As Kurtz (1983) explained, “Heretics are within the circle, within the institution; consequently, they are close enough to be threatening but distant enough to be considered in error” (p. 1987). For example, in Lessl’s (1988) study of the conflict between the orthodox science of evolution and the heretical creationist science, he noted that strident, fundamentalist creationist movement of the early 1900s did not create a heresy and a crisis within scientific circles. The famous 1925 Scopes trial matched evolutionary scientists against fundamentalist Christians who were viewed as outsiders by the scientists. Although the scientists obviously opposed the fundamentalist preachers who attacked evolutionary theory, this conflict did not constitute a heresy crisis because the Christians were beyond the scientific circle. Much was at stake, but the science itself was secure.

In the 1960s, however, a group of scientists began pursuing research in an attempt to support the story of creation in the Bible. This movement grew into a creationist science that challenged the authority of the mainstream scientific community. The orthodox scientific community rallied to publish articles, write books, and testify in court proceedings against the deviant insiders. Creationist science became a heresy within the ranks of science.

In the field of special education, this first characteristic can be seen in the contrast between the dramatic response of positivistic special educators to the deviant expressions of insiders (i.e., special educators) compared to the relatively mild response to the criticism of outsiders. The writings of special educators such as Brantlinger (1997), Danforth (1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997), Gallagher (1998), and Skrtic (1991; Skrtic & Sailor, 1996; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996) have been organized by the orthodox under the heading of postmodernism. This aggregation of an otherwise unconnected group of articles created a unified group of scholars and ideas for the purposes of definition, criticism, and rejection. This group and the writings of this group have been treated as heretical because each has critiqued the validity and value of the current
The most striking example of this phenomenon is the unacknowledged rise of the interdisciplinary field of disability studies (e.g., Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002; Davis, 1997; Linton, 1998; Thomson, 1997), a stream of academic literature that has deeply critiqued positivistic modes of special education and rehabilitation without provoking the least response from the defenders of orthodox special education. Embracing a social model of disability that sharply opposes the medical model and the positivistic philosophical foundations of orthodox special education, disability studies scholars are primarily university faculty members in history, literature, and sociology. Academics who are housed in arts and science departments, no matter how fierce and continuous their critique of the primary cultural model of special education, reside safely beyond the outer boundaries of the profession. A deviant insider poses a far greater threat than a critical outsider. Although a general educator or a historian might simply misunderstand what special education is all about, special education professors such as the heretics have spent years working within special education. They have studied extensively and are highly knowledgeable about special education research and practice. Lessl (1988) explained:

Nominal qualifications give the heretic a legitimate claim to group membership, but at the same time the heretic appears within the institution as a stranger, an alien persona executing remote agendas. . . . Heretics consequently have a disruptive potency greater than, not merely different from, that of the external enemies of the social institution. (p. 20)

Insiders who question the unquestionable can become enemies within the system.

**Struggle for Authority**

The second characteristic of the sociological theory is the way that heresy instigates a struggle for authority in an institution or organization. Heresy is not merely a deviant opinion. It is a doctrinally incorrect belief that is interpreted by the orthodox as a challenge to the authority that they safeguard. It is a statement or belief that not only diverges from the position of orthodoxy but moreover “threatens established power relations” (Zito, 1983, p. 125). The problem of heresy goes far beyond the fact that the heretics express a different belief system than the orthodox. Many individuals and groups within an organization discuss beliefs that deviate from the institutional norm without receiving a collective response and definition of heresy from the orthodox. “Only when error challenges authority is it treated as heresy” (Lessl, 1988, p. 21).

In the field of special education, the orthodox and the postmodern heretics argue ostensibly over the positivistic science of disability; but the conflict goes beyond disagreements over frequently articulated concerns, such as the value of different research methods. The orthodox and the postmodern heretics struggle over control of the production of knowledge in the field. The orthodox defend a positivistic form of social science that has been prominent in the history of special education, while the postmodern heretics have submitted a variety of alternative epistemologies as equal or superior. What marks this group of heretics is not the fact that they all share a common orientation to social research, for they do not. They are implicated in common by
their voiced opposition to the authority of the positivistic social science of disability and by their shared role as a perceived threat to the authority of the institutionalized order of the field.

The key to understanding this conflict lies not in the merits of positivism or any of these alternative philosophies of science. The key lies in questions of authority and control: Who controls the knowledge base of special education? Who controls the authority to sanction or reject beliefs and educational practices? Or, more dramatically put, Who gets to say the way it is? Historically, researchers of a positivistic orientation have held primary control over the knowledge base in the field. Special education critics who have been dubbed “postmodern” by the orthodox have not only questioned whether placing these questions in the hands of a group of positivistic researchers is the best arrangement. They have, in a variety of ways, contended that the status quo dispensation of epistemological authority in special education does not serve the best interests of students with disabilities and their families.

Group Solidarity

The third characteristic of heresy is its potential for encouraging solidarity within the orthodox and, to a lesser extent, the heretics. It creates the social conditions for the unification of the orthodox rallied behind a cause.

Heresy is two-sided: it at once threatens the institution by introducing and propagating error but also causes the institution’s members to draw together in a community of responsibility devoted to extinguishing the fires of deviance. (Lessef, 1988, p. 21)

Through the labeling and suppression of heresy, institutional elites can rally support for their position through battle with a common enemy (Kurtz, 1983, p. 1299).

Organization members who otherwise might not worry about whether they are positivists can be drawn together under a single voice to battle the heretical interlopers.

The heretics may experience some degree of new found solidarity, depending on the extent to which their purposes and interests allow them to accept the grouping and labeling provided to them by the orthodox. For example, under the postmodern heading, the orthodox special educators lump together proponents of whole language reading instruction, Freudian psychotherapy, and facilitated communication. It is difficult to imagine all these groups coming together under a common group identity and purpose. Their commonality exists primarily in that fact that each independently engages in a professional activity unsanctioned by a positivistic social science of disability. On the other hand, some so-called postmodern heretics in special education did, in fact, join other educational scholars in founding the Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group, a subgroup of the American Educational Research Association, in 1999. Heresy can bring unity even to the heretics.

Boundary Work

The fourth characteristic of heresy is the creation of an atmosphere conducive to what Lessl (1988, p. 21) called “boundary work,” intellectual and practical efforts to clarify philosophical positions that differentiate between orthodoxy and nonorthodoxy. In many cases, heresy can provide a motivation and opportunity for institutional loyalists to work together to further define and articulate their doctrinal position, a task previously unnecessary due to the lack of a perceived threat.

The development of solidarity and the achievement of boundary work have both taken place among the orthodox of special education in this crisis of postmodern heresy. After the recent series of postmodern heretical articles, numerous statements explaining and defending a positivistic science of disability have been issued (Crockett, 2001; Dammann & Vaughn, 2001; Gerber, 2001; Greenwood, 2001; Heward, 2001; Kauffman, 1999, 2002; Mostert & Kavale, 2001; Sasso, 2001; Strain, 2001; Walker et al., 1998). Two complete issues of the journal Behavioral Disorders (May 1998 and November 2001) have been devoted to explaining the positivist approach to social research, touting that philosophy’s merits and describing postmodernism as misguided and dangerous.

To some extent, through the crisis of heresy, opposing groups and stances develop in a way that did not exist prior to the crisis. The struggle for authority impacts both the orthodox and the heretics, propelling the disputing sides to consolidate their internal alliances, build group identity, and further clarify their positions and beliefs. This occurs more fully and consistently among the orthodox who rally to defend a common, established order. Over time, self-interests and group interests become attached to the values and positions held by a given social group. In the case of the orthodox, these values and beliefs are distilled in support of the central ideology and in opposition to what they perceive to be the threatening positions of the heretics. Simultaneously, to the extent that the her-
tics see common ground among their interests, they may refine and codify their belief system(s) in contrast to the values and words of the orthodox. Individuals on both sides tend to organize their own self-interests and group interests through their group identification. Theoretical and practical differences within groups are downplayed as group identification grows. Similarly, overlap between the interests and values of the two groups tend to be ignored on both sides as the lines of group allegiance are sharpened by the conflict.

Denouncing Heresy as Ritual Activity

The fifth characteristic of heresy is that “the process of defining and denouncing heresy is a ritual activity” (Kurtz, 1983, p. 1090) executed to, among other things, relieve anxiety within the organization or institution.

Rituals serve to relieve the social and psychological tensions and to focus anxiety on that which is controllable... Anxiety over the weather is channeled into anxiety over the proper performance of weather-oriented rituals, such as the rain dance. (Kurtz, 1983, p. 1090)

Anxiety over the inevitability and uncontrollable nature of death is channeled into concerns over the costs and procedures of proper health care. Anxiety over violence in society is channeled into attention to the performance of police investigations and the criminal prosecution of offenders. In general, anxiety over what lays beyond the control of the organization is translated into ritual activities that focus energy on objects, people, and activities that seem to be within the bounds of control.

Lack of control has been central to the writings of the orthodox during this heresy crisis. Specifically, the group has expressed dismay over special education practitioners who fail to implement the professional practices that the orthodox know will bring about positive educational and life outcomes for students. The commonly expressed argument is that the positivist science of disability has discovered effective practices for teaching students with disabilities. Teaching practices should be driven by this science.

Special education research has produced a significant and reliable knowledge base about effective teaching practices. (Heward, 2003, p. 188)

Special educators, like scientists, are problem solvers... A central question we need to answer is whether or not our practices may be replicated by others to solve similar problems. It is with respect to repeatability that scientific positivism provides the scientist/special educator with the means of making genuine progress toward effectiveness. (Greenwood, 2001, p. 48)

But the teachers, however, fail to consistently implement the practices researched and authorized by the positivistic researchers. Perhaps in no field is there a more glaring disconnect between the availability of proven research-based methods and their effective application by consumers than in education (Walker et al., 1998). An objective comparison between what research has discovered about effective instruction and the school day experienced by many students with disabilities reveals a large difference between what is known and what is practiced (Heward, 2003, p. 201).

This is a powerful frustration, knowing precisely what should be done but watching professionals not following that correct advice. Faced with this frustration, Heward (2003) encouraged special educators to conduct research on how to get teachers to implement scientifically validated practices. “The answer does not lie in more research alone. We need more research aimed at bridging the gap between current knowledge and classroom practice” (p. 201). The cure for the anxiety faced by positivists is positivism.

Perhaps the greatest frustration among the orthodox concerns other university professors who do not espouse positivism-supported educational practices to their students, professors who fail to remain faithful to an orthodox view of disability science (Heward, 2003; Kauffman, 1999; Sasso, 2001; Walker et al., 1998). It is to this group of deviant professors and research colleagues that the orthodox turn their attention and focus their anxieties in the process of defining and suppressing the postmodern heresy.

The heresy ritual coordinated by the orthodox denounces the postmodernists as the infidels of disability science. Sasso (2001, p. 188) described the impact of postmodern heresy as “a deterioration of intellectual energy,” a powerful drain upon the resources of the field. He lamented that “the postmodern critics of special education appear to have given up on children with disabilities” (p. 188), thereby equating the positivistic view of social science with the profession’s moral purpose of improving the well-being of children with disabilities. Walker et al. (1998) compared positivist disability science to “a compass and a sense of direction to find our way through the thickets of bias, assumption, and intuition.” Using a similar travel metaphor, Heward (2003) expressed fear that special educators may lose their way without positivist science, and he encouraged them to return to the faithful, orthodox path.
The journey is difficult, and it is easy to get discouraged when progress is slow and there is so far to travel. At times we may lose our way in the maze created by postmodern deconstructivism. Blinded by the promise of fads and miracle cures, it is easy to lose faith in the trustworthy but slow-moving and cautious guides who have been part of the field from the beginning: empiricism...parsimony...philosophic doubt...and scientific manipulation.... These four attitudes of science have served special education well since the field’s inception.

We need them now more than ever. (p. 201)

Among the orthodox, failing to believe in the validity and value of the science of disability is equated with giving up on both special education and students with disabilities. An attempt is made to alleviate anxieties through the ritual of heresy, through blaming the postmodernists for the fact that many classroom teachers do not utilize positivist-supported professional practices.

**Contradiction Amidst Agreement**

In the struggle for professional authority between orthodoxy and heresy, special educators may tend to identify with one side’s cause or the other and ignore the common values and beliefs that lie beneath the conflict. To date, there has been little serious attention to the beliefs and values shared by the orthodox and the heretics in special education.

Heresy researchers point to the shared terrain of agreement as the linchpin of the dispute, the site of the most useful and insightful analyses of the organization or institution (Grundmann, 1995; Zito, 1983). The path to drawing insight from the shared space is not to blithely champion the commonalities in order to downplay the power of the disagreements. Instead, Grundmann and Zito encouraged researchers to plumb the depths of mutual agreement in search of rational inconsistencies, seeking the incongruities that exist within agreements. When a struggle between orthodoxy and heresy erupts, the ferocity and content of the conflict arises out of the fact that the two sides simultaneously agree and disagree on fundamental values. The foundational confluence of agreement and contradictory disagreement surfaces, expands, and ruptures through the struggle for authority. Bringing forth that deep contradiction—the simultaneous agreement and disagreement—into the light of day will provide special educators with insight into the social dynamics of heresy and orthodoxy within the profession.

In order to locate the deep contradiction that underlies the heresy/orthodoxy struggle in the field, one must find disagreement hidden within the topography of agreement, the ground of beliefs and assumptions that the positivists and the postmodernists in special education mutually espouse. The result of this analysis will be an illumination of the foundational incongruity, thereby allowing special educators to view heresy not merely as a disruption of the status quo but as an opportunity to understand the social dynamics of the profession.

**Deep Contradiction Among Special Education Researchers**

Because special education researchers and professors are the authors of the series of journal articles that have been part of the conflict between heresy and orthodoxy, in this portion of the analysis, I will focus on that social group. Although the dispute over positivistic social science has profound implications for professional practice, the orthodoxy/heresy conflict in the field exists most obviously among the researchers. Analysis, therefore, is focused on this most obvious group.

Special education researchers and professors, regardless of where they stand on a host of research issues, demonstrate the following foundational belief in their writings and university teaching: The actions of university special educators—the articles and books they write and the instruction they provide to teachers—should directly or indirectly provide benefit to the educational experiences and lives of children and adolescents with disabilities and their families. Simply put, university special education professors should make a positive contribution to the learning and well-being of children and adolescents with disabilities.

The fact that this statement seems rather bland and obvious is evidence of the fact that they are virtually undeniable assumptions made by university special educators. There is no doubt that both orthodox and heretical special education professors hold at least this belief as part of the moral basis of their professional work.

The current heresy conflict in special education arises from the disagreement contained within this agreement, the incongruity that arises as a contradiction within this foundational value. This value asserts that university special educators and researchers are engaged in a moral calling that should lead to useful and worthwhile results in the lives of students with disabilities and their families. The contradictory circumstance arises over the notion...
that one should act in such a way that "provides benefit" to students and families. The struggle between orthodoxy and heresy in special education has provided ample evidence of the fact that special education professors and researchers do not all agree about what they should be doing to "provide benefit" to students and families. They do not share a consensus about what kinds of service, arrangements, and practices might be beneficial. They do not agree about what constitutes quality research or knowledge. They do not agree about what university professors and researchers should be writing and teaching in order to bring about this disputed benefit.

The lack of consensus about what special education researchers and professors should write and teach leaves many in that group distinctly aware that their efforts to row the professional boat in an eastward direction are fully countered by another researcher's efforts to row the boat to the west; and both are dismayed to notice that another duo of opposing paddlers is attempting to propel the craft simultaneously to the north and to the south. As Zito (1983) explained, "the true believer finds, in the case of heresy, that the beliefs that he has devoutly held may lead to quite other consequences than his faith has led him to expect" (p. 128). Though east is viewed as the one true direction, and although that orthodox believer paddles fervently and honestly to the east for many years, the whole boat may be heading elsewhere.

Outcomes of a Heresy Struggle

With paddlers pushing in opposing directions, where is the boat going? Where will the heresy/orthodoxy struggle lead? In this section, I examine the four possible outcomes to a heresy conflict in a profession as described by Wolpe (1994): competition, conformity, schism, and triumph. Then, in the conclusion, I explore the limitations of the heresy model in application to special education, propose an alternative explanation, and challenge the field to engage in a more democratic and inclusive kind of professional discourse.

Competition

My analysis thus far has focused heavily on the first outcome, an on-going political competition for authority between the orthodox and the heretics. "Prolonged competition is a sign of a relatively weak orthodoxy" (Wolpe, 1994, p. 1143), whereas a short, quick struggle indicates a secure orthodox authority. Competition can lead to a truce, a sort of live and let live arrangement, whereby each group agrees to pursue its own goals while allowing the other to pursue its own ends. More often, though, competition leads to conformity or schism.

Conformity

The primary strategy of most orthodox groups is to encourage conformity within the profession. This has certainly been true of the writings of the special education orthdox as the group has claimed that positivism is the only correct path for the profession. For those who hold that the very identity and moral value of the field is synonymous with a positivistic social science approach to social problems, the existence of paddlers pressing simultaneously in opposing directions is a profound indication of the failure of the field to embrace a single definition of social science and the resolute purpose articulated by and through that science. The response of the orthodox in this struggle has been to encourage university special educators to conform to an ideological consensus, to accept and hold faith to a positivistic social science as the means to discerning beneficial action in the profession.

The campaign for scientific conformity can profoundly impact the work of new researchers; untenured university faculty members; and doctoral students, whose immediate career success depends, to some extent, on how senior researchers view their research. It may be that the message to conform to a specific articulation of disability science has the greatest impact among this relatively vulnerable and low-powered group, who do not have the cultural capital (such as doctorates and university tenure) that would allow them the luxury of pursuing dissident forms of disability scholarship.

Schism

A third possibility is a schism, a split of the profession into two distinct, professional groups. "When the heretical group is powerful, unyielding, and radical, schism is usually the result" (Wolpe, 1994, p. 1145). In the case of the postmodern heresy, the organizational and legal structure of special education within the public schools does not support the likelihood of a professional schism. Federal law and bureaucratic arrangement only enfranchise and fund one special education system in the United States. Strictly speaking, unlike a religious schism that may produce a new church or temple
Postmodern heresy

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around the corner to accommodate the newly organized and independent heretics, the special education profession is fairly singular in structure.

Nonetheless, the options for schism are still two-fold, one in terms of research and one in relation to teacher education. Nonconforming nonpositivistic researchers can gather under the heading of disability studies (e.g., Barnes et al., 2002; Davis, 1997; Linton, 1998; Thomson, 1997), an advocacy-focused, interdisciplinary field of scholarship that unites the humanities and critical sociology in explorations of disability issues. Disability studies is multiparadigmatic and multidisciplinary, facilitating a suitable conceptual and methodological connection to the broader field of educational research through the specific development of an educational emphasis within the disability studies literature. The American Educational Research Association (AERA), the largest educational research organization in the world, has long been home to multiple paradigms and traditions of social research, simultaneously nurturing positivism, critical theory, hermeneutics, and postmodernism under one broad umbrella. In addition, the AERA includes many researchers who investigate issues of social identity (e.g., class, race, gender) and educational experience, creating a comfortable home for the development of a disability studies in education.

In relation to teacher education, inclusion-oriented heretics can leave special education proper to pursue inclusive education while straddling the general education/special education fence. For university teacher educators, this is increasingly possible given the trend in university schools of education to collapse departments of special education into departments of teacher education, creating a structure for melding general and special education at the university level.

Triumph

The last possibility Wolpe (1994) envisioned is triumph, a victory of the heretics over the orthodoxy. If the heretics do win, the history of the struggle and the field itself are both re-written. The heretics are likely to be recast as pioneers who were ahead of their times rather than miscreants and malcontents. If the postmodern heretics in special education triumph, it would signal not the replacement of one paradigm of disability research with another but a shift to a multiparadigmatic, multidisciplinary field of research and scholarship (see Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995; Skrtic, 1986, 1991). Positivistic social science would continue unabated, yet it would operate in conjunction with a wide variety of research programs and methods in the social sciences and humanities. It would be best to describe this shift as a move from a single orthodoxy that vests authority in one form of social science to a heterodoxy that supports many forms of disability research.

Beyond the Heresy Model: The Current Challenge to Special Education

Certainly, the heresy model provides valuable insight into the social dynamics of the special education profession by exposing many of the internal tensions and political dramas that take place over questions of knowledge. Yet, it simultaneously fails to help us see the way in which this positivism-postmodernism struggle presents a portrait of special education more suitable to the past than the present. This conflict rings true as more of an echo of special education history than an indication of the current state of the field. This debate has hit the journal pages not at the height of the ideological tensions between positivism and its opponents but years after positivism has relinquished sole ownership of the conceptual and practical core of the profession.

The most significant weakness of the application of heresy theory to the field of special education is the assumption that a hierarchical, bi-partite description of special education is comprehensive and accurate. In this description, the orthodoxy sit behind the great normative wall defending the established tradition against the invading, radical heretics. This depiction assumes the existence of (only) two fairly well-defined groups, one holding on to the reins of power and one contesting that power. It also assumes that special education has a single ideology at the core of research and practice.

In 1975 or 1980, or perhaps even as late as 1985, it would have been reasonable to say that positivism as demonstrated in its two primary strands—psychological measurement and behavioral psychology—stood at the vital core of the research and practice of the field of special education. Nonpositivistic alternatives generally operated at the margins of the field. Nonpositivist research traditions, such as interpretive ethnography and biography, though alive and valued in some circles, played a clear second fiddle to positivist research. Likewise, nonpositivist instructional traditions,
such as constructivist pedagogy, multicultural education, portfolio assessment, and relationship-focused pedagogies (e.g., caring, gentle teaching; psychoeducational teaching) took a backseat to positivistic approaches, such as behavior modification, direct instruction, and curriculum-based assessment.

Framing the recent conflict between positivism and so-called postmodernism in terms of a conflict between a dominant, singular orthodoxy and a radical, fringe heresy effectively transports us back to the special education profession some 20 or more years ago. This framing of the field produces a nostalgic picture of special education prior to the inclusion movement, prior to Will’s well-known 1986 report calling for a new effort to include students with disabilities in general education programs, prior to early debates about inclusion, and the widespread adoption of inclusive reform goals by the field.

What the positivist researchers have created in their various papers criticizing “postmodernism” is a rhetorical artefact that sets up an outdated positivist science as the moral standard-bearer of the profession and presses virtually all other ideas and activist science as the moral standard-bearer of the field.

It is a mistake to contend that it would require a triumph of the heretics over the orthodox for the special education profession to develop from a mono-ideological state to a multiparadigmatic, multidisciplinary field of scholarship and action. For the most part, that diversified professional field already exists. Most subareas of special education have already embraced a variety of research paradigms, multiple traditions of scholarship, and a wide variety of instructional approaches. Most subareas of special education have already moved beyond the earlier goal of uniformity of professional thought and action via a consensus around positivistic science.

Although the field is no longer ensconced in a single ideological framework, special education still faces the crucial question of how various ideologies and traditions of knowledge and practice can live peacefully and productively side-by-side in the same profession. The positivism–postmodernism struggle is an indication of the degree of discomfort existing between philosophically strange bedfellows who are unsure of how to relate to one another in a constructive way. To some extent, it may also be a reaction to the increasing interaction and overlap between general education and special education research and practices. The two traditionally isolated educational fields now frequently intermingle and cross-pollinate on the practical, theoretical, and paradigmatic level.

The challenge facing special education is tall but clear. John Dewey encouraged professions to both embrace the value of social research and participate in a rich, democratic dialogue of diverse positions and ideas. He once wrote, “Conformity is the name of the absence of vital interplay; the arrest and benumbing of communication” (Dewey, 1930, pp. 85–86). A genuine, democratic kind of communication entertains a vital interplay of many contrary ideas, refusing to seek a frozen conformity.

The current challenge to special educators is the development of a civil, professional conversation, including and supporting a wide diversity of philosophical and personal perspectives. This full, inclusive discourse requires a resolution to respectfully discuss and critique the ethical and political value of various research paradigms, theories of disability, and programs of professional activity without ever confusing the apparent allure of conformity with the success of genuine communication.

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