Seminar

Ethics, Politics and the Limits to Knowledge

by

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Abstract

The paper addresses some of the ethical dimensions that shape the relationships between ethics, politics and the production of qualitative social research knowledge. The argument is that questions of research ethics are inextricably bound up with those of politics, ideology and epistemology because the nature of social research is in part determined by political and ideological conditions creating environments favouring some modes of research and research questions (and answers) rather than others. These conditions are both structural and personal. This positionality, shaping researchers identities, also shapes their understanding, the ideological choices which confront them, and their capacity and competence as social researchers. They are thus limited in their capacity to know the social conditions of both their own and other people’s existences, identities and socio-biographies; and in their competence to analyse them. Ethics committees are similarly limited in their ability to assess the ethical dilemmas likely to arise in any actual research situation. The author illustrates her arguments with examples taken from her own research and with questions about hypothetical research situations wherein fundamental ethical issues might arise. She concludes that the scientific tradition of continuous critique and deconstruction is the only antidote to the inevitable ideological (already known) elements from which new knowledge is necessarily constructed.

Biographical Sketch

Pat Carlen BA, PhD is a sociologist who has published 19 books and many articles on criminal and social justice. She was co-founder of the UK campaigning group Women in Prison and from 2006 – 2013 Editor-in-Chief of the British Journal of Criminology. From 1976 – 1996 she worked at Keele University where she established a Department of Criminology, becoming the first Professor of Criminology at Keele in 1988. From 1996 - 2002 she was Professor of Sociology at Bath University. In 1997 she was awarded the American Society of Criminology’s Sellin-Glueck Prize for Outstanding International Contributions to Criminology, in 2010 the British Society of Criminology’s Award for Outstanding Achievement and in 2011 an honorary Doctorate of Laws from Lincoln University. Best known among her books are Magistrates’ Justice and Women’s Imprisonment. A short biographical chapter is to be found in Fifty Key Thinkers in Criminology (eds. K. Hayward, S. Maruna and J. Mooney, Routledge 2010). A collection of her selected works entitled A Criminological Imagination: Essays on Punishment, Justice, Discourse was published in Ashgate’s Pioneers in Contemporary Criminology Series in 2010. Presently co-editing with Leandro Ayres Franca an international criminology collection Alternative Criminologies to be published in Portuguese (2016) and English (2017).