

# Cautiously Engaging Stylized Facts: A Critical Lens on Educational Research and Policy

Filiz Oskay

*The Ohio State University*

In “What to the Educational Researcher Is A Stylized Fact?” Derek Gottlieb and Jack Schneider based on Danial Hirschman’s account, provide an intense analysis of “Stylized Facts” and their impacts on educational research and policy.<sup>1</sup> I sincerely appreciate the intellectual journey this response has sparked, leading me to reflect on how stylized facts can transform into effective tools aligned with specific purposes. It has been enlightening to consider their implications and how to approach them. In this essay, I will briefly outline the content of Gottlieb and Schneider’s article before delving into a discussion on how scholars can adopt a stance regarding stylized facts.

## UNDERSTANDING STYLIZED FACTS

Hirschman defines stylized facts as “simple empirical regularities requiring explanation.”<sup>2</sup> These facts assume the stable existence of social kinds worth theorizing about, explain them in understandable ways for non-specialists, are non-robust claims, and indicate essential connections signifying some form of dependence. Social science research aims to explore the nature, direction, strength, and underlying mechanisms of these connections. Also, stylized facts are normative in two ways: they suggest which aspects of the world deserve attention and propose the best or most appropriate way to describe regularity.

Gottlieb and Schneider further explain that stylized facts are normative by suggesting which parts of society or institutions can be changed and are good targets for policy. They also function as robust dependence claims and empirical evidence supporting and rationalizing policy-making and political actions, blurring the line between objective science and political agendas. However, the power of stylized facts can be misused, leading to public confusion, erosion of democratic norms, and misallocation of resources due to exaggerated or underdeveloped claims.

In their analysis, Gottlieb and Schneider exemplify the impact of a

stylized fact by referencing President Barack Obama's 2012 State of the Union Address, where the statement "We know a good teacher can increase the lifetime income of a classroom by over \$250,000," was used.<sup>3</sup> This stylized fact implies that replacing a low-performing teacher with an average one could significantly raise students' lifetime income. However, the term "good teachers" is vague and open to interpretation, allowing the fact to transcend disciplines and periods. Its usage in Obama's address highlights its political influence and ability to shape public discourse, implicitly suggesting that education has economic implications or provides necessary scientific evidence for new teacher assessment protocols. This case study underscores how stylized facts can mold public perception and policy decisions by presenting a specific interpretation of empirical data, which may vary based on historical, political, social, and economic contexts.

Recognizing the risks of relying too heavily on stylized facts in research and policy requires understanding how they can be easily misinterpreted. Thus, for the authors, using stylized facts in educational research and policy is problematic as it promotes a technocratic view of society and politics, fosters unwarranted confidence in large-scale effects, and contributes to a cycle of constant reform without achieving actual progress in justice and equality.

#### STYLIZED FACTS AS PART OF KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURE

Gottlieb and Schneider raise valid concerns about the potential misuse of stylized facts in educational research and policy, and it is difficult not to agree with their viewpoint. However, is there a way to stop the production of stylized facts? Or can scholars afford to disregard them?

I invite Daniel Hirschman's analysis of knowledge infrastructures to the conversation, as presented in "Rediscovering the 1%: Knowledge Infrastructures and the Stylized Facts of Inequality."<sup>4</sup> to provide more confident answers to these questions. Hirschman evaluates the significance of knowledge infrastructures in tracking trends and generating stylized facts in the social sciences. Constructing knowledge infrastructures is a complex process that requires balancing competing theoretical, political, and practical demands. They are essential for research as they collect, process, and distribute data. "Designers and maintainers" of these infrastructures must make crucial decisions about data collection, processing

methods, and distribution practices.<sup>5</sup> These decisions require significant resources, primarily funding, often sourced from foundations or government grants.

According to Hirschman, knowledge infrastructures enable research communities to produce knowledge, achieve consensus, and identify trends over time, which is crucial for the social sciences' reliance on stylized facts. The stability of knowledge infrastructures creates inertia, making it difficult to reorient them, even recognizing their limitations. Choices made during the initial construction have lasting consequences, reflecting theoretical, empirical, and political interests. Knowledge infrastructures also produce ignorance by focusing resources on particular research areas, leaving others understudied or ignored, creating cycles of non-knowledge. This highlights the significant role of stylized facts in knowledge production and circulation within various domains. Understanding the functions and importance of these infrastructures makes it clear that researchers cannot overlook or dismiss stylized facts. Stylized facts are not isolated statements but are part of broader systems, requiring more intense focus and evaluation.

#### HOW SHOULD EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS APPROACH STYLIZED FACTS?

Given the inescapable production, circulation, and influence of stylized facts within knowledge infrastructures, educational researchers must embrace a reflexive approach to navigate these complexities. I propose applying Pierre Bourdieu's work at this point because it highlights the role of the researcher in conducting research and shaping knowledge production. Bourdieu's challenge to traditional views of research will help us understand how educational researchers should approach stylized facts. His concept of reflexivity emphasizes the necessity of examining the "epistemological unconscious" and "social organization" of their discipline.<sup>6</sup> Kenway and McLeod highlight how Bourdieu's approach differs from other understandings of reflexivity, as it focuses not only on individual reflexivity but also on the social and intellectual unconscious that shape research practices.<sup>7</sup> Reflexivity, in this sense, is seen as a "collective enterprise" essential for sociological work, aiming to strengthen the epistemological foundations of the discipline. When considering the realm of stylized facts, Pierre Bourdieu's reflexivity involves scrutinizing the implicit assumptions and beliefs embedded

in research practices, including the dominant paradigms and methodologies that shape the interpretation of stylized facts.

Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity involves a critical examination of the social structures that shape our understanding of the world.<sup>8</sup> These structures are not only external frameworks but also internalized systems of understanding, including implicit assumptions and beliefs. In educational research, these structures encompass dominant paradigms, theories, and methodologies that shape how researchers interpret stylized facts. Researchers can uncover biases and assumptions by scrutinizing these structures, enabling a more nuanced perspective on stylized facts.

Moreover, Bourdieu emphasizes that social structures are dynamic, evolving over time.<sup>9</sup> Researchers must, therefore, be aware of these changes and their impact on the interpretation of stylized facts. This awareness leads to more informed and rigorous research practices. Educational researchers must emphasize examining the underlying assumptions and unconscious dispositions regarding stylized facts in their research practices. Adopting a reflexive stance allows researchers to challenge ingrained ways of thinking and better understand the broader structures shaping research practices.

Regarding approaches to stylized facts, Hirschman proposes three options for researchers: acceptance, rejection, or suggesting inadequacy.<sup>10</sup> Given their influence and integration into knowledge infrastructures, a more practical approach combines accepting stylized facts while also being open to revising or expanding them based on research findings. A critical educational researcher could delve deeply into stylized facts like Obama's statement, examining the context of data production and comparing it with current conditions. This approach clarifies why certain stylized facts may not align with reality, especially regarding educational challenges influenced by social injustices, policy implications, and unequal distribution of resources. Such research helps contextualize stylized facts within practical realities.

## CONCLUSION

Given the discussion, it appears impractical and perhaps unwise to completely halt the production of stylized facts. They are essential for con-

structuring knowledge and are deeply embedded in knowledge infrastructures. However, philosophers of education should approach stylized facts cautiously, acknowledging their potential for misuse. It is crucial to consider a variety of perspectives and methodologies in research. While education scholars cannot ignore stylized facts, they should use them judiciously, recognizing their limitations and engaging in rigorous and ethical research practices. Philosophers of education can effectively use critical thinking skills to harness stylized facts for creating new and efficient knowledge, avoiding undue influence.

---

## REFERENCES

- 1 Derek Gottlieb and Jack Schneider. “What To the Educational Researcher Is A Stylized Fact?” (2014); Hirschman, Daniel. “Stylized Facts in the Social Sciences.” *Sociological Science*, 3 (2016): 604–625. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v3.a26>
- 2 Ibid., 606.
- 3 Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address.” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed November 1, 2023. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.
- 4 Hirschman, Daniel. “Rediscovering the 1%: Knowledge infrastructures and the stylized facts of inequality.” *American Journal of Sociology* 127, no. 3 (2021): 739–786. <https://doi.org/10.1086/718451>
- 5 Ibid., 744.
- 6 Bourdieu, Pierre, & Loic JD Wacquant, L. J. D. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University Press, 1992): 36, 40.
- 7 Kenway, Jane, and Julie McLeod. “Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology and ‘spaces of points of view’: Whose reflexivity, which perspective?” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25, no. 4 (2004): 525–544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569042000236998>
- 8 Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (Cambridge University

Press, 1977): 72-85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>; Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. (Stanford University Press, 1980): 99-102  
9 Ibid.

10 Hirschman, "Stylized Facts in the Social Sciences," 604-626. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v3.a26>