

(Draft for discussion)

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN BLACK STUDIES

(Brief comments on outline for final report)

I. Introduction

The introduction should point out how the leadership of the Black Studies movement, after ten years, has been consolidated in the formation of the National Council for Black Studies. The National Council for Black Studies was organized so that the Black Studies movement might have greater political clout, while at the same time having the basis to pay systematic attention to the fundamental intellectual issues. The first major report was the National Curriculum Committee report, and it is our general agreement on a core curriculum that provided the basis for establishing the Committee on Methods. This introduction should end with a quote from the minutes of the July 1980 meeting of the National Board, by which the Board established the Committee and its composition.

2. Why is method important?

There are at least three major reasons why method is important:

(a) Black Studies is interdisciplinary, so that within it knowledge takes different forms: for example, the type of knowledge presented in the Social Sciences vs. knowledge as presented and developed in the Humanities. Hence, there is a need to generalize a discussion of epistemology, research technique and method so that (overall) Black Studies

might (self-consciously) move closer to being a coherent body of knowledge, one which is not limited to the traditional disciplines.

(b) The method employed in a study is inseparable from the content (subject and results) of that study so that when we discuss a study of the Black experience it is necessary to focus on its content as well as the method by which the analysis was carried out. Of course, this is true whether it's Styron's analysis of Nat Turner, or Fogel and Engerman's analysis of slavery.

(c) Method is important because it is more useful, possibly even more generalizable at any given moment than the substantive knowledge at that time in Black Studies because it is always a guide to practice, that is to say, it guides the scholar in uncovering the past toward the overthrow of old knowledge, and the simultaneous development of new knowledge. One might in fact argue that while the initial success of a student with a Black Studies background will be a function of what they learn about the Black experience in the present and the past, but in the long run it is the methodology implicit in that body of knowledge that the student will need to move from the present into the future and therefore, in the long run, it very well may be that the student's grasp of method will prove to be more decisive. Therefore, method in Black Studies is an issue of considerable importance.

(d) Method is important because Black Studies is a collective enterprise, and as such there must be rules that govern and guide the collective process (team research, replication of research, continuation of research, etc.).

3. Basic Philosophical Issues

In dealing with the general question of method and methodology in Black Studies, there are essentially four basic philosophical issues:

(a) Values and objectivity: or, what is real? We should reference the general discussion of objectivity undertaken by Max Weber, and the more recent discussion of this in the general debate over the subjective factor in understanding Black reality.

(b) Patterns of discovery: or, how do we study what is real? Here, we're interested in both the notion that one must be a detached observer (or a classical participant observer), where you are detached from the local situation, though being in physical proximity to it and therefore, able to observe it. A good example of this would be Gunnar Myrdal being chosen to do the American dilemma study because of his being Swedish and therefore being detached from the local situation. The second approach to this question of patterns of discovery is being "involved", and a good example of this is the discussion by Kenneth Clark in the introduction to his Dark Ghetto, where he contrasts being a participant observer with an involved observer.

(c) Verification: or, how do we prove what we believe? Here, the fundamental question is how do we approach the question of truth and the question of how do we prove what is true?

(d) Modes of explanation: or, how do we convince others of our proof and to agree with our pattern of discovery about what we consider to be real? Here, we are dealing with the question of the logical presentation of evidence. It's the literary legitimacy of the explanation as supported

by documentation, meaning footnotes, and, last, emotional, or normative claims made on the reader to believe, based upon what is morally and politically correct.

The basic philosophical issues in method have to do with, first, defining a set of terms, second, developing a logical set of propositions that constitute one's assumptions, or one's point of departure, and third, establishing the basis for operationalizing these abstract concepts and propositions such that they are applicable to the empirical analysis of data and subject to principles of utility.

4. The Critical Factor

One of the main aspects of method in Black Studies is the extent to which Black Studies is critical, that is, the extent to which Black Studies establishes its legitimacy by challenging the prevalent notions that exist. This critical factor is fundamental and particular to Black Studies for two reasons (of course, it should be noted here that all disciplines and all areas of study require a critical stance because indeed it is only by being critical that old knowledge, or incorrect knowledge, is repudiated and new knowledge is created. That is to say, in every case new knowledge emerges in opposition to old, or correct ideas emerge and develop their existence in opposition to incorrect ideas.) The first factor is that of scientific-academic racism. Here, Black Studies emerges in opposition to White Studies, so that because of errors of omission, leaving Black people out, errors of commission, consciously or unconsciously distorting information about the Black experience, must

be combatted, and therefore, Black Studies emerges as necessarily critical because it must repudiate White Studies. And secondly, within this, is that Black Studies is one of the intellectual arms of the Black Liberation Movement. We make prescriptions about how to change the society, that is to say, establish the basis for normative statements about the political experience of Black people in the present future, by virtue of studying the present past political reality of Black people in making scientific descriptive and analytical statements about that. So, in sum, Black Studies is critical because it must not only defend Black people against racist knowledge, but it must also arm Black people with knowledge that it can implement in practice toward achieving the goals of the Black Liberation Movement.

5. The Technical Factor

In the context of Black Studies, there are three major technical issues. First, there is the question of library skills for developing techniques to access the products of Black intellectual history. This is critical because many of the standard tools for literature searches do not include those sources of information created by Black intellectuals. It is necessary, therefore, to become aware of Black reference tools, to become aware of Black special collections of a national, regional, and local scope and to develop lists of key informants who are specially skilled at and/or knowledgeable about sources of information. Second, the technique of oral history. Here, we have at least three main aspects of accessing information about the Black experience which has not been written down and which is not

being collected in the context of a standardized survey questionnaire instrument. These aspects are: (a) the style of interacting with people such that people feel at ease, open up, begin to report the world and their experience as they think of it themselves, as opposed to the way they consciously shape it to someone who they don't want to be completely open and honest with. The second aspect of that is the grasp of language. Here, we're talking about dialect, as well as other languages that, as far as Afro-Americans are concerned, are relevant. For example, the French of Haiti, the Spanish of Cuba, the Dutch of former Dutch Guyana, the Portuguese of Brazil, etc. And, last, the issue of quantification, the use of statistics and machines, meaning computers, for the analysis of aggregated data that can be quantified. So much of the data that at least has been collected by governments and large bureaucratic organizations is to be analyzed in this form and, therefore, one of the techniques that must be mastered within Black Studies is the techniques of statistical analysis.

6. The Disciplinary Factor

Here, we've got to take up a discussion of how each discipline is concerned with method, though we also can talk about how, in fact, method, in the academic organization of the university, often comes down around the method of the social sciences and method in the Humanities. However, we should also be mindful of the fact that there are methodological principles and techniques that can and do cut across the boundary between the social sciences and the Humanities. An example of this, of course, is

the way in which the computer is being used for content analysis to assist in research with literary materials. And likewise, much of the logical and formal and theoretical textual analysis coming from, say, literature and how that is being used in the social sciences as well. The main point here is how method fits into the disciplines. We should also talk about how, increasingly, disciplines are not sharply walled off from each other, but rather more and more are characterized by inner penetration and overlap. This, of course, brings the interdisciplinary character of Black Studies to the fore. We've got to discuss this question of how method can be coherently discussed and developed in the context of an interdisciplinary area of study.

7. The Political Factor

Here, we have to deal with the question of how and why it is that Black Studies must have a method that includes style of work and that the style of work of Black Studies inside the current organization of the university and the current structure and process of the U.S. society must be decidedly political. That is, people must always be prepared to struggle politically in a university and in the society when logic and fact are not sufficient for change. We might discuss some of DuBois' commentary here in his essay "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom", printed in Rayford Logan's edited volume What the Negro Wants.

8. Recommendations for Action

Here, after discussing the many aspects of method and giving as many

concrete examples, or at least references to concrete examples undertaken by Black Studies scholars, it is going to be necessary to develop specific and a limited amount of recommendations for action. For example, we might very well recommend that Black Studies majors be encouraged to take one of several sequences of methodological courses, and of course this would include either the straight social science and/or Humanities type method courses. Secondly, we might recommend that attention be paid in every existing Black Studies course to method in the works used as texts. An example of this might be Frazier's work on the Black family, or Blassingame's use of the slave narratives, or Carter G. Woodson's use of documentary sources, etc. Third, another recommendation for action might very well call for nationally organized workshops in basic methodological issues in Black Studies, so that people who are skilled might begin to disseminate the information and skill that they have, for example, on the question of oral history, or, for example, in relationship to doing literature searches for material out of Black intellectual history, etc.