

Some Ruminations on the SDS Retreat

Steve Brown

I read with interest the articles on the future of SDS printed in the January 1999 issue of the *Quarterly*. Each poked some kind of memory, response, or emotion. Some I agreed with; some I did not. That is not such a shock. Many did not agree with each other. I have not been to an SDS meeting in several years. I have wanted to go, but have not had the funding to do so. I have been asked a couple of times to run for the SDS Board. I declined, because I had no sponsorship to get me to meetings. And in a final example of how personal funding issues have impacted my own involvement, I just had to make a choice: to continue membership in SDS or to continue to subscribe to *DSQ*. I chose the latter. Why? From which do I benefit more?

I am so tired of talking to people of lack of funding. If you ever visit our house (or if you have been here already) you know that we have very nice living quarters with a house full of material things. What we do not have is a steady income. That has been our choice. We made a conscious decision to focus on promoting a concept - disability culture - in which we believed and which we were committed to seeing become a part of the everyday landscape of our culture. And it has. And we have been amply rewarded (well, not amply enough, but who ever is?) for our efforts.

We do not attend SDS meetings (and those of other organizations) because unlike just about every person who wrote in the most recent *DSQ* we have no sponsorship to attend these meetings. No university, CIL, or other organization to pay our way. How many of you would attend these meetings if you had to pay your own way?

I have kept the above paragraphs intact because that was indeed my reaction when I wrote those words. David Pfeiffer, however, responded to me that: "most SDS members are academics who receive funding to attend. Not all, however, are funded. I am surprised at how many are not. They pay all, or in my case part, of their expenses themselves. Having been a member of the Board for a decade I know that we have often discussed how we could obtain funding for many others to attend. No foundation funds people to attend conferences like SDS. We are still searching."

I do not doubt that David's assessment of the situation is accurate. And what that means in my particular case is that unlike others I have chosen to prioritize something else. Again the question to ask is why? I think David also responded to that: "SDS is a specific function organization. Its specific function is to provide a place where people studying disability (especially people with disabilities studying disability) can present the result of their research. Most people who research disability are academics..."

I am not sure all of SDS would agree with David's statement. In fact, I would say from my reading of the SDS retreat comments that there would be some vociferous disagreement with parts of his comments. I want to address the last sentence. I am not at all convinced that most people who research disability are academics. I do not doubt that most people funded by traditional organizations to do such research are academics. However if we use any of the definitions of research I just looked up in my dictionary - 1. careful or diligent search; 2. studious inquiry or examination, especially aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revisions of accepted theories or practical application of such theories, and 3. collecting information about a particular subject - I think we would find as many, if not more, non-academics conducting research. They will not, however, be likely to be found at SDS meetings or in *DSQ* publications. More likely they are to be found on the internet or in newsletters and disability publications like the *Ragged Edge and Mouth* or never reporting at all on their research, but simply going about the business of conducting it for their own pleasure. So, what can we do? I sense a research project here. How are theories about disability being developed? Who

is suggesting these theories? Promoting them? Being credited for them? An academic might get funding to do this research and then report on it at an SDS Conference.

The retreat articles included a lot of discussion about research and advocacy, people with disabilities and those without (enough said by me on this subject); and quality of scholarship.

One of the things I heard when I arrived at the World Institute on Disability in 1990 was that WID had not been taken seriously because we were advocates. I do not know when advocacy got such a bad rap in scholarship. When people in the Middle Ages were ostracized and killed because they advocated innovative ways of looking at the universe (like the earth is round and revolves around the sun) or later when an innovative physician was ridiculed when advocating the revolutionary notion that doctors wash their hands before working on patients or maybe when advocates for integration and against the Vietnamese war changed the landscape of American universities? It has never made sense to me. Maybe that's because when I was in graduate school it was drummed into me that everyone has an agenda. The issue I learned was never that we did not have agendas, but to recognize, acknowledge and use our own biases and preconceptions.

Again, David responds: "SDS consists mainly of scholars who are also advocates, although many of them keep quiet on their advocacy when around non-disabled academics. Many of us also steadfastly state that advocacy and scholarship must both happen. We point out, as you said, that everyone has an agenda. It is not a popular thing to say, but it is true. The only people I know who disregard the scholarship of advocates are the federal agencies (who also are a main source of funding)."

I have no argument with this commentary. Just two questions and a final commentary: 1. Why are we so scared of non-disabled academics (if indeed this is the case)? Do not we realize that part of keeping quiet is meeting their own advocacy agenda of maintaining things as they are? and 2. why are we not advocating (or what are doing to advocate) with the federal agencies to recognize the reality of scholar-advocates (or advocate-scholars) and the potential exemplary quality of our work?

Everyone knows that I am an advocate of disability culture and disability rights. I do not know how many people also know that I am trained as a historian. Only because of the juxtaposition of a glut of trained historians in the early 1980s and an encounter with personal employment discrimination did I end up in the advocacy world. Did being a good historian mean I could not be an advocate? Does being an advocate mean I cannot be a good historian? I do not think so. But it does mean that I may use what I learn in both areas to support one another. It may mean that because of my historical knowledge I can with very little effort become a passionate opponent of assisted suicide. Despite my own strong views on the topic, I can still recognize that someone else with the same knowledge may become a proponent of assisted suicide. Does that make either of us bad historians? Not from that set of facts alone. Research, advocacy, and scholarship are not contradictory in and of themselves. Perhaps those who continue to believe that they are could look again at their own agendas?

Like disability culture itself there is one other huge problem with resisting advocates who are scholars or scholars who are advocates. We are here. More of us are being generated all the time. The question is not should we be here, but how can we benefit the organization and each other?

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