# The Role of the Scholar: From Activism to Expertism and Back[1]

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Last fall I found myself sitting on the stage of a school auditorium in a rural, upstate New York school district, along with two of my university colleagues and the district's shared decision-making committee. There was a moderate size audience, more than I had expected, in attendance. The agenda for the evening was a discussion of the federal government's role in education (particularly Goals 2000) and school-to-work initiatives. The superintendent had invited my colleagues and me to address the committee and the community as "counter-point" to a recent presentation by a retired classics professor who, along with his conservative, grassroots organization, was campaigning against "outcomes-based education" and Goals 2000 as efforts by the federal government to undermine local control of the schools.

The three of us approached our task with similar two-part tactics. First, we tried to provide an accurate description and explanation of just what the matter was. (This involved synoptic presentations on the role of state and federal governments in educational matters; an overview of the history and content of Goals 2000 legislation; and a description of recent arguments on the changing nature of work and the incumbent educational reforms.) Second, we presented a mixture of analysis and skepticism intended to assist the committee and the community in creating ways of thinking about these issues and engaging in improved educational practices. While there was palpable tension among the shared decision-making committee, school administrators and some community residents in attendance, the ensuing dialogue focused on the issues at hand and a number of conflicting perspectives were heard (including some combination of distrust of educational initiatives from Albany and Washington as well as professors from the state university). The meeting did not resolve any community disputes, but if one can judge by the number of people who lingered after the meeting to continue informal conversations, the meeting was successful.

My colleagues and I, of course, had similar previous experiences and were quite aware that our talks at this public meeting called for something quite different from the typical academic research presentation. In the days that followed, as we debriefed our experience over lunch and in the halls of the university, our conversation was directed toward contradictory images of the researcher as a "disinterested scientist" versus the researcher as an "active reformer." In his 1961 book, *Normative Discourse*, Paul Taylor framed the contradiction this way: "We must *decide* what ought to be the case. We cannot *discover* what ought to be the case by investigating what the case is."

As researchers how *do* we decide "what ought to be the case" ? What are the implications of Taylor's claim for our roles as researchers and the purposes of educational research? In the balance of this paper I explore how we might respond to these questions in light of two factors: (a) the historical relationship between social reform and the academic disciplines in the USA and (b) the redefinition of the purposes of social research and the identity of the social researcher in recent times.

## The Historical Relationship Between Social Reform and The Academic Disciplines In The USA: The Move from Advocacy to Expertism[2]

The academic disciplines have a strong reformist tendency, which has evolved over the years as various cultural, social, and economic elements have shaped the professionalization of social science. In his account of the development of the American academic expert, Thomas Popkewitz (1984) notes that the "belief that society as well as individuals could be emancipated through communities of competent professionals initially appeared outside the university" (p. 111). American Social Science Association (ASSA), which functioned from 1865 to 1909, helped to create communities of inquiry through its publications and other activities, and played an important role in the birth of organizations for specialized academic disciplines such as history, economics, and sociology.

The founders of ASSA were genteel reformers who adhered to the idealism of Emerson and Hegel and reacted against the determinism of European positivism with an unwillingness to admit limits of human freedom and the maintenance of the theological distinction between people and nature. The ASSA was concerned not merely with understanding society, but improving it. As a result, these researchers conceived social inquiry as having two dimen-

sions: (a) understanding and explanation and (b) the activity of reform, including popular education to obtain the allegiance of the masses on particular issues. The task of the organization was to create ways of thinking about the reorganization of social affairs and the authority of social science provided legitimacy for this mission.

> ASSA members felt a moral obligation of their class to educate the masses to the nature of good and evil and to guide the evolution of the society. The Association's leaders were involved in the abolitionist movement and supported John Brown. The Association was formed to work with the Massachusetts Board of Charities to reform the state's charitable and correctional institutions. The call for social science was to publicize the abuses and to coordinate a decentralized system of almshouse, hospitals and *ad hoc* relief. (Popkewitz, 1984, p. 112)

The reformist stance of the ASSA, however, came into conflict with the emergent structure of the research university in the late nineteenth century. Social scientists sought the institutional arrangements of the university but found that their activism and incursions into public education created strains within the university and the business community. Daniel Coit Gilman, the first President of Johns Hopkins University, was a charter member of the ASSA. Gilman came to believe, however, that investigation and agitation could not coexist within the university. A university president had to account for the pressures of the university board of trustees, and public criticism and agitation might challenge the interests of the trustees who were typically members of the business community.

In addition, the ASSA "doctrine," if you will, that human affairs involved moral agents who were autonomous and masters of their own fate, no longer dominated the cultural outlook. For example,

> Leading economists of the time rejected the notion that the social scientist could combine both investigation and popular education. The public airing of disagreement was seen as hindering efforts to affect public policy. Academic debates were to be internal to the professions, aired at professional organization meetings and in scholarly writing. The more efficient means towards reform was through the role of expert-advisor to policy-makers. (Popkewitz, p. 115)

The emergence of the modern American research university encouraged this shift in world view—away from "the volunteeristic and spiritual view of self-help" that underlay the ASSA toward a new social science professionalism that valued sociability, careers and organized space in which to practice. As a result, the tradition of popular education to obtain the allegiance of the masses was dropped as a strategy of social science by the early 1900s and a strategy to influence policy-makers was adopted.

While this shifting of strategy narrowed the audience for social science research findings, it did not insulate social science from its cultural, social and political location. Social and educational researchers have maintained a transformative role, but there are at least two significant developments that obscure the role of the scholar as activist: (a) the ideology of neutrality and (b) scholar's loss of the public vernacular.

*Ideology Of Neutrality*

An "ideology of neutrality" became internalized in the consciousness of most research communities following the establishment of the modern research university. The linkages between political agendas and research were (and often remain) blurred by the legitimating function of social and educational research. This can be seen in many educational research studies that accept the objectives of pedagogical programs and are organized to "explain" how the objectives were reached (Popkewitz, 1978). For example, research on "effective teaching" extols the value of direct instruction over teaching that promotes student-to-student interaction, democratic pedagogy and a learning milieu that values caring and individual students' self-esteem. The results of such research do not question the assumed conception of student achievement—efficient mastery of content as represented by test scores. Issues such as the criteria of content selection, the resultant mystification and fragmentation of course content, linkages between improved test scores and national economic prosperity, and the ways in which the social conditions of schooling might unequally distribute knowledge, also remain unexamined (see for example, Hirsch, 1996).

*Scholar's Loss Of The Public Vernacular*

A second way in which the element of advocacy in research is obscured is through the amalgamation of formal and public language and the scholars' loss of public vernacular. This is a double edged sword. On one edge, educational research findings can function to validate preexisting beliefs about the standard operating procedures of schools and teaching—reinforcing the control mechanisms of schools such as high-stakes testing, differentiated curricula, top-down decision making, etc. On the other edge, by defining their roles as advisors to policy-makers, researchers have largely abandoned the arena of public deliberation. The historic demise of the public intellectual has been met with the rise of the pundit, with public discourse largely limited to sound-bite scholarship in which ideological driven research is presented as mere commonsense.[3]

## The Redefinition of the Purposes of Social Research and The Identity of the Social Researcher: The Return to Advocacy

The methods of social and educational research have dramatically shifted in the past quarter century. This has been a period of epistemological disarray and redefinition,

in which the Cartesian/Newtonian paradigm of social research was subjected to internal (e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cronbach, 1975) and external (e.g., Kuhn, 1970) critiques. As a result, the boundaries of "appropriate" methods or stances of social researchers were blurred and the significance of the researcher and the importance of interpretation and understanding (incontrast to causal determinism) in social research has grown. The mythological "disinterested" natural scientist is no longer the role model of social researchers.

As social and educational researchers have embraced interactive processes of inquiry–with a concern for mutual understanding and practical reasoning–both the empirical and moral status of situations that require practical action become increasingly apparent. In curriculum research, for example, Joseph Schwab (1969) explored the implications of the Aristotelian distinction (which was revived by Kant) between *theoretical knowledge* (states of affairs that can be checked, tested and accepted) and *practical knowledge* (decision making). Since then, it has become increasingly clear to educational researchers that "knowing the truth about the workings of the world is one thing; knowing what to do about it something else" (Hamilton, 1994, p. 63).

It is this "something else" that proves to be problematic for applied social science and educational research in particular. To reference my own field, Jack Nelson's (1994) appraisal of the contemporary social studies education literature notes that mainstream social studies education (i.e., K-12 social studies curriculum and instruction) has reflected the recent conservative sociopolitical climate of the nation, despite the social studies education's liberal-progressive origins. While essentialists have held their own in the social studies classroom, Nelson is guardedly optimistic that shifts toward conservative orientations are largely interruptions in the general long term trend toward progressivism in the social studies. Nelson's review illustrates how in social studies (and in every situation) questions of "what to do" relate not only to what is, but to what ought to be.

Deciding what to do about issues of social studies curriculum and instruction, or any educational issue, requires the application of moral judgments in the realm of human action. The grounds for exercising moral judgment—as well as the methods of conducting research—in the social sciences have radically shifted. The moral authority of positivist social science is (or was) grounded in scientific procedures, rules of evidence and impersonal knowledge that posits a world of efficiency and rationality. Interpretive and critical social science pursues democratic forms of communication and social justice by appealing to principles of human freedom and social emancipation. The challenge facing us today, however, is not merely making a choice between competing paradigms. The foundational bases for the exercise of moral judgment in both positivist and critical social science are challenged by deconstructive-postmodernism, in which groundlessness is the only constant and values, ethics, and history are viewed as arbitrary.

A fully formed new character of social research has not yet emerged, but there are some outlines, however contradictory, that can be identified. Cherryholmes (1988) for example, describes social research as a set of discourses shaped by beliefs and commitments, explicit ideologies, tacit world views, linguistic and cultural systems, politics and economics, and power arrangements. As such, disputes within and among discourses cannot be solved by appeal to the ways and means of scientific reasoning. Rather, discourses take on meaning in the context of conversation and deliberation—like the conversations my colleagues and I engaged in with the folks in that small rural school district.

Where does this leave us in our search for how to decide what ought to be the case? In our roles as social and educational researchers, we must persuade one another (and the public) of the value and goodness of our way of thinking. Because of the complexity of human behavior there are no laws or theories upon which we can build a science of ethics (as Aristotle pointed out). As social researchers we are engaged in a normative enterprise that requires ethical reasoning. Ethical reasoning requires deliberation—sizing up of the situation, weighing ofinformation, and making decisions in the particular (Schwandt, 1993).

Sociologist Peter Berger once observed, rather cynically, that: "The world today is divided into ideological camps. The adherents of each tell us with great assurance where we're at and what we should do about it. We should not believe any of them" (1976, p. 1). But it seems to me that we have little choice but to confront the moral purposes of social inquiry and our responsibilities as researchers and to this end conversation and deliberation will serve us better than unbelief.

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## Footnotes

[1] This paper was originally given as an invited address at the Eastern Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Hilton Head, SC, February 21, 1997.

[2] I am greatly indebted to the work of Thomas S. Popkewitz for the arguments in this section. Particularly his book *Paradigm andideology in educational research: The social functions of the intellectual* (Falmer, 1998).

[3] There are, of course exceptions to this trend, such as scholars who write for newspaper op-ed pages or appear on radio talk shows to discuss specific public policy and educational issues. But, these are the exceptions not the rule in the research community.

[4] Conservative campaigns for school vouchers and privatizing welfare are excellent examples of how highly ideological research is presented as mere common-sense in the mass media. See for example: McGrath, C. (1997). Commercially correct talking heads. *The Progressive Populist*, *3*(2); and Miner, B. (1994). The power and the money: Bradley Foundation bankrools conversative agenda. *Rethinking Schools*, *8*(3), 1, 16-21.

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