Qualitative Research in the UK: Short-Term Problems, Long-Term Issues

Harry Torrance, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

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Abstract

There are disagreements about, and contradictory indications of, the state of qualitative inquiry as a global endeavour. The paper argues that these disagreements rather miss the point. The issue is not whether or not qualitative approaches to social research are developing across disciplines and continuing to receive funding, but rather to what purposes are qualitative methods being put? What research agendas are being pursued, and who sets them? The paper illustrates these issues with respect to the effects of research selectivity and concentration in the UK and argues that qualitative research should continue to develop as an iuntellectual resource for the community rather than as a technical service to government.

Introduction

There are disagreements about, and contradictory indications of, the state of qualitative

inquiry as a global endeavour. Denzin (2010a, b), for example, argues that qualitative inquiry

faces a global onslaught from conservative and neo-liberal critics, especially in the field of

educational research, and especially in the United States following the writing into legislation

of the requirement for federal educational research funding to be allocated to so-called

'scientific' research (REA 1999, NCLB 2002, NRC 2002). 'Scientific' research has been

extensively defined in US legislation, and includes reference to "measurements or

observational methods that provide reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers…

evaluated using experimental or quasi experimental designs…with a preference for random

assignment experiments…" (NCLB 2002, 1965). The argument of critics is that qualitative

research is not scientific, or not scientific enough, and cannot produce definitive evidence

about 'what works' in social policy interventions. Qualitative research produces too many

disconnected, non-cumulative studies that do not provide convincing evidence for central

policy-making. What is required is the 'gold standard' of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) for establishing cause and effect in social programs.

Such criticism is not confined to the USA. In a speech to the UK's Economic and Social Research Council in 2000, titled "Influence or Irrelevance" the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett (2000), asserted that

> Many feel that too much social science research is inward-looking, too piecemeal, rather than helping to build knowledge in a cumulative way, and fails to focus on the key issues of concern to policy-makers, practitioners and the public (p.1).

More recently, similar arguments have arisen once again in a paper from the UK Department for Education. In language paralleling the US debate, the paper asserts that randomized assignment of treatment to samples is the most appropriate way to conduct research in general, educational research in particular, and that more experimental research should be undertaken in education, specifically via RCTs (Goldacre 2013). Such criticisms combine critique of methods employed, with critique of purposes pursued, arguing that social research in general, qualitative approaches to social and educational research in particular, are not responsive enough to the needs of government.

So significant challenges to qualitative inquiry are apparent, but others are more cautious in their assessment of these challenges. Fielding (2010) for example shares Denzin's concerns with respect to 'the dirigisme and anti-intellectualism of the gold standards lobby' (p.127) but notes that circumstances vary internationally and that threats to qualitative research should not simply be read from a North American perspective. Others still, argue that qualitative inquiry is healthy, diverse and growing, both geographically in terms of its global reach, and in terms of its diffusion across disciplines and across applied research fields such as

education, health, business and so forth (Atkinson and Delamont 2006). A key point that Atklinson and Delamont (2006) make is that qualitative research is still widely funded in countries such as the UK (though, as noted above with Goldacre's (2013) paper for the UK Department of Education, the terms of the debate may be changing in the UK). Delamont and Atkinson (2012) also note the development of a number of successful interdisciplinary journals in the field (e.g. *Qualitative Inquiry* based in the USA, and *Qualitative Research* based in the UK) along with increases in the numbers of issues per year of these journals and thus the numbers of papers published. They also note the continuously expanding market for qualitative research methods texts and sourcebooks such as Sage Handbooks and Major Works, not least Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, now in its fourth edition (2011).

There are some disagreements in the field then, in some respects representing different interpretations of the prospects for qualitative inquiry in the USA and the UK. However, what I want to argue in this paper is that these disagreements rather miss the point. The issue is not whether or not qualitative approaches to social research are developing across disciplines and continuing to receive funding and policy attention in diverse countries around the world, but rather to what purposes are qualitative methods being put? What research agendas are being pursued, and who sets them? It is clear that qualitative methods are indeed being taken up widely across regions and disciplines, with the scale and scope of the annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) from which this special issue derives being part of the positive evidence. It is also undeniable that, internationally, social research in general, qualitative approaches to social and educational research in particular, have been under very specific attack for fifteen year or more (Hargreaves 1996, Tooley and Darby 1998, Blunkett 2000, NRC 2002). Criticism is manifested in different ways, and with different levels of

severity, in different countries and different disciplines. The pressure derives from concerns about the quality and the utility of social and educational research more generally, not just concerns about qualitative approaches (c.f. Hillage et. al. 1998, Blunkett 2000, Oakley 2000, 2003, Yates 2004). It also derives from an increased government focus on value-for-money in research, and how social research might better serve social policy (Torrance 2011).

Qualitative methods of inquiry can be seen to play to this policy and utility agenda as much as to a social justice agenda, or indeed a disinterested scientific agenda. Qualitative methods can be deployed in policy-driven research as well as in more open-ended inquiry, and thus may survive and even prosper, but not necessarily in ways that all qualitative researchers will welcome. Researchers and evaluators in many applied research fields including health care and education have noted the reduced timescales now associated with qualitative work, and the narrowness of many research agendas being pursued (Meyer 2005, Giddings 2006, Torrance 2011). This is also the case in what we might term the more traditional disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Mills and Radcliffe (2012) report on the increasingly truncated timescales for anthropological fieldwork and the use of a more limited range of ethnographic methods among 'freelance development consultants' (p.149) and in development agencies such as the World Bank. Thus while it can be argued that qualitative research remains widely supported, the form that such research takes might be said to be somewhat limited, and even of poor quality, given arguments for exploratory and extensive field immersion that are apparent in many ethnographic textbooks.

Such an orientation towards the use of qualitative methods is apparent in a range of policy development settings and intervention agencies. Thus for example, Valerie Caracelli (2006), writing from the perspective of the US Government Accountability Office, argues for the

inclusion of qualitative methods in evaluation studies "to assure contextual understanding" (p. 84). She states that:

> Recently, there has been an acknowledgement about how ethnographic studies can inform agency actions and how it can be used to study culture in organisations (p.87).

However whether truncated timescales and narrow policy agendas can be easily reconciled with the theory and practice of 'ethnographic studies' is a moot point. Moreover studying 'culture in organisations', in order to 'inform agency actions' seems to suggest the utilization of qualitative inquiry as as technology of government, rather than as an approach to understanding emergent issues that policy may not want to address.

A recent UK Cabinet Office report produced in the context of the move toward evidence-informed policy and practice presented guidelines for judging the quality of qualitative approaches and methods. Interestingly, one of the key quotes in the report used to justify the use of qualitative methods comes not from the epistemological or methodological literature, but from a civil servant, a government department "research manager":

> I often commission qualitative research when it's about users or stakeholders and . . . I want to understand . . . how a user is likely to respond. . . . I want to know how they see the world…it's a wonderful vehicle . . . if you want to understand the motives of people. (Cabinet Office 2003 p. 34).

So agencies and policy makers on both sides of the Atlantic value qualitative research for the insight it can provide into the "culture" of organisations and the "motives" of the people who work in them. As a result qualitative methods might well be used more extensively than critics such as Denzin allow, but for what purpose, and at what cost to the quality of the resulting research?

Research selectivity and concentration: nationalising UK social science?

It is in this context of the potential co-option of qualitative inquiry to the agendas of policy that I want to focus on a particular sub-issue of this wider debate: that of research selectivity and concentration in the UK and its implications for qualitative research methods. Significant changes are being enacted in the UK, with regard to university finance, governance and the nature of scholarly activity, that carry potentially very severe implications for the practice of social research in general, and for qualitative approaches to research in particular. There is an argument that social research is increasingly being nationalised and corporatized in the UK – seen by many social researchers as well as policymakers as an arm of government and more important to universities for its income-generating potential than for its contribution to knowledge and the public good. Thus arguments about whether or not qualitative approaches to research remain popular are rather irrelevant. What is at stake is the legitimacy and quality of the research which is being undertaken, and the purposes to which it is being put. As noted above, policymakers, and some social science scholars themselves, have argued that social and educational research, particularly qualitative research, is too often conceived and conducted as a small scale 'cottage industry', producing too many small scale, non-cumulative studies which do not provide firm evidence for decision-making. It is axiomatic to such criticisms that providing evidence for policymaking is indeed the proper role for social science.

Additionally, governments around the world are seeking better value for money from their investment in research and university teaching, and this has involved restricting and focusing resource allocation. Selectivity and concentration of research resources are particularly being pursued in the UK. The Conservative dominated coalition government is cutting public spending in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis and global recession; so there are fewer

resources available for research than might otherwise have been the case, and selectivity and concentration have become even more severe in the UK over the last couple of years. Concentration of research is effected both through focused core allocations from the higher education funding agencies and through highly competitive bidding to research councils and foundations as described below. Success leads to further success and to relatively few universities securing the overwhelming majority of available funding. This in turn produces the issue of universities seeking research funding first and foremost for their own corporate survival, rather than for the public benefits that may accrue. It also leads to social research becoming part of a nationalized approach to managing national social problems, rather than being part of an international (scientific) community pursuing better understanding of the nature of social problems and what produces them.

Funding agencies and individual universities are now concentrating resources on fewer research units and programs, and are taking decisions to develop a 'big science' model of social science. This is being pursued by funders supporting fewer, larger projects, with explicit policy encouragement for researchers to develop cross-institutional, mixed method approaches, to address the supposedly 'big issues' of our time: health and well being, an aging population, sustainable growth, and so forth. These issues are indeed important, and research evidence should be produced to interrogate and inform public debate. But such issues are being presented as part of a common-sense, taken-for-granted trade-off of government funding in exchange for social scientists serving policy. Critique, diversity of perspective, and the insight into complexity which detailed qualitative studies can provide are potentially being marginalized. Social science is being reconceptualised as a technical service to government rather than developed as a democratic intellectual resource for the community.

The remainder of the paper will provide some brief illustrative examples of policy initiatives and how this change is being accomplished.

Funding universities

University policy and funding is located in the UK government department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – evidence in itself of where government priorities lie. Universities are not housed in the Department for Education (DfE). A recent BIS White Paper (i.e. a policy statement framing legislation) stated quite clearly that "we intend to maximize the impact of our research base on economic growth" (p. iv). It went on:

> To compete effectively the UK must harness its strengths in…research…and its
>
> expertise in areas such as design and behavioural science… (BIS 2011 p.6).

In essence the White Paper argues that investment in research should be oriented to those areas that promise most economic return, with "behavioural science" being deployed to understand and change people's behaviour in relation to key threats to economic development such as poor health and global security. Moreover the White Paper goes on to assert that major social and economic challenges "can only be resolved through interdisciplinary collaboration" (p.20) and thus government will "actively support strong collaborations" (p.8) across disciplines and institutions. Research, including social research, will be marshaled and directed in the national economic interest.

Such policy discourse then sets the tone for the activities of intermediary agencies such as research funding councils and individual universities. While individual research councils can set their own agenda, their budgets derive from government (BIS) are unlikely to stray too far from policy imperatives. Similarly universities, while independent, must compete for specific

forms of funding under common national rules and thus common institutional structures of research prioritization, monitoring and compliance emerge across institutions.

Funding research

Research in UK universities is funded in a variety of ways:

Directly by government via the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) through separate and distinct funding allocations being given for research and some elements of teaching (principally expensive laboratory subjects in the medical and natural sciences);

and indirectly through individual scholars and consortia bidding competitively for research grants from government funded research councils (in the case of social science this is the Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC).

Universities can also generate additional 'soft money' research income from winning other research grants and contracts from charities, foundations, individual government departments, the European Union and so forth[1].

The research allocation which universities receive from the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) is based on quality ratings derived from an accountability exercise originally called the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and now known in its current iteration as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). As a result of these exercises funding has become highly concentrated in historically elite institutions, with, for example, only four universities receiving 32% of all HEFC research funding in 2009-10, and 25 universities receiving 75% of funding (out of 120 universities in the UK, Aston & Shutt 2009). Of course it might be argued that *not* receiving such funding is not necessarily such a bad thing, since it leaves the majority of universities outside the mainstream funding agenda and thus outside

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[1] Universities also receive income from student fees for tuition, much of which is government supported by a student loan system.

this particular mechanism of government control. However the mainstream agenda remains dominant since university managers simply cannot ignore it. Some research success, however small, is regarded as better than none, especially with respect to the reputational gains associated with research activity and associated student fee income. For all practical purposes, when it comes to research funding in the UK, the REF is the only game in town.

Clearly, this level of selectivity begs serious issues for university finance, management and governance. Moreover the current exercise, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) undertaken in 2013 with results announced at the end of 2014, will allocate quality grades on the basis of a weighted profile of:

65% Research Outputs (i.e. quality of publications);

20% Research Impact (i.e impact of the research on economic, social and cultural activity);

15% Research Environment (i.e. numbers and value of research grants won, numbers of research students registered and PhDs awarded).

The pursuit and measurement of 'Impact' is likely to drive research activity further towards applied and policy-oriented research. Moreover the pursuit of specific research tenders and contracts is also likely to be increasingly emphasized by individual universities, as noted above, both to fill gaps in core funding left by increasing selectivity and concentration, and to maximize the metrics available for the 'Environment' element of the profile.

So this element of core research funding, derived from the Higher Education Funding Council, which is intended to provide the underpinning platform for basic university research, is becoming increasingly selective and concentrated, and is now being significantly oriented towards applied rather than basic research. Thus while, technically, the agenda for this

research activity remains under the control of individual scholars and research groups, increasingly they need to think about developing research programs which fit with government, university and departmental priorities, in order to maximize quality gradings and income. In turn universities and departments are developing strategies and programs to manage the REF accountability procedures, and research impact and environment issues more generally, such that research is becoming an increasingly planned, bureaucratized and managed activity. Ironically, given the current emphasis in some quarters on the 'gold standard' of scientific method, university research is ceasing to be scientific in the sense of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and becoming a corporate, commercial activity undertaken on behalf of individual universities themselves and their financial survival. In turn, the social relations of research within universities and departments are changing.

It might of course be argued that 'twas ever thus' – universities have always had to fund their activities and individual scholars and research groups have always had to manage and mediate the relationship between funding opportunities and the research that they think is important to design and undertake. My argument is that this balance of calculation is under severe pressure in the UK at the present time – both with respect to the overall funding available and with respect to the position of qualitative research activity within this funding environment. It might be further argued that this balance should change, and that the pursuit of more applied policy-oriented research should be undertaken; a second paper could be written about the issues at stake and the arguments deployed. My point for moment however, is simply that such change does indeed seem to be occurring.

Funding social science

Still, to reiterate, in principle the research agenda pursued with this funding regime remains under the control of faculty and research groups. However, another irony of the current situation in the UK is that, if anything, the funding strategy of the research council - the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – further compounds the problem rather than providing any sort of counter weight. In principle the ESRC is an 'arms length' body, independent of government, allocating awards for excellent social science research in response to competitive bids refereed by peer review. It might be thought, therefore, that the ESRC's agenda would reflect the research agenda of the social scientific community as a whole. However all research council funding derives from government (via BIS) and as such is clearly influenced by government priorities; the ESRC is no exception. The ESRC shapes the content of the social science research agenda much more directly than government policy, but does so in large part, because its funds derive from government. Again, of course, there are many intermediary processes and activities, with ESRC officials seeking to maximize funding available in difficult times, in return for responding to government priorities. Likewise peers review proposals on merit (in-so-far-as peers, who are also competitors, *can* review proposals on merit) but these proposals have already been produced in response to priority areas and specific funding calls.

The ESRC works within the context of an overarching cross-research council strategy. There are seven research councils in the UK, distributing funds across the natural and social sciences, humanities, and medicine. Each council has become progressively more managerial over recent years, not simply responding to bids from the scholarly community for funding, but actively shaping the agenda around which bids can be made – establishing priorities and issuing specific calls for proposals, as noted above. It is not clear what authority or mandate

they have for this – other than the reality of power which proximity to government and associated disbursement of funds brings. A central core of permanent administrative staff, along with key senior academics, develop and disseminate research policy in their respective fields. Their overarching body – Research Councils UK (RCUK) – in its "Strategic Vision" for 2011-2015 argues that:

> Public investment in research is an investment in the nation. It ensures…a productive economy, healthy society and …a sustainable world…[ ]…Our research will contribute…to enhancing economic growth…[ ]…we will…steer collaboration amongst research organizations…leading to greater research concentration…[ ]…Focusing research to produce impact for a productive economy, healthy society and a sustainable world…" (RCUK 2011, pp. 2, 3, 4 & 6)

It is interesting to note that the document refers to the work that it funds as '*our* research' – indicating very powerfully the way in which RCUK perceives the relationship between research councils and individual researchers and research groups. The agency does not see itself as a buffer between government and independent research(ers), supporting the work of the broader scientific community, but rather as a sponsor with implicit ownership over the knowledge produced. Overall the document reflects a basic assumption that research can and should feed the decision-making of a taken-for-granted, completely benign, technocratic government.

In turn, the ESRC's "Strategic Plan 2009-2014" is titled "Delivering Impact Through Social Science". Its associated "Delivery Plan 2011-2015" states:

> The ESRC is…identifying and addressing key societal challenges and co-ordinating the national social science research infrastructure…we will:
>
> Align and shape our strategic research investment in three priority areas:

Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth;

Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions; and

A Fair and Vibrant Society…

[We will] Focus our resources on longer, larger grants…

Invest in future leaders…

Concentrate PhD training in the best centres… (ESRC 2011 p.2)

Total funding available is restricted, so longer, larger grants also means fewer grants being awarded, bringing yet further concentration, to go with the concentration of HEFC research funding, and selective recognition of PhD training for ESRC support.

The assumptions embedded in this statement of strategy reflect the development of an institution which sees itself governing social science rather than supporting it – defining priorities, selecting "future leaders" and concentrating PhD training in a few selected centres so that those leaders are in any case selected from an increasingly narrow institutional and intellectual base. The use of the term "training" for the development of future scholars also seems indicative of a directive rather than a supportive role. The "Deliver Plan" goes on to address this specifically and states:

We will develop national capability through:

…Broadening the skill of all social science PhD students by emphasizing transferable (employability) skills training…We will require institutions to provide training on core topics such as impact, public engagement and media training…to ensure the continuing pipeline of excellent researchers for the Nation

(ESRC 2011 p.10; capital 'N' for Nation is used in the original).

The Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan also identify a need for the longer, larger projects to be interdisciplinary and involve cross-institutional collaborations which are defined as "essential in studying and resolving complex challenges" (ESRC 2009, p.1). In effect social science is being re-conceived and re-structured as the "behavioural science" arm of government, so that social science can 'influence behavior and inform interventions'.

It might be argued that because ESRC's budget and level of activity is very small when compared with overall funding for social science in the UK, its influence will be similarly small. The ESRC budget is c. £166M in 2014/15 (ESRC 2011). The total 'science' budget for UK higher education is £4.6B (ASS 2013). Detailed breakdowns between different natural and social science allocations are difficult to identify but it is likely that ESRC does not fund more than 10% of overall social science teaching and research activity including that supported from student fees. Thus, again, there is a case for suggesting that most UK social science research is beyond the reach of ESRC and, in turn, government policy agendas. But, as with the REF, influence far exceeds scale of activity, as universities and research groups seek to bid for research council funding despite success rates dipping well below 20%, and develop postgraduate training activities to mirror ESRC provision so that they are not excluded from future funding possibilities. Nevertheless further concentration of funding might be construed as an opportunity as well as a challenge for qualitative social research, to reach out to community support and other forms of charitable, foundation and European Union funding. An interestingly critical issue for the current policy of selectivity concentration is at what point might the nationally state-supported funding base shrink so low that the research council's influence over the sector as a whole will disappear?

Furthermore, there is a separate paper to be written about whether or not, and if so in what ways, social science *should* develop so that it can 'influence behavior and inform interventions' on behalf of government. Many would argue that social science should engage more directly with the public and help to inform democratic debate and decision-making, though such activity is not necessarily co-terminous with simply acting in response to and in support of government policy (see Torrance 2011 for a longer exploration of these issues). Likewise, with respect to the content of research 'training', some would point to statistics indicating that only around 20% of research council supported research students secure academic posts in universities and thus a wider training in 'employability' is important (Vitae 2010). Yet by the same token the statistics indicate that 80% go on to work in research-related and more general administrative, teaching and managerial roles in other public sector, charitable and commercial organisations. If these figures are accurate then not only is such a problem not the responsibility of ESRC to solve, it is not actually a problem at all, since PhD graduates are already securing employment outside academia and the influence of social science training could be said to be extending well beyond university departments. In fact students often value these broader elements of their doctoral programs as academic employment opportunities are so limited. Nevertheless time spent on 'public engagement' and 'media training' is time not spent on fieldwork and data analysis – the core of any qualitative research training. These matters are not necessarily clear-cut, but my point for the moment is simply that these developments are shaping social science in general in the UK at the present time, qualitative educational and social research in particular.

Short term consequences and implications

The first and most obvious consequence is that relatively small scale funding to undertake specific qualitative and case study-type work is no longer available from ESRC. Hitherto

ESRC ran a specific 'small grant' scheme (under £50K total budget) which was able to accommodate small scale exploratory investigations, pilot projects and post-doc projects from early career researchers. It was particularly suitable for supporting individual scholars to undertake detailed case study work over the period of a year or eighteen months, by 'buying their time' to concentrate on research for short periods; and of course because the grants were small, more could be funded. In the absence of knowing in advance which project would show most theoretical and empirical advance, funding more small scale projects seems sensible. This support is no longer available. The smallest 'open call' grant now available is £200K – still modest by international standards – but substantial enough to indicate that a larger scale mixed methods approach would be more likely to win funding when evaluated against 'value-for-money' criteria. Additionally ESRC used to support a 'first grant' scheme, which was similarly oriented, as the name implies, towards early career researchers who, again, often applied for small scale funding for qualitative work. This funding has been replaced by a scheme called the 'Future Research Leaders' scheme which involves a commitment to further training and leadership development-type activities, as well as undertaking a research project *per se*. Once more, the rhetoric of selectivity, concentration and corporate-style program leadership and management activity insinuates itself into the development and design of social research. (See ESRC's website for further details of their funding calls:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/index.aspx).

Thus qualitative work must now be conceived and proposed either in terms of much larger scale longitudinal ethnographic investigations (no bad thing, but not the same as a small first grant), or (and much more likely to attract funding) as part of a large scale, cross disciplinary and cross-institutional mixed methods research design. Again, involvement in such work is

no bad thing, and no doubt will contribute to the continuing popularity which Delamont and Atkinson (2006, 2012) claim for qualitative methods in the UK, but it should not be the only qualitative research that secures support. Moreover, when such large scale investigations are only funded because government wants to 'influence behavior and inform interventions', be they mixed method or ethnographic, and perhaps especially when they are ethnographic, then they beg many questions about the legitimate role of social science in a democracy. As noted above, qualitative research 'is a wonderful vehicle if you want to understand the motives of people'.

The key issues here comprise both the scale of endeavour now expected, and the control of the research agenda. Social scientists are being positioned, by government and by some leading members of the social science community as experts in social policy whose function is to respond to social problems. Again, social science should indeed be prepared to respond to social issues, but not to the exclusion of critical social inquiry. Furthermore the 'expertise' of the community depends on what we might term a hinterland of basic social theory and social research. From this hinterland expertise can be drawn and framed in response to particular issues – the move from basic to applied research. But if social science can *only* now act in relation to prescribed issues, problems and large scale empirical research designs then, over time, it will lose the ability to construct its objects of study independent of the context of inquiry. It will in effect cease to be social science in any meaningful sense.

With respect to the social relations of research, opportunities for early and mid career social scientists to develop their own intellectual trajectories are likely to decrease as areas of strategic investment are defined by funding agencies. Moreover large scale grants are likely only to be awarded to senior researchers who have a track record of managing and

'delivering' on previously funded work. Thus early career researchers must now attend to bidding for research grants, especially in areas of applied research, and look to secure collaborative funding with more senior colleagues. This is now a core feature of any social science career. Developing scholars must also become able to design impact strategies and build networks, including with policymakers as well as other scholars, in order to become included in collaborative (probably mixed method) research designs. In effect involvement in social research is being reconstructed as a technical and professional career, and indeed a quasi-governmental career, rather than as a contribution to science, or as an independent and critical service to the community and the democratic process. The very nature of the purposes and practices of social research is being changed.

My argument is not that that these matters are entirely novel or uncontentious. Social science has had an uneasy relationship with government funding for many years (cf. Nicolaus 1972, MacDonald 1974, House and Howe 1999). Similarly, outcomes are not easily determined. There are many mediating interpretations, actions and institutional processes between grandiose policy documents, often written first and foremost to secure funding rather than control it, and the activities of individual researchers and research groups. Yet the material and discursive context of interpretation and mediation means the direction of travel becomes ever more difficult to resist. Nor is my argument that none of these things should be happening; to reiterate, universities, research groups and individual scholars have always had to fund their work and certainly should be responsive to the needs of social policy development. However, responsiveness to policy and to wider contexts of action should take their proper place in the overall career trajectories of social researchers and scholars more generally. Intellectual curiosity, about how society operates and with what effects and consequences for individuals and social groups, must remain the driving force of social

science and scholarly activity. Otherwise it simply becomes a technology in service of government, rather than an independent and critical intellectual resource for democratic debate.

Longer term trends and prospects

A more general issue is whether or not the social science community is right to accept that proximity to government will necessarily ensure its sustainability. Part of the backcloth to the current debate is the uncertain status and legitimacy of both science *and* government at the present time. Government, and the process of mainstream electoral politics, is itself generally unpopular and under pressure 'to deliver', especially with respect to economic competence and with regard to the provision of public services. Can we always assume the benign intent and impact of government? What reasons are there for state intervention in the lives of ordinary citizens? How appropriate is it for social research to attempt to 'influence behaviour and inform interventions'?

It is at least arguable that government intervention can dis-empower communities, and it certainly locates agency in government and professional bureaucracies, including those of social science, rather than local communities. A different approach would involve social research helping to build communities' capacities to develop themselves, rather than simply providing evidence for central policymaking and the development and evaluation of government intervention programs. In this respect it may be the case that deriving legitimacy for social research from proximity to government is self-defeating. Such a strategy links social research to an inherently unpopular institution and at one and the same compromises the basic claim for the legitimacy of science – that of disinterested inquiry. Of course many qualitative researchers also want to pursue a social justice agenda, not just a social scientific

agenda. But here too, collaborating with local organisations, institutions and communities, rather than government, would seem to hold much more promise with respect to both the quality of the research and its potential 'impact' on social and economic life.

A second element of an alternative approach to the further development of qualitative research must be to maintain involvement in international networks and debates, and resist attempts to render qualitative research into a parochial set of research techniques to be pursued in the national interest. The use of qualitative research methods has a long and distinguished history in education and the social sciences. Discussions of qualitative methodology have been at the forefront of many decades of debate over whether, and if so in what ways, we can conduct enquiry and build knowledge in the social sciences. It might even be argued that it is qualitative methods, or perhaps, more generally, a qualitative sensibility and approach, that constantly questions the development of social research as a technology. The strengths of qualitative research are at their most manifest when used to address both the substantive topic under investigation *and* the way in which that topic is constituted and realised in action by the social processes at play. The phenomenon under study is not simply taken as given.

Thus local activity and development can draw intellectual sustenance from global debates. A key strength of a qualitative approaches to social research is face-to-face engagement with participants. This must be maintained as both an *ethical and political* strength, as well as an epistemological strength. Many recent international discussions of quality in qualitative research revolve around issues of engagement, deliberation, ethical process and responsiveness to participant agendas, along with the need to maintain a critical perspective on both the topic at hand and the power of particular forms of knowledge (Lincoln 1995,

Schwandt 1996, Lather 2004, 2010, Smith 2005). It is these strengths of a qualitative

approach that should be privileged in any discussion of their inclusion larger scale social

research activities, not in order to 'influence behaviour' (though influencing the behaviour of

policymakers might be no bad thing) but in order to maximise the possibilities for the

democratic development of research procedures. If research is to serve the periphery as much

as the centre, in political debate and decisionmaking, then engagement of research

participants in both setting the research agenda and evaluating the outcomes of the process

must be developed as central to the future development of social research methodology.

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