POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

by Arthur R. Jensen

Researchers need not be helpless puppets of a particular social ideology, says Mr. Jensen. Research as a "unique and independent force" can play a valuable role in society.

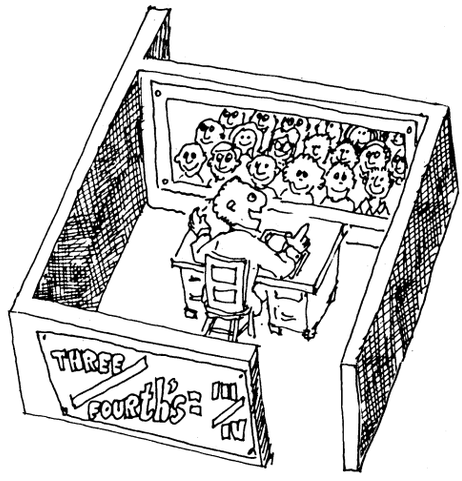

Illustration by Jim Hull

AN EDITORIAL in the *New York Times* not too many years ago made this statement: "Politicians use sociologists in much the same way as trial lawyers use psychologists: to prove their point with expert testimony that best serves their purpose. The goal therefore is to find the expert who comes up with the desired findings."[1]

Scientists and researchers in every field are increasingly coming to realize that the selection of problems for research, the choice of guiding theories, the interpretation of evidence, and the resultant conclusions all can be — and, in fact, often are — shaped by political or social ideology. This increased awareness deserves applause, in my view. If it is infused with keenly critical vigilance, such awareness affords the best safeguard to our integrity as researchers.

My point is that, as researchers, we need not be helpless puppets of one social ideology or another, wittingly or unwittingly shaping our research to reinforce its dogmas. Indeed, my thesis is that our justification as researchers should be measured primarily by our effort and ability to conduct research that fulfills the ideal of scientific objectivity. I view research as potentially playing a much more valuable role in society — as a unique and independent force, which might be termed "the Reality Principle" — than it ever could play by allying itself with one political philosophy or another or by serving as a tool for furthering a preordained social ideology.

This view of research as an independent force was essentially the perspective adopted by such pioneers of educational research as Johann Pestalozzi, Stanley Hall, Charles Judd, and E. L. Thorndike. These pioneers and others were imbued with the idea that the general methods of scientific investigation, which aim chiefly at guaranteeing objectivity, should be applied to the problems of education. I am not willing to abandon that ideal. Indeed, I can hardly conceive of a philosophy of research that is not based on the assumption that a reality exists with respect to many of the variables involved in the educational process — a reality that is both independent of any currently prevailing political philosophy and amenable to discovery and understanding by the methods of objective science.

In a free society, prevailing political philosophies and policies are subject to change, sometimes almost overnight. So I will not concern myself here with any specific brand of political thought, whether it be radical, conservative, neoconservative, liberal, libertarian, Marxist, or located elsewhere on the ideological continuum that ranges from the extreme Left to the extreme Right. Rather, I wish to emphasize my view that the primary concerns of researchers should be to discover and to represent the educational realities that prevail despite shifting politics and policies. Only then can research hope to gain respect and the power to influence policy in the only way it legitimately can — as dependable knowledge. Researchers must strive to yield objective, research-based information that will act as ballast for the ship of education in the tossing sea of political vicissitude.

THIS IS NOT to say that educators, educational researchers, and those who carry on research in the behavioral and social sciences should be political eunuchs. Like all other citizens, they will have their own political values. But it is absolutely essential that they take special pains not to allow their advocacy of a political or social ideology to masquerade as research-based knowledge. Disregard for this danger (or insufficient self-imposed vigilance) discredits research and makes a mockery of its basic philosophic justification, which I have termed the Reality Principle — that is, the idea that it is possible to obtain scientifically objective information about the nature of man, of society, and of the educational process, rather than having to rely only on dogmatic beliefs dictated by political ideology.

If educational researchers fail to heed the ideal of objectivity embodied in the Reality Principle, which provides the sole justification for their work, they can count on a justifiable backlash against what the public will perceive as ideology in

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the guise of social and educational research. One letter-writer has already fired the opening salvo of this backlash, addressed to the editor of *Science:* "Does anyone remember any social scientist who *ever* complained when his or her funding was based on social philosophy, back in those lush days of the New Frontier and the Great Society? I don't. Did any social scientist *ever* suggest that the government was ignorant, arrogant, or even dangerously dogmatic when it poured money into the research of social scientists who never tired of telling us that redistribution of wealth would cure social injustice, disease, illiteracy, and crime? . . . The social sciences are in hot water today because they were too willing to serve politically expedient philosophies yesterday. They took the money and ran, without caring one whit about the ultimate consequences."[2]

But poorly informed public opinion (which can also be at odds with the Reality Principle) provides fickle and undependable guidance for research. Some critics have argued, for example, that Head Start is a large-scale educational program that was motivated from the beginning — and that has been sustained ever since — by political forces, not by research.

In 1981 David Caruso and Douglas Detterman published the findings of a study of Head Start that focused on determining "*what* we knew, *when* we knew it, and, more important, *how* this knowledge influenced policy decisions."[3] They concluded that social ideology, rather than research-based evidence, initiated Head Start and has since maintained it virtually untouched by whatever sketchy objective data could be gleaned from the program. Caruso and Detterman argue that Head Start expanded rapidly and extensively, without heed to research. Instead, Head Start drew its supposed scientific justification from what Caruso and Detterman call "the Joyce Brothers data base — ideas endorsed by the public at large but not necessarily supported by research."[4] The authors noted, "Even when research began to accumulate showing that Head Start was not having the desired effect, the response was to authorize additional funds."[5] They concluded, "The massive sums that have been spent on Head Start have produced no increment in our knowledge of how to provide effective intervention. . . . We should not be concerned that many of the studies done in this area produce negative results. What should concern us is that we are no better at producing positive results than we were 25 years ago."[6]

Political influence can creep into an ostensible research enterprise through various avenues. These include researchers' choices of research topics, peer review of proposals for research grants, researchers' selective uses of data and their biased interpretations of findings, and the biases of journal referees or book reviewers — to mention only the most obvious avenues of potential corruption, against which we may be able to exert some conscious opposition.

I have no idea of their number, but now and then I come across researchers in the social sciences whose primary concern seems to be the fostering of certain social changes. These individuals view research as just another tool of propaganda, useful for achieving the changes they desire, not as a means for determining whether the desired changes are feasible or for discovering the actual mechanisms that could bring them about. Such individuals implicitly believe in the possibility of changing human nature by legislation.

Other social scientists, with no apparent ideological axe to grind, may nevertheless press their ears to the ground to catch the political rumbles that suggest the kinds of research proposals that are most apt to reap rewards for the researcher. These rewards come, of course, because the proposals have embedded in them the hidden promise of fulfilling political aims. A doctoral student might choose to do a dissertation on this issue as it relates to the educational research carried out during the eras of the New Frontier and the Great Society.

Although I consider the shaping of research conclusions by political beliefs an anathema, I think it entirely proper that one's personal appraisal or acceptance of a political program should be strongly influenced by that program's cognizance of, and responsiveness to, the findings of objective research. Why should one support any political program based on notions that are decisively contradicted by scientific knowledge?

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THIS BRINGS US face to face with a fundamental question about research and ideology. Is there an objective reality — the grist for research — that can, in principle, be independent of political ideology, or does ideology dictate the reality?

The claim has been made that no possible distinction exists between scientific statements of fact and ideological statements of value — especially in the behavioral and social sciences, the fields in which educational research is supposedly rooted. This claim, propounded in recent years in the name of the "sociology of knowledge," has become the keystone of the Marxist interpretation of science, which has found its most plausible application in the human sciences.

The Marxist interpretation maintains that there are no objective truths (in the behavioral and social sciences, at least), because what we regard as truth is an inevitable product of the political and economic systems, which reflect the social relationships and values dictated by the groups that control the means of production. Scientific theories and the interpretation of data, in this view, are inevitably shaped — wittingly or unwittingly — so as to serve the purpose of legitimizing the existing economic class structure. Hence, the proponents of this view see research in the human sciences not as a search for objective knowledge but as a sociopolitical activity that reflects the social contexts and value systems within which individual researchers do their work. According to this view, socioeconomically conditioned presuppositions and prior prejudices about the nature of humankind and of society force social scientists to produce theories and purported evidence that inevitably confirm their social prejudices.

Although there may be some kernel of truth in this notion, I believe that it has been greatly exaggerated — as well as essentially contradicted by empirical evidence. In the first place, individual scientists in every field have always exhibited errors, blind spots, and biases. Yet science over the years has indisputably generated larger stores of objective knowledge in every sphere of scientific endeavor. Of course, the idea that science cannot be objective, because it cannot escape the context of social values, is itself not exempt from the same generalization. If this theme is overplayed, it places its advocate in a paradoxical position not unlike that of the Cretan who declared, "All Cretans always lie." If the statement is true, it must be untrue, and hence we need not take it seriously.

Fortunately, progress in scientific knowledge is distilled from the endeavors of the many individually imperfect scientists who investigate the same phenomenon. In the long run, the scientific enterprise succeeds in its aim of objectivity, despite the subjective biases of individual scientists and despite the influence of so-

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cial context that the Marxist sociology of science presumes. Gregor Mendel's theory is accepted and Trofim Lysenko's competing theory is rejected (even by the Soviet ideologues who once promoted it), solely because there is indeed a reality out there in the world — a reality in terms of which theories can be criticized and tested by innumerable other scientists, each with his or her own individual biases or blind spots but each scrutinizing and testing the others' formulations.

One of the chief virtues of science is that, in order to succeed, its practitioners need not be paragons of detached objectivity. When many individual scientists — ordinary men and women with specialized technical competencies — are able to think as they please and to conduct their research unfettered by collectivist or totalitarian constraints, science is a self-correcting process.

In any case, the Marxist sociology of science cannot exempt the critic from a detailed analysis of any particular theory or empirical claim; the critic must show precisely how the theory or claim fails as objective science or why it should be rejected and replaced by some competing formulation or body of evidence. This has always been the normal procedure of science, and we know that it works.

BUT CAN THIS procedure really work in those fields of research (such as education) that deal with the nature and behavior of human beings? Are there basic elements that enter into educational problems — elements that may have an independent reality, regardless of the prevailing political ideology? Looking at this question from the standpoint of my own research interests that bear on educational problems, I would note that, if a biological basis for individual differences in scholastic achievement exists, the observed variance in achievement (which seems largely to have resisted countless forms of educational intervention) can scarcely be significantly influenced by social ideologies of whatever variety.

The so-called "I.Q. controversy" embraces perennial questions that apparently will not go away — questions about the nature and measurement of mental abilities, about the relative roles of heredity and environment in the etiology of individual and group differences in mental abilities, and about the educational and social importance of these differences. Those who espouse the Marxist "sociology of knowledge" view the so-called nature/nurture controversy not as a genuine question about reality but as a political pseudo-question to which the Left and the Right will find diametrically opposing answers, knowingly or unknowingly dictated by their respective ideologies and by the contrasting social and economic systems to which these ideologies give rise.

However, if independent realities concerning the nature of human beings exist and are objectively knowable through scientific research, then we would expect even scientists who work under highly dissimilar and conflicting political, ideological, and economic systems to obtain highly similar findings and to reach essentially identical conclusions in their research. This would be true, of course, only if the conduct and publication of such research were not completely proscribed by a totalitarian government, such as existed, for example, under Adolf Hitler or Josef Stalin.

In a sense, then, the heredity/environment issue provides a test case of the Marxist sociology of science. In the normal course of scientific research, will scientists who work within two highly dissimilar ideological and economic systems arrive at congruent or contradictory findings and conclusions regarding the roles of heredity and environment in mental ability?

Evidence for this test case is now at hand. It unequivocally refutes the Marxist sociology of science, i.e., the notion that the conclusions of research in the human sciences merely reflect the ideologies of the groups in power. What do we find when actual scientists from quite dissimilar political backgrounds (rather than political ideologues masquerading as scientists) tackle a given problem, such as the heredity/environment question?

RECENT RESEARCH by scientists in the Soviet Union, Poland, East Germany, and other communist countries has addressed the heredity/environment issue with respect to differences in mental ability and has overwhelmingly yielded evidence and conclusions that are virtually indistinguishable from those of behavioral-genetic researchers in capitalist countries. Both groups of scientists, working independently, find that the heritability of I.Q. is substantial, with most estimates falling between .60 and .80. (Heritability is the proportion of the total variance — i.e., individual differences — in a trait that is attributable to genetic factors.) One large-scale Soviet study of monozygotic (identical) and dizygotic (fraternal) twins, for example, found a heritability of .78 in the mental test scores of these Moscow schoolchildren[7] — a figure in excess of that (.69) reported by Hans Eysenck[8] from a reanalysis of all available western data, excluding Cyril Burt's. (Burt's data on twins must be excluded because their authenticity is at best questionable.[9])

It is also noteworthy that, in these communist countries (which have emphasized complete egalitarianism in their school systems as well as in all of their other social institutions), the variance of I.Q. is the same as in western capitalist countries. Moreover, researchers in the communist countries have reported the same correlations between children's I.Q.s and the occupational classifications of their parents as researchers in the capitalist nations have found. Similarly, the communist researchers interpret these differences as largely attributable to genetic factors. (These and many similar studies from communist countries have been reviewed elsewhere in more detail by Eysenck.[10])

The studies that I have cited here and much other evidence seem to me to justify a renewed enthusiasm for seeing educational research proceed on the working hypothesis that an objective reality germane to the most fundamental processes of education exists — and that many aspects of this reality remain to be discovered through unrelenting scientific research, to the potential benefit of education and of society as a whole.

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1. Quoted in A. J. Lewis, "Making the Public Schools Work: Urban Education in the '80s," *Focus 9* (Educational Testing Service), 1982.
2. *Science*, 24 April 1981, p. 396.
3. David R. Caruso and Douglas K. Detterman, "Intelligence Research and Social Policy," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1981, pp. 183-86.
4. Ibid., p. 185.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 186.
7. N. G. Lipovechaja, N. C. Kantonistova, and T. G. Chamaganova, "The Role of Heredity and Environment in the Determination of Intellectual Functions," *Medicinskie Problemy Formirovanija Livenosti*, 1978, pp. 48-59.
8. Hans J. Eysenck, *The Structure and Measurement of Intelligence* (New York: Springer, 1979), p. 115.
9. Arthur R. Jensen, *Straight Talk About Mental Tests* (New York: Free Press, 1981), pp. 124-27.
10. Hans J. Eysenck, "The Sociology of Psychological Knowledge, the Genetic Interpretation of the I.Q., and Marxist-Leninist Ideology," *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, vol. 35, 1982, pp. 449-51. □