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Notes

1. IUP is a research consortium made up of the UCLA Chicano Research Center, the Stanford Center for Chicano Research, El Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos of Hunter College, and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

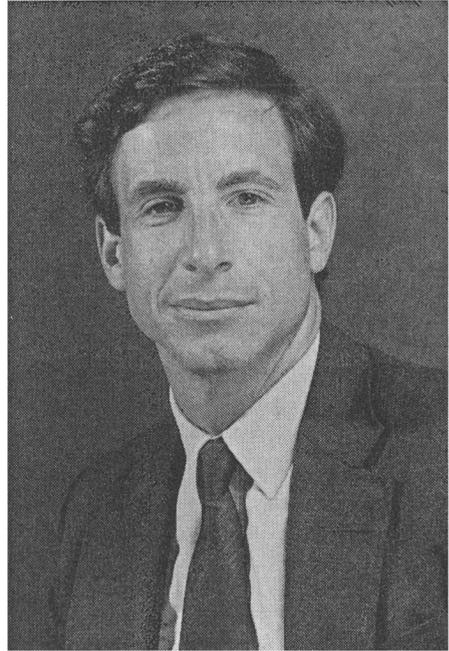
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Motives, Morality and Methodology in Third World Research

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In the summer of 1980, while proceeding along a bumpy dirt road in Northern Nigeria, a resident of the village I was leaving strained to catch up with me and pose a question. Sweating and panting, he earnestly wanted to know how my work there—mainly mapping his village to trace its physical evolution from British colonial days—would help his community. At the time I was working as a research assistant for a prominent anthropologist back in the States, and until that moment had been



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Photo by Russ Sparkman

brimming with exuberance and excitement at the success of my first research experience in Africa. I had not yet questioned the utility or value of my work, caring only to satisfy my academic mentor back home and to reap whatever *kudos* my data accumulation merited. I really didn't know how to answer the question, and had to wait several months before asking my research director how he would have responded. The professor, who up to that point had been my intellectual idol, mumbled something about 'furthering knowledge for its own sake' and 'the more we learn about the world the better—the more we can improve it.' I knew that such a response would have rung hollow to the villager; it rang somewhat hollow even to me. And although I have subsequently been building a career on similar premises—studying about the Third World 'for its own sake'—from time to time the villager's question surfaces from certain recesses and gnaws at me.

One way to redress this personal dilemma is to consciously inject—as many in the

profession do—a moral or ideological component to one's research agenda. Knowledge is good if it leads to "something" that—however indirectly—can be used to improve social or political conditions. Indeed, there are few political scientists today who would claim that their work is absolutely "value free," "scientifically objective" or "ideologically neutral." Yet rare—and self-destructive—is the political scientist willing to admit bias in his or her particular research project or methodology. While all (or virtually all) admit that some moral imperative is unavoidable in setting the research agenda, we must nevertheless invoke the rigors of the scientific method—or at least the "coolness" of reason and logic—to justify our findings and arguments. Depending on social and political context, however, even the method one employs may become problematic from an empirical as well as a moral point of view.

Just as there are graduations in politicization among academic disciplines so are there areas of greater and lesser sensitivity within our own. Mathematics is inherently less subjective than political science; public opinion technique is less controversial than Marxist ideology. In a previous issue of *PS* John Bendix shows that there is a world of difference between doing doctoral research in America and in West Germany.¹ By the same token, there are several worlds of difference between carrying out a survey in Boston and carrying one out in Bamako; or polling in rural Canada and polling in rural Cambodia. Unfortunately, the published results of polls, surveys and questionnaires convey little of the context in which they are conducted. When the research is being conducted in Third World settings, the context may be even more significant than the findings. Let me illustrate from my own experience.

In 1983 and 1986, as part of my research into self-identity and national consciousness among the Hausa people of West Africa, I carried out surveys in rural villages on both sides of the Niger-Nigeria border. I wanted to determine if colonial partition and national independence affect the way rural villagers in Africa view themselves and perceive co-ethnics of foreign nationality. I believed then—and still believe—

that the surveys were of unique theoretical value. The research even resulted in one of the highest "goods" in academia: a publication.²

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In the field, however, given the differences found in African communitarian norms and Third World impoverishment, I did have serious quandaries about the ultimate value and justification of such "social science." I had even greater qualms about presenting the results of my research disengaged not only from the circumstances in which it took place, but the ones it fostered. There are fundamental methodological problems encountered by researchers which are rarely admitted or alluded to at the writing up stage. It is necessary to reconstruct from my journal, so difficult is it to recall that which blurs in retrospect as "fieldwork":

"The social relationship is queer. The notion of having an individual opinion (as opposed to sharing the group's perception) is itself somewhat alien. That anyone would be interested in such opinions is again strange. The pollster-polled relationship is supposed to be between peers, between equals. The pollster is hardly supposed to 'awe' his respondents. But awed some of them are. Spectators don't understand that a *personal* viewpoint is being solicited—some just blurt out answers for their friends and neighbors, even after being requested 'in God's name, to be patient and silent . . .'

"The conceptual framework is alien to some—the notion of a survey, choosing between two forced sets of answers. The fear of giving the 'wrong' answer, or appearing foolish in front of others, is also a problem. (But I can't always insist on conducting the interviews in private, for that

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would be the height of cultural rudeness or arouse undue suspicion.)

"The choice of respondents also presents problems. As a 'neutral outsider,' there is less chance of receiving only the answers the authorities (e.g., school-teachers or other government pollsters) would solicit. People who know me best, regularly converse with me, trust me, would probably be more open than the random sample of every fourth householder to which I am rigorously restricting myself. Because of different degrees of confidence, I feel there is a sacrifice of quality of response for integrity of methodology. Lesson: there is no truly objective survey operation, especially in small, LDC societies, and especially when the questions may be of political or social significance."

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Beyond methodology, the sheer act of administering the questionnaires raised questions of morality:

"Interviewing in the bush—this notion of social scientific neutrality/objectivity is bunk. There is almost something obscene about 'polling' people in poverty . . .

"The children close in tight to get a better look and create a wall around me. It literally cuts off the air. Some of them, not having washed (how can they, without water?), stink. The flies that they bring with them are voracious. They stare in wonderment, suffering from open sores, blisters and infections, psoriasis (?) on the head, the youngest faces caked with snot. Even as I interview, some touch me, out of curiosity. Sometimes I must chase or have them chased away. This is called 'surveying.' . . . When I go searching for my next 'respondent' they follow me, like the Pied Piper, chanting my name over and over. . .

"But the adults are themselves in a similar state. At best, they are impoverished

peasants trying to make it through the farming season. They need better clothes, more and varied food, medicine—and here I am with pencil and paper, trying to solicit their 'opinions from the heart.' . . .

"There are also the more shocking situations. In a traditional society, where institutionalization of the old, infirm, and handicapped is not only unknown but would be morally offensive, one gets to meet a more 'interesting' group of people. Certainly interviewing old or blind people presents no great difficulty—but if a person is deaf (and this village has a large number of deaf folks), then the situation is impossible. But the worst is when 'random sampling' has dealt you a leper—and you have to proceed as if everything were normal. One particular 'respondent' had gnarled, deformed fingers, a malignant looking growth coming out of the back of the head, and at least one toe that—hooked and crooked—looked repulsively reptilian. But he *could* answer, and I *did* interview him—but trying to maintain my normal tone of amiability and pleasantness raised other questions in my mind as to the moral appropriateness of the entire exercise. . . .

By its very nature, the Third World is a more problematic region to conduct certain kinds of research than is, say, North America or Western Europe. In the U.S.,

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most surveying is not even conducted in person, the telephone having become the mode of preference for such kind of data collection. One is less likely to encounter

physical degradation in Sweden than in Sudan: should ethics (and not only politics) establish what is permissible to query in the former but impermissible in the latter? Is there some threshold of material well-being that human beings must achieve before they may be targeted as "respondents" or "informants"? Does a society's standard of living determine the kind of research that may legitimately be conducted in it?

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Ultimately, this is not just a "social science in the Third World" issue. For if the answer to the above questions is affirmative, then one may wonder more generally just how much leeway should be given the second component of the phrase "political science." It also opens the Pandora's Box of situational ethics for research-active political scientists. This is not a topic with which the profession is keen to deal: the APSA is far from drafting a Code of Conduct for its member researchers. Yet even if it cannot be addressed on an organizational level, the uncomfortable dilemma of professional and moral responsibility is one that political scientists may be asked to address on a personal plane. Even if the dilemma is starkest for those working in and "on" the Third World, it may also apply, shorn of their nuances and subtleties, to colleagues concentrating on the Second and First Worlds.

About the Author

William F. S. Miles is assistant professor of political science at Northeastern University in

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Notes

1. John Bendix, "Reflections on Doing Dissertation Research Abroad." *PS* 21 (Summer, 1988).
2. William F. S. Miles. "Self-identity, Ethnic Affinity and National Consciousness: An Example from Rural Hausaland." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 9 (1986).

Searching for Deans: A Political Perspective

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In the past 14 years I have experienced the various pains and pleasures of working with 6 Presidents, 9 Deans and 6 Chairmen; some of them were acting, others gave every impression of permanence, but all were in some form of passage—a common state in academic politics. From this experience in observing administrative turnover, together with the knowledge of political science which I profess, I have developed some guidelines about the political pitfalls involved in the search process which account for the most common errors made by faculty members involved in such searches. Although I cast the problem in the form of searching for a new college dean, I expect that this political perspective has a more general application to academic politics.

The politics of searching has five levels, with faculty involvement primarily in the first four: definition, structural organization of the search, timing of the search, evaluation, and negotiation. Each stage has its own set of common political malfunction.

Definition. Defining the job to be filled is not as easy as turning to the university's