Program Research as Social Practice

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PROGRAM RESEARCH AS SOCIAL PRACTICE*

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The conventional wisdom attributes moral dubiousness to those who
sponsor or execute research on programs designed to help the disadvantaged.
Albert Murray provides a definitive portrait of this genre. He describes
a new social science specialist; the "white or somewhat white hunter"
who is a, "Two-finger Pig-Latin Swahili Expert, an image technician who
files survey-safari reports on Ghettoland, U.S.A." Armed with this
picaresque image the researcher projects an aura of being on the last
frontier of danger and adventure as he plumbs the depths of human misery.
This stance has several advantages for the Ghetto-adventurer:

> (1) He is consolidating his one-up
> status over those base-camp white people (who
> subsidize his reports because they are interested
> in reading about Negroes but are terrified at
> the mere notion of entering the Eight Ball)
> and also over other white reporters; (2) he is
> up-grading his credentials and bargaining power
> with white editors and publishers; and (3) he is
> making a public presentation of his black pass-
> port to such Eight Ball tribal chiefs as might
> figure in future safari assignments.[1]

There is a darker and less romantic counterpart to the researcher
as aggrandizer; that is the researcher as victim. Consider the following
situation one of us experienced:

> Several years ago I was working as a community organ-
> izer in a poverty program based in a large urban

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[1]Albert Murray, The Omni-Americans (New York: Outerbridge and
Dienstfrey, 1970), pp. 69-70.

center in the East. Part of the job was to work
with black youth in the inner city. I functioned
as a liaison between the teenagers and the neighbor-
hood community action agency. I enjoyed the job
and had good formal and informal communication with
those with whom I worked.

After a little more than six months on the job, the
director of the neighborhood agency where I was
based asked me if I would be interested in doing
some research for the agency. He explained that
the agency's citizens council was dissatisfied
with the program for neighborhood youth. This
agency had put most of its resources into a recre-
ation program for children and teenagers. This
program was not attracting the older teenagers
and the citizens council wanted something done
about it.

The agency director's response to this was to
propose a research survey that would help determine
what kind of fall and winter programs would be
attractive to these youth. I said I would do
some thinking about the feasibility of the study
and make a rough estimate of a budget. He assured
me that he would find the funds for the study and
implied that the bigger I could make the study the
more valuable it would be to him. (The city had
just received a cut in its OEO program and the
competition for available funds was very stiff.)

In thinking through the decision as to whether or
not a study was necessary I was fortunate in that
unlike many researchers I had intimate acquaintance
with the program and its recipients. From this
experience it was already apparent that whether
or not the agency had a good or bad recreation
program had nothing to do with whether or not it
was used. The real interests of these teenagers
were in something else, jobs. I remember one young
man putting it quite succinctly, "Man we don't need
no games, we need jobs."

The agency's policy guidelines stated that it had
to work with youth, they did not specify that recre-
ation had to be the exclusive focus. The agency
director's experience and interest was in recreation.
He wanted to avoid developing the employment program
his citizen council was pushing for. The promise

of a research study on the recreation program was
a means of temporarily placating the citizens and
avoiding action which he did not want to take.

My observations had convinced me that there was no
need to study the recreation program but that there
was a need to do a study on how to develop a youth
employment program within the limitations of the
current staff resources. I informed the admini-
strator of my conclusions. He told me to forget
about doing the study and to go back to community
organization, since that was what I was hired to
do anyway. He then secured permission from the
director of research at the central office to use
one of his research staff to design and conduct
the recreation study. The pressure from the
citizens council was relieved by hiring several
of them, at $2 per hour, to do the interviewing.
I went back to community organization.

What ties these illustrations together is that depending on the
circumstances the same person could reflect either situation. What
distinguishes between them is the source of research sponsorship.
In general, the independent entrepreneur researcher receives his support
from foundations or federal grants. No matter how practical the investi-
gation it is usually identified as basic research. And, most important,
the researcher expects to publish the results of his work. Public
exposure is the saving grace of the independent researcher. It encourages
debate on whether or not there is a culture of poverty, or the poor
can delay gratification, or cultural deprivation leaves the poor children
unprepared for school, or any number of similar issues. As long as free
discussion continues there is always hope that over time some truths will
be identified.

The researcher who works for the organization which is the subject of
his examination seldom has the right to publish without permission. His
work is seldom disseminated except in limited editions of mimeographed
reports. While all details of conceptualization and design are the same
as in basic research the goal is usually to initiate or justify programs.
The hired hand must face the dilimma of knowing that the political justi-
fication of a program requires claims that no research can ever substan-
tiate. For example, the number of theories about delinquency is equaled
only by the number of programs designed to control this behavior. No
theory is definitive and no program has ever been seen as an unqualified
success.

Occasionally when the question of the continued value of a program
becomes a matter of public debate in-house reports receive public exposure
and social science is roasted for its presumptuous claims, poor methodo-
logy, and the lack of ethics by its practitioners. We question whether
the problem is that simple. It is easy to be an after-the-fact moralist
and philosophize about the responsible researcher's role. Who cannot
be self-righteous about those who participate in empirical frauds or
fail to prevent or expose any distortion of truth. We can admire the
researcher who fails to cave in to inappropriate demands or sneer at
those who capitulate for personal glory, profit, or sheer survival.
That does not solve the problem of how to make the knowledge of social
science or the skills of the researcher useful for alleviating human
privation.

Social science research and the social science researcher have come
to be considered key factors in the efficient functioning of many social
welfare programs. Usually when the word "research" or "survey" is men-
tioned images of great objectivity, almost infallibility, are conjured
up. All too often the researcher does little to dispel these false notions.
The point here is one of honesty, not of value free objectivity.
Objectivity in science means that one presents his work in such a
way that another investigator can repeat it. It means, not that a
person is value free, but that he identifies his value position
explicitly. The world is too complex to be described totally. At
any point one undertakes to describe a part of something he is making
a value choice that the elements he chooses for his description are
more important than those he is leaving out.

When the social survey was first used it was as an instrument for
reform. Most of the early surveys were frankly arguing for a position
and gave their results the widest possible circulation. In addition,
the early surveys gave relatively limited attention to public opinion
and devoted most of their effort to documenting social conditions which
the sponsor and researcher felt needed to be changed. Today survey has
come to mean something different. It is not usually conceived of as
an instrument of reform but as a form of participatory democracy where
opinions are solicited about likes and dislikes. Opinions became the
basis for program planning, but the data on which the planning is based
are seldom available.

We do not dispute the right or even the necessity of any admini-
strator to present his agency or his program in the best possible light.
There is, however, a vast difference between an administrator arguing
for the program he wants and his saying "research," where he has stacked
the deck, supports the need for the program. In the illustration we
presented there would be little to say if the administrator had said,
"I have certain program interests which I want implemented and I want
you to help me do this." It doesn't even matter if he doesn't want to

look at alternatives. Any social scientist who is either a member of
the agency staff or is hired to do such a job can certainly do so with
a free conscience. What he should not do is present his work as a
"scientific" research report. Merely using appropriate methodological
tools does not make scientific research. Data does not speak for itself,
even when it is collected under the most rigorous and perfect methodolo-
gical circumstances. Science comes in when a basis is provided for
interpreting the data and the negative as well as concurring evidence
is examined.

Researchers tend to overestimate the influence of their work in
policy decisions about program planning or continuation. This often
deludes them as to their real function. For example, sponsors at the
operating level often call in a researcher and present him with a problem
that is unsolvable. If this happens, no matter what the quality of the
research, the nature of the factual information gathered, or recommen-
dations for solutions, the administrator can use the research to support
the decision he had already made. More important, the complex range of
information that goes into policy decisions about programs of necessity
makes the data from research findings play a small role. We have not
been able to identify any major program that was saved or eliminated on
the basis of research findings.[2]

To meet the dilemmas the "applied" researcher faces it is necessary
to consider research with action implications as a form of professional
practice; this requires standards and review procedures. The National
Academy of Sciences provides a model definition for the changing role
of the researcher. They say:

> The job of the social scientist is clear.
> He can keep track of what is happening, work
> at understanding the sources of conflict and
> resistance to change and try to determine both
> the intended and unintended consequences of
> problem solving actions. Through the analysis
> of specific instances, social scientists seek
> to illuminate the ways in which the society
> is working.[3]

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[2]Harris Chaiklin, "Evaluation Research and the Planning-Programming-
Budgeting System," in Planning Programming Budgeting Systems and Social Welfare,
ed. by Edward E. Schwartz (Chicago: The University of Chicago School of Social
Service Administration, 1970), pp. 27-34.

[3]The Behavior and Social Sciences: Outlook and Needs, A report by the
Behavioral and Social Sciences Survey Committee under the auspices of the
National Academy of Sciences (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.,
1969), p. 88.

In focusing on this issue we are concerned about the wider ethical issues connected with professional practice. Most of the current interest in the ethics of research has focused on protecting the rights of the client.[4] This is only an element in the emergence of research as a form of social practice. One of the things which identifies a profession is its ability to set and maintain its own standards. Where research as social practice is concerned this effort is only in the beginning stages. Within sociology, for example, concern is expressed that the current code of ethics will restrict free inquiry.[5] Others see it as a way of protecting professional status and position in the bureaucracy without really changing anyone's behavior.[6] Meanwhile the movement to employ social researchers in direct service organizations grows. Foote sees this as necessary for a true social science. He says:

> ...the salvation of sociology lies
> in shifting its attention from colleagues
> to clients. That is not to become
> less professional, but at last to become
> professional. By concluding with a
> call to orient training to the
> intelligible, purposeful presentation of
> sociology to non-sociologists, we are
> not re-directing sociologists back to
> academic sociology . . . we are re-directing
> them at last to sociology.[7]

Put in these terms one would have to ask how sociology would be distinguished from social work. Gilbert and Specht identify skill in applied research as the core of one of the two basic wings of social work.[8]

This convergence between the interests of sociologists and social workers is highlighted by the fact that current codes of ethics do little to help the employed researcher who seeks truth while trying to meet the needs of his employer. Trela and O'Toole present both ends of the

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[4]Footnotes, February, 1975, pp. 1, 16.

[5]John F. Galliher, "The Protection of Human Subjects: A Reexamination of the Professional Code of Ethics," The American Sociologist, 8(August, 1973), pp. 93-100.

[6]Dean S. Dorn and Gary L. Long, "Brief Remarks on the Association's Code of Ethics," The American Sociologist, 9(February, 1974), pp. 31-35.

[7]Nelson N. Foote, "Putting Sociologists to Work," The American Sociologist, 9(August, 1974), p. 134.

[8]Neil Gilbert and Harry Specht, "The Incomplete Profession," Social Work, 19(November, 1974), pp. 665-674.

problem when they say the researcher, "must recognize and accept the service organization's goals and interests," and at the same time, "he must also retain his identity as a scientist and continue to subscribe fully to the norms of science."[9] This neatly avoids the real fact that the goals of service organizations and science are usually necessary and legitimately antithetical. Our suggestion is a modest one and is based on the idea that continuing tension between organizational service goals is required if both are to be true to their aims. It is that codes of ethics should provide for independent review of the state of the art in applied research and arbitration mechanisms for specific conflicts.

Setting standards and conducting periodic reviews are not seen as a panacea. In any practice situation conditions are always changing. The job of keeping ethical standards in focus is continual. We do not want to set up review committees with dictatorial power; rather we envisage something like the procedures used by the American Association of University Professors. The AAUP is neither a militant nor a powerful organization. Its Committee on Academic Freedom probably handles only a small number of the abuses of academic freedom which occur. Being censured by the AAUP has never closed a school. Yet by its very existence it affords a measure of protection. Schools do not like to be censured by the AAUP; most of those that are eventually make some effort to get off of the list. But, because it exists many schools and many professors do alter their behavior to take its standards into account.

We believe the same advantages could accrue if a similar device existed within our professional organizations. The existence of an outside professional body to which a researcher can appeal and which makes, maintains, and disseminates standards should help reduce some of the reprehensible relationships which have grown up in operating agencies.

What is done with the information developed by any researcher involves ethical and political considerations out of his control. In administrative research the sponsor has been able to dictate all conditions. We believe that this has contributed to the crisis in confidence about whether or not developing knowledge makes a difference in solving the problems of this world. It is time for professional societies to take more responsibility for the behavior of their members and to provide them with more protection.

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[9]James E. Trela and Richard O'Toole, Roles for Sociologists in Service Organizations (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1974), p.