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## **GATEKEEPERS AND THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF SOCIAL RESEARCH\***

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Increasing concern has been expressed over the way sponsorship of research by various governmental agencies and private foundations has influenced the "objectivity" of scientific investigations. Actual manifestations of the social control of research can be studied through an analysis of the role of the "gatekeeper." Gatekeeping influences the research endeavor in a number of ways: by limiting conditions of entry, by defining the problem area of study, by limiting access to data and respondents, by restricting the scope of analysis, and by retaining prerogatives with respect to publication. Strategies are not well developed for managing pressures of gatekeeping. Furthermore, the location of researchers within university settings mitigates against confrontation with gatekeepers, particularly if the research effort is directed toward elites or powerful institutions. Where institutions such as universities agree with gatekeepers that proposed sensitive and critical research would be "inappropriate," researchers must create autonomous positions from which to conduct their research.

Many in the research community have expressed concern over the way sponsorship by various governmental agencies and commissions, as well as private foundations, has influenced the "objectivity" of scientific investigations. Specifically, researchers fear that sponsorship not only influences the formulation and execution of a variety of researchable issues, but directs the analysis and presentation of findings as well (Cf. Crawford and Biderman, 1970; Blumer, 1967; Green, 1971; Horowitz, 1967; McCartney, 1971; Orlans, 1967; Platt, 1971; Rist, 1973b; Galliher and McCartney, 1973; Furstenberg, 1971). Thus, from formulation of the problem, through data collection, to final analysis and presentation of results, the imprint of the sponsor upon the research endeavor is increasingly viewed as an unmistakable and undesirable intrusion.

The way sponsors exert their influence can be broadly summarized as occurring in one of three ways.

1. Through detailed specification of the research issue so that the eventual problem is cast within a framework congruent with the sponsor's perspective.
2. Through emphasis upon a positivistic style of research thought more susceptible to manipulation for the purposes of controlling the results.
3. Through the threat of withdrawing present funding and denying future support should the researcher move into areas "not in the best interest" of the sponsor.

The actual manifestations of social control over social research can be shown

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as they appear within organizational frameworks. A key component of that control effort is the small group of managers and administrators within a formal organization who screen prospective researchers seeking funding, entry into the organization itself, or access to data already collected. This small group of "gatekeepers" has a central role in deciding the fate of those who desire to conduct social research with someone else's money, data, or organization.

Though not all gatekeeping functions are performed in structured organizational settings,<sup>1</sup> this paper focuses on those who are vested with institutional authority to grant or withhold participation for any particular research endeavor. What follows is an analysis of how the gatekeeper is able to exercise influence and control during the various stages of research, from the initial efforts at entry to the final interpretation and form of the analyzed data.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it will be argued that, rather than having a direct, unilateral influence on the research process, the impact of the gatekeeper is conditioned by and contingent upon the researcher's own institutional base supporting and strengthening that influence.

#### GATEKEEPING AND THE CONDITIONS OF ENTRY

Since most social science researchers are situated in universities or research institutes affiliated with universities, it is important to understand how the institutional base itself circumscribes the researcher's options in gaining entry to the data. Specifically, entry can be gained in one of two basic ways: covertly, through disguise, manipulation, false pretense and other strategies of deception; or officially, through open and consensual negotiation with the gatekeeper. However, while the former tactics have been characteristic strategems of investigative reporters, journalists, espionage agents, and muckrakers in general, the tradition for social scientists has been different (Lehman and Taylor, 1974). The university setting within which social research is technically planned and coordinated has also a political and moral order where the "appropriateness" of covert social research is defined as unacceptable.

Politically, institutions such as universities and research institutes are forever sensitive toward those crucial relationships that underlie their economic and social "lifeblood." Survival is dependent on reciprocity, consensus, and cooperation, particularly at the inter-institutional, bureaucratic and organizational level (Record, 1967). Thus, as Glazer (1972:167) noted:

When the institute (or university) is subject to political and financial pressure, the researcher is in a vulnerable position. He (or she) may learn that the institute is not only concerned with the integrity of his (or her) individual effort, but also must consider how the particular incident will affect the long-term interests of the organization. Will a critical account make other groups wary of

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<sup>1</sup> Sponsorship is not the only way that social research is vulnerable to outside influence and control. Although it has not yet received widespread discussion in the literature, attention is being given to the kind of gatekeeping influence that research subjects themselves introduce into the research process, particularly in field work (cg. Glass and Frankeil, 1968; Miller, 1969; Dean and Whyte, 1969; Argyris, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> The substantive focus of this analysis is specifically concerned with "social" research, although many of the same problems are shared by researchers in the natural sciences. See past issues of *Science* for a rich source of news-items relating primarily to the influence exercised by various agencies in controlling the funds for natural science research, and in overseeing the protection of human subjects.

cooperating with requests for access to conduct research? Will the institute gain the reputation for overzealous debunking of respectable institutions?

Strategies of covert entry used by university affiliated researchers involving invasion of privacy, disguise, and false representation potentially pose the kind of problems Glazer discusses. And professional researchers frequently echo the sensitivities of their institutions: "If we wish to enjoy public support as a responsible profession we must not only avoid acting as spies even in the best causes, we must make it clear in advance that we will not act in this way" (Barnes, 1970:243). Similarly, Erikson (1970:253) maintained that covert strategies must be appropriate for espionage agents and journalists,

... but it certainly does not follow that the conduct of a sociologist should be judged in the same terms; for the sociologist has a different relationship to the rest of the community, operates under a different warrant, and has a different set of professional and scientific interests to protect.

Political positions assumed by institutions on matters such as a covert entry are morally imbued. Not only is covert entry seen as impolitic (and officially prohibited), but it is also seen as a breach of professional propriety and ethics.

To the extent, therefore, that the researcher's institutional base is viewed as a political and moral order, the methodological options available for gaining entry are significantly and clearly circumscribed. But conformity is not assured; the research of Festinger (1956), Lofland and Lejeune (1970), Sullivan et. al. (1970) and Humphreys (1970) stand as classic exceptions to these institutional proscriptions. But as exceptions their end effect upon the larger institutional and professional world has been to generate a heightened consciousness and concern about these methodological liberties. Indeed, the critical responses to the above-mentioned research from Davis (1970), Erikson (1970), Bickerman and Henchy (1972), and others have gone far in reaffirming the political and moral order that circumscribes the researcher's tactical options. On gaining entry, then, it is increasingly expected of the professional researcher openly to negotiate with the gatekeeper of any given organization or bureaucracy for access to the research problem (Rist, 1975).

#### GATEKEEPING AND DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

In negotiating to allow entry, the pivotal concern for the gatekeeper is reciprocity, determined by what benefits the research can offer the agency as a whole, or the particular careers of the gatekeeper and other managers. The gatekeeper is concerned with either:

1. The agency or organization; e.g., its public image, size and/or changes of market or client population, competitors or adversaries, delivery and utilization of services.
2. The operational and management problems of the administration; e.g., allocation of resources and manpower, lines of authority and promotion, staff efficiency, personnel conflict and/or cooperation, staff morale, administrative reorganization.

With these concerns in mind, there is little for the administrator to gain by allowing "pure" academic research which might undermine his authority, reputation, operation, or competitiveness. In the attempt to alleviate the con-

cerns of the gatekeeper and thus secure permission for entry, the researcher must convince managers that there is some benefit either to them or their organization by allowing the research to proceed. And, as Glazer (1972:11) noted, "the field worker will often promise things that he (or she) will come to regret." By specifying the conditions of reciprocity to their own benefits, gatekeepers can require an exact specification of the substantive problem that the researcher will investigate. Furthermore, they can build into the agreement a variety of "feedback" mechanisms whereby the researcher would have periodically to submit work-in-progress statements, as well as requests for additional access at each level of the research.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, in some cases the matter of reciprocity may not necessarily restrict or constrain the activities of the researcher. For instance, when work is in a nonsensitive area and agreements have been made to report findings to the sponsor, the researcher should ostensibly be free of further intervention or control. Yet researchers, particularly those engaged in field work, often discover the substantive problem during the actual investigation. In many respects, this possibility is one of the more promising contributions of field work—the discovery of new social processes, problems, and issues in the field itself (see Glaser and Strauss, 1965, 1967; Schatzman and Strauss, 1974).

Many researchers also want to understand particularly powerful bureaucracies and organizations in ways other than through common sense or "official" perspectives. These researchers investigate the "dark side" of bureaucracies, or those activities that are secretly and strategically hidden from public view. However, in negotiating for entry, these interests of the researcher are more than likely to be at odds with the interests of the gatekeeper. The common result, therefore, is for the gatekeeper either to reject the investigator's bid to do research, or for the researcher to reformulate the research problem within boundaries that are acceptable.

An interesting aspect of the gatekeeper's influence is that the institutional base, where the researcher is situated politically and morally, strengthens the gatekeeper's position in establishing the patterns of reciprocity. The gatekeeper's authority to reject critical or controversial research is strengthened by the reluctance of the researcher's institution to create conflict and hostilities within its inter-institutional or organizational community. As Sjoberg and Miller (1973: 140) suggest:

Analysis of investigative research yield the conclusion that universities can too readily become embroiled in serious controversy. At present, universities and professional organizations lend little support to researchers who wish to carry out controversial research on bureaucratic power groups. . . . If researchers take a highly critical stance toward a bureaucracy through studying its secret side, both their universities and their own positions will likely be placed in political and economic jeopardy.

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<sup>3</sup> If one extrapolates from the individual gatekeeper to the activities of a Federal funding agency, there is a similar set of circumstances at work. By having shifted federal funding for social science research away from grants to contracts, there are now stipulations built into the award which necessitate feedback mechanisms, exact delineation of the methodological approach, and the need for federal clearance of any major changes in the research endeavor, regardless of whether they are conceptual, methodological or with personnel. Such procedures are especially employed in areas of political sensitivity. The second author has so used them on numerous occasions in his support of research on school desegregation.

This political and moral bind that the researcher is caught in between institutional base and gatekeeper of a research site clearly emerges when serendipitous or secret information inadvertently comes into the investigator's possession during research. In other words, even in projects that are officially screened and approved the researcher frequently discovers damaging or critical information (Roth, 1970). This situation prompts the researchers to "wring their hands" over the political and moral impact of their work.<sup>4</sup>

The researcher's bind is twofold: the political and moral impact of the sensitive information on the gatekeeper and subjects; and the political and moral reaction of especially powerful organizations on the researcher's institution, including his or her own position within that institution. Specifically, the anxiety of the researcher is enhanced because the researcher, the sponsoring organization, the subjects, and the researcher's institution are all simultaneously cast into a position of political and moral vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> To this extent, the typical posture assumed by the researcher, particularly toward powerful bureaucracies and organizations, is to defer to the influence of the gatekeeper by formulating research interests that compliment "official" interests.

#### GATEKEEPING AND THE FREEDOM OF ACCESS

Once entry is gained and the patterns of reciprocity are established, the next stage of the research endeavor introduces new areas of influence to be exercised by the gatekeeper, primarily in terms of controlling and limiting the collection of data. The researcher can find restrictions placed on the time span, depth, and scope of the investigation. Spencer's (1973) study described eleven strategies employed by the bureaucratic elite at West Point to control his research. Basically, all eleven strategies can be collapsed into the following three categories:

1. refusal to allow access to data by classifying "For Official Use Only";
2. limited access only to data that are either incomplete, distorted, or managed;
3. explicit control of the researcher by the assignment of personnel to "escort" and introduce him or her to either "safe" informants or "safe" data.

In reaction to such constraints, some researchers such as Lehman and Taylor (1974) have advocated alternative, "conflict methodologies" in situations where consensual arrangements are not possible. Unfortunately, mere advocacy in itself of new methodologies does not come to grips with the realities of the complicity of the researcher's own institutional base in controlling social science research.

<sup>4</sup> There is a pragmatic issue here as well. If the researcher publishes sensitive materials not meant for public dissemination, it is rather assured that the researcher has forfeited any future entry or opportunities with that organization. Though those who publish such sensitive materials are sometimes accused of being "hit and run" social scientists, there is nonetheless the reality that when an institution has had private information made public, it is not likely again to trust that individual to conduct research. With the publication of his book on the St. Louis Public Schools in 1973, Rist was informally told by several St. Louis school officials of his *persona nongrata* status in the school district. In a different context, the question can be raised whether the Rand Corporation would ever again hire Daniel Ellsberg? These issues suggest the risks taken to publish information institutions would wish to keep private.

<sup>5</sup> The recognition of the vulnerability within one's own institution has led, in at least two instances known to Rist, to situations where researchers have deferred publishing important case studies until after they have achieved tenure. Both studies remain unpublished at present.

What researchers do need is a reconstituted organizational framework that politically and financially insulates them from pressures to compromise the data and turn attention to "safe" issues.

The problem for the researcher in gaining access to data, particularly in terms of escaping the controlling influences of the gatekeeper, is not only of methods, but legitimated authority. It is the kind of authority that, institutionally, the researcher does not have.<sup>6</sup> The presence of this institutional predicament may explain why researchers hesitate to investigate the integral workings of powerful bureaucracies and organizations. As Sjoberg and Miller (1973:138) have noted:

Admittedly, some of the tactics employed by investigative journalists—e.g., collecting data under false pretense, playing off hearsay evidence of one informant against another, pilfering files—are for political and ethical reasons, unusable by sociologists. In light of the sociologist's present institutional base . . . and code of ethics, too little attention has been focused upon how they are to secure "sensitive information" about powerful bureaucracies.

#### GATEKEEPING AND FREEDOM OF ANALYSIS

The data analysis and subsequent presentation of findings provide a fourth area where gatekeepers are able to exercise control and influence. Any substantive problem can be analyzed with respect to any number of "causal variables." Furthermore, "there is a great deal of laxity in choosing variables in our field" (Blumer, 1967b:85). Thus, the question posed by Becker and Horowitz (1972: 57) is an important one: "How do sociologists choose from among the many possible causes those they will emphasize in their . . . analysis or investigate in their research?" Certainly an important consideration is the selection of an analytic scheme that "closely fits" what the data indicate. But there are other considerations as well. As Becker and Horowitz (1972:58) replied:

On further inspection, we can see that the assignment of causes to events has a political aspect. The way sociologists assign causes, both in setting up hypotheses to be studied and in announcing conclusions, exhibits the influence of a political point of view, however implicit or hazy.

Becker and Horowitz argue that in the assignment of "cause" the researcher simultaneously assigns "blame." Insofar as the behavior of certain actors is identified as creating the substantive event or problem under investigation, the analysis "blames" actors for its occurrence. Insofar as impersonal forces (the social system, norms, roles) are identified as creating the substantive event or problem, the analysis "excuses the people whose actions appeared to be morally suspect by suggesting that they could not help doing what they did" (Becker and Horowitz, 1972:58). In such situations, therefore, the political ramifications of the analysis become an important matter of consideration. As Glazer (1972:172) noted:

<sup>6</sup> Though the case law is yet to be clarified, there are increasing suggestions that social scientists will find the strongest support for their sensitive research not in any new institutional setting, but in the application of legal protections now afforded in limited ways to journalists, particularly as elaborated upon in the *Branzburg v. Hayes* case decided by the Supreme Court in June, 1972. Likewise, there are suggestions that the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 provides a basis for studying the internal workings of the regulatory agencies of government as well as those involved with national defense, internal security and foreign affairs (cf. Nejeleski and Finsterbusch, 1973; Nathanson, 1973).

The pressures on field-workers, no doubt, often lead to important revisions in their work. Many of these instances probably go unreported by researchers who prefer to compromise rather than brook the fury of influential sponsors and respondents. A conscious attempt to compile cases of bureaucratic intrusion would be enlightening and would serve to alert other social scientists to the variety of dangers they face as they attempt to study those whose power far exceeds their own.

Regrettably, there are still few published reports or case studies in which researchers have discussed the control that the gatekeeper exercised in forcing them either to revise or depoliticize their analysis. Daniels (1967) is an exception by discussing the fate of a research project on the military where she was principal investigator, until "persuaded" to resign under pressure from both the gatekeepers involved and her own institutional base:

. . . in the first discomfort at seeing the research take a different line from what had been anticipated, the granters attempted to pull my research organization (through which the grant was administered) into the fray. . . . The director of the research organization pointed out to me that I was jeopardizing future grants from this branch of the military to his organization as well as the future of my own grant (Daniels, 1967:286).

Eventually, in order to salvage the remainder of the research, and placate the anxieties of both the military and the administrators of her own institutional base, Daniels assisted in finding a replacement for herself. Even at this, "the granting organization refused the renewal of the third year of what had been understood in the beginning to be a three-year grant" (Daniels, 1967:287).

Another important collection of case studies is offered by Record (1967) in discussing the experiences of a number of research projects administered from within a university affiliated institute.<sup>7</sup> One study, which examined the employment and recruitment procedures of a local business union raised some penetrating questions in a chapter about the power vested solely in the hands of the business agent. After reading the manuscript, the officials of the union reacted and contacted the institute's director, who in turn, consulted his senior associates. After considerable debate, it was decided to omit the controversial chapter and publish it as a separate study of union democracy. But, as Record reported, a decade later the research still was not published.

Another project concerned the collective bargaining relationship between highly skilled, technical employees and the administrators of an industrial corporation. The analysis indicated that the relationship had "many elements of paternalism and that the concessions the union had gained from management (were) somewhat inferior to those obtained for similar employees by industrial unions in other plants" (Record, 1967:27). On reading the research draft, the management "blew up" and one top official threatened to "take the matter up with higher authorities" unless extensive revisions and omissions were made in the draft. Once again, the officials of the institute judiciously intervened and convinced the researcher to "table" the paper at least for the time it takes for tempers to cool. After six years, the paper was still unpublished.

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<sup>7</sup> We think it important to underscore that both Daniels' and Record's reports are found in Sjobergs' (1967) anthology which remains a most important sourcebook of analyses on ethics and politics in social research. A second of major import is the special 1973 issue of *Social Problems* entitled, "The Social Control of Social Research."

Researchers are clearly reluctant to admit how often or how much their analyses have been shaped by the influence of the gatekeeper.<sup>8</sup> For our purposes, we are not as much interested in knowing the actual number of cases as in recognizing that the nature of the gatekeeper's influence in controlling the research process is in part contingent on how the researcher's institutional base politically and morally aligns itself to strengthen that influence.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In gaining entry and conducting research, particularly within powerful bureaucracies and organizations, the agreement between the researcher and the gatekeeper usually consists of a delimited substantive problem that requires an equally delimited access to data. Moreover, as Becker and Horowitz (1972:63) assert:

Ordinarily, the agency will not see its own operations as one of the causes of the problem, and thus those operations will not be included in the area the researcher agrees to study; by implication, he agrees not to study them.

But the influence of the gatekeeper is not absolute. The ability to influence the research process is dependent on how closely the sponsor and the researcher's institutional base cooperate. This cooperation is particularly salient in controlling the researcher who does not seem to internalize the necessary sense of "propriety" or "maturity" to conduct an "acceptable" investigation. One general indication of the persistence of this cooperative alignment can be gauged by comparing the dearth of critical or penetrating research on powerful bureaucracies and organizations to the remaining body of research literature. As Liazos (1972:11) noted, social science has assembled an overwhelming amount of research on "nuts, sluts, and perverts," but "little attention has been paid to the unethical, illegal, and destructive actions of powerful individuals, groups, and institutions in society." Similarly, social scientists have assembled considerable research on violence but almost nothing on covert, institutional violence in the form of oppression, racism, or exploitation (Knowles and Prewitt, 1969).

But what about the existing research that is critical, that has raised eyebrows, and that has not only transcended the "hierarchies of credibility" of powerful groups and institutions, but has also challenged and rebuked them? Our review would suggest that what critical research has been done was accomplished neither on the basis of researchers utilizing new "conflict" methodologies, nor was it on the basis of researchers audaciously ignoring the political and moral limits of their institutional base. Rather, it was largely accomplished by virtue of researchers in institutional positions that made it feasible.

Several case studies and analyses of past research efforts lend the assertion plausibility and thus encourage further analysis. For instance, Glazer's (1972) research specifically emphasized the essential role his institution played in minimizing the influence of the sponsor. However, Glazer's case may be an exception in that universities and university-related institutes typically lend little support to controversial research (cf. Record, 1967; Sjoberg and Miller, 1973). Vidich

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<sup>8</sup> And there are few if any accounts by gatekeepers of the ways they have controlled and influenced social science research. The lack of candid discussion in this area reaffirms the illusion that there is nothing missing from studies by social scientists and that any desired information can be obtained by acting in a honest and forthright manner.

and Bensman (1968), in *Small Town in Mass Society*, created a hostile reaction among prominent citizens and groups in "Springdale" which motivated the administrators of the sponsoring university (Cornell) and the project director to try drastically to revise and delete the controversial sections of the research. Yet all such attempts ultimately came to no avail. Bensman was never officially affiliated with either Cornell or the research project; his participation was informally solicited by Vidich. Further, it was not until after Vidich's position at Cornell had expired that the research in its final form was written and published. "Vidich and Bensman successfully resisted any attempt to modify their report because they were beyond the influence of both Springdale and Cornell" (Glazer, 1972: 165).

The societal reaction or "labeling" approach to deviance, as advanced by Lemert (1967), Goffman (1961), Becker (1963), and Scheff (1968) is useful to remember here for it champions the position of the "underdog." Labeling theory provides a perspective that functions critically to expose and debunk officials of local institutions and organizations (Gouldner, 1970). Since most researchers who pursue and advocate the labeling position are also affiliated with universities themselves situated within and politically sensitive to local communities, one would anticipate that research-based criticism would generally be muted. But Gouldner (1970:130) suggests quite the opposite. First, he argues that the younger scholars and researchers belong to "highly mobile middle classes (who) have a dwindling localistic attachment and a narrowing base of power on the local level." Concomitantly, he argues that, as a result of the funding situation which emerged in the 1960's, the commitment of these researchers, as well as their political and economic base, has come to be largely tied to institutional bureaucracies at the federal level:

With the new funding situation and the greater ease of access to research money, it is now also much simpler for younger men to procure funds for themselves, for their own researchers, and at an earlier age. Being their own masters, they can now more readily express their own underdog standpoint insofar as they have one (Gouldner, 1970:128).

Gouldner's argument provides an important implication for this present discussion. If a researcher's career is dependent on an authority transcendental to his or her local, possibly temporary, institutional base, that institution or its local community can exercise less influence over the researcher's actual work. In this sense, researchers may have a position similar to Vidich and Bensman's in that, while they may be identified as physically situated within a local community and university, they are economically and politically beyond the influence of those institutional controls.

Our study of the role of the gatekeeper suggests that sponsored research at all stages tends to be significantly influenced and controlled by gatekeepers. The gatekeeper's ultimate influence is contingent on how far the researcher's institutional base backs it up.

Conversely, what sensitive research does exist, particularly with regard to powerful bureaucracies and organizations, is largely the result of researchers institutionally placed to make such research feasible. These are positions within universities that are powerful enough to resist outside pressure from other powerful organizations and groups, or they are positions where the researcher is beyond the power and influence of both the university and outside organizations.

Yet such positioning is inevitably problematic as well as tentative. Organizational arrangements shift and power bases are frequently fluid and unstable. Certainly there are no "sure-fire" formulas as yet available for researchers who wish to engage in sensitive research. Nevertheless, this analysis suggests that among the different strategies ultimately used, all must incorporate variations of a *single* theme: namely, the degree of autonomy that researchers are able to carve out in the future will be as much the result of their success at reorganizing their own institutional base, as with the success of their face-to-face confrontations with the influence of the gatekeeper.

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