PART FIVE

Researching the Researchers

Introduction to Part 5

It seems fitting, in a volume so consciously reflexive as this one, to devote a section to researching the researchers themselves. The following two chapters undertake this project in quite different settings: one in an ethnographically based research and service project, the other in a university classroom. Both authors conclude that researchers are no more exempt from interested behavior than are the people they study.

This is not a particularly novel insight. Max Weber made this the basis of his methodological discussions.[1] Alvin Gouldner took the argument a step further and argued that researchers' interests affect not only their choice of focus, but also their theoretical assumptions and conclusions. For example, Gouldner criticized Howard Becker and other sociologists for their self-serving approach to the problem of deviance. Becker's professional interests shape his theoretical approach.[2] Similarly, Gouldner treats Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism as an attempt to justify and serve the growing welfare state.[3]

However, Gouldner's innovative project has not been particularly popular in the social sciences. Nobody likes being subjected to critical analysis, and few have followed in his theoretical footsteps. Even in this postmodern age of academic reflexivity, which has spawned so much methodological navel-gazing, few social scientists have undertaken empirical research on research itself. An exception is the growing school of "sociology of scientific knowledge," based in Britain, which is focusing attention on aspects of natural scientific research—but even here, the social scientists are not studying research in their own fields.[4]

The two case studies that follow attempt to fill this gap. Kathryn Fox examined an AIDS education project directed by professional ethnographers. She worked alongside outreach workers who pounded the

pavement in high-risk neighborhoods, handing out bleach (for sterilizing syringes), condoms, and streetwise advice on AIDS prevention. She observed firsthand the limits and constraints facing the project: for instance, the outreach workers' desire to spend their limited time educating potential AIDS victims conflicted with the directors' research goals of gathering detailed field notes and statistics. These research goals were necessary to document the agency's success in reaching high-risk populations, in order to ensure future funding—a constant subject of concern throughout the organization. Lipsky describes the tension between the interests of public service workers and their agencies as characteristic of "street-level bureaucracies."[5] Time and again the AIDS Project was forced to compromise its altruistic ideals to fulfill its contractual research obligations to the funding institute. Indeed, the directors even decided not to participate in what they felt was one of the most effective AIDS-prevention programs, needle exchange, because their major funding source had threatened to halt their operation if they did. In this way, the researchers' interests determined the project's design.

Charles Kurzman studied the graduate sociology class in participant-observation methods that produced this volume. Approaching classroom discussions from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, he observed which statements were accepted by the class and which were not. He found that statements tended to be evaluated not in terms of their evidence or their theoretical paradigm, but rather in terms of deeper values. He identifies two sets of values that are deployed in different contexts: the opposed values of respecting one's subjects' perspectives or denying them validity, and the opposed values that see human action as socially determined or outside social determinism. The availability of contradictory values, Kurzman argues, gives the sociologist's actions a certain flexibility, retaining a certain amount of free will, which is all too often lost in discussions of interests.

Thus both of the following papers attempt to pursue Gouldner's insight that social scientific research may be analyzed in the same way it analyzes others—in terms of interests, relations to the state, normative orders, or whatever. This project is of course vulnerable to similar analysis itself; the authors are in no position to claim an exemption themselves from the interests that they identify in other researchers' work. Perhaps this vulnerability explains the paucity of research on research.

But this is really a false vulnerability, because the analysis of social scientific research does not necessarily make it less valid or worthwhile. It may be that some analyses denigrate their subjects, taking the form of exposés and debunking; other analyses, however, may actually enhance the credibility of the research, showing, for instance, the con-

straints and limits within which the research was conducted, or linking the research with the researcher's goals. In any case, such analyses are useful to clear away some of the suspicions and accusations that accumulate in a world where, as Karl Mannheim noted, everybody thinks everyone else is guilty of ideology.[6]

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