

Irrelevance of Lived Experience to Liberal Study

by [Mark Mercer](#) (May 2021)



Masquerade, Grace Hartigan, 1954

Some researchers and teachers are members of the groups they study, other are not. I contend that membership is neither an

advantage nor a disadvantage. Incisive research on a group of people can come from both insiders and outsiders, and so can effective teaching.

A popular argument has it that scholars who are members of the people they study are typically in a better position to gain and communicate insights into the object of their investigations than are scholars who are not. This argument begins with the observation that insider scholars have shared the common experiences of the people under study—experiences, perhaps, of oppression, subordination or marginalization. They know what it is like to be one of the people they study, for they are one of them. Their embeddedness gives them an advantage over outsiders and, thus, tends to make their research stronger. While I accept the premise of this argument, I do not think the conclusion follows.

Decades ago, the popular argument was that scholars who are members of the people they study are typically in a worse position than are scholars who are not. This argument appeals to the claim that insiders will have sympathies and concerns for the group and its members that will distort their reading of the evidence. Outsiders to the group will be receptive to evidence from all directions and be inclined to weigh evidence accurately. Thus, outsiders have an advantage that tends to make their research stronger. Again, while I accept the premise of this argument, I do not think the conclusion follows.

If belonging to the group studied is neither here nor there, then group membership is not an academic ground on which to make academic decisions. Neither insider nor outsider status is an academic ground on which to decide who to hire. It is not an academic ground to figure in whether a professor is to be promoted or appointed to a chair, or whether his research is to be funded or he is otherwise to be favoured with resources. It is not an academic ground on which to

decide which scholar is to teach which course. It is not an academic ground on which to invite a scholar to give a lecture or to participate on a panel.

Liberal study

Group membership and the lived experience that might come with it is irrelevant academically, at least within liberal study, or so I will argue. What is this thing, liberal study?

Those engaged in liberal study are committed to understanding things as they are. To understand things as they are is to have a true theory of some aspect of the world or some range of phenomena. Theories are systems of propositions that can be used to describe what is going on, to explain it, and to predict and, sometimes, control it. An understanding will include generalizations as well as descriptions of concrete particulars, though those generalizations need not be law-like. Not all studies, of course, are heavily theoretical; some are interpretive, some appreciative. But I think "understanding things as they are" can be given a reading, not too forced, that covers understanding a poem, although getting a poem right isn't quite the same as getting the phylogeny of mammals right.

A person engaged in liberal study wants to understand the object she studies, wants to understand it as it is. And she wants to understand it as it is for the sake of understanding it as it is. This does not mean that she is indifferent to the usefulness or beauty of her understanding of it, or the power or prestige that might come to her as a result of her expressing her understanding. It does mean that the desire to understand it is sufficient to motivate her study. Even were she to suppose that that understanding would be useless in relieving suffering or sorrow and pointless from the perspective of her career or other concerns, she would still be keen to understand her object of study.

A person engaged in liberal study enjoys reading and thinking, writing and discussing, performing experiments and taking measurements, and everything else she judges necessary or useful in coming to understand things as they are. The liberal scholar is an active researcher.

It is important to the liberal scholar that she believes truly and values soundly. As I've said, she aims to create a true understanding of the object of her study. But it is not enough for her that she believes truly and values soundly. She wants also to believe and value only on the basis of her own good reasons. Indeed, she would rather hold a false theory on the basis of evidence and reasons that she accepts than hold a true theory because of social pressures or whatever other causes affect her thoughts and emotions.

People are remarkably subject to desires for belonging and fears of being excluded. Even their mental lives are easily and strongly influenced by social and other pressures. That one will be ostracized for believing something or valuing something can be a powerful cause of one's not believing or valuing it, even in the face of solid evidence in favour of it. That the attractive people will honour one for believing something or valuing something can also be a powerful cause of one's mental states, though maybe not as powerful as the fear of ostracism. It is pressures to believe and value coming from sources other than evidence and argument that the liberal scholar seeks to avoid, or at least to ignore. These pressures can corrupt the project of liberal study.

Alongside believing truly and valuing soundly, then, or maybe even on the self above them, is independent thought. A scholar is not a liberal scholar if believing truly and valuing soundly matters more to her than believing and valuing for one's own reasons of evidence and argument.

In teaching, liberal study consists in helping others to acquire the ability to fashion understandings of things as

they are, and to fashion them on the basis of evidence and argument alone.

Institutions of liberal study will of necessity be places of wide freedom of expression. Only by protecting freedom of expression can an institution avoid placing pressures to believe or value certain things on the scholars and their students within the institution. For a liberal scholar, scholarship, both research and teaching, is disputatious and ludic.

Group Membership and Lived Experience

By virtue of their lived experience, scholars who are members of the groups they study will almost invariably produce better scholarship or be better teachers than other scholars. They will produce better scholarship because they will bring new topics or new considerations to the table, or provide new perspectives on old topics, or because their evidence will be more subtle or comprehensive.

I reject the above argument, but if its conclusion is true, then group membership would be a decent predictor of academic ability. It is a further step, though, to say that because group membership is a decent predictor of academic ability, it should be used in making academic decisions. While there's no harm in making a prediction on the basis of group membership, we should not be so lazy that we don't bother checking our prediction against the work itself. To discover academic ability, we need to appraise the scholar's work, not the likelihood of the scholar producing good work.

Now the contention that lived experience makes for better scholarship is not so crude as to imply that any work by a scholar belonging to the group will be superior to any work by a scholar not belonging to the group. But it must at least imply that scholars who belong to the group can be expected to produce work more original or insightful (or more

original while being no less insightful) than scholars who don't.

A scholar possessed of the lived experience of the group knows what it is like to be a member of that group. This knowledge, in turn, provides the scholar with an understanding of the beliefs and values common to members of the group. From this understanding, the scholar can articulate insights into the life and ways of the group that are not available to the outside observer, no matter how sympathetic that observer is, how much experience with the group she has or how rich her observations are.

This argument fails not because lived experience or knowing what it is like to be a member of the group does not generate ideas that might be true or useful in a scholar's understanding of the people under study. It does. The argument fails, rather, because lived experience or what's it like to be a member of the group is simply raw material for the scholar. The claims the scholar makes on the basis of her lived experience must be evaluated and incorporated in a theory of the people under study. If they are not evaluated, they are not believed on the basis of evidence or argument; if they are not brought together with other ideas, they remain inchoate, inarticulate. The point here is that the deliverances of lived experience are, for the scholar herself as well as for scholars not members of the group, part of the subject matter of scholarship; they are not themselves instances or products of scholarship.

To gain a scholar's understanding, a person engaged in liberal study must reflect critically on lived experiences, his own and others. The better scholar, the more insightful or comprehensive or incisive scholar, is the one who makes the best scholarly use of the deliverances of lived experience.

One might object to my position on the grounds that it rests on the view that understanding is theoretical or

linguistic. A person's lived experience is not a theory, the objector would remind me; it is not even, primarily, a set of cognitive states. But it may well nonetheless contain an understanding of how things are. The scholar who has this lived experience possesses that understanding, and only a scholar who has that lived experience can possess it. Possessing this visceral though inarticulate understanding provides a strong basis for constructing a scholar's articulate understanding. And that is why having lived experience makes for good scholarship.

Yet even if we grant that lived experience contains a pre- or non-verbal understanding of how something is, my argument stands. A pre- or non-verbal understanding is not a scholarly understanding but simply material to be critically evaluated and used in constructing a scholar's understanding. Indeed, it is not lived experience against which theories can be falsified or verified, but only against judgements regarding lived experience. Scholarship consists in articulated ideas and judgements about them while lived experience, whatever it might be, is inarticulate and unsystematized.

I concede nothing to the objector if I add that psychological, historical, sociological and anthropological understanding requires lived experience and its deliverances. Scholars in the human and social sciences would have nothing to theorize about or to understand in the absence of lived experience. Lived experience is important to scholarship about humans, just as suns and planets are important to astronomy.

What about teaching? Perhaps a teacher who belongs to the group about which she teaches will be better able to communicate the experiences of those people to her students. That might be true, although with imagination and empathy an outsider could also do an excellent job. A better response to this concern about teaching, though, would note that a scholar's task is not to communicate experiences, but instead

to communicate understandings of experiences, understandings with which the students might then engage critically.

Outsider Advantage

Having lived experience gives the insider no advantage as a scholar, but neither does being an outsider. Being an outsider might be thought to give a scholar an advantage, for the outsider will not be tempted, consciously or subconsciously, to downplay evidence that goes against her preferred view or to exaggerate evidence that favours it. The insider, on the other hand, cares that her people flourish (let's suppose), and this care could easily distort her thinking and her research.

The observation is true, but, importantly, it is hedged with "mights" and "coulds". The insider scholar could lose her dispassionate attitude and might be partial to the plight and aspirations of her people in such a way as to produce propaganda rather than scholarship. We are, though, considering the liberal scholar, one who is passionate about understanding things dispassionately. Now, it is no easy thing to acquire the habit of dispassionate investigation and teaching. But for a scholar passionately dispassionate, that passion might well compete effectively with whatever other passions move her. There is no general reason to think that a person's desire to engage the world as a liberal scholar will lose out to any other of her desires.

My claim here is not about objectivity or value-free inquiry. Indeed, liberal study is itself something one either values or doesn't, and if one values it, one values it above or below other things one values. As well, what we value sets our projects for us. A concern for justice might well direct one's scholarly endeavours into particular areas rather than others. That a scholar focuses on the dispossessed or the marginalized might have everything to do with that scholar's lived experience (actually, with her interpretation of it).

Nothing I have said implies that a scholar's engagement in a particular field of scholarship cannot or should not rest on a deep concern for justice or flourishing.

Liberal study is not corrupted by its results being put to use. A liberal scholar might properly hope and even expect that her work will have beneficial consequences for people—for all people or for a particular group of people.

There are parallels with teaching. A liberal scholar teaches not in order to improve the moral character of her students or to instil in them a concern for justice or the good. She teaches simply in order to involve her students in liberal study. Students are apprentice liberal scholars, and the teacher wants to help them to become master liberal scholars. Yet a teacher might hope and even reasonably expect that in becoming master liberal scholars they will become good citizens motivated by a sense of justice. She can hope and expect this, though, only if she believes, on good evidence, that there is a connection between competence in liberal study and good citizenship. If she believes that competent liberal scholars tend to be good citizens, then she may see her teaching as creating good citizens. But her commitment as a teacher must be only to helping students become competent scholars. To try to make her students into good citizens would be to attempt to indoctrinate them into certain beliefs and values. Since indoctrination bypasses the subject's own reasons of evidence and argument, indoctrination—and, thereby, the project of educating for citizenship or justice—is a betrayal of liberal study.

Academic Grounds

The only way to judge a scholar is by judging her scholarship—her research and teaching. When we need to judge a scholar, for the purposes of hiring, promotion, assigning courses, distributing scarce resources and the like, all we can have to go on is our judgement of her work. Anything else

is extraneous, even if there are strong correlations between good scholarship and something else (such as possessing lived experience or not being a member of the group in question). Any correlation we find might turn out to be explanatory, certainly. That is, we might find that scholars who possess the lived experience of the people they study produce insightful scholarship because they possess that lived experience. Yet in our evaluation, only the scholarship is relevant. If we think otherwise, we are wrongly taking a cause for an effect or a symptom for a criterion.

If we are committed to liberal study, we will judge on academic grounds alone, and ignore everything extraneous to those grounds.

Against Liberal Study

I've argued that group membership and lived experience are irrelevant to liberal study. A scholar's background should be to institutions of liberal study a matter of indifference. No academic decision affecting a scholar should take account of that scholar's affinities—natural, compelled or elective.

But what's so great about liberal study that we should have public institutions dedicated to it, institutions funded by tax dollars? Well, first, it's not clear that we in Canada today have any institutions dedicated to liberal study, public or private. Many universities are hostile to liberal study and liberal scholars in any contemporary university make up a small minority of the teaching and research staff. Contemporary universities are organized around job training, preparing a professional and managerial elite, instilling proper attitudes toward such things as equity, diversity, inclusion, the economy and the environment, and producing socially useful research. A university organized around one or another of these ends would not be concerned to protect or promote liberal study. Non-academic grounds might be the appropriate grounds on which to make decisions at such

universities. And, so, arguments that students from minority groups appreciate having minority-group professors might be appropriate in such institutions. The ethnicity or lived experience of the professor or applicant could be entirely relevant to the purpose of an institution outside liberal study.

Indeed, liberal study might, according to those who favour the post-academic university, be more trouble than it is worth. A history professor at my university opined in conversation that independent thought is greatly overrated. Better, he suggested, that our students believe truly and value soundly as a result of social pressures than that they believe falsely or value unsoundly for their own articulate and examined reasons. The thoughtful racist is much more dangerous than the fearful, know-nothing social justice warrior. Cancel culture can be brutal, but it gets an important job done.

If you are a partisan of liberal study, you are not offended by these sentiments. That is because nothing offends you. Offence, being a second-hand emotion (offense is not directed at states of affairs in the world but at people's attitudes towards states of affairs), is foreign to the intellectual temperament. You are not offended by these sentiments, but you do want to understand them, and to appreciate the reasons possible both for and against having them. That is because your commitment to liberal study will rest on having a good critical response to them.

[Table of Contents](#)

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