

ON BECOMING A SOCIAL SCIENTIST

By Shulamit Reinharz: A Critical Review

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In her very interesting and provocative study, Shulamit Reinharz describes and analyzes the issues, dilemmas, and personal crises involved in becoming a social scientist.¹ She employs herself as a case study via an introspective, intellectual autobiography, in an attempt to illustrate the process by which she struggled with the dilemmas of different sociological methods, attempted resolutions, and formed her identity as a sociologist. Her aim in the study is to illustrate "the intertwined development of method and identity" to "change the consciousness of the reader by questioning the assumptions and practices of various research methods", and to propose an alternative method (experiential analysis") in an attempt to "rehumanize" the sociologist, sociology, and society.²

I

Reinharz characterizes socialization into an academic discipline as the dual search for identity and method. One of her major hypotheses is that "socialization can be fruitfully understood precisely as the creation of a sense of identity hinged on the resolution of conflicts concerning method."³ She focuses on the changing perceptions of the self and the profession as the student moves through the undergraduate and graduate experience. The crucial element for her is the sequence of research projects, because she believes that "methods reflect personal values," and holds research to be the "mastery-inducing experience."⁴ In sum, "In the role playing of research, the persons being socialized discover themselves and their profession."⁵

Reinharz uses three research projects (a conventional survey study, a participant observation study in a mental hospital, and a team fieldwork study in an Israeli town) to illustrate her growing alienation and disillusionment with the traditional methods in sociology. In the process of research, she discovered numerous discrepancies between research practice and how the traditional methods are ideally presented in the university. The result of these discrepancies for students, she claims, is an identity crisis and the emergence of

a new identity "either as a creative or as a conformist resolution of dissonance within a discipline." She concludes that "socialization (the acquisition of an identity and a method of action) requires the personal resolution of the inherent conflicts, not the simple adoption of the given definitions."⁶

II

Reinharz calls for the redefinition of research and proposes a tripartite set of criteria by which to evaluate social research: "All projects should generate knowledge within the three components engaged in a research project: person, problem, and method. In this scheme self-knowledge (person) is a necessary and publicly relevant product of social research."⁷

When she began her socialization, Reinharz notes that she accepted the scientific model of "mainstream" sociology, i.e., the problem-solving approach which proceeds rigorously and self-consciously from questions to hypotheses to verified conclusions. She also adopted the textbook notion of research, which integrates problem and method but considers the researcher-as-person as irrelevant or as a potential source of bias. However, her experience with survey empiricism led her to conclude that the scientific model is replete with implicit assumptions that elicit patterned ways of defining a situation. In sum, it is a "ritual inhibiting discovery" whose function is to protect researchers against colleagues' criticisms of procedural errors, and against the criticism of sponsors who are potentially dissatisfied with results.⁸

Reinharz argues that survey empiricism assumes that the social scientist is unique, autonomous, value-free, and transcends social life, when in fact "detachment is impossible in practice and undesirable as an ideal." She argues that "personal values creep into all the components that are supposed to be regulated only by scientific procedure, from the definition of the research topic to the preparation of the report" because "presuppositions cannot be entirely stripped." She concludes that detachment leads to disinterest and alienation.⁹

In addition to assuming a static reality that can be controlled and measured, survey empiricism assumes that problems and questions are selected "objectively," whereas they are often selected to fit the method. It assumes that respondents are objects and that answers to questionnaires are accurate, whereas respondents are humans whose responses are influenced not only by the questions themselves, but by the context in which the questionnaire is presented, and the "audience effect." It assumes that deception is necessary in order to insure subject compliance, whereas deceptive research assumes "that better knowledge can be obtained from a naive subject than from an informed collaborator." In addition, Reinharz feels that control over subjects is a "fantasy." Therefore, "The results reflected the researchers, the questionnaire, and the readers rather than the people questioned."¹⁰

From her experience in the survey research project, Reinharz concludes that survey empiricism is an aggressive "rape model" of research whose "fundamental problem is the researcher's assumption of a 'right to know' that serves as a carte blanche for activities that contradict other values," and that "the tension between the 'ideal' of experience denial or value freedom and the impossibility of achieving that ideal produces deviousness, ritualism, and evasiveness within the research process" and leads to the dehumanization of the scientist and the subject. In addition, Reinharz concludes that truth cannot be defined in mathematical terms, that self awareness must be restored as a source of "insight," because bias is "nothing more than being human and socially structured." Finally, she concludes that "Objectivity should thus be redefined from the elimination of the influence of the investigator's personal features to a clear understanding of their influence."¹¹

III

The discrepancy between the ideal and the real experience of her initial research project led Reinharz to seek a method of social research that could serve as an alternative to survey empiricism. In her second research project, Reinharz focuses on the dilemmas of detached participant observation as a research method. The second project was initially concerned with a participant observation study on friendships among patients in a mental hospital, but was changed in the field to include the significance of special relationships among staff and patients.¹²

As a graduate student at Brandeis University, Reinharz was influenced by the critical and humanistic approach of the faculty. Social psychology became her area of specialization, and she now sought to understand meaning in terms of the actor's perspective. Her method in the second project consisted of defining a general problem, preparing for entry into the field by reviewing some of the literature, and refining the problem. She was soon faced with the many dilemmas and limits of the participant observation method.¹³

In defining the research problem, Reinharz was confronted with the "dilemma of commitment:" "In the subtle matter of selecting a research problem and site, the researcher's unconscious and conscious needs seek fulfillment." Retrospectively, she concluded that the difficulty lay in formulating the problem before entering the field, rather than letting the problem arise from the research process in the particular field setting.¹⁴

Reinharz notes that a second set of problems with the participant observation method concerned the "dilemma of preparedness:" "(1) the tension between entering the research project with no preconceptions (which is impossible) or with predetermined definitions. (2) the degree of generality (or specificity) with which the research problems are posed, and (3) the degree of rigidity (or flexibility) with which the topic is maintained." She notes that an

additional problem concerns the mastery of the literature: "Simply put, it cannot be mastered."¹⁵

Retrospectively, Reinharz resolved these dilemmas, which lead to blocked research, by freeing herself from prefield perceptions and rigidity. She did this by employing an unprepared approach that freed her to "explore the field as it presented itself to me and to relate it to the literature retrospectively." She concludes that "everything should be recognized as potential data."¹⁶

A third set of problems with the participant observation method concerns the dilemmas in selecting a role and stance for fieldwork. For Reinharz, "The selected role reflects both the self the researcher wishes to present and the particular definition of participant observation being used. Together these form the researcher's 'stance.' Reinharz found that there are dilemmas and limits inherent in the entire continuum of stances from complete observer to complete participant ("going native"). The main dilemma concerns "competing identities in the field," and the attempt to employ "multiple stances:" "Although these multiple stances optimize access to the social system, the researcher feels fragmented and inconsistent." The result is often role conflict between assumed role and research role, self-deception, manipulation, and identity confusion.¹⁷

Retrospectively, Reinharz resolved these dilemmas for herself by insuring that "the mode of self-presentation should be worked out before entry into the field" and by seeking "a higher level of reciprocity" with clients by "engaging in studies only upon client request, encouraging the client's active collaboration, and sharing findings and reports with setting members." She resolved the problem of identity crisis by recognizing that the task of sociology is not to provide a perfect description of all data, but to develop a theory to account for aspects of behavior, and thus by developing a theory of her own.¹⁸

In order to illustrate the "stress of detached fieldwork," Reinharz points out the dilemmas of gathering data. She resolved the dilemma implied in the attempt to record everything by learning to be "selective rather than inclusive in observing and recording." She resolved the dilemma of defining the boundaries of the system under study by recognizing that "all system boundaries are artificial and arbitrary," and thus by "shifting back and forth" between a necessarily larger context and a smaller adequate context. She resolved the dilemma of choosing indicators by learning "to not pay attention when the scope became unwieldy, and to abandon indicators that were too numerous to pursue." She resolved the involvement-detachment dilemma by accepting "passivity" in the data-gathering process and "rigorous activity" in the recording and analysis process. An additional dilemma of data gathering was the "multiplicity of perspectives." One of Reinharz's major assumptions is that "there is no single correct description of anything in the field, since every description stems from an observational perspective." She resolves (for herself) the dilemma of bias in perspective by assuming that all perspectives are valid.¹⁹

Reinharz relates that the most significant problem she encountered in gathering and recording data was the "internal noise" of anger and anxiety resulting from the attempt to suppress her personal responses, i.e. suppressing her humanness. She resolved this dilemma (for herself) by considering her personal feelings as data themselves, by considering self-observation as a special source of evidence, by utilizing her personal responses to the environment as "the very avenue for learning about that environment;" in sum, by a creative use of bias."²⁰

Reinharz states that a final set of problems concerns the dilemmas characteristic of drawing conclusions from detached participant observation fieldwork, i.e. problems of validity, proof, generalization, and publication. She perceives that one of the cardinal dilemmas of participant observation research is that "it is never finished:" "Conclusions are temporary and reflect the current coming to terms with the research experience." However, since participant observation relies on the uniquely human qualities of the observer, it "benefits from hindsight."²¹

From her participant observation study, Reinharz concludes that research must be redefined to integrate the person with the problem and the method, that the implicit values, beliefs, and commitments underlying one's reasoning have to be made explicit, and that "participant observation fieldwork is a frustrating, anxiety-provoking, yet personally fulfilling process that is experienced; it is not a technology."²²

IV

It was during her team fieldwork study in an Israeli town in 1970-71 that Reinharz refined and extended the participant observation method to include person, team, problem, and method. Her new method resulted from her discovery of the team group process and was a synthesis of phenomenology and "action research." She notes that with the "discovery" of experiential analysis" her professional identification "became less tied to an academic discipline than to a method that could be affiliated with diverse disciplines."²³

In keeping with her new method, the Israeli project initially focused on the effects of shelling on a border town, but was changed in the field to focus on two topics: "problems and coping behaviors of various groups in the town and the problems and coping behavior of the team members in the group project."²⁴

Reinharz notes that the prefield entry phase of the team project "contrasted favorably with the preparatory vacuum of the survey project and the unexamined assumptions and accepted definitions" of the detached participant observation study. She had resolved the dilemma of preparedness by differentiating information from expectations and differentiating the perspective of the insider with vested interests from those of the temporary researcher. She resolved the potential dilemma of discrepancies between prefield information and

field experience by noting "the necessity of evaluating preentry information in the light of experiences in the field," and by "contrasting insiders' and outsiders' information or interpretations" via "feedback consultation."²⁵

Reinharz employed a method of "pattern building" in the field for making sense of disconnected observations: "a method of organizing data by recording incidents or statements, watching for recurrences, and trying to formulate patterns. The next step is to challenge the pattern by testing if it covered the next related incident and if members of the setting considered it meaningful."²⁶

On the basis of her field experience, Reinharz formulated her hypotheses on group dynamics: "the group pressure to conform, the group's ambivalence to autonomy, its analogy to a family, the members' use of the project for private agendas and personal growth, the instability of a four-member group, and the impact of the pressures of time, danger, and climate." Among the benefits of teamwork she notes the "possibility of receiving immediate feedback on every aspect of my work," that "a team can gather more data," and that it can provide a holistic approach to research.²⁷

Reinharz argues that the experiential method has therapeutic effects on the subjects being studied, i.e. for catharsis, reinforcement, and for the organization of thoughts. This beneficial impact of "temporary affiliation" between fieldworkers and subjects is based on "interviewing procedures that are informal, unstructured and not standardized" and "an open interactive style" that "allows the researcher to discover the subjects' qualities in their own terms." Reinharz states that the "feedback consultation" phase of the study must be conscious of the "multiple perceptions of a situation," must avoid blaming the victim, must be seen as a continuity of the research process, and must convey findings to audiences in usable form.²⁸

Reinharz concludes that the aim of research is theory, the tests of findings of experiential teamwork are "comprehensibility and applicability," that "fieldwork can be redefined as the activity in which researchers undergo experiences similar to those of the people being studied," and that teamwork is a check on self-deception.²⁹

V

There is much to commend in Reinharz's attempt to develop a "new method" for social research ("experiential analysis"). Her attempt to transcend the rigidity and narrowly structured perspective of disciplinarity by employing a transdisciplinary research strategy (phenomenology) is commendable.³⁰

Reinharz employs a holistic approach in an attempt to study experiences in their entirety, to learn "what it is and how it fits" into the whole. She employs an "experiential language" which she feels has a transdisciplinary application. She employs an interdisciplinary teamwork method that has a general applicability in

pursuing problems which emerge across, as well as in-between, the specialized disciplines. She advocates a discipline-transcending pedagogy that includes "systematic self-analysis as part of training." She employs a research strategy that has a theory-building as well as a problem-solving purpose. Finally, she employs a research strategy that facilitates rather than inhibits social activism.³¹

Reinharz is convincing in her argument of "the intertwined development of method and identity" in the socialization of the social scientist. She is convincing in her critique of the positivist assumptions and inadequacies of survey empiricism and the detached participant observation methods. Her call for a redefinition of research to make explicit one's implicit assumptions, and to "rehumanize" the social scientist, the social disciplines and society, are commendable. However, Reinharz is less convincing in her explicit phenomenological assumptions and her advocacy of a "creative use of bias." Only by accepting the phenomenological assumption of Husserl, Kierkegaard, and Dilthey that there is an ontological distinction between nature and society, that there are no "fixed laws" in social life only a "process of becoming," can she conclude that the attempt to discover laws in social life and to control the social world is simply scientific arrogance, and that social science requires a method different from that of the natural sciences.³²

Reinharz does not explain why social history could not consist of a unity of both "fixed laws" and "processes of becoming," as occurs in natural history. Some social scientists would argue that the conditioning nature of the technoeconomic infrastructure upon the social structure and the ideological superstructure in society are no less "fixed laws" than such "processes of becoming" as the development of social classes, exploitation, class struggle, social revolution, and social development.³³

Only by accepting the phenomenological assumption that meaning can only be understood subjectively, as lived experience, can Reinharz accept subjectivity as a method of social science. Only by assuming an identity between meaning and behavior can Reinharz deny that behavior is worth studying independently of meaning, reject the possibility of separating the observers from the observed, and conclude that the task of social science is to explicate meaning, i.e. the mental superstructure, and nothing more.³⁴

However, in social science it is crucial to differentiate the felt feeling of freedom and purpose behind one's actions, and the unintended consequences of one's behavior. The meaningful, intentional actions of individuals correspond or clash with that of other individuals, so that the desired outcome is only rarely achieved. The results are often what no one sought to achieve nor could foresee. So in spite of the existence of individual meaning and purpose, social history has proceeded in the manner of a natural process independent of individual meaning and with its own laws of motion. Therefore, behavior is not identical with meaning, it is worth studying independently of meaning, the observers can be separated from the observed, and the task of social science, as in natural science, is to

discover the laws of social life. Whereas Reinharz assumes meaning and self-awareness as the start for understanding social life,³⁵ it is the understanding of social life that is the start for understanding meaning and self-awareness. Life is not only a struggle for meaning, but a struggle for sustenance and for power.

Only by equating the scientific method with extreme positivism and inductionism can Reinharz assume that science is just another belief system and that all perceptions are equally valid.³⁶ As Harris notes, "It does not follow from our inability to obtain absolutely certain knowledge that all knowledge is equally uncertain."³⁷ Science is not a one-sided positivism nor inductionism, it is a synthesis of induction and deduction, of empiricism and rationalism. Its proof is the demonstration of overwhelming probability, and the natural selection of paradigms. It is the clash of scientific paradigms or research strategies that guarantees an open mind, i.e. "objectivity." The solution to the problem of bias is not to abandon the attempt to be scientific, but to attempt to overcome subjective limitations by being more scientific. Because it is transcultural and not relative to specific groups or cultures, the scientific method is not just another belief system.³⁸

What is Reinharz's alternative? She would abandon the tool of science because, like any tool, it is subject to abuse. Rather than advocate more and better science she advocates less science, and a glorification of egoism and subjectivity. Her source of knowledge is "insight," "intuition," and "preverbal experience." Her validity criteria include a "felt response," a "sense of closure," and that the explication must "make sense" to the members of the setting. Her criterion of certainty is the "irrefutable" experience of relived phenomena. Teamwork is her check on self-deception.³⁹

While Reinharz differentiates between "explication" and "experience" and employs "teamwork" as a way of assessing knowledge,⁴⁰ she fails in her attempt to transcend a purely phenomenological approach. To assume that a participant observer can relive the experience of the subjects is a naive fantasy. With Reinharz's method there can be no proof that one's subjective experience is accurate, because the experience itself is the measure of accuracy. Teamwork is a necessary but not sufficient check on self-deception, since all the team members may employ the same research strategy.

What profound insights did Reinharz discover with her experiential method? From her experiential study in the Israeli town, Reinharz relates the following insights and discoveries: "One feels safer by virtue of acting;" "the psychological value of seemingly irrational behavior;" "the individual subjugation to the group norm;" "the strength and potential demoralizing effect of rumors;" "rumor-defying or fear-reducing explanations must be plausible;" "Under stress such as fear, the senses can be partially immobilized;" "Fear cannot remain at a crisis stage; eventually it becomes routine."⁴¹ These were the profound "insights" "discovered" by Reinharz through the employment of her "new" method. By substituting a subjective for a scientific method, she neither sheds

new light on old problems nor provides a new alternative perspective. What she has in fact achieved is the discovery of the obvious, by reinventing the same old wheel of phenomenology (with slight variations) and attempting to employ it in social research.

Reinharz's call for a "rehumanization" of the social scientist, the social disciplines, and society is commendable, but it is based on the erroneous assumption that a scientific approach is dehumanizing. A scientific approach in social research appears dehumanizing because it explains behavior independently of meaning, and questions the Liberal ideal of the autonomous individual. A scientific approach offers an alternative explanation of behavior for which the individual himself was previously given credit, i.e. it reveals individual behavior to be socially conditioned, and undermines all forms of egoism and subjectivism. Conversely, Reinharz's experiential research strategy leads not only to intellectual obfuscation, but also to moral opacity. Because her investigation of assumptions and presuppositions stops short of a social class analysis, an unintended consequence of her strategy is to further aid in the dehumanization of exploited peoples. For example, she labels all the Palestinians fighting for their homeland as "terrorists."⁴²

NOTES

¹Shulamit Reinharz *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and Participant Observation to Experiential Analysis* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1979).

²*Ibid.*, p. xii; pp. 370-371; p. 37.

³*Ibid.*, p. x.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 29.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 374-75.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 370.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 247; p. 113; p. 251.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 64; p. 95; p. 92; p. 115; p. 119.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 95; p. 114; p. 247; p. 255.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 127; p. 231.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 132; p. 135; p. 145.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 141; p. 140.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 149; p. 152.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 156; p. 161.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 158; p. 163; p. 176.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 202; p. 205; p. 206; p. 209; p. 211.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 212; p. 225.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 233-35.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 237.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 264-65.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p.283; p. 288.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 273; p. 277; p. 279.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 282.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 303-05.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 318; p. 315; p. 319; pp. 324-25; p. 330.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 333; p. 326; pp. 339-40; p. 353.

³⁰Cf. Raymond C. Miller, "Varieties of Interdisciplinary Approaches in the Social Sciences," *Issues in Integrative Studies*, No. 1 (1982); Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (New York: Random House, 1979).

³¹Reinharz, p. 363; p. 262; p. 265; p. 356; p. 176; pp. 38-40.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 243; p. 254.

³³e., Cultural Materialists and Dialectical Materialists.

³⁴Reinharz, pp. 355-56.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 254.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 246; p. 211.

³⁷Harris, p. 322.

³⁸Cf. Harris, 316-27.

³⁹Reinharz, pp. 359-63.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 359; p. 362.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 348-51.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 270.