

RESPONSE TO PHIL HODKINSON

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British Journal of Educational Psychology, vol. 72, part 3, September 2002, pp. 452-453

I agree with Phil Hodkinson on two points concerning his thoughtful criticisms of *Making Social Science Matter*, and I disagree on another two points. Hodkinson is right in saying there is a risk with the book that rather than transcending the Science Wars, it may contribute to one side in the struggle within the social sciences between those who still believe in the possibility of a social science modelled after natural science, and those who do not. But this is a risk that cannot be avoided, in my analysis, although it can be mitigated. I have attempted such mitigation by placing the book's emphasis on empowering social science as such vis-à-vis natural science, instead of on empowering a certain type of social science against other types within the social sciences. Hodkinson is also correct in his important insight that the 'anything goes' type of relativism is a bogeyman, something we need not waste our time fighting. Nevertheless, we may need to spend time convincing other researchers that this is the case, because not everyone sees the phantom as clearly for what it is as does Hodkinson.

My first point of disagreement with Hodkinson is his claim that I use the term relativism in two different ways in the book. This is not the case. I use the terms perspectivism and contextualism instead of relativism when I talk about what Hodkinson calls 'non-foundational' relativism; and I do not see perspectivism and contextualism as truly relativistic. However, *if* we choose, as some do, to name as relativistic actions and writings that are done from a position, then perspectivism and contextualism must be called relativism. But then any human action or writing must be called relativistic. I make a point of this distinction in the book and did not intend to be understood as saying there are two types of relativism. Given Hodkinson's interpretation of what I say, obviously I have not expressed myself with sufficient clarity. To be clear, I prefer to reserve the term relativism for Hodkinson's bogeyman, what he calls 'total relativism' or 'anything goes', and I associate this type of relativism with nihilism.

My second point of disagreement lies in Hodkinson's understanding of validity claims. Hodkinson finds curious my claim that the better of two alternative interpretations in phronetic research can only be established on the basis of validity claims. This claim contradicts, says Hodkinson, my claim that the discourses in which results of phronetic research are used have no special status compared to other dialogical discourses. There is only a contradiction here, however, if you believe that using the term 'validity claim' requires 'a secure foundation', in Hodkinson's words, upon which 'validity claims can themselves be validated' and 'infinite regress' be stopped. Hodkinson somewhat surprisingly seems to believe this. If that is the case, this is the type of objectivism I argue against in *Making Social Science Matter*, because a secure foundation for validating validity claims has not yet been found in social science and philosophy, despite centuries of attempts.

In phronetic research the understanding of validity claims is hermeneutic, not objectivistic. Thus I relate validity claims to interpretation and I oppose the view that any one among a number of interpretations lacks value because it is “merely” an interpretation. The key point here is the establishment of a *better* alternative, where “better” is defined according to sets of non-foundational validity claims. If a better interpretation demonstrates the previous interpretation to be “merely” interpretation, this new interpretation remains valid until another, still better interpretation is produced which can reduce the previous interpretation to “merely” interpretation. And so on.

This is the procedure which a community of social scientists would follow in working together to put certain interpretations of social life ahead of others. Again, this procedure describes not a relativistic approach. Rather, it sets forth the basic ground rules for any social inquiry, since, as said, final grounding of validity cannot be made. It is in this sense the results of phronetic research, or other social science research, have no special discursive status in social dialogue. The results count as arguments like any other. If and when social scientists' arguments carry special weight it is because social scientists are often allowed to spend more time and diligence in establishing their validity claims than are other social actors, not because social scientists have access to a special type of validity claim. We are talking about a difference in degree, not in kind. In my interpretation, this is the reality of social science, although some social scientists act as if validity claims can and should be given final grounding. The burden of proof is on them. By substituting *phronesis* for *episteme* I have attempted to develop a social science which avoids this burden, impossible as it seems to lift.