Common roots and contemporary issues of applied sociology and practice research

Contribution to the Hong Kong Conference on Practice Research

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A. Coherence between goals and values?

B. The origin of values? Alternative values?

C. An adequate choice of means? Alternative means?

D. Implicit consequences of goals? Unintended consequences?
## Governmentality of Social Policy and Applied social research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Main discourse of biopolitics</th>
<th>Subjects to Social Work Research</th>
<th>Paradigm for applied social science</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950-70</td>
<td>Structural policy</td>
<td>Social Categories Professional institutions</td>
<td>Social surveys Summative evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970-80</td>
<td>Structural policy</td>
<td>Social categories Social network and communities</td>
<td>Social surveys Action research Formative evaluations</td>
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<td>1980-90</td>
<td>Cultural policy</td>
<td>Communities Milieus Volunteer organizations</td>
<td>Empowerment evaluations Constructive evaluations</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990-2000</td>
<td>Cultural policy</td>
<td>Communities Milieus User- organizations</td>
<td>Empowerment evaluations Social analysis of practical experiences</td>
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<td>2000-2010</td>
<td>Public management</td>
<td>Public Management</td>
<td>Systematic reviews of effect studies</td>
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</table>
The genealogy of evaluation research

- Summative effect evaluation
- Summative process evaluation
- Formative evaluation
- Empowerment evaluation
- Constructive evaluation

Results and effects

1st year 2nd year 3rd year

InstA

InstB
A Plan

Interrelated actions

A field of objects and problematics

Consequences

Generated processes

Accordance

Evaluation and interpretation

Accepted values

Ideal normative premisses

Theories

Interrelated hypothesis

Expectations

Accordance

Accepted evidence

Camhis 1979
Donald Campbels guidelines for applied social research

Campbell regards experimental activities as a basic property of human societies. People have always been involved in program development. Campbell sees the whole cultural development as an experimental laboratory with a running selection of inventions with unintended consequences. ”The raw material for such evaluations is the remembered experiences of participants transformed into institutional decisions”. It is this raw material that is the subject of qualitative research. Campbell is willing to accept all kinds of document analysis, informant interview, participant observations of different kinds of dialog research connected to mutual consultation an regular conferences as input to the sampling of human experience.

(Campbell 1978).
The idea is to reorganize sociology as a knowledge of society so that inquiry begins where people are and proceeds from there to discoveries that are for them, for us, of the workings of a social that extends beyond any one of us, bringing our local activities into coordination with those of others. The project is to extend people’s ordinary good knowledge of how things are put together in our everyday lives to dimensions of the social that transcend the local and are all the more powerful and significant in it for that reason. We participate in them without knowing what we are doing.

Dorothy Smith 2006 p. 3
Transformation of ethnocentrism to ethnography

- Systematic reviews
- Traditional social science
- Institutional Ethnography
- Practice research
- Practitioner research

Research community
Concepts and discourses

Informants
Concepts and discourses
Conclusions after 60 years of applied social research

Conflicts between political decisions and applied research are related to:

- The unclear expectations of the political actors.
- Ambiguous goals.
- Interest conflicts related to the results and conclusions of evaluations.
- Systematic ignorance as regard unintended consequences.
- The complex character of the intervention due to political interventions in the process.
- Political ambivalence as regard the need for alternative theoretical explanations.
- Interference with common-sense judgment and the hidden agendas of strong social actors.

Michael Burawoy: **Types of Sociological Knowledge**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Extra-academic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Sociology</td>
<td>Policy Sociology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflexive</td>
<td>Critical Sociology</td>
<td>Public Sociology</td>
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Conclusions 100 years after Weber

You must expect that political decision makers refuse to acknowledge results that does not fit into their basic conception of social reality.

After some years, an accumulation of results from research will influence and change the political frames of reference their conception of social phenomenon and political philosophy.

There are no such thing as evidence based political decisions.
Recommendations

Applied sociology have always tried to improve the premises for political and professional decisions on different levels. It might be professional strategies, user groups, local activists or governmental decisions.

The development has included a wide range of different designs from summative evaluations to empowerment evaluations, different kinds of collaborative designs and institutional ethnography.

The development has delivered an accumulated fond of solid experiences that you should take into consideration.

The experiences have reduced the expectations as regard the immediate influence on political decisions due to the irrational and often rather chaotic nature of political decisions.

Some of the designs and considerations seems to be pretty close to the ones you find in practice research. But they all seems to keep a greater distance to practice.

The strength of practice research lies in the construction that combines findings and implementation.

But it is important to be aware that the close relation to practice might reproduce professional discourses, definitions and structures that are being taken for granted.

Sometimes you need to be outside and keep a distance before you can see the forest.
References


