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*This chapter argues that public scholarship can transcend
the epistemological limitations of research universities by
drawing on postmodern social theory and pragmatism in
order to help solve social problems that too often expert
knowledge itself has helped create.*

Public Scholarship in the Postmodern University

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Public scholarship can be defined as scholarly activity intended to serve the
public interest. Though rooted in academic practices such as service, ser-
vice learning, community engagement, and civic education, public scholar-
ship is much more than the sum of these.

A Description of Public Scholarship

Public scholarship is primarily a scholarly activity generating new knowl-
edge through academic reflection on issues of community engagement. It
integrates research, teaching, and service. It does not assume that useful
knowledge simply flows outward from the university to the larger commu-
nity. It recognizes that new knowledge is created in its application in the
field, therefore benefiting the teaching and research missions of the univer-
sity. Student activities such as voter registration, tutoring children, volun-
teering in hospitals and prisons, commendable as they are, do not constitute
public scholarship unless they involve active thinking, reflection, and
engagement with relevant theory. Service learning is often conflated with
public scholarship, but they are distinct. Service learning is defined pri-
marily by its pedagogic technique where students acquire "learning" in the
physical act of service, but it may or may not involve engagement with
social theory. To summarize, public scholarship involves some or all of the
following attributes: it addresses an issue of public interest; knowledge is
generated in the community as well as in the university; agents producing

knowledge include community residents as well as teachers and students; it integrates research, teaching, and service; it generates new knowledge through reflection and engagement with social theory; the beneficiaries of new knowledge include the university as well as the community.

Traditions of public scholarship and service have a long history in the American university. Today's discourse on public scholarship is quite consistent with the thoughts of John Dewey (1850–1952), believed by some to be the most influential thinker on education in the last hundred years. His lasting legacy is the importance he placed on the practical and on "learning by doing," a position that was adopted by his friend Jane Addams, who ran the famous educational experiments at Hull House in Chicago. In his *Democracy and Education,* Dewey (1916) sought to integrate theories of politics, knowledge, and education. He believed that education was fundamentally a social process that helped individuals reach their full potential in a democratic society. He linked education and democracy through his theory of knowledge, grounded in the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism. He believed that the Cartesian dualisms between mind and reality, knower and known, and knowing and doing were most unfortunate because they had the undemocratic consequence of perpetuating a hierarchical class society of elitist thinkers at the top and workers at the bottom. Pragmatists do not make a distinction between knowing and doing, for they believe that much useful knowing occurs in the acts of doing where individuals are constantly adapting to the demands of ever-changing social situations. Dewey believed that school itself is a community not unlike a training camp for living in a democracy; for him, school was much more than mathematics and science—it was a process that prepared youth to engage in social life in cooperative and noncompetitive ways.

Dewey's philosophy that children learn by doing established itself long ago in early childhood education, but its relevance for undergraduate education was not appreciated until the 1980s. Menand (1997), in his book *Pragmatism,* called attention to an essay titled "Towards Pragmatic Liberal Education," written by historian Kimball (1995, cited in Menand, 1997). Kimball argued that since the 1960s there has been a trend in U.S. undergraduate education to move toward a pragmatic educational philosophy. For decades the dominant model in American higher education was the research university, which set the standard that all other education institutions aspired to reach (Boyer, 1990). In it, learning is split up and organized into specialized disciplines housed in separate departments where teaching and service are generally devalued, notwithstanding public pronouncements by deans and presidents. The research university model pursues "knowledge for its own sake" and neglects practical affairs, it claims to be objective and value-neutral, and it emphasizes discovery of scientific facts over understanding the relation of values to science. According to Kimball, small liberal arts colleges across the United States are leading the way toward a

curriculum that integrates teaching, research, and service, emphasizes values, encourages community service, and teaches the value of cultural diversity and citizenship—in short, back to a Deweyan model of education based on a philosophy of pragmatism.

The focus on citizenship is not confined to small liberal arts colleges. For example, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities published a report in 1999 titled *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged University*. The Morrill Act of 1862 created land-grant universities specifically so that higher education could respond to the practical needs of rural and industrial America. The Kellogg Commission report recognized growing public frustration with the land-grant institutions' unresponsiveness to the questions of public interest. Where society has "problems," it noted, land-grant universities have "disciplines." The report called for the creation of an "engaged institution," a university that goes beyond outreach and service. An engaged institution, the report suggested, redesigns its teaching, research, and service to become more sympathetically involved with the communities it serves.

In 1985 The Carnegie Foundation issued an important report on education, *Higher Education and the American Resurgence,* stressing the critical importance of preparing graduates for a life of committed citizenship (Newman, 1985). A direct result of this was the founding of Campus Compact a year later. Campus Compact is a national coalition of more than nine hundred university presidents committed to the idea of civic engagement in higher education. It provides money, advice, and other resources for faculty and students to participate in scholarship and civic engagement.

A maturing of the concept of service learning is seen in the announcement of the ten Wingspread Principles of Good Practice (Honnet and Poulson, 1989). This was a product of collaboration among a large number of experienced practitioners from national and regional organizations who reported on the best examples combining community service with student learning. Many campuses across the country have adopted the Wingspread principles for designing their own programs of service and learning.

The main driving force behind this growing movement for engagement is the notion of civic responsibility: since society has invested so much in youth, education, and the university, it is only just that we as teachers and students perform our duty to society by responding to its needs. Fair enough. But I believe that there are some serious limitations to this movement for civic engagement. Using ideas borrowed from postmodern discourse theory and philosophies of pragmatism, I will argue that the existing programs of public scholarship, however well intentioned they may be, are framed within an epistemology that prevents them from producing socially useful knowledge. I believe that our responsibility to society depends on something that goes much deeper than civic engagement. For the purpose of this argument, I consider a series of social problems such as poverty,

racism, and destruction of the environment. I will argue that academics are not in a position to produce knowledge that can help society address these problems in useful ways. In fact, the knowledge we have produced thus far on such matters is deeply implicated as causative agents of the very problems we wish to solve. That, of course, is a serious allegation—but one that should not be read as an invitation to reject the role of the university in addressing social problems. Rather, it is an invitation to be more reflective about the nature of contemporary knowledge and to produce a new theory of public scholarship that will help us engage society in new and effective ways.

A Note Regarding Epistemology

The concepts of public scholarship and civic engagement are founded on the principles of contemporary social science as practiced in the modern university. But we need to move away from that model if we are to find effective answers to social problems. I have argued that the concept of public scholarship has the potential for developing an alternative epistemology by using ideas adapted from postmodern discourse theory and pragmatism.

Throughout this chapter I shall employ the term *postmodern* even though the ideas I use are better characterized by the term *poststructural*. The difference between the two can be explained by invoking two aspects of the postmodern condition. The first, ontology, makes claims that the world we live in is now postmodern. In that sense postmodern is a description of the changes that have taken place in the world in the last three decades: the diffusion of modern communication technology, the integration of nation-states into a global capitalist economy of post-Fordist accumulation, a bewildering variety of consumer goods in the market and accelerated consumption, the rise of identity politics and the celebration of difference and cultural diversity, and so on (Lyotard, 1979; Harvey, 1989; Best and Kellner, 1997). The second aspect of postmodernism, epistemology, concerns "how we know what we know." The term poststructuralism is often employed to refer to postmodernism as an epistemology that questions the claims of modern science to be objective, value-free, neutral, and essentially true. Science is founded on what philosophers have called the "correspondence theory of truth." This is the view that scientific propositions are true when they correspond to certain facets of reality in the external world: science simply represents what is given in the world, scientific work is free of values, and hence science is neutral. Postmodernists reject the view that the world is simply an objective given that is "out there" waiting to be discovered through experiments and hypothesis-testing. They also reject the Enlightenment ideal of the scientist as dispassionate knower. Instead, they argue that the world we know is discursively constructed; this is so not only for the human world but also for the physical world described by the so-called hard sciences. Instead of a universal and absolute truth,

what exists is an understanding of truth that is community-based; truth is relative to the community in which we participate, a position that is almost identical to Dewey's own views on the concept of truth. In this chapter I use the term postmodern in this second sense of epistemology, or poststructuralism, and not in the ontological sense.

Most books on postmodernism begin with a chapter on semiotics (the theory of signs) and language by drawing on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher Charles Pierce (1839–1914). I find it interesting that the genealogy of American pragmatism also begins with the writings of Pierce (Menand, 1997). Back in 1907, William James wrote that it was Charles Pierce who first introduced the term in 1878 (James, 1997). Dewey elaborated on the ideas of pragmatism in several books and applied it very effectively to theories of education. The links between pragmatism and postmodern epistemology are best brought out in the writings of the contemporary American philosopher Richard Rorty (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 1979). Rorty, who calls himself a "postmodernist bourgeois liberal" and who calls Dewey "a postmodernist before his time" (Rorty, 1991, p. 201), has written extensively on the overlap between pragmatist philosophy and postmodern ways of knowing the world.

A few decades ago several French thinkers—Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, among them—began to question the validity of the epistemology through which "we know what we know" (Grenz, 1996). Many observers have described their writing as belonging to a school of postmodern thought because they questioned several premises of Enlightenment thinking that were the foundation of much that is modern, including that of the modern university. These thinkers argued that language and meaning were much more central to our understanding of the external world than social science has previously acknowledged. The conventional model of science assumes that words simply reflect meaning already existing in the world of objects. Rorty has called this the *mirror model* because language is supposed to reflect, as in a mirror, true meaning that already exists. The model assumes that words can be directly mapped to objects as in a one-to-one correspondence, and that objects have intrinsic or "essential" attributes through which they can be known and named. Postmodernists and pragmatists contend that this view is false; they say that things do not have inherent meaning that can be captured by words. Meaning is constructed through mediating concepts. This is called the *constructivist approach.* Often the number of mediating concepts between a word and the named object are multiple, giving rise to an important concept called *polysemy.* Expressions commonly used today, such as "social construction of reality" or "discursive construction," represent efforts to capture the idea that language—that is, how and what we think and say—is key to how we know the world. These ideas have crucial implications for determining several elements of knowledge and public scholarship.

The postmodern critique of social science that I hope to apply to the project of public scholarship is vast and scattered over a very large literature. For the purposes of this chapter I take three strands of that critique, each of which has a direct bearing on public scholarship: the duality of the problem and the nonproblem, the duality of self and the other as manifested in the observer and the observed, and the scientific practice of searching for root causes of problems. The problem with the search for root causes is it invariably gives rise to *metanarratives,* which rob potential change agents of their agency.

I shall illustrate these claims by drawing on a public scholarship project that I have designed and managed for six years—Rethinking Poverty: The Philadelphia Field Project. This project illustrates the limitations of conventional, research-university models of public scholarship and points to a way that public scholarship might overcome some of those limitations.

Limitations of Social Science: Poverty as Example

The Philadelphia Field Project has an underlying social theory that makes the following claims: urban America's "poverty" problem is not independent of the discourse we have constructed to study the poor; in fact, that discourse is deeply implicated as a causative agent in the very problem that we wish to solve. If that be the case, we need to pause and rethink the role that undergraduates and their teachers play as participants in public scholarship, and eventually, as agents of community change. The research we have produced, reported at http://www.geog.psu.edu/phila, has given rise to an alternative knowledge of urban poverty that will not only benefit the community but also change the way we think and teach about poverty in the university. This rethinking is intended to redefine both how we as social scientists perceive society, define social problems, and seek solutions and who is designated to act as agents of change.

The official and the commonsense views of poverty treat it as an economic problem caused by low incomes and lack of investment capital in poor areas. In the United States poverty is measured by the number of people whose income falls below a defined income threshold. The data are gathered on the commonsense notion that in order to solve the poverty problem we must first find answers to the following questions: Who are the poor? What is the extent of their poverty? Where do they live? And, finally, what are the principal characteristics of individuals, households, and areas that are designated as being "poor?" This economic definition of poverty constructed by the U.S. Census Bureau does not constitute an objective representation of poverty in America; it is not a picture of poverty "as such." In fact, it is a particular way in which the U.S. Census Bureau has chosen to depict, and thus, discursively construct, the poor.

The official discourse has greatly skewed our perception of American poverty, as is evident from the enormous attention given by scholars, media, and the public to race, gender, household type, and place as explanatory causes of poverty. It is true that disproportionate numbers of people from particular racial groups, inner-city residents, and women live in poverty. But the material scarcity they face is not entirely of economic origin; it is socially constructed at a large number of sites outside the so-called poverty sector. Unfortunately, our commonsense, official, and social science notions of poverty conceal the manner in which scarcity is socially and discursively constructed. The economistic view of poverty appears so natural and obviously true that it is difficult to question it without sounding absurd or irrational. The economistic view is also quite consistent with the canons of "good social science."

Implications for Public Scholarship

My main point is this: public scholarship done in the name of addressing poverty still suffers from the limitations that the larger discourse imposes on our scholarship. But unlike other varieties of scholarship at the university, public scholarship does have the potential to transcend and overcome the deficiencies of conventional scholarship. For example, in the Philadelphia Field Project we do not ask why households do not make more income. Instead, we ask a different set of questions, such as why poor households have problems with adequate nutrition, housing, transport, health care, and so on. Our research has shown that it is indeed possible to acquire these "goods" without high incomes. As an example, consider the question of a good diet with a sufficient amount of calories, protein, vitamins, and trace elements. We do have a vast storehouse of knowledge in the United States on how to obtain good nutrition even when incomes are low. For another example consider the high costs of health care, which make people poor. Again that issue can be reframed by taking into account the role of good nutrition and exercise in a way that makes income less central to the issue of good health. This argument can be extended easily into other sectors such as transportation, housing, energy, and education. The income approach suggests one kind of public scholarship. The alternative approach suggests a different kind of scholarship with crucial implications for higher education, outreach, and public scholarship.

Economists and geographers think of poverty as essentially an economic problem that can be addressed by bringing jobs to "poverty areas." The Philadelphia Field Project uses a "nonessentialist" approach based on postmodern and pragmatist epistemology. Instead of looking at income in isolation, we study the multiple relational aspects of the poverty condition in order to find practical ways to address it. It is very easy to demonstrate that conditions of material deprivation in areas such as West Philadelphia

are in fact aggravated by the manner in which the problem is represented by academics. If we concede for the sake of argument that poverty is an economic problem, then we are forced by our own theory to seek "economic" solutions to that problem. According to income criteria used by the 2000 U.S. Census, a person working full-time at minimum wage supporting a spouse and child will still be officially poor. But the idea that such minimum wage earners in the United States can demand and receive much higher wages is not credible when they have to compete in a global labor market where multinational capital can buy the labor of very poor people at a fraction of what they pay workers domestically. Clearly, a public scholarship project on poverty cannot succeed if it is conceived in the dominant "essentialist" framework of economistic thinking. For scholarship to be effective we need to find ways to transcend the limits of academic knowledge on this subject. But the point I make about limits of knowledge is not confined to my example of poverty discourses. In fact it can be shown that the flaws I speak of are fundamental and structural and go to the heart of the epistemology of the modern university.

Conventional scholarship on poverty exists within a duality of the problem versus the nonproblem. According to this dividing practice, the nonpoor are separated from the poor to reflect the separation of the nonproblem from the problem. Academics are part of the nonproblem, while poor people represent the problem. The poverty sector contains the poor in a conceptually and geographically bounded region. Conventional academic research assumes that causes of poverty can be understood by studying the internal conditions of the area of the poverty sector. That is why social scientists focus on things such as race, gender, and marital status—because these attributes are viewed as independent variables that explain poverty. It can be argued that the division of the world into two realms—the poor as the problem and the nonpoor as not the problem—not only is a false duality but also prevents scholars from addressing effectively such issues as malnutrition, poor housing, and lack of good health. Locating the site of scholarship outside the university provides an opportunity for students to reflect on the idea that some of the causes of the problems that the poor face do not lie entirely in their own communities but reach deep into what we have traditionally called the realm of the nonproblem. Earlier I stated that one defining characteristic of public scholarship is the site at which knowledge is generated. The Philadelphia Field Project provides an example of the kind of knowledge we produce when it is greatly influenced by the place where it is produced.

The dualistic logic of the problem and the nonproblem has a parallel dichotomy in what postmodern theorists call "the subject and the object." The poor are the objects of study and those who study the poor are the subjects. By virtue of their location in the realm of the nonproblem, academics place themselves in a position of subjecthood. Likewise, we tacitly encourage our students to join the ranks of subjects. They are intervening in the hope of

improving the lives of the poor. We do not invite them to think about the argument that the sector of the nonproblem in which they reside is in fact deeply implicated in creating problems for poor people. A few years ago, one of my students wished to study the causes of street crime in West Philadelphia with the intent of producing a document that would eventually help reduce crime in the area. I discouraged her from pursuing this topic because I felt the residents of the community would not be interested in this topic. However, I suggested to her that residents—particularly women, children, and older people—would be very interested in the topic of safe streets. Because we were living in the neighborhood at the time, she understood instantly the difference between the two topics: street crime and safe streets. She was able to overcome the subjecthood ascribed to her by social science and generate a new kind of knowledge that looked at the community sympathetically through the eyes of its residents.

There is one more issue of subjecthood that I wish to address. The intellect that we adopt not only gives a view of the objects we study but also makes us into who we are, the educational aspect of socialization that Dewey (1916) talked about at length. Postmodern questions of subjecthood invite students to reflect on their own growth and help them understand that knowledge is not just a window into the "object-other"; they too are factors in the "construction of self." All participants of the Philadelphia Field Project are self-conscious of their intellect and self-aware of their own roles as researchers.

Finally, I wish to raise a few points about the nature of causation and agency in social change. "Good social science" tells us that we should look for root causes of problems. We use an array of statistical techniques, such as multiple regression, in the hope of discovering the few select variables that matter the most in explaining the patterns of variance in a dependent variable. We believe that when we understand the root causes of problems we are in a better position to formulate policy to address the problem. Now postmodern theorists have argued that the search for root causes of problems is a futile exercise and that in fact it hinders society's ability to address problems effectively. I shall illustrate the point by returning to the poverty example.

The material deprivation that some groups in society experience is socially constructed in a nexus of relations—technical, social, cultural, political, ecological, and academic (Yapa, 1996). Each relation forms a site at which scarcity is constructed through discursive and nondiscursive practices in a vast network of nodes diffused throughout the larger society. For example, consider the amount of money that a "poverty household" in West Philadelphia spends on food, and assume for the sake of argument that this household does not have a nutritionally adequate diet. A solution to the problem is to increase household income, but that may not guarantee an improvement in its nutritional status. Furthermore, increasing income may not be an option for all such households. Now, if we place food in the center of a nexus of relations we discover a large number of sites—technical, social, cultural,

political, ecological, and academic—that directly contribute to the poor nutrition of this household. By way of example, I shall explore a few of these sites in no particular order of importance. Assume our household is located in an area where food stores offer inferior produce at very high prices. Because many poor households have limited geographic mobility, local food stores enjoy a near-monopoly in such neighborhoods. Yes, the obvious solution is to increase the household's income and its geographic mobility and thus break the monopoly of neighborhood food stores. But that thinking excludes myriad other ways of addressing this problem. For example, a neighborhood food cooperative can be organized that could pass on to consumers the savings from bulk buying of produce. As the Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension has demonstrated, growing vegetables in urban gardens of Philadelphia is quite feasible. Further, Penn State Cooperative Extension's EFNAP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) conducts classes for low-income families on nutrition education, food preparation, and "smart buying." In any event, possible solutions other than increasing income are literally endless.

So what precisely are the root causes of poor nutrition in West Philadelphia? There are none. The argument about root causes has a direct bearing on the theory of public scholarship. The formulation of root causes gives rise to metanarratives, as described by Lyotard (1979). These grand narratives may provide intellectually satisfying explanations of problems, but they also have the serious disadvantage of robbing us of our agency to act in society.

Consider the student participants of the Philadelphia Field Project. They have little or no power to act in a world of grand narratives describing lack of jobs, female-headed households, high crime, and so on. But when we describe these same conditions as a dense network of interconnected and mutually constituted relations, the new formulation offers a large number of sites at which they can act in ways that are proportionate to the power they have. In other words, the science of root causes serves to rob people of their agency. And that is another very important reason that public scholarship needs a new epistemology of how we know: because how we know determines how we act. Students do not only generate new knowledge, they also find practical agency in learning by doing. The postmodern argument against metanarratives and root causes that I have applied here to public scholarship is consistent with many of the stands taken by pragmatic philosophers such as James, Dewey, and Rorty. It is precisely this kind of scholarship that Dewey (1916) described in his *Democracy and Education.*

Conclusions

Though they are related, public scholarship should be distinguished from a variety of other pedagogies such as service learning, experiential learning, and civic education. Public scholarship works in the public interest,

generates new knowledge, works in and with communities, recognizes that community residents themselves possess knowledge and are partners in the generation of new knowledge, and believes that the generation and use of knowledge is a social process that has profound transformative value for university students. Public scholarship entails overcoming dualities between knower and known, subject and object, problem and nonproblem. If public scholarship is to be effective in the way Dewey thought that knowledge should be social and practical, then it needs new ways of knowing that transcend the limits of the epistemology of the modern research university. Fortunately, the tools for building such an epistemology are available in the philosophies of postmodernism and American pragmatism.

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