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Jorge Baxter (JB) interview with Dr. Judith-Torney Purta (JTP)

JB: Can you summarize for our readers some of the big research questions that you have asked over the years? How have these questions been satisfactorily answered in your mind?

JTP: It's a big order because I've quite a few years to summarize. I started working on this area in 1961. I was offered a job as a research assistant on an interdisciplinary project which combined Psychology and Political Science at the University of Chicago. That was the first of my many attempts to do interdisciplinary work, which is still extremely difficult. Some of the questions that we began to answer are still only partially answered. That said, I still find myself trying to convince people all the time that we do have answers to some questions.

The first question is the age at which it begins to be sensible to talk to young people about political issues or civic engagement (I will use these terms interchangeably). In those days, we were questioning second to eighth graders. We asked them questions about the President, about policemen, about the laws of the country. These were fairly simple questions and the students gave quite sensible answers. We interviewed them before developing a questionnaire. Without knowing it, we were doing what is now called multi-methods studies. We discovered that it was quite reasonable to ask them questions as long as you didn't ask them about ideological positions, about which they had no ideas. They knew or thought they knew quite a lot about the President. Some of the second graders had rather bizarre ideas of the Statue of Liberty; for example, they said that it was a man and that if we took him away there wouldn't be any liberty anymore. So they had some creative ideas about these things; but by the time they were in the eighth grade, their attitudes and beliefs didn't look all that different from those of their teachers.

I still find myself needing to justify to others the importance of working on these issues with younger children. In the IEA Civic Education Study we decided to test 14-year-olds, and it was a quite pragmatic decision.[1] The reason was that after the age of 14, countries moved away from compulsory education. To test a representative sample of young people in schools you had to test 14-year-olds. But I still go to meetings of rather informed people in this field and I hear comments like this, "You can't ask 14-year-olds those questions, we should be asking 18-year-olds." Well perhaps you should ask 18-year-olds these questions but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be asking 14-year-olds also.

Not many people have recently studied younger children. Kent Jennings, who is now a professor of Political Science at Santa Barbara, was another one of the pioneers in political socialization studies. He has said recently that we ought to go back to studying childhood. I thought this was very interesting given that he studied secondary students, whom he has followed from the 1960s to the present. Usually it is hard to convince political scientists that much important happens before age 18, while psychologists want to study children under the age of 10. Differing assumptions like that are

among the reasons that interdisciplinary groups fail to come together.

I think that Latin America may be more open to testing children because the average age of those leaving school is earlier. If you are going to try to make what is going to happen in schools effective, you have to talk about educating students who are 10 and younger. You can't say, "We will wait until they are in secondary school to teach them about politics and civics." I think one of the researchers who has done some interesting work on this issue in Latin America is Eleonora Villegas-Reimers. In short, the age question is open, but I'm always interested to see this back on the agendas of political scientists.

A second interesting problem is how it is possible for people in one regional setting to understand citizenship formation processes in other regional settings. How is it possible to collaborate? This isn't just a technical problem. This is a research process problem. How is it possible to collaborate when people are coming from such different situations and settings? How is it possible to lead a study in a way that makes it clear that you really want collaboration among equals?

I am reminded of what happened in the IEA CIVED study in about 1993 or 1994. We had our first meeting of national representatives. There were about 14 or 15 countries coming together. Some of the Eastern Europeans came into the meeting and said, "We want to talk to you about this study. We think you are just coming here to show that we don't know what we are doing. We think democratic education is important but you are not going to tell us what to do. You are unqualified to tell us what to do." At that particular time there was really no guidance from studies of internationally collaborative projects. I said to them, "Well, you know we haven't taken any money for this project yet. We haven't solicited any grants yet. We have just enough money from IEA to get us together in the Netherlands to have this meeting. I do not have any test items in my back pocket that I plan to force on you. We came here to construct a framework for this study collaboratively. If after we meet for two days we can get a consensus about what that might be, it's great! If we can't agree on some basic ideas, we can say nice to meet you and goodbye." We left that meeting with more agreement than disagreement, and by the next meeting a year later we had managed to build up more trust. We began to communicate a sense that the people on the steering committee, which was multinational, were trying to listen to what everyone said.

We asked the 24 National Research Coordinators to write 24 case studies structured around a common outline. These are not thick descriptive ethnographic studies, but they were attempts to look, in an organized way, at what was going on in civic education in these countries. Once we started on training in focus group methods and on the interviewing of experts to help them do these case studies, the research coordinators began to see areas of commonality across countries. As soon as they began to see that the group and the steering committee were going to listen to them, they started to want to get their country involved. I think that was one of our biggest successes.

In 2008, the National Academy of Sciences put out a report on international collaborations. As part of the preparation I did a survey of 26 psychologists who were involved in international collaboration projects. That report concluded something that was parallel to our experience; researchers can't parachute in to collect data in a country and then leave.

JB: Yes, this is so important. There is an ethical and human dimension to international cooperation or collaboration that is so easily

brushed aside by the immediate demands of donors and projects. I think this is especially relevant for those of us who work in international organizations, development agencies, or even centralized ministries.

JTP: That's right. CIVED was a large project, in 29 countries. But we learned in this survey that something similar can happen in projects with two or three countries as well. Researchers from the United States came in and said, "Well, I have this scale and you ought to translate it and use it." Some people in the survey reported that this happened, but behind the scenes the project would often not work out very well. The local researchers would either present data that they thought would please the outsiders, or they would move very slowly. They had a lot of strategies to ensure that their own image of themselves as experts in their countries was being preserved. In my opinion, every participant in an international project has the right to expect respect for their ideas and skills. And they have the right to expect benefits, whether it is enhanced competence in a method or insight into a problem that they hadn't considered before.

JB: Do you think that some of the skepticism about the motives, purposes, and usefulness of international assessment has changed over time in countries?

JTP: Yes, but you have to work hard to make that happen. IEA is doing another civic education study (ICCS). It's being run in Australia by a very good team. I think they have more countries than the last study. A very positive feature of this study is regional modules in addition to the main study. This includes a module for Latin America. Some but not all of the Eastern European countries are participating. Some who are not participating feel that they learned from the first study as much as they needed to. There is also a relatively small amount of funds available in this subject area in many countries because this is not such a high profile topic.

But in general, I think the CIVED 1999 study has been thought of as raising the bar about how collaborative studies are done. TIMSS[2] is an institution in which every two or three years they are collecting more data. That's a very different type of model. They don't want to change what they have done in the past. They want a trend analysis every few years. With our civics study we have a 10-year cycle and I think that's fine. I wouldn't want to be in a situation where we were always constructing the next instrument before we did adequate analysis of data from the one before. So I think it's fine to be on a 10-year cycle.

IEA celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008. The organization has well-established technical committees that look at the instruments. They have committees that consult with national research coordinators about the samples. As a result, you have strong methods and strong data. I happen to think that CIVED 1999 is especially good because it was collaborative and also because of its potential for secondary analysis. We don't just have knowledge items; we have a variety of attitudinal and concept items that students in nearly 30 countries answered. There are an infinite number of PhD dissertations in that data set (and the data are in ICPSR at Michigan). In fact, we just won IEA's award for secondary analysis, and we were in competition with TIMSS and PIRLs.[3] I believe that our dataset is richer for that kind of secondary analysis than the others.

JB: You have been highlighting the potential research usages of the IEA Civic Study, but what about the potential for these studies to inform policy and practice? What's needed so that policymakers or even practitioners incorporate

the results of these studies into policy or into practice? From where we are situated at the OAS, we often see a big gap between the worlds of research, policy, and practice.

JTP: Some of the policy implications we have already mentioned; that is, at what age should civic education begin. And some work I did with the Educational Commission of the States (ECS)[4] also emphasized this, as well as how to build good measures in this area. Secondly, good civic education doesn't have to be big "P" political; in other words, it doesn't have to deal with candidates, parties, and elections. This area has a lot to do with support for the regime, or ways of being resistant to the regime, with understanding legal and political systems, and not just who is elected. But to answer your question, I think that a way to make this work more relevant for policy and practice is to do more with the teachers – what they know, believe in, and have confidence in discussing. We have some evidence from secondary analysis of our data that this sense of confidence makes a big difference. In the USA and other countries, it isn't just what teachers know, but what they feel they are able to present in a way that their students will understand. Do they feel that they are sufficiently mastering not only the content but the techniques to deliver the content? That's why what is going on at the OAS at present is important. At the OAS, you are trying to do that in a more in-depth way, so that some of those educators have that kind of experience. And it is also important to work with administrators because their support is needed. We also have to be concerned not just for the content of the curriculum but for the climate of the school and classroom. What students see in the schools and the way the students react to each other and whether there is intolerance makes a difference. It is not just a question of learning the branches of government, how a law is passed, etc. The climate of the school and whether students think they belong are crucial.

JB: I imagine there are unique methodological challenges to researching and implementing these other dimensions of civic education across cultural contexts?

JTP: Yes, the issues depend on the different outcomes. Some educators are interested in voting, some in service-learning and volunteering. Not all of these terms have clear meanings across countries. But the idea that if you foster interest in one of these things you are fostering interest in the others is not the case. Saying that volunteering in the homeless shelter passing out sandwiches is the same as passing out a petition for a law being debated in Congress is simply not true. So the question becomes how to make the former more political, that is, how to make the homeless shelter experience more relevant to policy. The student should begin to ask why all these people are homeless.

JB: Our understanding of political socialization has been enriched by interdisciplinary approaches to research. If you look at all of these as a whole, where do you see the biggest gaps in terms of knowledge? Let me put the question another way. If you had an infinite amount of money and could put an army of researchers together, where would you focus your attention?

JTP: I think we don't know enough about the new media and how this will reshape this process of political socialization (see Lance Bennett's work, for example). Also, the whole idea of climate in the classroom and the school is important and hard to define. Because I am a developmental psychologist, I look at the theories in this area. One of those is Lave and Wenger's social theory of learning. Their

main idea is the importance of communities of practice in which people engage and move from more peripheral to more central involvement. I think that has a lot to contribute in our study of school processes. How do schools relate to the communities they are in? How do various elements of schooling relate to each other? I have a student who did an excellent dissertation on the connection between neighborhood effects and schools using our data. It had very interesting results.[5]

I think that doing more mixed-method research is also needed. This summer I began to be more convinced of this as I started looking at some of the qualitative material that I have collected, like interviews and observations, and how it fits in with the quantitative data. We are doing two things now with our data that I think are going to help us in this area. We are doing cluster analysis with the survey data; so I can now begin to tell you what kinds of students there are in the different countries. For example, we were interested in looking at what alienation looks like. How is it different in the UK, for example, from what it looks like in the US and Sweden? This is one of the topics of the speech I will deliver in August as the recipient of the American Psychological Association's Prize for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology Internationally.

Often people look at the positive side in their research for, for example, factors leading to enhanced participation. They don't look at the young people who are alienated. That almost always demands that you combine qualitative and quantitative data. You can get some information from cluster analysis, but then you have to look at how other people have studied alienation.

A qualitative researcher takes a small segment of reality and studies it intensely. I think that qualitative researchers wonder if their research is generalizable. They want to know, "Am I just looking at this one school or this one particular community?" Quantitative researchers can tell you how many students are alienated, are they male or female, do they tend to be school drop-outs, etc.. When you can start collaborative work then you are really able to answer questions that you have trouble answering otherwise. To take another example, if you want to ask why, in Chile, the students protested for better education (in 2006), you can get some hints if you look at the CIVED survey. These overall statistics will tell you that for a national representative sample in 1999 these were the kinds of attitudes they had. But this needs a context. So you look at some of the observations or interviews gathered by qualitative researchers from Chile at the time of the strike. Then you have potential for a powerful set of arguments. Several years before this incident, this is what we saw from the surveys, and now on the streets in Chile this is what is happening. So when people say that surveys are useless and give you statistics that don't mean anything, I say let's try to put these things together so that they do mean something.

JB: Recently you were in Europe. What were you doing there?

JTP: We had 13 people from Nepal, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Turkey, China, Russia, and Colombia at the Humboldt University of Berlin. We sat down and in two and a half days we thought of research questions to investigate using the CIVED data set. As leaders, we helped them each develop a research problem and then they analyzed the data. The most relevant analysis in the Americas comes from a young man who is from Colombia, who did an interesting analysis of the meaning of political protest in Latin America. What are the interactions with gender? What are the sorts of issues that seem to provoke this kind of protest? What does it mean? In summary, in

two and a half days these social scientists were able to make substantial strides towards finding an answer to a research question. I thought that was quite extraordinary. Each group picked up an issue that was of particular importance to them. The groups from Russia and Turkey wanted to study immigrants. The immigrant issue in Russia does not look the same as it does in a lot of other countries. What is an immigrant in Russia? Is someone from another region who goes to Moscow an immigrant? The woman from Nepal wanted to study children's love of their country. Everyone started with the CIVED dataset but put their own stamp on their research and looked at something which had some personal meaning in their own situation.

JB: One final question: Where do you see the field going from here? Do you see interest in the topic waxing or waning?

JTP: I think that the topic is becoming of greater interest. There was a time in the 1980s when nobody was interested in this topic. Having done this research since the 1960s, I have in my basement a bunch of books published in the 60s and early 70s. It is amazing how many people published books then. What happened was a few psychologists and political scientists discovered this field of political socialization and began collecting data and writing about it. There were also lots of dissertations and articles as well as books. But then interest in the topic really declined. I got involved in human rights education for a while, and others went in other directions. Then I started studying the cognitive dimensions of political awareness. I was working with the International Communication and Negotiation Simulation (ICONS). This project at the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland started in the mid-1980s. High school students were role-playing diplomats from different countries and communicating on a computer system. I started watching those students as they did this and began to really understand how they were constructing their views of the international system. But during that period there were not very many people doing this kind of research. Then, about 10 years ago, interest in political socialization and civic education greatly increased again. And in one way or another, it is still flourishing, and I think this will continue.

Endnotes

[1] "The IEA Civic Education Study is an international assessment of the civic knowledge and skills of 14-year-olds in 28 countries. It was conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) sponsored the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study in the United States. In this study there was a total civic knowledge measure, a scale composed of two subscales: civic content and civic skills. Civic content refers to knowledge of content, such as characteristics of democracies. Civic skills refer to the interpretative skills needed to understand civic-related information (e.g. the skills needed to make sense of a newspaper article)". For a full description of the study see http://www.terpconnect.umd.edu/~jtpurta/ For a report of a special analysis of the data relating to some OAS member countries (Chile, Colombia and the United States), see http://www.educadem.oas.org/english/contenidos/strengthening%20democracy%20(IEA).pdf A full Spanish translation is also available at http://www.educadem.oas.org/espanol/contenidos/strengthening%20democracy%20(IEA).pdf

[2] Trends in Mathematics and Science Study. Carried out every four years in the fourth and eighth grades, TIMSS provides data about trends in mathematics and science achievement over time. To inform educational policy in the participating countries, this world-wide assessment and research project also routinely collects extensive background information that addresses concerns about the quantity, quality, and content of instruction. For example, TIMSS 2007 collected detailed information about mathematics and science curriculum coverage and implementation, as well as teacher preparation, resource availability, and the use of technology. See http://timss.bc.edu/TIMSS2007/about.html

[3] Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2001. PIRLS 2001 was the first in a five-year cycle of assessment that measures trends in children's reading literacy achievement and policy and practices related to literacy. PIRLS examines three aspects of reading literacy: processes of comprehension, purposes for reading, and reading literacy behavior and attitudes. See http://www.iea.nl/pirls2001.html

[4] See http://www.ecs.org/qna

[5] B. Wilkenfeld, (2009) A multilevel analysis of context effects on adolescent civic engagement. Summary of a Ph.D. dissertation available as a working paper on www.civicyouth.org