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On Research and Writing: A Personal Account

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When I was invited to write a short essay about my approach to research and writing, I was delighted about the opportunity to “lift my own curtains” and “look underneath my own rug” in order to critically examine the means I use to weave together threads of findings, threads of knowing, threads from various sources of inquiry. Research for me is never a solitary act. Rather it is a necessary tool for discovering what motivates people, how they go about doing what they do, and for analyzing problems and establishing the basis for policy decisions. In describing my approach to research and writing, I must begin autobiographically, not to indulge in memories, but rather to illustrate how my background and academic training influence the ways I undertake research.

Early on, I became keenly aware of and interested in the intersection of organizations and large bureaucracies with individuals’ behavior. I grew up in Germany (West) in a family of lawyers and judges—a family of civil servants who served and resisted bureaucracy and the state. Consequently, I considered public institutions and bureaucracies part of everyday life: occasionally annoying, never frightening, and always to be rendered

transparent so that one might influence and not be influenced entirely by them.

When I entered university in Germany, I studied political science. In retrospect my choice seems obvious. My student years corresponded with the height of the German student movement in the early seventies. My generation was obsessed with history. If we didn’t understand the past and what led to the rise of the Third Reich, how could we avoid such a tragedy in the future?! It became a maxim in my life to know as much as possible about the past, and how it conditions the present. I was driven by the desire to understand how decisions are made at the state level, decisions that influence people’s lives and hinder or foster the development of a democratic society. I was passionately committed to contributing to a society in which people are educated to become conscious citizens, with the right to self-determination and co-determination at all levels of the decision making process.

My German university education was strongly influenced by the thoughts and writings of sociologists Adorno and Habermas, and Klafki, von Friedeburg, and Konefke from the field of education. Although I received the equivalent of a master’s degree in political science under Gurland, this education opened doors to the study of sociology (Mayer), history (Boehme, Schmitt), and economics (Kade). In this context I learned, experienced, and understood that education takes place in a certain historical, societal, and economic context, and within certain political structures.

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When I arrived at Berkeley to pursue a doctorate in higher education, I brought with me the belief that research into higher education was a tool worth learning in order to better understand the institution that trains the next generation of professionals who will develop and practice new democratic leadership roles within and outside academia.

My doctoral education focused primarily on higher education from a sociological, organizational, and historical point of view (Martin Trow, Burton Clark, Philip Altbach, Arthur Levine, Guy Benveniste, Arlie Hochschild, Geraldine Clifford, Fritz Ringer, Frederic Rudolph). Political science provided me with basic quantitative research methods, a deeper understanding of organizational behavior and the implementation of policies and change. Sociology supplied the tools to study gender and race, moving from experience to scientific analysis. History introduced me to the pleasure of searching for and working with original sources, and the art of contextualizing and interpreting these documents. It also opened the genre of biography as a legitimate historical source. Thus, in my study *The Academic Kitchen* (1999), I was able to reconstruct the life of an academic department by combining organizational theory with gender stratification and the new historiography on women, and write the book as an institutional biography of a department chair.

I approach my research on graduate education first and foremost with passion and a commitment to identify structures that allow all graduate students to receive a quality education, and to have a positive experience in the process. To conceptualize a research project, I begin by visualizing the context, literally by drawing cognitive maps, of the focus of my study. Graduate education takes place in multiple contexts: between graduate students and faculty, within a given program, and in a certain department. The graduate program, in turn, operates within a particular graduate school

within a certain university. Each organizational unit, program, department, and campus graduate school has rules and regulations that influence graduate education and the experience of graduate students. In addition, each organizational unit has its own distinct culture and values that influence explicitly as well as implicitly the behavior of students, faculty, departmental staff, department chairs, divisional deans, graduate deans, and graduate school staff. Ignoring these units during the research process ignores the fact that admission requirements, program funding, student financial support, and overall dissertation examination requirements, while set by the graduate school, or better the graduate council, can differ in major elements from program to program within the same university, and among the same programs in different universities. Studying, for example, graduate students at the beginning of graduate school, we must not only interview or survey students, but we also must examine the different disciplinary approaches to graduate education and the different program structures and cultures. Only after such careful analysis may we dare generalize certain experiences, under certain conditions, in certain disciplines.

In studying students' experiences, I also include a time dimension. Doctoral education stretches over several stages: orientation to the program; course taking; preparation for and taking of exams; the search for a dissertation advisor and topic and the development of a prospectus; dissertation research and writing; and job preparation and job search. My recent work, with J. Cerny on the career paths of PhDs caused me to realize that job preparation and job search should not be considered the final stage, but rather should be incorporated into all other phases of a doctoral program. Research demonstrated that students need to examine their career goals early on, supported by departments' alumni employment records and realistic employment information that spans the

entire spectrum—from academe, to business, to government and non-profit sectors. I also take into account diversity. Studying graduate students means evaluating a diversity of experiences across gender, age, and family, socioeconomic and national status.

Over the years I have changed my focus from students to disciplinary culture. I realized that if we want to improve graduate education, we need to work with faculty. As Clark Kerr noted in *Higher Education Cannot Escape History* (1994), faculty at doctoral granting institutions are less loyal to their campus than to their discipline. Therefore, a new focus of inquiry will be the professional associations that influence our faculty's attitudes and values, as well as the curriculum. My focus has also shifted to include an inquiry into the influence major external funding agencies increasingly exert over doctoral education, by virtue of the way they provide money for graduate education. For example, by granting more funding for traineeships than research assistantships, these agencies are influencing institutional culture at the program level. A third outside factor that can influence departments and entire graduate schools is the national doctoral program assessment, done every ten years by the National Research Council. The outcome of this assessment has induced some universities to close entire departments. And, returning full circle to the inception of doctoral education in this country, I wonder whether the curious merger of the German model of doctoral education, which has no purpose beyond the advancement of knowledge and science

per se, with the pragmatic American Progressive Era notion of using science and scholarship to eradicate poverty and illness and to solve the problems of immigration caused a bifurcation that has greater ramifications than we have understood thus far.

Let me in conclusion explain the principles that guide my choice of methods in my work. First, if possible, I combine quantitative methods and information (departmental, university data, national data, large scale surveys) with qualitative methods (various forms of interviews, focus groups, context analyses, document interpretations). Second, I try to assure that I come as close as possible to the subject of inquiry during the preparation and research phase—I need to see, smell, touch, or talk with what I am investigating. Third, during the analysis stage, I create as much distance as possible between myself and the individual account. Fourth, during the interpretation phase, while assembling the threads of results and findings in front of me, I am constantly recalling my experience, my background, and weaving it together with all the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) I have amassed over time. Research endeavors are spiral; they involve continual testing and searching for better understanding of the context, the connections, the changes in these connections, the political and organizational influences at individual and organizational levels. My research has led to a deeper awareness of the complex interaction of personal and organizational factors-and, I hope, to an improvement in graduate education and in students' experience as well.

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