Assumptions and Habits for Effective Scholarship

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The process of social science scholarship - research, theoretical, methodological, and conceptual work - does not happen in isolation nor by accident. Scholarship builds on the ideas and efforts of others, challenges established orthodoxies, and provides the insights and evidence for a field of study. It is the collective process by which we’ve developed high resolution understandings of phenomena, solutions for complex problems, and more effective ways to flourish in our world. There is nothing natural about effective scholarship. Human nature tends toward confirmation bias, affiliatory preferences, and myopia. In other words, scholarship is a process that must be diligently maintained or it will regress back to the default characteristics of human nature.

For something this important, there’s surprisingly little discussion about the assumptions, norms, and habits under which we operate in scholarly environments. Perhaps it has always been assumed that those engaging in scholarship were naturally enculturated as part of their technical training.

Maybe this was true at one point, but over the years, there has been a noticeable decline in many of the long-established informal scientific traditions. And to be clear, I am not referring to the differences between [positivist and naturalist orientations](https://revisesociology.com/2015/05/18/positivism-interpretivism-sociology/), nor between [quantitative and qualitative methods](https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/quantitative-vs-qualitative-research/) of research. What I am referring to here is a decline in a basic understanding of what constitutes good scholarship. This has been supplanted with a deterministic orientation to press a preferred narrative, and the subjugation of scholarship toward that end. That, of course, is not scholarship, it’s advocacy. And while advocacy certainly has it’s place, the two should not be conflated.

The recognition of this decline has changed the way I introduce my  graduate students to research. Rather that assuming that certain assumptions and habits will germinate and develop naturally over time, I have begun explicitly articulating them as a launching point for discussions. As with any thesis, there are statements here that thoughtful people may disagree with; and I welcome any constructive feedback a/or criticisms.

# Assumptions and Habits

1. To claim that you understand an idea you must be able to operationalize it, provide examples of it, and articulate what should follow from it.
2. The scientific method does not prove, it only disproves. A theory only remains tenable through the accumulation of evidence that fails to refute it.
3. Research can be used selectively to support most any position. Examine the full body of evidence before accepting an evidence-based argument.
4. Demagoguery does not edify nor does it further understanding of ideas. If you disagree with something, then present a better argument.
5. Peer review does not necessarily mean quality. Know what constitutes quality scholarship so you can distinguish the good from the not so good.
6. Scholarship is not immune to narrative, politics, and culture. Mind the exogenous influences when evaluating a body of scholarship.
7. Statistical significance is not the same as practical importance. Know the established benchmarks within a field before evaluating the importance of a claim.
8. Scholarship is grounded in reason. The integrity of an idea is what matters, not the passion that surrounds it.
9. Affiliatory biases inhibit scholarship. Guard against reflexively accepting ideas because they are from within a familiar group or reflexively dismissing them because they are extrinsic to the group.
10. Humility is the inevitable outcome of effective scholarship. Be cautions of those who claim to hold a monopoly on the truth.