

Towards Responsible Political Research

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Every message, phrase, sign is loaded with an ideology, an agenda, a history, a bias. The propagation and dissemination of these memetic mind-bombs is the business of intellectuals through publication, education, and public debate. To support a style of teaching, prescribe to a school of thought, or even engage in intellectual activity is to advocate for one agenda over another. When thought of in this manner all scholars are activists championing one lifestyle over another. I aim to demonstrate in this article a current trend in the social sciences towards activist research, which tries to mitigate some of the power disparities, not only between the researcher and the subject, but also in the relationship between science and civil society. To sum up I will provide a short description of some of the small methodological tools that should be incorporated into every responsible research design.

ACADEMIC SOCIAL SCIENTISTS VS. ACADEMIC CITIZEN EXPERTS

We are warned the institution of political science generates a self-filling prescription for fact-generation and dissemination that does not necessarily lead to better citizens or government (Ricci 1984). Furthermore, the discipline, particularly when adhering to a belief that there is a way to buffer ones subjectivity through the academic peer-review process, creates a set of ideational ‘facts’ that are loaded with the prejudices of the current regime of expert academics (Feyerabend 1979; Kuhn 1996) These experts tend to be wealthy, white men whose propensity to maintain their positions of superiority (Hubbard 1989) has led to the continued exclusion and exploitation of those excluded from this technocracy (Chomsky 1967). It is because of the technocratic nature of this

endeavor that average citizens are excluded from this process despite the limited success of ‘experts’ to generate knowledge leading to unilateral progress (Fischer 2002).

There is a dichotomy in the academy between two camps of researchers at this point: “academic social scientists” and “academic citizen experts”. The academic social scientist is easier to define because it is the tradition of individuals who adhere to the rigors of the academic institution as the ultimate form of knowledge generation. The existing body of knowledge is encountered in academia; the process of data gathering adheres to the methods designated by academia; the findings are produced for other members of academia; and the critiques and fact-checking come from others in academia (Isaak 1969; Ricci 1984; Kuhn 1996). For the academic social scientist, the process of inquiry remains, for the most part, within the confines and regulations of academia.

If the knowledge generated within the academy then only affected the academic community this process would be unproblematic; but because the ideational ‘facts’ generated through this closed process are used to justify policy and social institutions outside of academia –particularly the knowledge created by political scientists– there is a trend to incorporate outside voices into this process of knowledge generation as a means of humanizing the process of inquiry and to empower those left voiceless in the current structuring of society.

The roots of modern civil-minded intellectual can be traced to the *advocacy researchers* of the 60’s and 70’s that aimed to work with unheard perspectives and issues (i.e. antinuclear, environmental, women’s rights, and black movements) as a method of providing academic clout (Fischer 2002). Other terms for these individuals are *social*

*scholars, citizen experts, and activist academics*¹. Gitlin, while not a fan of the word *activist*, finds the term useful as a reminder that “the world not only *is* but is *made*” (Gitlin 2003). What scientists choose to study affects not only how the world is understood, but what that world is. The activist researchers sought out groups and ideas that were not being represented by “Big Science” (Feyerabend) and working to encourage democratic empowerment (Fischer, 38). The *academic citizen expert* is today’s manifestation of this trend: a social science investigator conscience of his position within society whose research design empowers the knowledge of citizenry to a similar degree as the academy. This is a growing trend embraces the idea that intellectuals a moral responsibility not only to their professional peers, but to their fellow citizens as champions of the truth and educators of the public (Chomsky); it holds that true change can only happen on a one-on-one basis (Zinn 2005); and it combines these ideas into the idea that the academic can integrate his roles as a scientist, an educator, and a citizen in one without jeopardizing any of them. Rather than leave this vague description of this trend towards more socially

¹ *Advocacy researcher, social scholar, and activist academic* are invocative terms that arouse certain prejudices about the individual (the tendency towards biased research would be an obvious accusation of those in a more traditional scientific camp); but each of these terms is both too broad in the type of academic they include and too narrow in the type of citizen they include. *Advocacy, social, and activist* imply the pursuit of creating a certain world ideal and an activeness to achieve that goal. The same could be said about any academic social scientist actively perpetuating a specific world-view through the careful adherence of traditional “non-biased” science. Ignorance of one’s effect on changing the world does not make one’s actions less impactful upon those effected. If the scientist can label the subject as a dependent or independent variable, then the subject can label the scientist as an *active advocate* for the current *social* power structures. The cat can fairly blame you for killing it just for entertaining your curiosity. *Researcher, scholar, and academic*, on the other hand, are too specific and give a disproportionate amount of power to one group of people based on the academic source of the knowledge they claim to have. I use the term “academic citizen expert” in this article because it seems to be the most inclusive of the ideas proposed here, though I qualify the citizen expert as an academic to separate him from other technocratic research participants as Fischer does.

responsible and progressive research, I will use the example of Dr. Robert Putnam and his ongoing research project Better Together to demonstrate how this process can look in a political science context.

ROBERT PUTNAM AS A CITIZEN EXPERT

“Today, as we enter a new century fraught with vast demographic and technological challenges, we need to harness the civic energy that our Progressive forebears found, repeating their feats while learning from their errors” (Putnam and Feldstein 2000)

This call to arms is found in Robert Putnam’s book, *Better Together*, a write up of the meetings, interviews, surveys, and conferences sponsored by the Better Together initiative through the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. These are not the words of an objective scientist, nor is his methodology one of a solo investigator bent on further understanding within one strand of science; rather, this project works to connect various community organizers “with a deep commitment to improving the infrastructure of national civic life” (Putnam and Feldstein). This project demonstrates how a citizen expert can incorporate the various roles of *academic*, *scientist*, *educator*, and *citizen* together to generate and disseminate knowledge not only within academia, but also into the larger population.

Citizen: Where Does Your Question Come from and Where are Your Findings Going?

This project and research stems from the question “*how can we increasingly build bonds of trust amongst Americans and their communities?*” as a reaction to what Putnam sees as the most important issue in the United States today: the decline of community involvement and civic deliberation as a method of addressing the nation’s increasingly

complex issues. The problem that Putnam is asking is not based upon abstract theories found within the tomes of the university library, but from his first-hand experience as a global citizen and ethnographic investigator.

While the origin of the research question is not radically different than one you may expect from an academic social scientist, the goals and end products of the research are much different. The purpose of this project is not only to produce some sort of academic knowledge, but rather to collectively generate new methods for increasing social capital to be used by individuals and communities across the nation. The very nature of the inquiry and the ultimate goals and destination of the findings is what makes this research such a departure from the current informational inbreeding that occurs with academic social scientists.

Scientist: How do you do Research?

Because of the nature of the question asked and the end goals of the project, Putnam has not positioned himself in the traditional researcher role for this project. He is not sitting back and observing a trend in society, but he is actively trying to change the very trend he is seeing through a collaborative project with the people he is observing. There is a growing trend now not only to study peripheral issues as a means of representing fringe issues, but of incorporating citizens and subjects² into the research process to make them

² There is a debate over what to call the people who take surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc. *Surveyee*, *focus groupee*, and *interviewee* describe the ways in which people were subjected by methods and are excellent descriptors. *Participant* is problematic because unless the individuals have helped design the research methodology, the investigator is subjecting them to the process even if voluntarily so.

real participants in the research process. This idea of *participatory research*³ refers not to the placement of the researcher within the community, as with participatory observation, but the process of research as one of a collaborative process between the researcher and local citizens. As academics continue to try to bring about change in the social structure of the world, part of what needs to happen is the reconfiguration of the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched.

Academic: How Is the Researched Placed Within the Political Science Field?

Even though Putnam jeopardized his objectivity throughout this process, he is still able to produce valid academic writing which contributes to and builds upon current knowledge and understanding because he is

a) a gifted researcher able to deftly navigate these various roles

b) honest throughout the process to the participants, the audience of the papers, and the people he is trying to sway with his work.

Every researcher tries –or at least ethically *should* try– to disclose his biases to the best of his ability– not only to our audiences, but to our participants as well so as to avoid deception and manipulation. This approach encourages full disclosure at every step because the aim is to create an open and generative process not only within academia, but with the communities with whom the researcher is working.

Educator: Who Are You Teaching and How Are you Teaching Them?

³ Due to the page constraints of this paper, I will not be able to elaborate more fully on participatory research in other social sciences or within the field of political science.

One of the major ways this project shifts the academic social scientist paradigm is for whom this information is and how they can access it. There are three populations Putnam is trying to educate as part of this model of responsible research: *university students/ scholars, community leaders, and the general population*. Just as many other citizen experts within academia are, Putnam employs a range of communications strategies to reach these different groups including the use of new information communications technologies such as websites.

The students and scholars Putnam is trying to reach is done primarily through his publications, courses, and academic presentations. This is not entirely different from the more tradition approach of the academic social scholar apart from Putnam's decree that "political science must have a greater public presence" (Putnam 2003). His message of engaging with citizens and the citizenry is a departure from the assumption that the political scientist must stay separate from the people. In fact, he invokes the political responsibility and roots of the discipline which held a commitment to improving not only the quality of knowledge about politics, but also the quality of democratic practices (Ricci).

Putnam is not merely trying to extract knowledge from the community leaders with whom he worked, but through the collaborative process of deliberated discussion and idea generation, create a network of innovative thinkers who will learn not only about the process of community building, but also how to generate new approaches to this type of work. By placing himself within the network of participants, and not outside of the conversation looking in, Putnam has encouraged a more democratic process of knowledge generation where the fruits of this intellectual labor will go directly back to

those who contributed. Aside from the more academic book, Better Together produced a report of the findings targeted towards community leaders, not only those who worked with the project, but also any who are interested. This is not a closed loop of information collection and dissemination, but an open and organic process that continues to inspire.

Finally, this project is ultimately geared towards educating the general public, or *citizens*. Both the report and the academic book are written in a manner that makes them understandable and accessible to the layperson. Beyond that, the report and suggestions for average people to increase their social capital today are available on the website, bettertogether.org. This may be one place where Putnam's approach to this method of outreach is a bit behind the trend to fully embrace new technologies for reaching the general public. Academics are increasingly using blogs, podcasts, and streaming video to make their academic and activist ideas accessible and open to the public for comment and critique. Regardless, Putnam is still committed to teaching, educating, and learning himself from the general public, which brings this process back to the role of the citizen. For the academic expert citizen the process of research begins and ends with the citizens; the academy is at the second and penultimate steps of this knowledge building process.

CONCLUSION

Robert Putnam is by no means the only social scientist using this approach to research, the academy, and the general public. In fact, he is one of the least radical of a crowd that includes Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Edward Said, Robin Kelly, Todd Gitlin, Patricia Williams, Manning Morable, Sut Jhully, Frank Fischer, amongst others. All these people have and continue to lead to successful lives within academia while fulfilling a moral and ethically responsibility to our fellow men and women. Because I

owe so much of this to Robert Putnam, I'm going to give him the final word. From the
2002 APSA Presidential address:

Part of our professional responsibility is to engage with our fellow citizens in deliberation about their political concerns, broadly defined. Political science must have a greater public presence... I believe attending to the concerns of our fellow citizens is not just an optional add-on for the profession of political science, but an obligation as fundamental as our pursuit of scientific truth.

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