Gaining "relevant" political knowledge, mastering specific political-administrative competencies, and participating in community processes -- all avenues of curriculum development for political activism -- can be ineffective if a student has been unable to resolve certain psycho-philosophic concerns. These concerns help to explain the nature and extent of a person's approach to social action; provide a framework for considering effective implementation of curriculum; and can explain the difficulty a student has in taking action either because he is unconscious of these issues or because he has resolved them in a way that inhibits his ability to exert influence. The concerns can be grouped as follows: achieving commitment at the cost of openness or openness at the cost of effectiveness, finding respect for persons a barrier to commitment to cause and to change in institutions; determining the scope of one's power and the role in which to employ it; maintaining personal integrity in the face of challenges from all sides; and identifying without prejudice one's motivation for involvement as being social or personal. (Author/JH)
Psycho-Philosophic Concerns of Social Activists: the Need for
Research and Curriculum Development

by

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Paper presented to National Council for the Social Studies,
Traditionally social studies educators have espoused as one of their objectives for students effective participation in community affairs. Much recent criticism has been directed at the teaching of government, history and other social studies subjects for failing to present knowledge relevant to this objective. Some critics propose that we teach less about the structure of government, more about the realities of political process, with special emphasis on how power is wielded informally within the system. Others suggest handbooks on community organizing, or tricks of the trade of the successful activist. The need for students to become involved in community-oriented projects in which students interact with the world beyond the school has been advocated. While I support each of these approaches, I believe they are not sufficient for enabling students to become more effective in exerting influence in public affairs.

The gaining of "relevant" political knowledge, the mastery of specific political-administrative competencies, the opportunity for community involvement can come to naught if a student has been unable to resolve what I refer to certain psycho-philosophic concerns. Suppose a person feels so overwhelmed by forces beyond his control that he cannot bring himself to act at all. Or suppose another feels so omnipotent that he sets goals which are impossible to achieve. Some people may be reluctant to act because they see public controversy as a form of interpersonal warfare, and they do not want to take part in hurting people. A potential activist may falter if he concludes that his principles must be compromised to such a degree that he will lose personal integrity. These are illustrative of a number of concerns, beliefs, attitudes, "hang-ups" which may be rooted in an individual's psychic structure and philosophical perspectives. They may be viewed as dilemmas whose resolution may help to explain the nature and extent of a person's approach to social action. I have classified a large number of concerns into the general categories of commitment and openness; persons versus causes and institutions; use of power; integrity; and personal motives and social justifications. These issues have not been documented through quantitative research. I propose them as an initial taxonomy, based on diverse reading in social science, my observations of young and adult activists, and my own participation in various citizen efforts to influence public policy.

I. Commitment and Openness

A number of apparently contradictory dispositions and orientations can be subsumed under the general problem of commitment and openness. On the one hand, an activist must be certain that his position is correct. He must be committed to pursue his goal, undaunted by attempts of adversaries or skeptics to prove him wrong or to predict his failure. On the other hand, he must remain receptive to criticism, to new information, to alternative interpretations, so that his action can be intelligently adapted to demands of the environment. In many situations he must be able to recognize the complexity of the problem he attacks, and the inevitable fact that almost always his action must be based on incomplete informa-
tion and evidence. On the other hand, if he refuses to act until "all
the evidence is in" or until his proposed action has been proven correct
beyond question, he will never be able to act, because the possibilities
for continued study on social problems are infinite.

Taking decisive action in the face of uncertainty is especially
difficult for persons who wish to "keep all options open" or who
generally feel that the "grass is always greener." Such individuals
tend to feel that by committing themselves to a certain course of action,
they may miss out on something else that might come along. The extreme
form of this ambivalence is seen in persons who can rarely finish a
book, but can only taste small parts of many, in persons who never pursue
a hobby in any sustained continuous way, but dabble in several. The
person who attempts to learn "what he wants," or "what he is committed
to" by continuous superficial exploration of alternatives may find
himself never committed to anything. Certain psychological findings
suggest that commitment or sustained involvement develops only if one
actually takes a plunge, heavily investing himself in a cause or
activity (Kanter, 1972). Erikson's (1959) notion of a psycho-social
moratorium is an attempt to recognize the developmental need of a
period which allows both for a certain amount of ambivalent dilettant-
ism, but also for total personal investment and commitment in a focused
direction.

In many situations the activist must have enough perseverance to
work in the face of apparently overwhelming odds, on projects which
last many days, months, or years. Feedback on the results of one's
actions is often delayed far into the future, and praise, recognition
and approval are infrequent rewards for one's work. This suggests that
the activist have the courage and the strength to continue a long
arduous battle. On the other hand, he must be realistic enough not to
waste energy on efforts that cannot be successful no matter how total
the commitment. Knowing that a refusal to try, or giving up, simply
because one predicts failure can become a self-fulfilling prophecy,
the activist must be willing to commit himself to work in the face of
serious obstacles, yet realizing that one's energy is limited, he must
be selective in choosing only those battles where success seems feasible.

Another manifestation of the problem of balance between commitment
and openness involves the conflict between systematic planning, organized
anticipation on the one hand versus flexibility and spontaneity on the
other. Persons who are for the most part present-oriented will have
difficulty planning for future contingencies. Some are extremely cautious
about excessive planning of a program or campaign, fearing that one will
become a slave to one's structure and will not be able properly to respond
to circumstances as they arise. Others prefer a more systematic attempt at
future planning for all contingencies, fearing that a looser, "play-it-by
ear" approach will be too unorganized and ineffective. The art is to
arrive at some balance that incorporates the advantages and avoids the
pitfalls of each orientation.

II. Persons vs. Causes and Institutions

To influence public policy, to affect institutions, to resolve
issues, to fight for causes, one must relate to individual persons—
colleagues, adversaries, potential supporters and opponents, and persons
important to the activist who may not be directly related to the issues (e.g., parents, friends, etc.). One's regard for and relationships to such persons often becomes a problem in the context of a social struggle. How such problems are resolved affects not only the interpersonal world of the activist, but also the outcome of his efforts on institutions and policy.

Reluctance to become involved in public affairs may result from a general belief that such involvement almost inevitably results in deterioration in interpersonal relations, or at least a lack of attention to the needs of each human being as a special person. Some point to the danger that in the midst of social causes, people become objectified: adversaries become targets to defeat, replace, to prove wrong, supporters become means to an end—votes, dollars, bodies, troops. The attempt to achieve the social goal (stopping a war, passing an equal rights law, lowering taxes) in the most rational, efficient way often obscures the importance of personal needs of adversaries and supporters alike. Given the conviction that every human being is deserving of certain moral respect as a unique person, we are warned that through such objectification, as people become cogs in a larger struggle, this basic value will be forgotten. An extension of this argument is that rather than concentrating on problems of policy or institutional change, all people should simply put their energy into becoming humane and understanding with each person they encounter. If everyone did this, it is argued, there would be virtually no need to worry about equitable public policies.

There are psychological explanations for this plea to focus more on the quality of interpersonal relationships than on matters of institutional policy. For adolescents, identification with particular persons outside the family may be critical in the development of identity. If a major developmental task is the working out of interpersonal relationships among peers and adults, then we would expect the adolescent's choice of causes or issues to be a result of his being turned on or off to certain people, and we would expect him to focus primarily on the quality of interpersonal relationships as opposed to the manifest social cause for which he works. Concentrating upon personal relationships also usually provides more immediate feedback and reinforcement as to "how one is doing"—a psychological benefit that abstract causes or institutions cannot provide.

The activist may understand these observations and deliberately attempt to become sensitive to the "human" aspects of attempting to influence public affairs. If he is overly responsive to personal needs, however, progress toward achieving his goal can be retarded in at least two ways. First there is the danger that because of human respect for one's adversary, one will incorporate enough of the adversary's position into one's own so that one becomes co-opted, that is, one no longer works toward the goal or policy he originally favored. Instead, he begins to support the original adversary or at least to tone down his action so as not to oppose the adversary. Second, the activist might show such respect for the feelings of his colleagues and such a desire to resolve all questions of interpersonal tension that it becomes impossible to mobilize group organization toward completion of a task. One result of becoming sensitive to individual personal needs is that individual differences may become so accentuated that colleagues no longer feel united in a common cause, except possibly for improved human relations among themselves.
The point of these observations is to support neither a person-oriented nor a cause-oriented position, but to indicate that those people who wish to exert influence in public affairs must recognize a dilemma: on the one hand, the activist must not allow his commitment to the cause to dull his sensitivity to people as individual humans (this sensitivity is necessary both as a basic moral premise, but also instrumentally to assist one in being effective); on the other hand, the activist must not allow his concern for personal needs and harmonious interpersonal relationships to deter progress toward justifiable public policy.

III. Use of Power

An activist makes several choices concerning the use of power. First is the general problem of defining the scope of one's action. Given an almost infinite number of issues or causes, the activist must realize that because of limited time and resources, he must choose only certain issues on which to take an active stand. Selecting a few from among many issues is frequently troublesome, especially for those individuals who cannot admit that they are deliberately ignoring certain causes in order to work for others. However painful the process, one must establish priorities, or else the limited power he has can be diffused too widely to exert any influence at all. In addition to making priority judgments about the type of issues he will work on (peace, environment, consumer protection, civil rights, welfare reform), he must also make a choice about the scale of his objectives. Institutional changes of worldwide significance can be too ambitious. Instead, he should begin to work toward smaller steps that might cumulatively add up to significant influence over time: disseminating some information about an issue, working for the election of a sympathetic official, developing an organization, etc. Enthusiastic commitment to the "smaller steps," to problems over which he does have the ability to exert influence is crucial. At the same time, he cannot become so obsessed with the local, more immediate and manageable issues that he diverts attention from the ultimate objective. A person who attempts to take on the Defense Department before he has the support of neighbors belonging to a local peace group will probably not succeed. On the other hand, if he spends all his life trying to persuade a stubborn neighbor, he will certainly never get to the Defense Department.

A second problem in the use of power is the extent to which the activist construes himself as leader and follower. The general image of a person attempting to exert influence in public affairs conveys a quality of assertiveness and leadership, yet it is not my intent to suggest that everyone become a leader. Obviously the successful exercise of influence depends upon a great deal of cooperation, delegation of authority and power within groups. To participate in such a process, those inclined to assert themselves and lead must realize that in so doing, they must be careful not to deny power and responsibility to those inclined to follow, lest a movement become a one-man show which is usually doomed to failure. Conversely, those inclined to follow must feel enough of an investment in the task so as not to accept orders blindly, but to assert their own power within the movement. Needless to say, the resolution of authority and power conflicts within a group is crucial to its success. The activist whether inclined basically as a leader or follower must continually examine the way in which he exercises power within his group. Neither doing it all yourself nor letting someone else do it all are satisfactory solutions.
Another manifestation of the leader-follower problem can be seen in the contrast between a service-maintenance versus a change orientation to the use of one's power. In a service-maintenance orientation, persons and institutions invite the assistance of an activist, who attempts to please the client or recipient of his efforts. However, a change orientation implies that an activist has his own agenda which the recipient usually opposes because it involves his bending to the activist's will. Volunteer work at the prison, Head Start Center, or home for the elderly would fall into the first category. Attempts to have the School Board adopt a student bill of rights, a Black Student's Union, and to abolish grading illustrate the second. By and large, advocacy for public policy is not considered a "service" by those to whom proposals and protests are addressed. Rather, it is a struggle by certain actors to persuade other actors to change their ways. This is not to imply that change cannot be induced through the service-maintenance orientation. Tutoring programs may change students, Peace Corps volunteers may change living conditions, volunteer clean-up for the Park Department may improve the condition of the parks; but these kinds of changes are intended to service the interests of hosts. In contrast, however, the crusades of a Ralph Nader are perceived--at least initially--as contrary to the interests of the target of the action.

From this one might conclude that students undertaking change-oriented projects will have far more difficulty completing their tasks than students undertaking service-maintenance projects. This observation alone, however, should not discourage people from attempting change-oriented action. The severity of struggle may be determined more by idiosyncrasies of particular projects: persuading a school administration to supply draft counseling (advocating change) might be easier to accomplish for a group of students than providing effective tutoring for low-income students (service-maintenance).

Since the change agent is so often in the role of attempting to manipulate the lives of others, or to bend their will to his, he is not likely to gain much sense that he is meeting others' needs. This might explain the social activists' feelings of loneliness and isolation. Joining an organization whose purpose is social change may be one way to compensate for such feelings. The activist, as a volunteer, can now help to service and maintain the organization, finding perhaps the comfort of meeting the needs and following the will of fellow humans (i.e., those in the organization), yet at the same time struggling to change those on the outside.

In a sense the service-maintenance orientation implies the role of follower (one caters to the needs of others) while the change orientation suggests more independent leadership (one attempts to control or guide others). To avoid construing activism as falling exclusively into only one of these categories, a transactional interpretation should be considered. Here action is not viewed as a one-way process (I-help you, or I-change you) but as a process in which the activist and the recipient or target of action grow mutually. The activist in this role suspends enough of his agenda to listen to and respond to the needs of his client or target (on the assumption that he, the activist, will benefit therefrom), yet he does not become the total servant of the recipient's agenda, for it is also assumed that the recipient will benefit from exposure.
to the activist's own change-oriented goals. The purpose of action in the transactional sense is synergetic growth, not a one-dimensional, cause-effect result.*

A third problem occurs in situations where the activist is forced to use power in ways that inevitably seem to hurt others. Suppose he works for an organization that has limited funds and can hire only one staff member. There are ten well-qualified applicants for the job, all of whom desperately need the income, but nine must be turned away. Decisions on priority items in a budget can similarly result in giving resources to some people, denying them to others. Adolescents who have been given the power to govern alternative schools often show a reluctance to use power over their fellows. Many are not even satisfied with a majority rule system of deciding disputes, because they feel no person or group should exert any power over another. In addition to the reluctance to make policy that may deny some people their wishes, adolescents will often not participate in enforcing policy if it involves prescribing penalties or sanctions on individuals. With all the rhetoric about power to the people, and student participation in governance, we must recognize that attainment of such power poses continuing dilemmas, as the activist must decide who is to benefit the most from his use of power. This issue also relates to problems discussed under persons vs. causes and institutions.

IV. **Integrity**

A persisting dilemma for many activists is how to continue to work toward a goal without "selling out" or violating one's integrity. This struggle manifests itself in many forms, and is felt with varying degrees of severity. A person feels strongly that a public act is wrong and he wants to denounce it harshly, yet he knows he must quell the vehemence of his expression if he is to exert influence in appropriate places. In a bargaining situation, he must decide whether to stand firm and press for all demands which he feels justified, or to compromise on some issues for the sake of victory on others. Should he work for a candidate who fails to measure up to his standards, but who nevertheless seems preferable to all the alternatives? To preserve his image and credibility, he may agree to do things which he would otherwise never do (e.g., cutting his hair and dressing up, attending meetings or social functions he despises). He may participate in volunteer work which he feels to be poorly managed, yet withhold his criticism if he feels it would have a destructive effect on reaching the ultimate goal.

*For a more thorough treatment of this problem, see Freire, 1970 and Hampden-Turner, 1970.
The successful resolution of such problems requires more than advice to the activist that "compromise is often necessary." These issues can make demands on a person which go beyond a call for flexibility in tactics or approaches. To demonstrate flexibility or reasonableness a person may sometimes be required to revise or modify strongly held objectives that symbolize profound philosophical and moral commitments. Sticking by one's objectives or principles in the face of serious opposition should not necessarily be considered inflexible rigidity, an artificial attempt to save face or honor, or impractical politics. Actions that might be interpreted this way can have ramifications that touch one's identity as a person. When compromise means to the activist that he is called upon to violate that part of himself which constitutes the "sameness and continuity" (Erikson, 1960) that defines his very existence, questions of political strategy can be inextricably entwined with the very personal question, "Who am I?" In this sense, the question of compromise can have deep psychological and philosophical significance. If curriculum is to assist a person in exerting influence in public affairs, it must help him examine which compromises can be justified in terms of objective and ultimate policy goals and in terms of possible threats to or violations of one's personal identity.

V. Personal Motives and Social Justifications

Although we have recommended that the activist justify his attempts to influence public policy through a process of moral reasoning that can be examined in public, we must recognize that the formal rational justification one gives for engaging in a particular action is not a sufficient explanation of his behavior. "Why" a person becomes involved can also be explained on the basis of personal needs that may seem irrelevant to the formal justification. There are a variety of ways of describing such personal needs or motives, and some of them are more available to conscious examination than others. We might ask, for example, if one's involvement in action might be meeting one's personal needs at the expense of others: "Might my attempt to help others reflect a need of mine to manipulate or control them, or to foster their dependence on me, or to demonstrate my superiority?" We can wonder about the extent to which one's involvement is based mainly on what is currently popular: "Might my involvement in this campaign be based on a transient sense of excitement, being part of an 'in' issue, rather than sticking with a more permanent commitment that may not always attract attention?"

In one project we inquired about students' views of the main function of their social action efforts. For some students, personal learning is the major function. They become involved primarily because they want to develop individual skills, gain knowledge about specific problems, broaden their understanding of groups of people with whom they have not previously come in contact, gain information on possible vocational interests, etc. The individual student sees the activity as contributing to his individual education or growth. The main function of participation in this sense is self-education.
Other students, by outward appearance more "militant" and committed to a cause, see the completion of a task or project as the major function of their activity. The object is to persuade the Council not to rezone the land, to publish a group newspaper, to elect a candidate, to raise money for the poor, to organize a peace rally, or to provide reliable volunteer service. Though students feel they learn while carrying out their projects, self-education is seen not as the central focus, but as a fortunate by-product of the activity. The central mission is to complete a successful project, to produce results. This function we label task completion.

Many students see neither self-education nor task completion as the major purpose of their involvement in a social action project. Their goal may be simply to escape the routine, the pressures, and the demands of ordinary courses; to find a chance to relax, to rap with friends informally; to get away from adults; or to be "entertained" by guest speakers or field trips. Such concerns can be summarized as the function of recreation.

Finally, we notice students who seem to have no identifiable view of the purpose or function of their involvement in social action. They do not seem to be interested in either learning, completing a project, or "having fun." Such students seem to pass through school mindlessly, without a sense of purpose, almost as if they were under anesthesia. The student appears to be in a state of suspension from involvement or choice. The function of social action (or probably any other activity) for such a student is only another context for hibernation.

In asking whether the social justification for one's involvement is compatible with personal motives, one might identify important contradictions. A student whose primary motive for involvement in an electoral campaign is to learn something about political process may shun routine clerical work, feeling that he could learn more if he participated in top level policy discussions with "the heavies." In this case pursuit of his personal motives might reduce chances of winning the election.

Personal motives might also be approached by examination of different roles of the activist. Some students are primarily concerned with helping others, often in a one-to-one relationship as in volunteer work in day care centers, homes for the elderly, tutoring programs, etc. These we might call the "good samaritans." Others are primarily interested in fighting for something of direct benefit to themselves: securing a bill or rights for students, developing citywide bike trails, trying to establish a Black Students' Union. Because these students have a more tangible self-interest in the outcome of their work, they can be called the "bested interest advocates." Finally there are students who work for broader social causes: achieving world peace, developing a rational city plan, diminishing pollution, improving police-community relations. These are issues in which the activist often does not appear to have an immediate tangible personal stake. Neither are such issues focused on helping a particular constituency. Activists in this category can be said to operate more in the role of "social planner" or "everyone's citizen" working for the betterment of the community at large.
We can ask about possible motivations underlying such roles. Might the effort to engage in one-to-one personal helping situations be an attempt to escape the conflict and complexity involved in vested interest advocacy? Might extensive involvement in vested interest advocacy reflect insensitivity to needs of others, or lack of willingness to concern oneself with the total community? Might the social planner orientation involve a desire to remain distant from the concrete, day-to-day needs of individual humans, and in some sense reveal a desire to control whole communities or institutions? These are just a few of the kinds of questions that might help a person view personal motives in the context of the social justification for his acts.

The point of distinguishing between personal motives and social justification is not to imply that one's action is less legitimate or contaminated if personal motives are attached to it. Quite the contrary. It is hoped that the attempt to exert influence in public affairs will bring joy, recreation, humor, intimacy, adventure and other personal benefits to the activist—benefits that may not be relevant to the public, rational justification for his policy aims. Alinsky (1971), for example, argues that it is important for the activist to have a good time, not simply from the point of view of individual benefit, but also in order to be effective in the struggle. He even claims that part of the reason for failures of radical new left elements was their lack of a sense of humor. Because one's personal motives and needs can serve to enhance or inhibit one's ability to exert influence in public affairs, it seems important to examine them explicitly, especially as they relate to the more public justification of one's efforts.

What are the implications for social studies curriculum of the various psycho-philosophic concerns raised thus far? There may be two tasks for curriculum depending upon the students' general needs. First there are those students who have difficulty in acting either because they seem never to have consciously considered these issues, or because they have resolved them in a way that inhibits their ability to exert influence; for example, the student who has "resolved" the commitment-openness dilemma by becoming so dogmatic that people "tune him out." For these students, the task of curriculum is to create materials, experiences, styles of interaction which encourage a student consciously to examine (or re-examine) such dilemmas, rather than to neglect them or resolve them in ways that prevent effective action. Second, there are students who have already become aware of some of these issues, and by struggling with them have become paralyzed by their inability to arrive at perfect solutions, for example, a student who refuses to participate in an environmental clean-up, because he claims it attacks only a symptom of the problem. He also refuses to participate in an effort to reform the economic system, which he calls the heart of the problem, because he feels that problem is too big and complex. Curriculum for these students will require materials, experiences, styles of interaction which not only help to define aspects of the dilemma, but which seek an admittedly imperfect resolution, and an acceptance of the possibility of deriving satisfaction from acting on the basis of those admittedly
imperfect resolutions. The extent to which curriculum on such concerns would emphasize psychological counseling, study of basic philosophical issues, further social research, etc., is a problem for future development.

I do not mean to suggest that these psycho-philosophic concerns are unique to the activist. They represent a number of more general problems of the human condition and could be seen as raising the most ultimate and complicated questions of developing a philosophy of life or a healthy psyche. Some might argue, therefore, that they cannot be resolved through the narrow educational aim of assisting students to exert influence in public affairs, because (A) we do not know enough to solve such problems, or (B) even if we did, we do not, as social studies teachers, have access to enough of the student's life to make an impact with regard to such fundamental issues. To the first point, I can only urge that through curriculum development and research we try to learn more about the definition and "successful" resolution of such issues. Second, if we believe that increasing student ability to exert influence should be a major objective, and if we are able to learn what kinds of curriculum and resources are required to assist students in this venture, then we must seek whatever additional resources (cooperation with parents, community organizations, teachers of other subjects, etc.) which seem necessary to make a significant impact.
References


