

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOOL EXAM**

**Critical Analysis:**

Haas, E. & Fischman, G. (2010). Nostalgia, entrepreneurship, and redemption: Understanding prototypes in higher education. *American Educational Research Journal* 47(3): 532-562.

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# **Critical Analysis: “Nostalgia, Entrepreneurship, and Redemption: Understanding Prototypes in Higher Education”**

## **Part 1 Description of the Overall Study**

There has been much scholarly work regarding linguistics and cognitive sciences as it relates to policy, education, research and schools. The understanding of these notions can lend a great deal of insight as to how concepts are perceived consciously and unconsciously; moreover, determining whether the usefulness of such information is more understandable contingent upon how it is perceived. This research project focused on the primary use of editorials and opinion related articles (i.e. op-eds) in determining how people understood the university and college as concepts. The stated goal of the research was to demonstrate the advantages of using preliminary models or prototypes of social institutions as a tool for analysis to determine if greater understanding could be gained as it relates to policy making in higher education.

As opinion texts generally reproduce accepted representations of social realities and ideologies, editorials provide deep reflection on matters of public concern and are an effective medium for understanding prototypes in higher education. The basis for this study was comprised of 1,053 opinion articles and editorials published from 1980-2005, derived from three major metropolitan influential US newspapers with vast circulation – i.e. New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Washington Post (Haas and Fischman, 2010 p. 533). The article for analysis was divided into four parts representing 1) theory and experientialist knowledge regarding prototypes; 2) the methodology utilized in the study; 3) data derived from the study and 4) the analysis, as well as conclusions derived from the research.

The social constructionist approach in the research design utilized Rosh’s and Lakoff’s notions of prototypes (conceptual categories) and Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis as the

main tools for understanding the prototypes for the conceptual category institutions of higher education (Haas & Fishman, 2010). Critical discourse analysis involves deconstructive reading and interpretation of language as a form of social practice with a focus on the ways social and political domination are visible in text and talk- language and power are entirely linked (Fairclough, 1995). Consistent with grounded theory, open coding/recoding objective-descriptive patterns and close text analysis of written documents (editorial and opinion articles) were employed to draw meaningful conclusions related to understanding social prototypes in higher education. Recursive method of constant comparison was used looking for correlational clusters with the goal of bridging prototype analysis directly to practical application.

According to Haas and Fischman (2010), they concluded the durability and applicability of gestalt constructions within policy debates including those that transpire in op-ed discourse: lived experiences is a fundamental aspect of conception regarding higher education constructs and prototypes; and further, redemptive educational consumerism (REC), academic nostalgia (AN and educational entrepreneurship (EE) are the most prevalent prototypes with redemptive educational consumerism attempting to reach a happy medium between educational entrepreneurship and academic nostalgia.

## **Part II Critical Evaluation of the Research**

Qualitative research can be valid and reliable; however, much of the internal and external validity as well as reliability are contingent upon the rigor of the researchers. Haas and Fischman presented as though cognizant regarding this issue as they reviewed op-ed sources that are considered a significant source of information regarding trends ideas and opinions within public policy debates. Although qualitative research can be less generalizeable than quantitative research, considering the criteria established within the study and the correlations to qualitative

methodology, it can be argued that the chosen methodology is the most appropriate for this study.

Haas and Fischman conducted an extensive review of the scholarly literature in their research study. The authors appear to have reviewed subject matter specific literature that was relevant to each component within their research project. With regard to the subject of conceptualization of prototypes, Haas and Fischman cited works by Lakoff, 1987, Murphy, 2002, Prinz, 2002, and Rosch, 1977, 1978, and 1999. According to Lakoff, with regard to scholarly literature, as humans, we understand the world via the construction of groupings or categories of concepts regardless of whether the concept is regarding the physical or the more abstract (as cited by Haas & Fishman, 2010). Haas and Fischman (2010) posits that humans understand the conceptual representation of prototypes as primary features of how single examples are categorized, thus greater understanding can be gained in the ways prototypes are understood consciously and unconsciously.

Haas and Fischman (2010) explored the notion of prototypes further as a means of justifying the need for their study. The authors derived from the empirical research available regarding social prototypes presented by mass media for higher education that such preliminary models can have a profound and significant effect on how individuals understand a concept at issue and whether policies related to the social prototype are sensible or not. Due to human understanding with regard to prototypes being most unconscious, those propositions that seem to favor the most prevalent prototype will have the advantage as the posited programs and policies will have a fundamental “gut-level” rationality and significance that other less politically prevalent prototypes will not (Hass & Fischman, 2010).

The research utilized text as the basis for their qualitative study. Reportedly, they collected 3,894 opinion and editorial writings from the Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and the New York Times at roughly 2-year intervals from the period of 1980 through 2005 (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p 537). Of those collected, 1,053 (27%) were related to higher education. The manner in which the researchers gathered the information was primarily through the use of a keyword search of the Lexis-Nexis database, with all false positives eliminated (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p 537). According to the researchers, these particular newspapers were chosen because they have a significant circulation and are frequently cited as being influential and asserting somewhat “ideologically balanced and nonpartisan” information (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p. 537). Further, these newspapers purportedly have a relatively heterogeneous readership and are considered more likely to include and incorporate various prototypes. Given the op-eds were anchored in New York City, Los Angeles and Washington, DC, there may be a potential for varied findings if newspapers were inclusive of rural, mid-West and Southern tier publications in analysis.

For this particular empirical study, the researchers analyzed the op-eds by using multilevel coding via NVivo 8 (WSR International), which is a qualitative software program specifically designed for conducting open coding and adds rigor to the analysis and consequent validity and reliability to findings. Initially, the researchers conducted coding on patters that were objective-descriptive of all 3,894 education op-eds; which, according to Hass and Fischman provided some descriptive contextual framework to the news population writing the articles and to the sociopolitical activities that are reported to have triggered the writing of the pieces.

Subsequently, the researchers conducted a series of iterative or repetitive close text analyses of a subset of the op-eds that were randomly selected with (n=249 or 23.6%)

representing the subset as higher education (n=1,053) (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p. 537). The open coding constant comparative methodology used by the researchers is consistent with grounded theory, which posits an inductive methodology consistent with the qualitative nature of the current research study. Grounded theory focuses on the systematic generation of theory from research that is conducted in a systematic; providing a set of rigorous research procedures that lead to the emergence of conceptual categories. These categories relate to each other as part of a theoretical explanation of the action that is in continuous resolution of the focus of the research (Glaser, 1978). This open coding constant comparative methodology utilized by the researchers was also used to identify and describe the discourse patterns that established the basis for the identification of the concept of higher education prototypes (Fairclough, 1995a).

The articles were read several times and were openly coded and recoded as the researchers went along. They then collected the codes and placed them in groups until they had established categories designed to be internally heterogeneous and homogeneous across group. The categories the researchers developed were representative of the larger sociopolitical context as previously discussed in the op-ed, and the elements of the argument posited by op-ed (Haas & Fischman, 2010). During this part of the researchers' analysis and empirical process, the approach utilized was common to other textual analyses that have been completed inclusive of critical discourse and discourse analyses.

Researchers took the additional step within the final round of analysis by examining presentation by op-eds' of how the institutions were structured to manage the access-quality, private-public tensions on the whole, the larger societal values, underlying belief system regarding higher education, and the means the institutions have to achieve the proposed goals. Researchers took the continuous recursive method of constant comparison to look for examples

of each tension in a manner based on a specific prototype lens, or a related set of characteristics that generated a prototype or gestalt institutional structure, in an effort to find correlational clusters versus being bound by a particular counting approach that values characteristics equally in a sufficient and necessary definition of the category as outlined in classic category theory.

Haas and Fischman (2010) maintain the goal of these additional analysis and steps were to bridge the prototype analysis as understood in critical discourse analyses and cognitive linguistics in an empirical application specifically applied. Through this theoretical lens, the researchers sought to establish how the op-ed writers conceived what a college or university is and should be, what is and what should be instructed, the students that are admitted and eventually graduate, how institutions of higher learning are and should be funded, and the desired and actual purpose of higher education, etc (Haas & Fischman, 2010). The three prototypes developed around three prototypes - one emerging and two already settled. Those prototypes that were consistently well formed and distinct were labeled educational entrepreneurship (EE) and academic nostalgia (AN) by Haas and Fischman (2010). The emerging prototype was labeled as redemptive educational consumerism (REC), which was considered partially formed; an attempt to find a middle road of reconciliation between AN and EE into a single institutional model while at the same time remaining distinct from the other two. Following, all articles were reviewed again and recoded according to the newly established prototypes to either confirm or note the general strength and presence and to provide a situational analysis of the presence in the media (Haas & Fischman, 2010).

There have been a number of recent advances in cognitive science that identify and help in our understanding of prototypes as a necessary act in the analysis of policy due to the natural emergence as a primary aspect of human cognition (Haas & Fischman, 2010). Like other

prototypes, those regarding higher education develop initially as gestalt; utilizing the unconscious and reflective processes that result in discursive variations that tend to be negated as insignificant inconsistencies that can be solved by simply presenting better and more data. One of the primary goals identified in the project was to contribute insight into the issues of higher education to aid in overcoming the limitations that pit educational researchers against each other. The researchers acknowledge that the use of prototypes within education policy requires significant change in contextual framework and conceptual perspectives. Due to the tendency of education researchers to presume the existence of exclusive conscious they tend to overlook that “facts about education” are not universally appreciated or understood and neither are goals of the nation and the institutions and policies required to achieve them (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p. 555).

Haas and Fischman maintain that as a result of the study and findings they ascertained that higher education prototypes are durable gestalt constructions that do not fluctuate in policy debates, even in newspaper op-eds. Various historical periods and other contexts will most likely produce different prototypes in addition to the ones described by the researches. Given the current political, demographic, and financial changes occurring in the United States, additional prototypes of higher education will more than likely emerge in the decades to come. Keeping abreast of these changes can be assistive in developing policies that are increasingly more effective.

Haas and Fischman provided an elegant and thorough discourse regarding prototypes, higher education, and the use and influence of op-ed as a reflection of individual and societal thought. The researchers provided sufficient justification for the decisions made to conduct a text based research project as well as the analysis that was utilized. This research project focused on

the primary use of editorials and opinion related articles in determining how people understood the university and college as concepts. The stated goal of the research was to demonstrate the advantages of using preliminary models or prototypes of social institutions as a tool for analysis to determine if greater understanding could be gained as it relates to policy making in higher education. Researchers took additional steps in their analysis to ensure rigor, reliability, internal and external validity as well as generalizability. The determinants in developing and establishing the three prototypes were clearly articulated and the scholarly literature used to support their study was sufficient to provide a great deal of insight. Data analysis provided by the researchers was inductive and the use of qualitative methodology was justified. Researchers clearly articulated the decision trail regarding reported analysis and the findings were consistent with current scholarly and empirical research and informed contributed to the knowledge base of empirical work on this subject.

Given the aforementioned, the design of the study is appropriate to address the research question as well as the objectives articulated by the researchers. They addressed a plethora of issues in considering the appropriateness of the design. Procedural rigor was evidenced in the research study and the researches clearly described the process and procedures instituted to ensure the accurate recording of data. Because this was text based qualitative research, some of the issues related to sampling and articulating particular steps regarding methodology were unnecessary outside of what the researchers provided as evidence of the processes utilized. There were no particular sites to access, informed consent to secure, or explicit training required for the execution of the study, which serves to make duplicating the research process accessible. For some, the fact that the research did not include participants or conduct any participant based analysis could be seen as lacking. A different perspective may have been garnered had the

questions been raised to individuals versus a review of op-ed articles and opinions. Whether by survey, using quantitative methodology, or by in depth interview using qualitative methodology, greater insight may have been gained if participants were used.

However, as the researchers chose to use text based research and analysis, inasmuch as the rigors of reliability and validity, the design of the study, and evidentiary support of their findings, the research was well done. Haas and Fishman acknowledge the notion that critics of this method of textual analysis indicate that interpretation is inherent in all language analysis, which could impact reliability and validity (2010). Haas and Fishman address this concern, “we do not attempt to eliminate interpretation but rather provide transparency on our research methods, as combined with data examples, to support our findings and conclusions such that the reader can re-experience the analytic process” (2010, p. 558). In support and as a strategy for validity, researchers included charts and primary data in a narrative account.

This work is important in that a great deal of insight is provided as to the perceptions regarding institutions of higher learning and how policy making is impacted. With the analysis derived from this study, a more critical look can be taken with regard to policy analysis and the impact of op-ed on policy decisions. It should be noted that researchers maintain that all media has bias and is true in this study as well with regard to liberal (early 90s) vs. conservative (late 90s) commentary (Haas & Fischman, 2010). Suggestions regarding the importance of future research in this area were noted as researchers acknowledged that completing the review with digitized media is more in keeping with the times but defend their choice by pointing to replicability of their study using digitized media. Extended methodology to online sources, combined with ongoing political changes and economic challenges in the U.S., may result in the emergence of different prototypes in addition to those revealed. Female population may be better

represented in online media as compared to the annual percentages range of 76% -92% in male authorship in this study (Haas & Fischman, 2010, p. 541). Also, public responses to blog type forums could be a basis for research in determining prototypes through critical discourse analysis. The support of surveys, interviews or blended research may also confirm or reveal alternative or additional conclusions and could incorporate triangulation as a means to strengthen validity.

#### References

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