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978-0-521-46767-4 - Mind and Social Practice: Selected Writings of Slyvia Scribner
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Introduction

Sylvia Cohen Scribner's Life and Work

Sylvia Scribner's life and work as a psychologist did not fit neatly into conventional categories and narratives. Her scientific writings were addressed at different times to academic psychologists, anthropologists, community psychologists, labor union officials, mental health professionals, politically concerned social scientists, and educational policy analysts. Her topics included reasoning, memory, IQ research, social class and psychiatric diagnoses, textbooks, thinking at work, formal schooling, literacy, developmental theory, and culture and thinking. Her methods of data collection and analysis were drawn and adapted from several academic disciplines.

Yet through all the diversity of intellectual traditions, audiences, aims, forms of knowing, and forms of persuasion – indeed, *using* this diversity – Scribner consistently focused on certain key themes in her work and activities. In some sense she was always, in all ways, concerned with the interweaving of theory and practice, of doing and knowing – and with the moral responsibility and accountability this entails for researchers. In this collection we sketch some of the personal and sociohistorical circumstances surrounding Sylvia Scribner's work at different periods in her life and let her writings themselves provide both examples and, reflexively, analyses of how she integrated knowing and doing in her life and work.

Born in 1923 and raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts, Sylvia Cohen wrote poetry and talked politics from an early age – activities she continued throughout her life. As a student at Smith College she studied economics and was active in the American Student Union. Graduating summa cum laude in 1944, Cohen found work as activities director for Local 415 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE). There she met activist civil rights lawyer and UE general counsel David Scribner, whom she later married. Their son Oliver was born in 1954; daughter Aggie, in 1958. (The biography of Aggie Scribner Kapleman preceding this introduction describes Sylvia Scribner's life in greater detail.)

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By the early 1960s the UE's policies had changed, and Sylvia and David Scribner decided to seek employment elsewhere. Sylvia Scribner's commitment to working people led her in 1963 to become Associate Director of the Mental Health Program of the National Institute of Labor Education in New York City. There, according to a curriculum vitae she later prepared, Scribner participated in developing national policy for public and private programs to meet the special mental health needs of labor, and worked with the Director and National Advisory Committee to organize multidisciplinary research teams at various universities, helping them design and implement research proposals.

In 1964 Scribner became Research Director of the Mental Health Program of the Sidney Hillman Health Center in New York City. She designed and conducted research to evaluate the effectiveness of a National Institute of Mental Health-funded demonstration program introducing new techniques for identifying and treating mental illness among blue-collar workers. Part of this research was a home interview study of the treatment histories of workers disabled by mental illness prior to the inception of the demonstration program.

Through these activities Scribner became interested in the roles psychologists played or could play in working people's lives. She began to take psychology courses at New York University and then enrolled as a graduate student in psychology at the New School for Social Research. In 1966 Scribner received an M.A. in social psychology, being awarded the Dorothy Kelgor Prize in Psychology from the New School's Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science. During this period she, Ethel Tobach, Eleanor Leacock, and Howard Gruber engaged in philosophical study and discussions.

Scribner's interests in how people think about their social conditions led her to find employment in 1967 at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where she worked and became friends with, among others, Hannah Levin, Frank Riessman, and Jane Knitzer. As an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry (psychology), Scribner developed material for postdoctoral training in community psychology, conducted research on concepts of mental disorders in various cultures, and designed a research program on the cognitive consequences of literacy.

Then in her mid-forties and working full-time, she was mother of two young children and had an extended family that included three grown children from her husband's previous marriage. Scribner also enrolled in the Ph.D. program of the New School, where she took evening courses in cognitive psychology with Mary Henle and lectured in courses on memory and thinking.

It was the late 1960s: public debates about and activities surrounding the Vietnam War and civil rights were reaching their height; the beginnings of second-wave feminism were in the air. At the New School Scribner worked with Howard Gruber to organize brown bag lunches where students and faculty could discuss the social responsibility of psychologists and actions they might collectively undertake, such as demonstrations and teach-ins. She was active in

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antinuclear activities in New York, working with Ethel Tobach and Eleanor Leacock among others, and in Psychologists for Social Action (PSA) with Howard Gruber and Doris K. Miller.

Scribner wrote for the PSA Newsletter and worked with others for the election of Kenneth Clark as President of the American Psychological Association. According to PSA's statement of purpose at the time, the Association had come into being because "We psychologists feel a deep sense of social responsibility. This responsibility calls for action beyond talk and study. We seek ways of applying our knowledge and experience toward the resolution of the urgent social problems of our time."

During these years David Scribner continued his work as a civil rights lawyer, participating among other cases in highly publicized trials involving the Black Panthers, prisoners in New York's Attica State Prison, and students at Kent State University. Oliver and Aggie accompanied their parents on marches and demonstrations, and political talk filled the household.

During the late 1960s, and early 1970s the field of psychology was undergoing changes as well. The "cognitive revolution" had refocused many psychologists' attention away from behaviorism and toward language, thinking, reasoning, remembering, and other aspects of higher mental function. Psychologists, along with scientists of other disciplines, were reconsidering the social relevance of their laboratory research, and Kurt Lewin's decades-old tradition of action research was again in the wind. These changes provided both organizational venues for Scribner's activities and scientific resources for her developing psychological analyses. The discussions within psychology of scientists' objectivity and social relevance offered openings for her analyses of psychologists' roles as both scientists and citizens.

In 1970 Sylvia Scribner was awarded a Ph.D. in psychology, having completed a dissertation ("A Cross-Cultural Study of Perceptions of Mental Disorder") under the sponsorship of Mary Henle, Solomon Miller, and Bernard Weitzman. She was forty-seven years old, and, from a narrowly academic perspective, was about to begin her work as researcher and teacher.

The papers reprinted in Part 1 reflect Sylvia Scribner's early and continuing commitment to promoting human welfare and justice through psychological research. She argued (with exquisite tact and unmistakable critique) that psychologists need to take responsibility for the values, aims, and interests embedded in their research practices and what they produce. To this end she articulated connections among the goals, priorities, and assumptions of the organizations and institutions with which psychologists work, the research questions they ask, and the theoretical concepts and methods they use. And she simultaneously worked to change the institutions.

In these papers and elsewhere Scribner did more than critique supposedly "neutral" science and professional practices, though she did so at a time when such analyses were rare outside radical science circles. She simultaneously

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theorized psychology as practice, as activities with social and human effects, and she clarified some of the roles psychological researchers can play (including advocacy) in addressing societal problems. In the parlance of the times, though she would have eschewed the trite expression, Scribner repeatedly challenged herself and other psychologists to consider whether they were part of the problem or part of the solution (and from whose point of view) – and to act accordingly.

Scribner's 1968 manuscript, "The Cognitive Consequences of Literacy," is both a crystallization of her psychological thinking at the time she was at Albert Einstein and the New School and a preview of directions her work took in the future. (It is included here in Part 3.) When she recognized similarities between her analysis of thinking as embedded in cultural systems and the work Michael Cole was carrying out at Rockefeller University, she contacted him for dialogue. As she put it in a 1970 letter to Cole, "From my speculative route and your empirical one, we seem to have arrived at similar constructs. We agree that on the "input" side we are dealing with cultural systems and technologies – not mentalities and capacities – and on the "output" side we are dealing with certain specific mental skills, such as the intentional structuring of cognitive tasks – not "intelligence.'" Cole responded generously, obtaining funds to offer Scribner an appointment as Senior Research Associate at Rockefeller, and in 1970 they began a fruitful collaboration.

Cole's laboratory at Rockefeller was an active part of a rich and varied intellectual environment for behavioral scientists. Cole's independently functioning laboratory (which later became the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition) was institutionally located in William Estes' Mathematical Psychology Laboratory, and members interacted extensively with each other and also with George Miller's Psycholinguistics Laboratory.

Scribner participated in seminars, working groups, and conversations with visitors on a wide range of topics and issues, including mathematical models of memory, children's narratives, logical thinking, and intelligence tests. During these years, in addition to Michael Cole, Scribner also developed several other significant and lasting collegial, intellectual, and personal friends, including William Estes, Kay Estes, Rachel Joffe Falmagne, Elsa Bartlett, Steve Reder, Sue Sugerman, William Hall, Anderson J. Franklin, Ray McDermott, George Miller, Tom Sibarowski, and Dalton Miller-Jones.

Relatively few of the women scientists at Rockefeller in the early 1970s held faculty appointments (as was typical of elite institutions at the time), and Scribner therefore sought opportunities elsewhere to obtain a faculty position. In 1974, while still at Rockefeller, she also held an appointment as Visiting Professor in the Ferkauf Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Yeshiva University.

Given Scribner's continuing and deepening concern with the societal roots and effects of psychologists' research practices, some of her work during the Rockefeller years involved detailed critical analyses of widely accepted concepts

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and methods in psychology. In particular she focused on research practices in the study of race and intelligence, of class and psychiatric diagnoses, arguing they embodied assumptions about individuals, capacities, and abilities that enabled (as she put it in an earlier paper) the "continued avoidance by psychology of the significant dimensions of social life." She knew and cared that this "avoidance . . . of the significant dimensions of social life" carried profound consequences for poor and minority children in schools, for people in psychiatric hospitals, and for others. Her earlier papers had provided analyses of psychologists' roles in more direct and overtly political and moral language, but now her rhetoric changed as her critiques were directed toward scientific audiences.

With remarkable clarity, and tailored persuasively to the concerns and language of those she addressed, this critical work keeps probing for an analysis of scientific concepts and methods that will enable researchers to understand other people's thinking in a way that does not impose, without reflection, the powerful analytic categories embodied in traditional psychological research practices. (Some of these writings are included in Parts 1 and 2.)

Some of Scribner's poems from this period may be related to her feelings about expressing deep scientific and political convictions within academic psychology's conventional logic and styles of writing.

It Doesn't Mean A Thing

The words I use
and mis-abuse
have nothing in common
with my views.
not what they mean
but what they say
is how I deal them
every day
and if you think
that something keen
gets lost between

the line?

Fine.

Lexical Lament

Pull them out
From those dark places
Exil – ees
Return!

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Lovely we's
and I's
Dot spaces
Actives take
Your turn.

No mercy to
Usurpers who
Parade as Things.
Data, Research, Study
Go!
None of you
Can ever "show"

Author, author
From the wings
Show us, please
How science sings.

As part of Michael Cole's ongoing research program on culture and cognition, Scribner spent several extended periods between 1970 and 1978 carrying out research in Liberia, West Africa. For five months in 1972 her daughter Aggie was with her; her biography of her mother describes memories of Scribner's concrete daily life in Liberia, her relationship with people there, and the regard in which they held her. Other information about the trips and the circumstances of the work in Africa is contained in the two books coauthored by Scribner and Cole. More than a decade later, when Scribner was living in Manhattan and commuting daily to work by subway through Times Square, she recalled to a colleague the pleasure she had felt in Liberia – and her respect for such sensible living – when she could simply sweep the floor, go out the door, and work.

On her first trip to Liberia Scribner lived in a small village in the bush, working closely with Kpelle collaborators to investigate how Kpelle people reason, remember, and carry out other cognitive activities. Cole and Scribner's book reporting this research, *Culture and Thought: A Psychological Introduction*, was published in 1974. It was well received, as was Scribner and Cole's 1973 *Science* paper on cognitive consequences of formal and informal education (which was reprinted in several anthologies on culture and education).

In 1973 Scribner and Cole undertook research among the Vai people in Liberia. The Vai were of particular interest: they have an original written script transmitted from one generation of men to the next, and a large segment of the population is not formally educated in schools. Thus, literacy in this group is not confounded with schooling. It was possible to examine specifically how each is related to thinking, remembering, and other cognitive activities.

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Scribner and Cole's report of the Vai research, *The Psychology of Literacy,* appeared in 1981, receiving the African Studies Association's Melville J. Herskovitz Award the following year. This book builds on methodological and theoretical analyses of the earlier one, and presents a clear shift away from the approach current in cross-cultural work at that time.

During the Rockefeller years, Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman were also editing *L. S. Vygotsky: Mind in Society,* the volume of Vygotsky's work that would appear in 1978. Scribner had earlier made a thorough study of Vygotsky's writings and those of other Russian cultural-historical psychologists and had incorporated them in her thinking. According to Cole's account of this period in the *LCHC Newsletter* (1992),[1] Scribner played an important role in promoting deeper understanding of this work among LCHC's members, an influence now evident in the widespread discussions among psychologists and others of the cultural-historical approach. Her classic paper, "Modes of Thinking and Ways of Speaking: Culture and Logic Reconsidered" (1978), was written during this time, merging her interest in logical thinking from graduate school days with her societal perspective on thinking. (It is reprinted in Part 2.)

Emerging out of direct engagement with societal and scientific issues, Scribner's theoretical understanding of thinking and learning had clear implications for real-world education policies. In 1978 she was recruited by National Institute of Education Director Patricia Albjerg Graham to become Associate Director and head of its Teaching and Learning Program. Scribner's interest in shaping research-based educational policy, the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition's move to California, and her lack of independent institutional status at Rockefeller converged to make the invitation attractive.

Both the NIE and the Teaching and Learning Program have since been dissolved, but at that time NIE's program was a major site of educational planning and a source of funding for research aimed at improving educational opportunities for all Americans. In addition to Pat Graham, Scribner's colleagues during this period included Lois Ellin-Datta, Ned Chalker, Susan Chipman, Judith Orasanu, Judith Siegel, Lauren Resnick, Michale Timpane, and Ramsay Selden – several of whom became lifelong friends.

At NIE Scribner sought to institute broader conceptions of learning, education, and literacy to include learning in sites other than schools – in the workplace, for example – and to focus on learning in adults as well as children and adolescents. She promoted an NIE program (jointly with the American Psychological Association) for minority researchers, and initiated discussions of technology and learning. She also launched a program of cognitive science applications to education.

In 1980 Scribner traveled to China as part of an NIE-funded Educational Research Delegation to the People's Republic of China to study literacy education programs in that country. A report of this trip is included in Part 3, together

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with other papers on literacy that show the range of audiences Scribner addressed and the scope and coherence of the questions and research methods with which she was concerned.

Colleagues describe the work she did at NIE as having a "cascading effect," although she was there for only a year. Her passionate commitment to quality in research, together with her personal contacts in many fields, enabled her to enlist as reviewers and advisors first-rate scientists who had not been involved in education research. For the NIE staff, the review process came to resemble seminars. One colleague recalled how Scribner would sit with twinkling eyes, playing with a twinkling gold necklace, "taking us all on a wild intellectual ride."

David Scribner had moved with Sylvia to Washington D.C. (Their children were then grown and in graduate school or working.) He had curtailed his activities because of heart problems, but continued to do civil rights work and train lawyers in labor law, and he represented the student body of his daughter's law school in a lawsuit against the university. Sylvia Scribner continued to be an avid and informed theatergoer, as she had been in New York, and made frequent lunchtime visits to the Smithsonian's Museum of Modern Art.

While at NIE Scribner began to establish connections with the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, and she was appointed Senior Scientist there in 1979, joining Ed Fahrmeier, Evelyn Jacob, and others. She left her administrative position at NIE soon thereafter and began a highly productive period of scientific work.

Scribner's previous labor union work and personal manner gave her the credibility necessary to establish relations of trust with union members and officials and with management at a dairy distribution plant in nearby Baltimore. There she developed a research program on thinking at work that brought together themes woven throughout all her scientific and political life.

In Scribner's own words,

> [My research] has three objectives. On the most ambitious level, I would like it to serve as a vehicle for elaborating the very general constructs of activity theory. I want to develop and test a method that integrates observational studies of naturally occurring phenomena with experimentation on model tasks. And most concretely, I want to discover something about the characteristics of practical thinking in everyday life.
>
> What activities might be suitable for investigating practical thinking? I chose to study work activities for reasons of both significance and strategy. Significance is apparent. In all societies, work is basic to human existence; in most it consumes the greater part of waking time, and, in many – certainly our own – it is a principal source of self-definition. Although we are not wholly defined through our participation in productive activities, the circumstances under which we work and what we do when we work have deep implications for intellectual and personal development.[2]

In 1981 Sylvia and David Scribner returned to New York City when she was recruited by Katherine Nelson to a professorship in Developmental Psychology

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at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. There she joined Katherine Nelson, Joseph Glick, and Harry Beilin on the Developmental Psychology faculty, which later added Dalton Miller-Jones, Mary Parlee, and David Bearison as well.

Scribner's CUNY appointment as Professor of Psychology at the age of fifty-nine was her first and only "real" faculty job. Her lifelong political and moral commitments had led her to work for much of her life outside the university. Her clarity and persistence as a scientist had enabled her to respond creatively to some of the personal and historical circumstances that often keep women and politically active psychologists at the margins of the academy and major research enterprises. She would continue to produce the psychological research and theory for which she is recognized internationally. There is no simple narrative of an academic career here; it is the life of an intellectual activist.

At CUNY Scribner taught graduate seminars on memory, mind and society, Vygotsky, and research methods, and attracted and trained a group of highly talented graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. These included King Beach, Pat Sachs, Lia DiBello, Michael Cohen, and others, contributions from many of whom are reflected in their joint publications with Scribner. Scribner also had a lasting influence on students who did not work directly with her in research but took seminars with her. One of them remembers most clearly Scribner's "passion for clarity, her interest in having us speak very clearly on an issue and listen to each other and say what we meant – and she provided a wonderful model of how to do it."

While at CUNY Scribner worked consistently to strengthen the research training offered in psychology by increasing the diversity of the faculty and student body. This is a connection she had been making in theory and practice since she entered the field: if ways of knowing and the resulting knowledge depend on who asks the research questions, why, how, and on whose behalf, then diversity of perspectives is more likely to be scientifically fruitful than monocular vision. Working with other faculty members and with Graduate Center President Harold Proshansky she was successful in bringing Dalton Miller-Jones, whom she had known at Rockefeller, onto the developmental psychology faculty, enriching the growing interest and depth within the program in a sociocultural approach to psychological questions. She consistently promoted the work of minority scholars at CUNY and nationwide and supported, financially and otherwise, a diverse group of students in her laboratory.

Scribner's commitment to diversity and antiracism were not limited to psychology, and she worked as well with other faculty at CUNY concerned with these issues (Del Jones, Leith Mullings, Bill Kornblum, Frank Riessman) until the end of her life. She continued to be an activist in non-academic arenas well. Among other efforts she worked to organize a demonstration against a proposed berthing of nuclear submarines near Staten

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Island – publicity being generated by Graduate Center faculty in full academic regalia marching along 42nd Street behind a saxophonist's "When the Saints Come Marching In."

In the late 1980s Scribner's research program was gaining momentum. With funding from the Spencer Foundation, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the National Center for Education and the Economy, and the National Center for Research in Education, she founded the Laboratory for Cognitive Studies of Work, developing it into an intellectual center for students, colleagues, and visitors and a site for planning and analysis of field and laboratory research. Laura Martin and Patricia Sachs collaborated with Scribner as Project Directors on some of the grants. Some of the research was coordinated through the National Center for Education and Employment at Teacher's College, Columbia University, where Susan Berryman and Ray McDermott were colleagues and friends.

Scribner's work, long known to researchers at the forefront of several disciplines, was beginning to generate excitement among more mainstream psychologists as well. When Scribner and some of her students presented their "thinking at work" research at the Eastern Psychological Association meeting in Boston in 1985, the large room was filled to overflowing – there was a sense in the air that something significant was happening. There were frequent invitations to address national and international meetings. Scribner maintained an active correspondence with colleagues in Germany, Japan, Russia, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and France.

By the late 1980s Sylvia and David Scribner were grandparents, and Sylvia took special pleasure – her face would light up when she talked about him – in being with her daughter Aggie's son Alex, who lived nearby. David Scribner's illness had worsened, however, and he died in April 1991. Sylvia Scribner's "sciatica" – which did not keep her from protesting against the Gulf War or from her research and teaching – was diagnosed as cancer in the spring of 1991, four months before her death. Her second grandchild, Aggie's son Scott, was born shortly before she was hospitalized.

When Sylvia Scribner died, friends and colleagues from around the world joined together through electronic mail to express their sense of loss and love, to share memories. In February 1992 a memorial symposium, "Sylvia at Work," was held at the CUNY Graduate Center to celebrate her life and work. The auditorium was filled with Sylvia's family, friends, and colleagues from different phases of her life. Sylvia Scribner, union employee, professor, protester, scientist, mentor, and friend, was remembered as the unique and remarkable person she was.

This is a collection of her work, in her own voice, speaking of things she cared about with her indomitable, passionate intelligence. Sylvia Scribner at work, Sylvia Scribner working, Sylvia Scribner's work – the dancer and the dance are one.

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