

## **Bearing Witness<sup>1</sup>**

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Today I want to share with you some thoughts on a subject about which many of us avoid prolonged reflection. We may avoid it because we think there is little to discuss or because prolonged reflection on the topic can produce ambivalence and discomfort. I would like to consider the relationship between the study of social conditions and efforts to improve them. In short, my topic is what James Rule (1978) called the relationship between "insight and social betterment."

The fundamental question is whether (or even if) a better understanding of social and community life actually can bring about improved social conditions. A second question is how does one go about translating social insights derived from research and scholarship into improved conditions for families, organizations, and communities? I personally am a skeptical optimist on this point. I am hopeful but do not take for granted the proposition that understanding and social betterment are automatically linked.

As I talk to my colleagues in academia and observe the workings of government, two somewhat disturbing portraits emerge. In government circles 20 years ago it seemed to be almost an article of blind faith that the government needed social science advice to improve social conditions. Since then a skepticism and even cynicism has emerged about the value of social science knowledge in conducting government affairs. But in both eras it has been my experience that government officials are as likely to select research to meet political needs as they are to use research findings to evaluate a problem or plan a program of social improvement.

Unfortunately, we in academia are little better. Many of us insist that our understanding of the relationship between social science knowledge and

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improvement in society can only be illuminated by certain kinds of theoretical analyses. These analyses usually involve the uncritical use of certain assumptions about who is to be improved, and how. These analyses call for simple but appealing solutions to complex problems of an afflicted or oppressed group. These are important goals, but usually the means for accomplishing them are specified only in the vaguest terms. Many of us trained in scientific skepticism and thoughtfulness suddenly become uncritical when offered a doctrine that promises much, analyzes little, and provides even less concrete evidence of its plausibility. These doctrines usually have a catchy name and they seem to come and go every 5 years or so.

These tendencies that I have just described are far from satisfactory and leave me feeling deeply uneasy. Surely we can do better than this. Perhaps we can benefit from two kinds of effort. First, we need a close and critical analysis of the underlying assumptions of social thinkers who have considered the question of the relationship between knowledge and betterment. Second, we need to attempt some self-criticism and examine our own past experiences in relation to this question.

### MODELS OF RELEVANCE

Let me begin by describing some underlying “models of relevance” or paradigms describing the relationship between social understanding and the improvement of community life (Rule, 1978). By examining these models, making explicit their underlying assumptions, and probing their weaknesses we may find one that is personally satisfactory. If none are satisfactory we may still ask what ideas and assumptions we can use to guide our actions as scientists or advocates or both.

At one level of analysis these alternative models are actually models of how society works as it attempts to transform social science knowledge into improved social conditions. That is, these models present an organized set of assumptions about where social science knowledge should come from, how it should be used in the interest of social change, and who the beneficiaries of knowledge and change should be. At another level of analysis however, each of these models also offers a role prescription for us as social scientists.<sup>3</sup> I return to this last point in a moment.

#### *Model 1: Social Science Knowledge Has No Relevance to Social Betterment*

I include this model (or perhaps more correctly this assertion) primarily for the purposes of logical completeness. I strongly suspect that few of

<sup>3</sup>I am grateful to Tom D’Aunno for the insight about the role prescriptions implicit in societal models of relevance and for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

us would have entered our field if we truly believed this to be so. Although I once heard a social scientist friend of mine say, "I study revolutions because they have such interesting structures," most of us have a much more instrumental orientation to the relationship between knowledge and social improvement and we do not see it as problematic.

Banfield and Wilson in their book *City Politics* (1963) made a sophisticated argument against the relevance of social science knowledge to social improvement. They argued that knowledge cannot play a real role in the solution of social problems because what holds us back is that we are really dealing with disagreements among interested parties, not a lack of knowledge. Banfield and Wilson summarized their argument by saying, "Thinking that a general increase in the level of knowledge (about politics) will promote better and faster solutions of social problems is something like thinking that a general increase in the skill of chess players will lead to shorter games or to 'solution to the problems of chess'" (p. 3). In other words, in this skeptical view, the contending actors may be able to deploy social science knowledge in the service of their interests, but the game may result in a stalemate.

Rule (1978) observed that this model is a difficult one to defend partly because social science must play at least a small role in the way contending social actors view the world and therefore must be influential in some way. Some view the no-effect model as politically conservative, but I see it as essentially skeptical. It does not argue that we should preserve things as they are (the classic conservative view) but that in the long run, contending parties in society will use their knowledge in what amounts to a zero-sum game rather than as a key to unlock the mystery of a social problem.

*Model 2: Direct Relevance of Knowledge to Well-Being:  
Social Problem Solving as Rational, Incremental, Piecemeal*

A second model (or actually family of models) has been proposed by social theorists and philosophers in a variety of forms (Rule, 1978). The most familiar names include Robert Merton (Merton & Nisbett, 1971) and Karl Popper (1963). This model sees the insights gleaned from our research and theory as being directly applicable to social problems and leading to social improvement. For example, Merton began by arguing that it ought to be possible to identify social problems or difficulties in social relations that it would be in everyone's interest to solve. Presumably Merton believed there are core conditions such as violent crime, poverty, or epidemics where social betterment would come about if solutions to these problems could be identified. Merton believed that problems of this sort represent a major discrepancy between agreed upon social standards and actual conditions of social life. This definition of social problems assumes that a single unified underlying set of values exists in our society (or for that matter in any society) and that

a value consensus can allow us to develop shared social standards about what actually constitutes a problem and how to solve it.

It is certainly true that such a list of social conditions could be developed. However, the meaning of the social problem, its significance, and what would be an improvement are matters where agreement is very difficult (Rule, 1978). If the last 8 years of our current administration has taught us nothing else it has certainly taught us that. Very different views of how to improve education, for example, can be found by reading the writings of John Dewey on the one hand or William Bennett on the other.

Merton's model compared society to an organism or a machine and sees the solution of social problems in terms of functional analysis. Our job as social scientists according to this view, is to make technical adjustments in the social system. But this prescription for technical change in the organism or machine of society fails to contend effectively with the problem of consensus about the nature of social problems, and indeed what constitutes an agreed upon course of action for doing something about the problem.

Merton also did not explicitly identify who the beneficiaries or consumers of the social insight should be. However, other versions of this model have suggested that the government or the state should be the beneficiary of social science knowledge. Periodically this has been the argument of well-known social scientists who have also been actors in the political arena. And it is not difficult to find pronouncements by National Institutes of Health or the National Science Foundation that make a similar plea. The underlying notion here is that it is the agencies of the state who should receive our social knowledge and engage in enlightened action. This of course makes the critical assumption that our government or the state in general is committed to the eradication of offending social conditions. A look at our safety standards at work or the pollution of air and water might suggest the counterargument that government action (or inaction) has produced these results rather than having a commitment to eradicating them.

A third aspect of this model that deserves at least a brief discussion is the implicit political tone of the piecemeal social engineering orientation. Advocates of this point of view such as Popper (1963) were made very uneasy by more ideological orientations to change. They expressed a strong discomfort with sweeping indictments of our current social system and to fundamental propositions for social change. They viewed this kind of thinking as "ideological" and, therefore, doctrinaire and closed minded. Instead Popper argued for what he called piecemeal social engineering. It is the most rational approach from his point of view both because he believed that we do not yet understand enough for large-scale sweeping reform and because such large-scale efforts are impossible to evaluate in terms of success or failure. Weick (1984) has made a more elaborate argument of the same kind, argu-

ing for “small wins,” noting their workability, the momentum they generate, and that they are attractive because they do not challenge basic value positions.

In any case, Popper and his more modern counterparts warned against sweeping utopian plans and instead argued for the elimination of concrete problems. Unfortunately Popper’s and Merton’s analyses leave ambiguous the question of what concrete problems can be agreed upon.

### *Model 3: Conflicting Interests and Special Constituencies*

A third family of models of the relationship between social knowledge and social improvement has also enjoyed widespread popularity among social thinkers. This approach accepts from the beginning the idea that what we call social problems are actually the result of conflicts between contending interests in society. It argues that we as social scientists should take sides and identify special constituencies within society who would best benefit from whatever social insights we may generate. This model shares the assumption of contending parties in society with Model 1 but draws more optimistic conclusions. Instead of viewing the glass as half empty, and assuming that a stalemate will occur, this model views the glass as half full, that some social improvement can occur from taking sides.

Of course the most famous proponent of this view was Karl Marx (Marx & Engels, 1959). For Marx the special constituency to benefit from his social insights was the proletariat. He believed that he (and by extension we as social scientists) should explicitly identify ourselves with a particular set of interests in society. In other words, our job is to communicate insights about the workings of the social world to this constituency. Marx believed ultimately that the proletariat would be free of the coercion of a capitalist state. The program for accomplishing this goal was nothing less than revolution and he believed reform measures could only slow the process of inevitable revolution and, therefore, were to be avoided.

More recently this constituency-oriented model as well articulated by Marx has been expanded to identify new consumers of social insight who are potentially special beneficiaries but who have not been compromised by the entrenched power structure. Beginning in the 1960s and even earlier, sociologists and other social thinkers identified a number of groups who are disadvantaged in society. They included racial minorities, the poor, and socially stigmatized groups that can represent special constituencies for the insights of social scientists. Unlike Marx, this most recent version of Model 3 does not argue that it is critical social insights that fuel social change. Instead, it is argued that it is our job as social scientists to dramatize the dis-

crepancies between what society asserts as its social values and our actual practices with these groups. This is clearly an activist approach but one which, as Rule (1978) observed, does not guarantee that these discrepancies portrayed will be sympathetically received by most people. Furthermore, this view does not specify how the consumers of these insights can act effectively to produce social change.

C. Wright Mills (1959) offered a similar prescription, arguing that as social scientists it was our job to hold those in power responsible for their decisions. We should educate those who are unaware of the consequences of those decisions and communicate our insight we have about the ways in which, to quote Mills, "personal troubles of the individual are actually connected with larger public issues" (p. 186). Although I am sympathetic with Mills' prescription, there remains fundamental ambiguity about who precisely our audience should be and what standards we should use to judge those in power.

Furthermore, this view does not acknowledge the complexity of issues we face or our incapacity to predict the long-range impact of short-range actions. A truly ecological appreciation of complexity acknowledges unexpected outcomes of apparently sensible short-term solutions. Cheap fossil fuel promised a better life for us and produced acid rain and the depletion of the ozone layer as by-products. Closer to home, few anticipated that those of us advocating for deinstitutionalization would be faced with the current problems of the homeless in our communities (Price & Smith, 1983).

## ROLE IMAGERY

As I mentioned earlier, each of these models is not only a model of how society could or should work as it transforms social knowledge into improved conditions of community life, it also prescribes a role for us as community psychologists. That is, each model speaks to us rather directly about how we should think about ourselves and how we should conduct our work. It is worthwhile taking a look at this role imagery because I believe that whether we are aware of it or not, we think of ourselves through one of these lenses, or perhaps feel torn and conflicted because we find ourselves simultaneously attracted and repelled by some aspects of the role imagery implied by each of these models.

The first model, which postulates that there is no relationship between social understanding and improvement in human affairs, calls up the image of a detached and even disinterested scholar, someone interested in knowledge for its own sake. This is laudable enough, but indicates little concern for the plight of others in the world. I strongly suspect that there are a few in

this room who feel comfortable with that image, or even can identify with it very much.

The second model calls up role imagery that is familiar to all of us. A model that sees direct links between gains in social understanding and improvements in human well-being is one that sees the social scientist as a seeker of truth, someone eager to uncover the facts, or someone who wants to unlock the social puzzle. This role also offers us a clear idea of how to get the knowledge we need. The image usually involves the construction of an elaborate research or evaluation design. Perhaps the quintessential example of this role model is Don Campbell, someone many of us greatly admire.

Model 3 also offers role imagery that is familiar to all of us. Here the social scientist is a seeker of justice and an attacker of oppression. Invariably, social scientists acting in this role have a clear idea of who the victim is and who the oppressor is. The methodology is also well known and calls up a vision of liberation of the oppressed through struggle and an oppressor vanquished. Perhaps the best example of this role model is Saul Alinsky, also someone many of us greatly admire.

### **SOCIAL PROBLEMS OR SOCIAL CONFLICT?**

It was Seymour Sarason (1978) who pointed out to many of us that social problems are unlike arithmetic problems. They simply could not be solved in a straightforward way. In his many writings he has offered alternative visions of how we could cope with the dilemmas of community. The anarchist's insight, the networks of Mrs. Dewey, and still other visions of social transformation have become part of our legacy. If social problems are not like arithmetic problems, then what are they like?

Is there an alternative conception of social problems and what is its implication for action? Rule (1978) has argued that attempts at rational technocratic social problem solving may actually disguise social conflict and competing efforts to control desirable resources in society. According to this view we do not have a "racial problem." Instead what we call racial problems are actually symptoms of conflict between supporters and opponents of more opportunity in society for blacks. Similarly, we do not have an "unemployment problem." Instead we have workers who have become too old or too expensive, which has led corporate owners to close plants and to hire younger, cheaper workers elsewhere.

This view of social problems argues that there is no definition of a social problem that is devoid of political judgments and parties in conflict. And there are no solutions to such problems without conflict among social actors. This view of social problems counsels us not to look for a "fix" of the problem but instead to identify the contestants and to take sides.

## OUR AMBIVALENCE

If you have stayed with me through this long exegesis so far you may have felt more than a small twinge of ambivalence. The very reason for the existence of our discipline is, in one way or another, to try to link whatever insights we can from our scientific work to an improvement in community life. And yet each of the dominant models of relevance have both appealing features and substantial flaws. Most of us would not be in our current work if we accepted the Model 1 assertion that there is no certain connection between social insight and the improvement of social conditions. Many of us have argued for a version of the Model 2 social problem solving model, recognizing uncomfortably that it is piecemeal, incremental, and begs questions about the nature of social problems and the possibility of value consensus about them. Many of us find too much that is appealing in Model 3 and like to imagine that our scholarly endeavors are aimed at a special constituency such as the poor, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed. At the same time, we may have grave doubts about whether our intellectual efforts can have direct or even indirect benefits for these constituencies.

I believe these are hard questions we must face. To retreat into mindless social engineering or revolutionary rhetoric provides no sound basis for our discipline. Let me turn to what I think are some partial solutions for me at least. One has to do with a rethinking of the meaning of social problems and the other has to do with lessons learned from two of my own modest attempts to link some modest social insights to social betterment. These stories are in the confessional mode because I believe that a self-critical examination of our own attempts can help to move us to our own personal model of the relationship between understanding and community well-being.

## TWO PROJECTS

I want to tell you about two projects in which I was recently involved, because they made me question my own role as a social scientist, its meaning, and how I should proceed. They helped me gain a few glimmers of insight about how we might conduct ourselves if we believe that there is, and should be, a link between knowledge and social betterment. I learned things I did not expect to learn from these experiences. They each left me still ambivalent about the Campbell versus Alinsky alternatives, but perhaps feeling a little better about my ambivalence.

The first project began several years ago and was a joint effort. Emory Cowen, Ray Lorion, Julia Ramos-McKay, as well as Beverly Hitchins of the American Psychological Association, were hard-working and valued col-



leagues in this effort. The American Psychological Association had appointed us to a task force on prevention. Our idea was to once and for all demonstrate to the public that there were prevention efforts that really worked. In my mind, this would provide a concrete response to the skepticism of some of our scientific colleagues. It would also be a response to the forces of the treatment lobby, whose entrenched interests meant there was little time or energy left for prevention. And finally, it would be a response to those who argued that prevention was just another way of deflecting our energies from liberating the oppressed. The story of how we were able to identify both those few prevention programs among the hundreds that we considered has been told elsewhere (Price, Cowen, Lorion, & Ramos-McKay, 1988).

What I learned from this project is not irrelevant to those models of relevance and scientific roles I have just discussed. I started out thinking our goal was largely a technical one, and that effective prevention programs could be evaluated primarily on empirical grounds. I ended up learning that prevention programs that were really effective took sides. That is, they managed to become an advocate for the population with which they were concerned. They communicated that sense of advocacy by offering a better alternative to the existing social institution in question, whether it was a high school, an obstetrics ward, or the juvenile court. And their designers were social advocates who insisted that high schools could be settings where students and teachers cared for each other and where dropping out might be seen as a failure of the school, not of the student. They were advocates who knew how to create circumstances where a couple could have their child in a setting where caring was available as well as medical technology. These advocates and designers believed that advocacy and companionship for kids in the juvenile justice system was a better alternative than legal processing and neglect—and they were right. So effective prevention programs actually offered a critique of the existing social system or organization and offered an alternative social form (Reinharz, 1984) that offered both advocacy and support for kids in trouble or poor black preschoolers, or widows.<sup>4</sup>

I started out thinking that our efforts at seeking and describing effective preventive efforts would speak for themselves. I ended up bearing witness for their value in a lot of ways that I did not expect to, and which were certainly not part of the usual professional role, including doing radio shows, writing in “popular” magazines, and testifying in front of Congress. This last experience brought home especially to me the realization that we were dealing in the political arena rather than with the social engineers design shop. My colleagues and I were testifying before the House Select Committee on

<sup>4</sup>I thank Ken Heller for his suggestion that preventive programs have these critical qualities and that they can offer alternatives to status quo social arrangements.

Children, Youth, and Families (Price, 1984, 1987). We bore witness to new possibilities for reducing the impact of marital separation, for reducing child abuse, and improving adolescent health and reducing pregnancy. The partisan response from some members of the Select Committee was that these were measures that would undermine the institution of the marriage and family and promote the teaching of sexual immorality in the schools.

I started out thinking that it would be easy to find lots of examples of effective programs. We ended up having to tell the truth. There are still so few that we must redouble our efforts. Nine hundred initial inquiries produced 300 responses, but only 14 programs that we could recommend as exemplary. And many promising efforts will never be able to provide hard evidence of effectiveness. It is just too expensive, too complex, and the knowledge and skills to assemble the evidence are not there.

Another project brought home some similar lessons and, again, made me wonder about my role as social scientist and advocate. For several years, my colleagues Ron Kessler, Jim House, Bob Caplan, and Amiram Vinokur at the Michigan Prevention Research Center and I have been studying the problem of unemployment and its impact on peoples' psychological and physical well-being (Kessler, House, & Turner, 1987; Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1988). We have also been developing programs that would help people get back into the labor market and continue with their lives with reasonable incomes and adequate security for the future.

One day I got a call from a law firm. They were representing a group of people who had been the victims of a plant closing and they wanted to know whether I would say something in court about what we had learned about the impact of unemployment. I said yes, and what has happened in the last year has again led me to reconsider my role as social scientist or advocate.

The plant that had closed belonged to a large manufacturing firm in the Midwest. Apparently, management had concluded that the company had excess capacity and had to make a decision about which plant to close. The plant they chose to close employed primarily older workers. In fact, the average length of time until retirement was only 3 years. The plant they kept open consisted primarily of younger workers, receiving low pay and with pension benefits due to them only in the distant future. Eighteen of the older workers from the plant that had closed sued the company for age discrimination, and they won. A second hearing was scheduled to assess the damages, both financial, in terms of lost pay and pensions, and psychological damage, in terms of anxiety, depression, and insecurity.

In order to learn more about the case, I interviewed each of the workers in the case and many of their wives. I thought I was just going to collect data, but after the first few interviews, I found myself deeply shaken by the

sense of betrayal, the fear and hopelessness, the financial hardship, and deep sense of insecurity about the future that I saw in these people. There were a lot of tears and a lot of agony in those interviews, and I confess to having been deeply moved and changed by the experience.

Again, I learned a great deal. I started out thinking that I was going to be an expert witness, and I ended up feeling the need to take sides, to describe both the findings of our research and the concrete reality of the agony and fear that these people were experiencing. I started out thinking the data would speak for themselves, and ended up on the witness stand feeling as I had never felt before, that there was a concrete connection between what we had learned in our research and interviews and the chance of justice and social betterment for these workers and their families. I started out thinking that the truth consists primarily of what we had found in our surveys, and ended up discovering that the concrete facts of these peoples' lives felt a great deal truer than the abstractions that summarized our research results.

## **TAKING SIDES, BEARING WITNESS, AND TELLING THE TRUTH**

So what are the lessons from these two projects, and where does it leave us in trying to create a more coherent model connecting social knowledge and community well-being? I can only offer my own conclusions, ones that feel right to me now. Whatever model eventually emerges for me will have embodied in it somehow three impulses to action. They are (a) take sides, (b) bear witness, (c) tell the truth. These are not meant to be simplistic injunctions because each of them triggers a dialectic that must be played out, since there are potential costs and potential victims to be concerned about.

### *Taking Sides*

These experiences have convinced me that we cannot avoid taking sides in our work. A view of social problems that imagines social actors in conflict rather than social puzzles to solve is one that requires that the engaged social scientist take sides. As Robert Kahn (1987) observed, it may not be so much of *whether* we empower others, but *whom* we empower.<sup>5</sup> Rather than avoid the issue, and fail to do the analysis that identifies the actors in conflict, the beneficiaries, and the victims, we can begin by admitting that we must be partisans. To admit it is a liberating act, but we must each for ourselves find what we regard to be the most urgent cause. We must also make

<sup>5</sup>Robert Kahn first made this insightful observation, and I only later realized its importance.

a candid admission of our role as advocates. To be candid requires some courage, but it is a major antidote to ambivalence.

There will be times when what we have to say will help to redefine apparently conflicting interests in ways that will allow resolutions that have the now familiar "win-win" quality. In those cases we will be fortunate to be able to point out that, in the long run, contesting parties share a transcendent common interest that makes short-term conflict less necessary or desirable. But there will be other instances in which no such long-term common interest or interdependency can be found, and in those cases, having taken sides, we will have to bear witness in a partisan fashion.

But to take sides involves other risks to be calculated. To take sides with one contending faction will probably mean never to have credibility with the other. We will not be able to use the cloak of ambiguity, which at times can be so useful in negotiating organization and community life as March and Olsen (1976) and Weick (1979) have observed.

### *Bearing Witness*

We have available to us a wide range of arenas for action in addition to scholarly publication. We should not be afraid to use them. Their very use sometimes violates explicit or implicit professional norms about the proper way to communicate one's insights, but I believe an engaged social scientist can do nothing else. It might be argued that we are acting most responsibly when we communicate in ways most likely to be heard, even if it involves a "popular" magazine article, whistle blowing, a radio program, a community forum, or the witness stand. We must be heard to make any difference. On the other hand, to be "unprofessional" in this way means violating norms that many of our colleagues do not take lightly. We will be accused of grandstanding, selling out, or engaging in "pop" activities, nothing a serious social scientist would ever do.

### *Telling the Truth*

Finally, as obvious as it may sound, we must tell the truth. This is a more subtle and demanding thing than we might first imagine. Truth-telling can come in many forms. Many theories of social life contain empirical propositions that yield to hard-headed social research and analysis (Heller, Price, Reinharz, Riger, & Wandersman, 1984; D'Aunno and Price, 1984a, 1984b). That is one kind of truth to tell. Telling the truth about what we do not know as well as what we do is another way of telling the truth. Hardest of all, we may have to tell the truth about those for whom we advocate. Even vic-

tims have secrets, and we must weigh the cost of telling the whole truth about those for whom we advocate.

Even telling the truth is not so simple. Sissela Bok (1979) has shown us that telling the truth is itself a moral choice which can sometimes produce unexpected harm to others. What about confidentiality? What about fidelity to community groups, clients, colleagues? And what about simple respect? Thus, even the simple injunction to tell the truth sets off a dialectic that one must see to its conclusion.

These are modest conclusions, not yet a fourth paradigm for the transformation of social insight into community betterment. They are conclusions that are hard to live by. But I believe we have no other choice.

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