ORLD 5527- The College Professoriate
(Fall 2002)

A Reflective Paper on Research in Academia

Introduction

The *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (2000) defines research as "a diligent and systematic enquiry into a subject in order to discover or revise facts, theories etc" (p. 1122). In academia, research is aimed at creating, deepening our understanding, transmitting and applying knowledge for the betterment of individuals, institutions and the community at large.

Traditionally, academic research (whether conducted by an individual or a group), is often regarded as an objective technical exercise, conducted along laid-down rules, and thus is devoid of personal knowledge, prejudices and emotions of the individual researchers. Hence, we very often read statements such as: "[T]he University of California completed a study of undergraduate education, recommending that …" (Boyer, 1990, p. 1). On the other hand, when a distinguished scholar proclaims that "This struggle is grounded both in what I choose to study and how I choose to study it," and that "[P]rivate qualities have bearing on public standpoints, thus not only what was said but who said it gives meaning and interpretation to knowledge claims" (Ladson-Billings, in Newman & Peterson, 1997, p. 61 & 64), we realize that in some cases, the research activity has personal underpinnings, and therefore cannot be truly objective.

Thus, in reality, research is of a dual nature; driven by community (social) efforts, goals and aspirations on one hand, and by the personal emotions, experiences, motivation and needs of the individual researcher(s) on the other. This certainly has implications on the professoriate.

In this paper, I will carry out a further elaboration on this dual nature of research, drawing on evidence provided by Becher (1989), Neumann & Peterson (1997) and a few other articles, so as to determine the tensions inherent in this duality and their implications on the professor's academic career. I will then use this evidence as a basis for offering a piece of advice to a beginning scholar as to what challenges and opportunities await him/her, since research remains one of the principal means of advancing an academic career.

Research as a Community-Based Endeavor

Research activities in academia take place within recognized academic disciplines, a concept which, according to Becher (1989), comprises two aspects - the subject matter of

enquiry (e.g. history, physics etc), and the social organizations of scholars (academic institutions, professional associations etc) who "engage, explore, construct and reconstruct ideas that form the subject matter." Jacobsen (in Becher, 1989) calls these two aspects "equally important" (p.20), an indication that, for any work to be recognized as being of relevance to the discipline, it must not only address subject matter satisfactorily, but must also conform to the norms, goals and expectations of the scholarly community that represent the discipline. This is also confirmed by Becher who emphasizes that, membership of a scholar community does not only involve technical competence in the subject matter, "but also a measure of loyalty to one's collegial group, and of adherence to its norms" (p. 24). Becher continues to indicate that it is the academic community that determines "what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument …" (p. 26). Thus, research work (done to the satisfaction of an individual or group of researchers), could still be rejected if it is deemed to have fallen short of meeting the established criteria and standards of the scholarly community. Maxine Greene (Neumann & Peterson, 1997) portrays this when she indicates that "many writers send their work to as many as nineteen publishers before finding one willing to take a chance [and publish it]" (p.20). As one's research work may not pass as authentic (hence contributing to knowledge creation) without the involvement of the scholarly community, it can be argued that academic research is generally a community-based endeavor.

Jacobsen (Becher, 1989) again points out that the two aspects of an academic discipline (knowledge and community) are "mutually determining" (p.20), a point confirmed by Becher with the statement that "[T]he attitudes and cognitive styles of groups of academics representing a particular discipline are closely bound up with the characteristics and structures of the knowledge domains with which such groups are professionally concerned, [and] it is unproductive to forge any sharp division between them" (p. 20). In short, subject matter determines social behavior and vice versa. Thus, the attitudes, style, conduct and even artifacts with which any researcher approaches his/her work are mostly traits acquired from the academic grouping to which he/she belongs. The code of practices of the disciplinary community, as Becher puts it, "conditions the way [its members] see the world" (p. 24). A historian who sets out to study a phenomenon, will most likely approach it in a way and manner that most historians will do. As community characteristics have a great influence on the way research is carried out, it will not be out of place to conclude that academic research (whether conducted by an individual or a group), is ultimately the responsibility of the scholarly community.

A third and final attribute of academia which gives credence to the fact that research is a community-based endeavor, is that most researcher's ideas and interests are conditioned and directed in part by the larger academic community. For example, whilst Concha Delgado-Gaitan (Neumann & Peterson, 1997) points out that she focused her research on ethnographic studies because her training as an educator taught her that the purpose of literacy is "the liberation of poor communities" (p. 42), Linda Winfield concedes that her research interests "were continually redirected and broadened by professional situations" (p. 201). Academic disciplines also provide forums (institutions, meetings and journal publications) for the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences, which in turn can modify a researcher's ideas and mode of enquiry. Thus, Greene (1997) indicates that her encounter with new colleagues in Hawaii "made a difference in the courses I was beginning to invent" (p. 26). The research activities of these academics will thus certainly exhibit some level of community influence and motivation.

Whilst the foregoing paragraphs convincingly illustrate that the characteristics and desires of the scholarly community direct the course of academic research, evidence abound that indicate that personal experiences, attitudes, desires and even emotions of the individual researcher also contribute greatly in shaping the course of research. In the discussions that follow, I will provide evidence that strongly support the personal aspect of academic research.

Research as a Personal Endeavor

As far as most social researchers are concerned, it is fairly impossible to separate an individual's professional career from his/her personal and private daily life experiences. Delgado-Gaitan (1997) points out that "I have learned that the border I had delineated between my work and my personal life must fade to make possible an integration of self and profession" (p.46). Also, Ladson-Billings states that "I resist the notion of myself as an 'objective' researcher when what I research is so intricately linked to the life I have lived and continue to live" (p. 52). The research work is thus part of the overall personal life of the researcher, and as such will be greatly influenced by personal attributes.

Secondly, personal interests, needs and desires are factors that can also contribute greatly in shaping the mode and course of an individual's research activities. Several examples in

Neumann & Peterson attest to this fact. Delgado-Gaitan mentions that the need to "challenge perceived personal limits" was a motivating factor for her research (p. 47), and Ladson-Billings also states that "I need to do the kind of research that will help make the system more equitable and just" (p. 64). Winfield's desire to learn how children develop was as a result of her being a first-time mother (p. 197), whilst Kathryn Au's experiences as a Chinese American contributed greatly to her interest in research on culturally responsive forms of instruction (p. 77). To these academics, research is a personally significant activity. They thus carry out research, not to satisfy community norms and goals, but to fulfill personal needs and ambitions. Their activities will thus be shaped and directed more by personal endeavors and less by community involvement and direction.

External events and issues that impact directly or indirectly on a person's private life can also influence his/her choice of disciplinary focus. Greene (Neumann & Peterson), reveals that "when I explained that [my daughter needed special attention] to her second-grade teacher, the teacher suggested taking a baseball bat to the child; and that opened my path to becoming an academic" (p.21), whilst the accounts of Ladson-Billings and Delgado-Gaitan (Neumann & Peterson), indicate that their research endeavors are the result of a struggle against cultural and institutional domination. The research activities of such academics can therefore be considered as personal crusades, informed by "voices from within" (Neumann & Peterson, p. 53), and obviously with little or no community support.

Implications for an Academic Career

The discussions so far indicate that, in most cases, individuals embark on a scholarly or research endeavor not just for the sake of it, but for the need to fulfill a personal ambition or desire (and they are at liberty to do that). At the same time however, for one's work to be considered credible, it must fall in line with the established benchmarks of the scholarly community. Ladson-Billings (Neumann & Peterson, p. 62) sums this up when she indicates that "Indeed, while the academy may be more tolerant of what scholars choose to study, it can sometimes be rigidly dogmatic about how research is to be conducted." Regrettably, personal meaning of research is most often in dispute with that of the scholarly community, thus generating some tensions which have far-reaching implications on an academic career.

One of such tensions arises out of the issue of a researcher's commitment to personal interests and goals versus his/her expected loyalty to disciplinary norms, customs and practices. Miller (2002) points out that "In most fields newcomers are judged according to their ability to move just far enough beyond the previous models of success in their discipline to be pronounced 'original,' without offending or confounding their predecessors so much that the newcomers find themselves excluded from the inner circle" (paragraph 3). Charles Emerson (Neumann, 1999) also indicates that, most disciplinary colleagues, "who had defined and built their careers based on established disciplinary perspectives," tend to resist ideas and activities that question or challenge these perspectives. Thus an individual researcher whose personal interests and passions are likely to conflict with disciplinary thinking, has to "walk a very careful, careful line," by simultaneously pursuing his/her personal interests, and also striving to appease disciplinary colleagues who might be intolerant of such interests. This situation can be demoralizing to the academic, particularly when this "careful line" cannot be clearly defined by the individual in question. How far are disciplinary colleagues prepared to compromise their positions? And to what extent can the individual distance him/herself from colleagues without suffering a backlash? On the other hand, this tension can serve as a potential motivating factor to a successful academic career, because successfully "walking the careful line," can lead one to gaining recognition in academia, building a reputation, and possibly carving out a niche in one's field.

Another tension is generated by the "objective" versus "subjective" issue regarding the methodology or mode of enquiry of a person's research work. The traditional belief of academia is that research work must be conducted objectively i.e. devoid of personal emotions and biases. Hence disciplinary communities expect all practitioners (in order not to compromise their research), to apply the established practices, rules of conduct, forms of communication etc. in all their research endeavors. Whilst this might be possible in some cases (as in the physical sciences), it is almost an impossibility when it comes to qualitative research in the social sciences. Winfield (Neumann & Peterson) feels that, in most qualitative research activities, "the researcher's intuition, involvement, and attachment are important because the researcher is the direct knower" (p. 200). Ladson-Billings (Neumann & Peterson) also wondered whether being an advocate for her (non-academic) community meant that her work was likely to be biased and hence will not be accepted by academia (p. 66). How then can one be personally and emotionally attached to a research activity (making it essentially subjective), and at the same time, present it as far objective as possible in order for it to gain acceptance by the disciplinary community? Also, what happens if

work which is personally fulfilling to an individual is, according to Ladson-Billings, "perceived as 'alien' in the academe?" This tension can be a source of frustration to the academic as he/she strives to satisfy personal ambitions whilst ensuring that his/her overall academic career is not put in jeopardy. From another look however, it could be seen as a challenge to the academic, thus serving as a source of motivation and inspiration and ultimately enhancing his/her scholarship. Ladson-Billings (Neumann & Peterson), who in my opinion has had a successful career, states emphatically that her scholarly work both challenges and enhances my personal life, just as her personal life challenges and enhances her scholarly work (p. 67). This is an indication that the person-community duality nature of research can really be a morale booster.

Thus, depending on how the individual academic approaches his/her research work, the person-community duality nature of academic research and the tensions therein can either enhance or setback his/her academic career.

A Piece of Advice for a Beginning Scholar

In academia, research is one of the main means by which you can gain recognition, get promotion, advance your academic career and possibly build a national and international reputation. You should therefore pursue meaningful research vigorously if you hope to have a fruitful academic career. However, as elaborated above, academic research has a dual character, and if your passions do not appear to connect with mainstream trends, don't give up. Rather adopt a "two-pronged" approach i.e. stay solidly connected to your scholarly community by carrying out activities that will appease your colleagues, whilst at the same time pursuing your personal interests and goals. Possibly, you might finally be able to make a connection with some audience and ultimately create a sub-disciplinary community.

Conclusion

I have used the writings and autobiographical accounts of experienced researchers in education as evidence to support the fact that research in academia has a dual character; a personal aspect and a community aspect. This duality can, in some cases generate tensions which can either motivate or frustrate an academic career. It is however the responsibility of the individual researcher to endeavor to strike a comfortable balance, and pursue a career that is both personally fulfilling and professionally acceptable to academia. The disciplinary communities must also

strive to minimize, not only the tensions that are inherent in research, but also all other tensions that might impact negatively on academic careers, by opening up to new ideas and also giving researchers enough room and encouragement to move in new directions. This will serve as a motivating factor for academics to sustain productivity for the benefit of both academia and society at large.

Bibliography

Becher, Tony. Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1989

Boyer, E. L. Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. 1990

Miller, N. J. (2002, March 25). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: Career Network. Retrieved December 2, 2002 from: http://chronicle.com/jobs/2002/03/2002032501c.htm

Neumann, Anna. "Case 9: Charles Emerson: Persistence and Achievement." Between the Work I Love and the Work I Do: Creating Professors and Scholars in the Early Post-Tenure Career. Occasional Papers Series, Center for the Education of Women and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Spring 1999.

Neumann, Anna, and Penelope L. Peterson, eds. Learning from Our Lives: Women, Research, and Autobiography in Education. New York: Teachers College Press. 1997.