

Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice

If the Social World Is How Qualitative
Researchers Say It Is, What
Impact Can their Work Have
on Policymaking and Practice?

Contributors: Martyn Hammersley

Editors: Martyn Hammersley

Book Title: Educational Research, Policymaking and Practice

Chapter Title: "If the Social World Is How Qualitative Researchers Say It Is, What
Impact Can their Work Have on Policymaking and Practice?"

Pub. Date: 2002

Access Date: June 18, 2015
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd
City: London
Print ISBN: 9780761974192
Online ISBN: 9781849209083
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209083.n4>
Print pages: 83-102

©2002 SAGE Publications Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Research Methods. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209083.n4>

[p. 83 ↓]

If the Social World Is How Qualitative Researchers Say It Is, What Impact Can their Work Have on Policymaking and Practice?

There is currently increasing pressure on social and educational researchers to make their work have greater impact on policymaking and practice than it has previously achieved. Moreover, it is becoming clear that this has implications not just for the 'dissemination' of research findings but also for the *kind* of research that is to be done. It is significant in this context that a very substantial proportion of recent British research on education is qualitative in character. And qualitative work was picked out for particular criticism in James Tooley's evaluation of the field (Tooley 1998). Moreover, David Hargreaves' critique of educational research (Hargreaves 1996) implied the need for more experimental or quasi-experimental research, on the model of evidence-based medicine, where randomised controlled trials are treated as the gold standard (see Cochrane 1972).

Perhaps as a result, recent official pronouncements about educational research seem to prioritise quantitative rather than qualitative research. An example is the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) funding programme on 'teaching and learning'. Despite recognition that a range of forms of enquiry will be required, the main emphasis seems to be on quantitative research. In a section of its web site that discusses 'capacity building', qualitative work is only mentioned in one bullet point (whereas quantitative research is mentioned in three out of five), and even here it is described as needing to be 'articulated' or 'combined' with quantitative investigations (Economic and Social Research Council 2000).

The implication of all this is that qualitative research is believed to be unable to 'deliver' the sort of findings that are required for evidence-based practice. Further signs of this belief - in the context of social research generally - are to be found in David Blunkett's speech to the ESRC in early 2000. He states,

One of our prime needs is to be able to measure the size of the effect of A on B. This is genuine social science and reliable answers can only be [p. 84 ↓] reached if the best social scientists are willing to engage in this endeavour. We are not interested in worthless correlations based on small samples from which it is impossible to draw generalisable conclusions.

It is not clear whether, in these terms, qualitative work could ever count as 'genuine social science' though the Secretary of State does add: 'We welcome studies which combine large scale, quantitative information on effect sizes which will allow us to generalise, with in-depth case studies which provide insights into how processes work' (Blunkett 2000:paras 56-7). At best, here, qualitative research is given a secondary - and subordinate - role; perhaps only as a supplier of illustrative material. Furthermore, the main emphasis on quantitative work is reinforced later when Mr Blunkett comments: 'There is a danger of too much concentration on the micro-level - what is the point of research which becomes narrower and narrower, with small groups of people responding to each other's writing in esoteric journals, read only by themselves and relevant only to themselves?' (Blunkett 2000:para 21). Here, 'concentration on the micro-level' seems to be a synonym for qualitative work; the assumption being that any study of a small number of cases will only be of interest to a small number of people - that only statistically generalisable findings can have general relevance.¹

In this context, it is interesting to note that Ann Oakley, who was once widely regarded as an advocate of qualitative work, has now become in the eyes of some critics 'a quantitative tyrant, a missionary of logical positivism' (Oakley 2000:21). Since the early 1990s she has been arguing for the importance of randomised controlled trials in a variety of fields, including education. She has also recently been involved in establishing the Evidence for Policy and Practice: Information and Co-ordinating Centre, at the

Institute of Education, University of London. In her book *Experiments in Knowing*, like David Blunkett, she presents qualitative research as playing (at best) a subordinate role to quantitative evaluations. Moreover, at one point she writes:

It is important to do the kind of research that will provide the best evidence possible about what works. *Whether* something works is here the primary question, the question of greatest interest to most practitioners and policymakers. *How* something works, and theories or behavioural models which might underpin the relationship between intervention and effects, are secondary questions. (Oakley 2000:310)²

It is evident from this that what is driving the increased emphasis on quantitative method is a highly instrumental attitude towards the value of social and educational research. Hodgkinson has argued that David Blunkett's ESRC speech assumes an 'engineering' view of the relationship between research and practice, and so makes positivist assumptions about the nature and function of social research (Hodgkinson 2000). Like Auguste [p. 85 ↓] Comte, the Secretary of State believes that the main task of such enquiry is to provide information that will facilitate the governance of society; this consisting of knowledge about determinate causal relationships. Hodgkinson comments: 'for Blunkett, the entire enterprise of social science is therefore encapsulated in the following: how does society "work," and how can we best "engineer" it?' (ibid.:3.1). The task of research becomes 'to "discover" the knowledge required by politicians to enact the necessary interventions' (ibid.:3.3). This is close to Comte's idea that science produces predictions which can form the basis for state policy; the assumption is that the whole point of research is the production of knowledge which has practical application (see Charlton 1959:35-6).³

Now, some qualitative researchers might insist that qualitative work *can* inform decisions about 'what works', perhaps even in ways that do not subordinate it to quantitative method. However, I want to suggest here that there is a fundamental incompatibility between qualitative enquiry and the instrumentalism which guides much current criticism of educational research. As already noted, that instrumentalism rests on an 'engineering' view of the relationship between research and practice; whereas, I will argue, there is an important sense in which a qualitative approach implies an

'enlightenment' view of that relationship - albeit one particular version of it. Specifically, I will argue that there is a conflict between the image of society built into the engineering model - and its close associate, the medical model - and the image of human social life which emerges out of much qualitative research.

The image of social life built into the engineering and medical models

The engineering model has, of course, been subjected to a great deal of criticism (see, for example, Bulmer 1982 and Finch 1986). What I want to highlight here is that it relies on an image of society as a machine, in which all the various parts of a national society are treated as designed to serve one another, and as capable of being re-engineered so as to maximise the performance of the whole. This is the basis for what has become a standard argument in current political discourse: that there needs to be continual improvement in the performance of all institutions, so as to ensure national success, or even survival, in the global economy. And, from this point of view, the task of the researcher is to provide information that is of direct use for this kind of social engineering.

Also employed in recent discussions have been medical analogies. One played an important part in Hargreaves' influential critique of educational research (Hargreaves 1996). He contrasted this research adversely with research in medicine, implying close correspondence in key respects between the work of teachers and of doctors. And he employed another medical analogy in a much earlier paper, which deals [p. 86 ↓] with the uses of qualitative research. Referring to the failure of educational reforms, he writes: 'our attempted grafts (and various forms of major or minor surgery) merely arouse the "antibodies" of the host which undermine our attempts to play doctor to an educational patient' (Hargreaves, 1978:20). More recently, he has referred to 'healthy' and (by implication) 'unhealthy' staff subcultures in schools. He comments:

Healthy subcultures among a school staff do not challenge the school leaders' right to manage nor the right of other colleagues to take a different point of view. Resistance groups [that is, 'unhealthy' staff

subcultures] are counter-cultures, who are actively subversive of management and intolerant of differences between subcultures. Such a group saps the morale and commitment of the supporters of change, and exasperates the leader(s).

He concludes: 'The most effective method of countering the resistance group is simply stated: get rid of them or at least the most active and vocal ones' (Hargreaves 1999c:60).

Despite important differences, there are strong similarities between metaphors treating social phenomena as machines and as organisms. As with machines, the various parts of an organism are designed to serve one another, whether by Creator or by evolution. And, once again, there is a role prescribed for someone to monitor performance and to intervene where parts are going wrong, or are not performing as well as they should be. From this perspective, the task of the social researcher is along the lines of the sports physician, who is concerned with devising means to enhance the performance of the athlete, including identifying what is unhealthy for the surgeon to cut it out.⁴

So, both the engineering and medical models treat societies - or, on a smaller scale, particular institutions, organisations or groups - as functioning wholes. In other words, they rely on a kind of functionalism, whereby each part is to be understood and judged in terms of its contribution to the operation of the whole. And both models define the role of researcher as concerned with monitoring and improving social functioning. On this functionalist perspective, there seems to be a smooth continuity between research, on the one hand, and policymaking or practice, on the other. In playing its proper role in society, the first feeds - or ought to feed - directly into the second.

Of course, use of the mechanical and organismic metaphors is by no means unknown even within qualitative research. The most notable example is the use made of the organismic metaphor by early British social anthropology (see Evans-Pritchard 1951:ch. 3). However, that metaphor has been subjected to sustained criticism, and in the past 50 years most qualitative researchers have rejected the whole tendency to treat societies as functioning wholes. Instead, they have employed a number of alternative metaphors for thinking about social life: as an arena in which conflicting groups battle and/or negotiate (conflict, negotiated [p. 87 ↓] order, or social world theory);

as a theatre, or set of theatres, in which actors perform (dramaturgy); as a field in which different individuals and groups carry on their activities in a variety of changing relationships (the ecology of games); as having the character of stories (narrative theory, of various kinds), etc.⁵

In the next section I want to examine what I take to be key ideas about the nature of social life that inform qualitative research, and that are at odds with the functionalism I have identified as characteristic of the engineering and medical models. Before I go any further, however, I should note the dangers involved in generalising about qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have claimed that it has travelled through at least six different 'moments'. Whatever one thinks about their account (see Atkinson et al. 1999 and Hammersley 1999a for criticism), it is certainly true that the field of qualitative research is now highly fragmented in terms of approach; and that it has always displayed tensions and variation in perspective. Nevertheless, I am going to risk making some general claims about the social imagery on which it relies.

The image of social life in qualitative research

A first - relatively banal, but not unimportant - point is that because in recent years qualitative enquiry has tended to focus at the micro level, there has not been much temptation for qualitative researchers to assume that the key unit for social analysis is the national society, in the way that functionalism and some other macro theories have often done. Instead, qualitative researchers have usually emphasised the diversity within national societies, as well as the constructed character of boundaries between them (see, for example, Cohen 1986). Moreover, with current recognition of the role of globalisation - and of the local constraints, the opportunities, and the varied responses it generates (on which, see Burawoy et al. 2000) - any notion of national societies as distinct and well-integrated entities becomes of doubtful value. An approach which recognises different and overlapping forms of organisation operating at various levels within and across national boundaries seems necessary.

A second point is that the functionalist model assumes a standard commitment to the national society, or to particular social institutions, on the part of members. This commitment is sometimes simply taken for granted, but in more developed sociological accounts it is treated as a product of the socialisation of members into relevant values and norms. In short, societies and institutions are not only viewed as characterised by *structural* integration, but also this is seen as produced by *social* integration.⁶ It is assumed that all the various parts of a society have been designed to work together and serve the whole, and that this is established and maintained by a consensus about the roles played by these various parts, whether institutions or particular roles.

[p. 88 ↓]

An important consequence of treating structural integration as a defining feature of societies, on analogy with machines and organisms, is that it is also taken to be an ideal. As a result, this type of functionalism is normative in two senses: it emphasises the role of conformity to norms (to rules and regulations) in producing structural integration; and it treats social and structural integration as a normative standard in analysing societies and institutions. Here we have the smuggling in of values that has often been highlighted in critiques of sociological functionalism.⁷ It is this which gives the impression that functional analysis can lead directly to diagnoses of what is wrong, and to recommendations about what should be done to remedy or improve the situation; hence its fit with the engineering and medical models.

Many, though not all, qualitative researchers have rejected not only functionalism but also the kind of 'correctionalism' that often follows from it; which treats the task of social science as to identify and remedy social problems. Instead, they have adopted what Matza refers to as an *appreciative* stance (Matza 1969).⁸ This requires a different starting point from correctionalism. We must begin not from societies or institutions as systems but from the activities of human beings. Moreover, those activities are viewed not in behaviourist terms, as automatic products of prior learning, but as artful productions, as exemplifying some form of practical rationality. Indeed, their rationality is a starting assumption: a key analytic task is to discover the rationality in what, from a conventional point of view, may be regarded as irrational. The most obvious example of this is attempting to understand the rationality of various kinds of social deviance;

and this was, indeed, the context in which Matza developed his notion of appreciation. However, it can equally be applied to understanding the negative responses of some practitioners in the health and education systems to what the present government calls 'modernisation'. Rather than dismissing these practitioners as 'forces of conservatism' or as participants in a 'culture of mediocrity', the aim would be to try to understand why they react in the way that they do (see, for example, Woods et al. 1997).⁹

It is important to underline the sharp break with correctionalism here. That point of view starts from some implicit or explicit notion of how the situation studied ought to be, and whatever departs from this is treated as defective, as a causal product of ineffective socialisation and/or of ineffective integration of social institutions. By contrast, the aim in qualitative research, I suggest, is to try to understand people's behaviour as necessarily making sense within the context in which it occurs. Indeed, it is emphasised that *all* behaviour *only* makes sense in context. Matza comments: 'A basic difficulty with the correctional perspective is that it systematically interferes with the capacity to empathise and thus comprehend the subject of enquiry' (Matza 1969:15). There is no need to accept the reference to empathy here in order to take the general point. And I suggest that what follows from this point is an insistence on the [p. 89 ↓] need to separate the task of description and explanation from that of moral and political judgement.¹⁰

A fourth point is that qualitative researchers often question the degree of structural integration that actually exists in modern societies. Of course, even functionalists recognise that there is sometimes a lack of integration between the various parts of society at particular times, but (in effect) they treat this as abnormal in a 'medical' as well as a statistical sense. By contrast, qualitative researchers treat it as normal in both senses: they resist any evaluation, and retain an open mind about the *degree* of structural integration to be found. Indeed, some of them question the viability of the concept. Even aside from the question of which level of social organisation is to be taken as the focus, we can ask: by what criteria are we to judge when one part of society is working well with another? There is plenty of room for disagreement, and even for quite different evaluative frameworks; though this does not rule out the possibility of reasonable judgement or even substantial consensus. Moreover, this is a matter of practical, value-based - not scientific - judgement (see Foster et al. 2000).

Equally important, underlying the ideal of structural integration is a strong notion of social causality, whereby a fixed relationship can be expected to be regularly displayed between particular causes and particular effects. This is what we might call the regularity theory of causation: it requires that there are recurrent patterns of action occurring in society in which instances of type A cause instances of type B. Now, qualitative researchers have usually been very cautious about the notion of causality. To go back to Matza, he distinguishes between hard and soft determinism, arguing for the latter (Matza 1963); and later he seems to abandon even this weak version of causal determinism (Matza 1969). And, even where they have not rejected it, qualitative researchers have generally adopted a very different view of causality from the regularity model.

A recent example is provided by Howard Becker (Becker 1992 and 1998). He presents a natural history or narrative model of social causation, arguing that it is a *process* in which there is *contingency*; in the sense that it can lead down different paths to a variety of possible outcomes. Conversely, the same outcomes can sometimes be reached by very different routes. Becker points out how difficult it can often be to explain an outcome without understanding the path by which it was reached, using the example of someone's decision to have a sex change operation (Becker 1998:26-8). Many years ago Sally Macintyre provided a similar analysis of the contingencies involved in becoming what would today be called a 'lone parent' (Macintyre 1977).

From this point of view, rather than specific causes regularly generating the same outcomes, causal factors always operate on existing states of affairs and do so at different points in time, with the result that outcomes are not determinate and predictable, at least not in any strong way. There is a variety of routes that events might follow from any starting position, [p. 90 ↓] depending not just on the particular factors that operate but also on the sequencing and timing of their operation.¹¹

It is not difficult to see that in a world characterised by this sort of causality the engineered society is a hopeless ideal. One can never start with a blank sheet, and the outcomes of action are rather unpredictable because of the effects of contingent factors (not just because of our inadequate knowledge). At best what is involved is a set of open systems, rather than a single closed one; and the elements of these systems

are continually threatening to, and often actually do, go off in different directions. Furthermore, the more complex and long term the course of action that is planned, the less likely that the goal will be realised without a great deal of adjustment along the way, and perhaps even change in the goal itself. Furthermore, this adjustment and change may not be a matter of conscious decision, but rather a process of 'drift' of which the actor is largely unaware (Matza 1963).

So, this narrative or path model of causality does not support the notion of structural integration as likely to be the norm, even in a statistical sense. I can illustrate this by appealing, once again, to the sociology of deviance; the area of social enquiry where Becker's work is best known (Becker 1973). From a functionalist perspective, the role of punishment is to deter further deviance: it is a mechanism which re-establishes structural integration. However, sociologists of deviance have shown that punishment can amplify deviance; an idea that has been applied to the way in which teachers deal with pupils in the classroom (see, for example, Hargreaves et al. 1975). Labelling can amplify deviance in two ways. First, it changes the circumstances of the offender's life, for example by making it more likely that a pupil will be identified as the culprit in future incidents, irrespective of what role they actually play in these. Secondly, it changes his or her sense of self. Following punishment, being a 'troublemaker' often becomes much more central to the identity of the person than it was before. For both these reasons, the chances of engagement in further deviance may be increased, not reduced. Moreover, this process of deviance amplification often involves the creation of a subculture which valorises a particular form of deviance; and this subculture may draw others into deviance, thereby producing amplification at the collective not just the individual level. It is important to stress, however, that the argument is not that labelling and punishment *always* produce deviance amplification, only that they *can* do so. Much depends on the temporally structured complex of events within which they take place.

Another, perhaps even more fundamental, point is that for most qualitative researchers action is based on interpretation: it involves people *making* sense of the world. This throws potential doubt on the idea that prior socialisation can predetermine social coordination or integration. In other words, people do not simply respond in automatic ways to the situations they face. Rather, they try to make sense of those situations, and they act on the basis of what sense these situations make to them.

[p. 91 ↓]

One of the most striking versions of this argument comes from ethnomethodology, which points out that the application of any value, or even of specific rules, to particular situations always involves judgement. Thus, Garfinkel rejects models of society that present people as 'judgemental dopes' who are simply programmed to act out roles (Garfinkel 1967b:67). And ethnomethodology sets its task as to explain how, despite the fact that prior socialisation cannot guarantee structural integration, social life is orderly in many respects; in the sense of being intelligible and even to some degree predictable.

By contrast, other interpretative sociologists have laid stress on the *variety* of ways in which people make sense of the same situation, suggesting that, because of this, some level of disorder and even conflict is inevitable. Diverse perspectives are a feature of how human social life *is*: it can never be rendered machine-like or organism-like in any strong sense, not even under totalitarian regimes. Under such regimes, people distance themselves from, and develop secondary adjustments to, commands and rules; even when they do not engage in direct resistance.¹²

In short, qualitative researchers typically view conformity to social structural requirements as less widespread than mechanical or organismic metaphors assume. Moreover, where it *does* occur, they treat it as generated by diverse motivations, and/or as a product of local *work* (rather than as emerging automatically or naturally from the operation of the whole society or institution). These points are summarised in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Qualitative doubts about normative functionalism

[p. 92 ↓]

In my view, these ideas coming out of qualitative research about the nature of social life, are sound, and they carry important implications for the role of all social enquiry in relation to policymaking and practice. They count against any idea that social

researchers can function in the way that technicians or medical personnel are often believed to do: identifying problems and prescribing remedies for them on the basis of research evidence; thereby simultaneously demonstrating their own 'value for money'.

Alternatives to the engineering or medical model

The engineering model has traditionally been contrasted with the enlightenment model. The latter sees research as rarely having immediate and determinate effects on practice, for example by providing solutions to specific problems. Rather, it has an impact by shaping how practitioners view the world, and thereby how they conceptualise problems. Indeed, it may even show that there are problems of which practitioners are unaware; or demonstrate that what was thought to be a problem is not one, or is not of the kind assumed. Thus, Weiss argues that: 'Social science provides an angle of vision, a focus for looking at the world. It is a source of illumination on the rich details and tangled interrelations in that world. Whatever else it may or may not do, it serves a global function of enlightenment' (Weiss 1977:17). Moreover, she and others have shown that empirically this is closer to the way in which social research has actually influenced policymakers: there is little evidence of it operating in the way that the engineering model suggests (Weiss 1980). And advocates of the enlightenment model have usually argued on this basis that the engineering model involves unrealistic or inappropriate expectations.

However, as I indicated in Chapter 2, the notion of enlightenment is open to diverse interpretations, and some of them are not as different from the engineering model as they at first appear. Indeed, there is a problem with the very term 'enlightenment'. In particular, it could be taken to imply that research supplies the light which enables practitioners to do their work, suggesting that without it they would be, and previously have been, in the dark. Many researchers may be tempted to accept this view, especially in relation to policymakers: it is not uncommon for researchers to see policymakers as prejudiced, as relying on conservative assumptions, as incompetent, etc.¹³ But this deficit model is misleading. It is not far from the dope theory of human

beings that I mentioned earlier. It denies the practical rationality of actors. And it ascribes a level of superiority to research knowledge that would be difficult to defend.

What this problem with the enlightenment model points to is that there can be variation in the nature of the enlightenment that research is taken to provide, and also differences in view about whether it is the *only* source of illumination. One aspect of this concerns variation in the comprehensiveness [p. 93 ↓] of what is supplied: whether research provides specific items of knowledge or a whole worldview. Moreover, this dimension crosscuts the distinction between engineering and enlightenment models. Figure 4.2 outlines this.

I will not spend much time discussing the engineering model row of this diagram. At one extreme, we have the researcher setting out to answer specific questions from some client. An obvious example would be a great deal of work in opinion polling and market research. At the other extreme is the kind of approach represented by Lewin's action research, where scientific method is taken as a model for rational action of other kinds (see Lewin 1948:ch. 13 and Marrow 1969).¹⁴ However, what is involved here is, at most, a difference of degree. Thus, the researcher as moderniser usually also provides specific items of knowledge along with a new way of thinking. Conversely, there is a sense in which even the supply of specific information or techniques always carries with it some perspective on the world, and an associated mode of operation; so that to one degree or another it remakes or reconfigures the world in which it is used. This is the import of some recent work in the sociology of technology (Woolgar 2000).

Turning to the distinction between the two versions of the [p. 94 ↓] enlightenment model included in Figure 4.2, this needs more elaboration, though once again we are probably dealing with a matter of degree. Here I have made use of terminology which is to be found in some recent discussions of the role of the intellectual: the distinction between the public, grand or universal intellectual, on the one hand, and the specific intellectual, on the other (see Jennings 1997). This relates to a difference in what is supplied; though it also partly concerns variation in the power or authority of the researcher as against practitioners, including political activists.

Figure 4.2 A dimension cross-cutting the contrast between engineering and strong enlightenment models

So, in the bottom right-hand cell of Figure 4.2, we have the researcher as public intellectual.¹⁵ This relies on what I have referred to elsewhere as the strong enlightenment model (see Chapter 2). The most influential examples of this approach are Marxism and what has come to be called the 'critical' tradition - based in part on critical theory, but also informed by feminism and anti-racism.¹⁶ In this model, a distinctive perspective on the world is supplied by the researcher, designed to replace or at least transform what is viewed as commonsense ideology.

Now, what I want to point out is that this strong enlightenment position shares the functionalism which I identified as underpinning the engineering model. It has been cogently argued by Cohen, and others, that Marxism relies on a functionalist image of society (see Cohen 1978; see also Hargreaves 1982 and Hickox 1982). While there are differences among Marxists in their societal imagery, most retain some notion of capitalist society as a system composed of parts that serve the whole. And many critical researchers hold a similar view of society (see Harvey 1990). Thus, some colleagues and I have shown that much critical research in the field of educational inequalities relies on social reproduction theory. This is derived from Marxism, and is clearly functionalist in character. It *assumes* that schooling, like other parts of the system, functions in such a way as to reproduce the existing, unequal social order (Foster et al. 1996: 165-70). Of course, Marxists and critical researchers differ from non-Marxist functionalists in their *evaluation* of the functioning of extant society, and about the potential (if not always about the prospects) for change to a different type of system. But this takes place within an overall commitment to functionalism, at least in the minimal sense of that term I outlined earlier.

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is an important correspondence in image of social life between the engineering model and at least one version of the enlightenment model. Moreover, this lays the basis for some similarity in their conceptions of the role of social research in society. One of the models associated with Marxism is the party intellectual; and, in some key respects, there is a close parallel between this role and that of government adviser, which is associated with the engineering model. Indeed, if and when the party served by the intellectual comes to power even the superficial

differences may disappear. For both these roles, the task is to produce knowledge that will promote particular [p. 95 ↓] practical purposes: in other words, to assist with achieving politically defined goals. Of course, by no means all Marxists have been party intellectuals. But even in the case of ‘fellow-travelling’ intellectuals who maintain autonomy from political groupings, as exemplified by Jean-Paul Sartre for much of his life, there is usually close identification with the cause. And, very often, given the absence of any commitment to value neutrality, what is written and said is shaped by assumptions about the interests of that cause.¹⁷

Of course, *some* critical researchers reject *any* kind of ‘constructive’ role in relation to ‘power’, whether the power of a government or of an opposition party. For them, the task of research is to criticise, and thereby to destabilise, the status quo; irrespective of the shape or shade of the current socio-political regime. Alongside this, and sometimes under the influence of postmodernism, in recent times many critical researchers have renounced any claim to produce a grand theory or worldview that can provide a basis for change to a new type of society. Meta-narratives are frequently rejected as themselves oppressive - not least as legitimating oppression by public intellectuals, including those on the Left.¹⁸ In terms of Figure 4.2, what I have just described is a move from the bottom right-hand to the bottom left-hand cell: to the researcher as specific intellectual.

There is a variety of versions of the specific intellectual.¹⁹ Some of these seem, at times, to reject the functionalist model of society; as, for example, in the case of Foucault's Nietzschean conception of power, or of Lyotard's appropriation of the Wittgensteinian idea of language games. However, on my reading, neither of these authors abandons the reproduction model completely; it remains in the background and continues to guide their thinking. Indeed, sometimes post-structuralist and postmodernist thought seems to take the reproduction model to the ultimate extreme, in which even resistance is portrayed as necessarily a product of the system and as serving to maintain it (Bogard 1990).

As with the French sources of the idea of the specific intellectual, its Anglo-American reception has also tended to involve retention of the reproduction model.²⁰ An example is to be found in the work of Stephen Ball. In an article entitled ‘Intellectuals or

technicians?', which effectively contrasts the engineering and enlightenment models, he outlines what he takes to be the proper function of the educational researcher. While he criticises the reproduction model at one point (Ball 1995:257-8), he does not abandon it. Indeed, he presents an account of the way policy or engineering science functions which seems to accept that, along with associated institutional processes, it can turn society into a machine.²¹ He argues that the study of education operates as:

a disciplinary technology, part of the exercise of disciplinary power. Management, effectiveness and appraisal, for example, ... work together to locate individuals in space, in a hierarchical and efficiently visible organisation. [p. 96 ↓] In and through our research the school and the teacher are captured within a perfect diagram of power; and the classroom is increasingly one of those 'small theatres', in which 'each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (Foucault, 1979, p.200). It is thus that *governmentality* is achieved through the minute mechanisms of everyday life and the application of 'progressive' and efficient technical solutions to designated problems (Foucault, 1979, p.20). (Ball 1995:262-3)

The implication seems to be that educational research, at least of a certain kind, participates in the exercise of massive control over the fine detail of people's lives. The image is of their being trained to behave in ways that predictably serve the dominant requirements. Here, disciplinary technologies and ideological subjection play much the same explanatory role as prior socialisation did in normative functionalism; and, once again, society is portrayed as having a very high level of structural integration.²²

Ball contrasts the proper role of the researcher with that of technician, which is associated with policy science. The researcher should be concerned with the production of theory, whose function, Ball claims, is 'destructive, disruptive and violent'; it offers 'a language for challenge, and modes of thought other than those articulated for us by dominant others' (ibid.:266). Thus, it allows us to work: '“on and against” prevailing practices of ideological subjection' (ibid.:267). In other words, the researcher is to be a 'semiotic guerrilla' (ibid.:268).

In effect, here the concept of functionality is retained from the engineering model, but its value is inverted. Where, under the engineering model, the task of the researcher was to facilitate the smooth running of the social machine, for Ball it is to throw spanners in the works. Yet the underlying model of society is much the same. And I think this is true of many accounts of the role of the specific intellectual.

So, I am claiming that both versions of the enlightenment model included in Figure 4.2, linked to the grand and specific models of the intellectual respectively, are at odds with the image of social life that I suggested comes out of much qualitative research. Given this, the latter must imply a different model of how research can relate to practice. This is what I referred to in Chapter 2 as the moderate enlightenment model. However, in some ways, this terminology may be misleading because it suggests that the difference from strong enlightenment is only a matter of degree; whereas there is an important substantive difference in social imagery involved. In order to emphasise this here, I will give this fifth model a new title: the cognitive resources model (see Figure 4.3).

The cognitive resources model assumes a much weaker and less determinate relationship between the products of research and policy-making or practice than the other four models. It insists that there are no practical implications *built into* the descriptions, explanations, and theories produced by research. Such implications can only be derived by [p. 97 ↓] adding value premises. Moreover, it is assumed by this model that research will not be the only source of cognitive resources on which practitioners rely. The idea is rejected that research can provide a replacement for, or transformation of, knowledge deriving from practical experience; an idea which is shared in common by those versions of the engineering and enlightenment models in the right-hand column of Figure 4.3. At most, the knowledge produced by research can only provide a corrective; and practitioners' judgements concerning whether to change their assumptions about the world on the basis of research findings are [p. 98 ↓] necessarily complex, and are not solely a matter of the validity of those assumptions; at least, not as judged in research terms. All of this implies that the effects of research on policymaking or practice will not be predictable or, usually, very dramatic.²³

Figure 4.3 The engineering, strong enlightenment, and cognitive resources models

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that built into the engineering and medical models - which underpin current pressure for educational research to be more directly useful to policymakers and practitioners - is a kind of functionalism. This treats national societies or social institutions as functioning wholes, and their parts are analysed in terms of how well they contribute to the operation of the whole. I suggested that this image of social life is at odds with the ideas associated with much qualitative research. Qualitative researchers do not usually focus primarily at the national level. Instead their work emphasises other levels and forms of social organisation. They question the regularity conception of causality that seems to underlie functionalism; with its idea that society is characterised by a high degree of structural integration generated by a high level of social integration. Indeed, when not denying the existence of *any* kind of causality in the social world, qualitative researchers adopt a rather different conception of it; for example one which stresses the way in which causal factors operate at different points in time, generating contingent courses of events, which can lead to a variety of outcomes. Even more fundamentally, they emphasise the role of interpretation in social interaction, and in some cases this is seen as leading to a plurality of perspectives and to conflict. So, structural integration is not regarded as automatic, or even as normal in a statistical sense; and when it does occur it is not produced simply by social integration, but by processes of adaptation and negotiation, in other words by local work on the part of particular social actors.

In the second half of the chapter I argued that the usual contrast between the engineering and enlightenment models is more complicated than it is usually taken to be. I suggested, initially, that we can identify two versions of each of these models, varying according to whether what is supplied is specific information or a comprehensive theory or worldview. Furthermore, I argued that the two forms of the enlightenment model that this picks out both share the functionalism of the engineering model. In response to this, I outlined a fifth model, one which matches the assumptions that I identified as associated with qualitative research, assumptions which I believe to be sound. I referred to this as the cognitive resources model, suggesting that it not only captures the way in which social research currently influences policymaking and

practice, but also implies that no major transformation of this relationship is likely to be possible. In other words, my argument is that researchers cannot be technicians, legislators or revolutionaries. And I [p. 99 ↓] suggest that the sooner this is recognised the better it will be for all concerned.

Notes

1. It is important to note, here, that it is not just qualitative research that does not provide statistically generalisable findings; neither does experimental research.
2. In an endnote Oakley recognises that this is only true where the primary concern is with 'effectiveness', but her whole book privileges that primary concern.
3. It is perhaps worth quoting from Charlton's discussion: 'Comte is a scientist in a hurry, and his desire for quick results leads him to accept easy results. In the last resort, he prefers false laws to no laws at all' (Charlton 1959:42). David Blunkett and other advocates of evidence-based practice seem likely to be subject to the same temptation.
4. Bulmer notes how the models of engineer and doctor operate more or less as substitutes within the literature on the uses of social research (Bulmer 1982:43). And, indeed, the medical model was also drawn on by Comte: in places he sees the sociologist as the doctor of society, diagnosing social ills and giving prescriptions, see Charlton (1959:47).
5. On conflict theory, see for example Bailey (1969) and Cohen (1974). On negotiated order theory, see Strauss (1978). On social arena or social world theory, see Clarke (1991). The key proponent of dramaturgy was, of course, Goffman (see Goffman 1959 and 1975). On community as an ecology of games, see Long (1958). Evans-Pritchard moves in the direction of seeing social life as narrative history, but others have taken this further. See, for example, Shotter and Gergen (1989).
6. The distinction between structural and social integration is a modification of that between system and social integration found in Lockwood (1964). This distinction,

though not the terminology, comes from Marxism. For an elaboration, in the context of 'analytical dualism', see Archer (1996).

7. For various criticisms of normative functionalism, see Demerath and Peterson (1967). The role of values in functionalist analyses was recognised by some of its proponents, see Fallding (1963).

8. Interestingly, Matza argues that some functionalism also has an appreciative element: those accounts which show the functionality of what is denounced from a conventional, moralistic perspective - such as organised crime and prostitution (see Matza 1969:31-7).

9. The phrases 'forces of conservatism' and a 'culture of mediocrity' were used by the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Tony Blair, in speeches in the late 1990s.

10. This is an area where, in my view, some recent qualitative research has departed from a basic and important principle (see Hammersley 1998b and 2000c:ch. 5).

11. This view of causation is not unique to qualitative researchers. A version of it was put forward by Stephen Jay Gould in his account of evolution (see Gould 1989). Furthermore, it would be accepted by many quantitative researchers. However, as Becker points out, currently available quantitative techniques for causal analysis cannot take this temporal character of causation into account; though there are some sociologists seeking to develop alternative models that will do so (see, for instance, Abbott 1992 and 1998).

[p. 100 ↓]

12. Goffman's work on total institutions is relevant here (see Goffman 1961:60-5 and *passim*).

13. There are elements of this, for example, in Finch's discussion of the relationship between qualitative research and social and educational policy (Finch 1986).

14. I have suggested that something similar to this second view informs some later versions of action research in the field of education, albeit drawing on a very different notion of research rationality (see Hammersley 1993).
15. For recent discussions of the perils of the public intellectual in the second half of the twentieth century, and responses to them, see Goodson (1999), Fuller (1999) and Smyth and Hattam (2000).
16. By no means all critical researchers adhere to the strong enlightenment model, as we shall see.
17. See Sartre (1949), Judt (1992) and Weightman (1993). See also Watson's discussion of English intellectuals' responses to knowledge about Soviet work camps (Watson 1973).
18. It is important to remember that post-structuralism and postmodernism in France were in large part reactions against Marxism, usually from the ultra Left (see Dews 1986).
19. See, for example, Foucault and Deleuze (1972) and Kristeva (1977). On this aspect of Foucault's work, see Jennings (1997). On Lyotard's view of the role of the intellectual, see Readings (1991).
20. Often it seems to be used as a new language in which to present that theory, one whose obscurity serves as a way of not facing up to the problems associated with Marxism. A curious feature of the Anglo-American reception of post-structuralism and postmodernism is its tendency to neglect French critiques (many of which have been translated, for example Ferry and Renaut 1990 and 1997) and even the critical Anglo-American secondary literature (see, for instance, Dews 1987); and to ignore the quite different intellectual trends that have prevailed in France for the past 30 years (see Lilla 1994).
21. On the notion of policy science, see Fay (1975). This conforms closely to the engineering model.

22. In one place Foucault characterises power as ‘a machine in which everyone is caught up’ (Foucault 1980:156). This is quoted by Merquior (1985:114), who also discusses the spurious distinction drawn by Foucault and his defenders between a disciplinary and a disciplined society. Of course, Foucault recognises that power not only constrains but also enables, and that it generates resistance; but there is little coherence or clarity in his account of the operation of power (Merquior 1985:ch. 8). Brenner reinforces this, arguing that Foucault's work displays a form of functionalism. He quotes Elster to the effect that there is a tendency ‘to see every minute detail of social action as part of a vast design for oppression’ (Elster 1982:454-5, quoted in Brenner 1994:700). Curiously, Ball has shown elsewhere that policies do *not* have determinate effects, that they are reinterpreted and negotiated over the course of their implementation (Bowe et al. 1992; Ball 1994). And this account is compatible with the assumptions I have suggested are implicit in qualitative research; whereas his discussion of the role of policy science in disciplining society is not.

23. It is a peculiar irony of intellectual history that the most devastating critique of the engineering and strong enlightenment models was written by an author who is often blamed for inspiring the new public management that currently threatens social research (see, for example, Ball 1997:259). In *The CounterRevolution of Science: studies in the abuse of reason*, Friedrich Hayek criticises [p. 101 ↓] the kind of positivism put forward by Comte, describing it as ‘the religion of the engineers’ (Hayek 1952). He argues that it misunderstands both the nature of social science and the character of the social world. Furthermore, the image of society Hayek adopts is not far from the one I have suggested is embodied in much qualitative research. He emphasises the role of subjective factors and the sense in which social order emerges out of the activities of individuals. At one point, he comments that the ‘presumptuous aspiration that “reason” should direct its own growth’ is a direct outcome of ‘a misunderstood or misapplied rationalism which fails to recognize the extent to which individual reason is a product of inter-individual relationships’ (ibid.:90-1). And he is very resistant to mechanical and organismic metaphors in thinking about society. Of course, for him the market is the central social institution, and he attributes to it a unique capacity to generate innovation and maintain freedom that few qualitative researchers would accept; and rightly so. Nevertheless his ideas deserve attention rather than instant dismissal. Interestingly, one writer has described Hayek's thought

as bordering on postmodernism, in the sense that he questions 'both the Cartesian individualism commonly exhibited in neoclassical economics and the holistic social theory characteristic of traditional Marxism' (Burczak 1994:37).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781849209083.n4>