Expertise and Equality

Who decides and how are perennial concerns in public policy. In relation to many matters, the answers given will depend on how the issues at stake are defined. The greater the extent to which any definition portrays them as technical ones of calculating how best to achieve some agreed end, then the more likely the who and the how of decision-making will be restricted to the activities of specialized experts. The greater the extent to which any definition suggests the issues involve contentious ethical choices, then the more likely the who and the how will include some form of involvement of ‘the public’. In democratic countries, most adults are treated as equally morally competent and they have expectations that decisions are taken in a manner that reflects the overall will of the populace. Therefore, just how concerns about expertise and equality play out for any given area is a matter of some significance.

In relation to the dual-use issues of concern in this book, previous chapters have contended that figuring out what should be done is a complex and vexing task, not least because what should count as the issues at stake is itself often in doubt. Against this background, though, it has been noted that the policy call for research community self-governance is a recurring one. The general risk/benefit assessment procedure central to many such calls exemplifies this preference (see Chapter 2). Therein, experts are meant to weigh up complicated scientific, security, and ethical considerations in order to determine the suitability of a research project or publication. The specific ways in which this general prescription has been formulated often suggest that a number of presumptions underlie these assessments: determinations of risks and benefits are scientific matters, a non-

assessments of the greater good can be made. Such a way of thinking contrasts with others, such as treating the weighing of risks and benefits as a largely political process where social groups are likely to have sharply opposing interpretations of what should be done.

While accepting that the need for community self-governance gives a center of gravity to decision-making, it does not resolve questions about exactly who should decide and how. If scientific experts are to be largely left alone to assess what needs doing, the question then becomes ‘who are these experts?’. So do all those called ‘scientists’ or ‘biologists’ equally count as experts? Presumably not, given their varying training and competences. Who then is to decide who is expert among the experts?

Of course, there may be those who do not accept community self-governance as sufficient. If war in the twentieth century became too important to be left to the generals, research in the twenty-first century might be too important to be left to the scientists. Along these lines it might be argued that the uncertainties and unknowns entailed, and the stakes involved, mean that political or public involvement is required.1 Scientists and other highly specialized experts have been criticized in the past for having a blinkered mind-set that means vital social concerns are rendered invisible to them.2 If only to prevent critical voices from becoming too prominent, those advocating an expert-based system need to consider how it would relate to wider societal deliberations.

This chapter examines the themes of equality and expertise in the seminars. As with the previous chapters in Part II, this one recounts the appraisals given in relation to the changing strategies we employed as moderators to inquire about this matter. As with those previous chapters, this one also assesses the parallels between the seminars’ substantive themes and their interactional dynamics. When one moves from national policy decision-making to group-based discussions, the dilemmas associated with how expertise and equality relate do not disappear. Certainly, that those seminars took place in a university setting where the intellectual worth of ideas is notionally crucial did not immunize them to awkward tensions about who should speak.

**Dual-use research in the public domain**

Concerns about equality and expertise were voiced in relation to a variety of topics. One area was the involvement by the public or political representatives in oversight systems. Although it was uncommon that statements were made in support of such involvement, six participants did express such sentiments. In relation to oversight this included