

OBJECTIVITY IN RESEARCH: NEGOTIATING A RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ROLE IN AN URBAN RENEWAL DEPARTMENT

David Seymour, Amjid Mahroof, John Rooke and Darryll Crook

School of Civil Engineering, University of Birmingham, B15 2TT

We describe efforts to negotiate a research role which, according to conventional standards, risks compromising objectivity because the researcher is required to play an organizational role. Given the particular nature of social research, an alternative conception of objectivity is proposed and a method for resolving the *objectivity/usefulness* tension is outlined.

Keywords: Objectivity, research methodology, social research

INTRODUCTION

Academics in construction management, in their efforts to acquire funding to do research, are required to demonstrate its relevance to practice, what benefits are likely to accrue and to state in precise terms the roles which they and their 'industrial partners' are to play. In our view, how to work out effective relations under these conditions is not well served by standard methodology textbooks which are usually based on research assumptions that are, at best, confused. Such assumptions present research as a special kind of activity which must be insulated from the concerns and activities of those who are the 'subjects' of the research if it is to achieve the necessary objectivity. Thus, action research and consultancy work are usually acknowledged but assigned a distinct status on the grounds that because they pursue some organizational aim, objectivity is necessarily compromised. In this paper we challenge this view and offer some thoughts on an alternative way to think about objectivity in order to clarify the nature of the relationship between researcher and researched. On the assumption that positivist notions of objectivity are not achievable in management research, we will propose an alternative conception of objectivity and a research method which may allow researchers to both maintain some autonomous academic standards and yet facilitate change.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First we will describe the context of some research upon which we are currently engaged in conjunction with an Urban Renewal Department (URD) in a local authority. In brief, the issue is how to negotiate a research role which achieves the twin aims of providing an academically-adequate account of the work of the department and of making a practical (useful) contribution to that work. Second, we consider some conventional views of what constitutes objectivity in research and how it is to be achieved with reference to Buchanan and Boddy's paper *Getting in, getting on, getting out and getting back* (1988). Third, from the work of Schutz (1962) we offer what we take to be a key distinction between the natural and the scientific attitudes. On the basis of this distinction, we then describe our own conception of how these matters may be dealt with, with reference to a

research workshop. We adopt this rather unusual method of describing our procedures since it enables us to both state some of the methodological principles on which our approach is based and to communicate some qualitative sense of the nature of these procedures.

CHANGING THE CULTURE OF URBAN RENEWAL

The URD with which we are working is seeking to redefine the nature of the service it offers to the public and in doing so to change its own organizational culture. Within local authorities there has for many years been recognition of the need for culture change. This is reflected in the continual process of change that different sections of local government have undergone in the recent past. With respect to Urban Renewal, the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 and Circular 17/96 have dramatically changed the statutory nature of the services that the URD must provide. With a steady decrease in funding, the Executive (equivalent to a board of directors) of the URD has taken steps which will allocate resources to identifying a new role for the division. A researcher from the University of Birmingham has been studying how the URD is managing this transition but has recently been invited actively to participate in the change process. We see this as an excellent research opportunity since it enables the researcher to achieve a detailed, fine-grained account of the change process. For the researcher himself, however, it is the occasion for rethinking quite what his research role is and coming to terms with what he sees as ambiguous expectations of him in the URD. In particular, he is concerned with what it means to be objective in carrying out his research.

THE DESIRABLE AND THE POSSIBLE: A FALSE DISTINCTION

The aim and guiding principle of his research is to understand better the nature of managerial work in the setting described above. However, in addition, he needs to negotiate a role for himself in which he can also be useful in helping to bring about the desired change. The first aim reflects a view shared by a growing number of organization researchers, including amongst others, Morgan (1986), Buchanan & Boddy (1988), Watson (1994) and Stewart (1989) concerning the nature and purpose of management research. Thus, for example, Stewart argues the need to clarify 'what is distinctive about managerial work' and to 'try to understand the constructs that particular individuals use to think about their jobs'.

It seems to us that while many writers on organization would endorse the objective of achieving a better understanding of managerial work, to the extent that they see the ultimate purpose of organizational research as *causal explanation*, they compromise their own ability to achieve this objective. As to the second intention of *participating* in the change process, we see no contradiction with our role as researchers. Thus, before describing our own methodological position, we will first state our differences with two of the above writers on the matters of explanation and participation.

The dominant view of research, we suggest, is that it is about finding out what members of the industry cannot see themselves because they are so immersed in what they are doing. In this view it is for the researcher to lay out general theories or models which distil the essence of what goes on, with the promise that to the extent that this is achieved greater understanding results and more effective action becomes possible. It follows from this view that in order to research 'what goes on', it is

important not to disturb or unduly influence it, lest it results in a distorted, biased or in some way an untruthful account. Thus, Buchanan and Boddy describe the aims of their research as follows:

“...to develop our understanding of the nature and sources of the organizational changes that accompany contemporary technical change and to examine how these patterns of change affect the roles and relationships of technology users and managers.”

In common with, for example, Max Weber, for them understanding is the means to achieve another goal which is to establish objective patterns which exist independently of an individual's perception. In other words, it is one thing to empathise with how people *perceive* the world but it is the project of sociology to establish how the world *really is* and how this constrains, enables, affects or is 'reflected' in social conduct. We do not wish to take issue here with the realizability of this project but will explore some consequences of it for Buchanan and Boddy's conception of the *desirable* in research. In other words, we will try to make explicit what they think research should aim to achieve. In doing so, we will try to show that in pursuit of this aim they ignore or look past the process in which they are involved as researchers and which is as constitutive of organization as any other process that they might wish to understand. We note incidentally that we do not deny the factual nature of the social world but wish to consider some difficulties in providing a scientifically valid account of it.

In their, in many ways, admirable paper *Getting in, getting on, getting out and getting back*, Buchanan and Boddy (1988) assume this standpoint. The paper is admirable because it offers some very practical advice to newcomers to research in organizations and disposes of many of the 'holy cows' of naive proponents of the hypothetico-deductive method. In essence their advice is: be opportunistic; be prepared to make use of whatever comes to hand. The practice of fieldwork research, they say, is the art of the possible. They suggest that much published research, written up according to the formal conventions, probably conceals stories of luck and bluff. While there has always been a gap between the need to comply with the ideal of what constitutes 'proper' research and the need to make the best of what is practically possible, in recent years, they argue, the problem has intensified. Organizations are increasingly deluged with requests for research access but at the same time, because of the harsher economic climate, time available for 'non-productive research activities' has decreased.

In general, we very much agree with their evaluation and endorse much of the practical advice they offer. However, (and recognising that their advice is primarily directed at the student researcher) we disagree, first, with the way they characterise the *desirable* and *possible* in research; second, with the way they tend to characterise the relationship between researchers and researched. Underlying both of these is the view that research, although researchers are often obliged to 'mix it' in the real world, is a special kind of activity dedicated to achieving a special kind of knowing.

“Fieldwork [they write] is permeated with the conflict between what is theoretically desirable on the one hand and what is practically possible on the other. It is desirable to ensure representativeness in the sample, uniformity of interview procedures, adequate data collection across the range of topics to be explored and so on.”
(*ibid*:53).

They then give a list of reasons why this is frequently not possible. The problem with this is that they set up an idealised version of the desirable—representativeness, uniformity, ‘adequate data’ (whatever that might mean) and imply that the possible will always fall short of it. Hence, though they challenge the standard arguments concerning the possibility of data which is somehow purified from the muddy water in which it has its very significance, nonetheless they endorse the basis of those arguments—which is that patterns which lie behind the hurly burly of the everyday can be objectively established. This seems to give rise to a series of methodological problems.

For example: amongst the problems of getting a full and accurate picture of what is going on in an organization, they say, is the ‘problem’ of ‘confidentiality’.

“Access will not be granted where it is felt that [...] commercially sensitive information is likely to be disclosed. Gatekeepers in organizations often have views on these matters quite different from the expectations of researchers [...] we have tried to develop strategies which anticipate and overcome these reservations”.

It is normal for members of organizations to distinguish different kinds of information and different kinds of people to whom they will or will not allow access. Although they acknowledge in passing that a response to this is to enquire into the nature of the circumstances in which access is denied, Buchanan & Boddy’s ‘solution’ is to suggest methods by which to gain access. In other words, while they talk about the need for an objective study of organizational reality, their prime concern is to negotiate their way *past* the very proprieties which *constitute* the organization.

Throughout the above, we have tried to highlight how, in setting up their problem in the way they do in the first instance, Buchanan & Boddy ‘buy into’ the very assumptions they claim to challenge. Let us be clear about this: there is *no* necessity to conduct the argument on these terms. And there is an alternative. Our response, therefore, is, as it were, to start from the possible—that is the reality of organization as they correctly describe it—and develop a methodology from that reality.

NATURAL AND SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDES

We think that the issues regarding the relationship between researchers and researched raised by Buchanan and Boddy are better dealt with using Schutz’ (1962) distinction between the *natural* and the *scientific attitudes*. The former refers to the fact that in matters of everyday affairs we accept things as they come for all practical purposes. Adopting the scientific attitude, our concern with respect to some specially and specifically chosen object of enquiry, is to ask questions about it that we would not normally ask and to suspend or bracket out what we normally take for granted about it. Hence—and this is crucial to Schutz’ distinction—the scientific attitude is a *modification* not a replacement of the natural attitude. Thus, for example, in conducting experiments on, say, the physical composition of a piece of wood, we adopt a distinctive attitude towards it (the scientific), different from the attitude that we adopt to the wooden bench on which we are conducting the experiment and, indeed, everything else around us which is not the object of our scientific attention (the natural attitude).

In the taken-for-granted world of the natural attitude, we expect regularities and patterns. We *expect* the world to be more or less predictable and consistent. And only if it’s *not* like this do we tend to take notice. Thus, for example, going to work each day, we expect people to behave towards each other more or less as they did

yesterday. In the workplace, routines, procedures and organizational structures are there to deal with the particular nature of whatever work is done for whatever markets, in whatever contexts and environments. The regularities and patterns which undoubtedly exist in organizations, markets, communities, societies and so on, are known and understood sufficient for our everyday practical purposes (the natural attitude). However, so patently are they 'out there' and so patently do they stand over and above our individual enterprises that social scientists have been encouraged to do somewhat better than (merely) characterise them for 'all practical purposes'. They have tried to describe and explain them *objectively*; to replace or to improve upon or to correct descriptions of society-understood-under-the-natural-attitude with objective descriptions of society-understood-under-the-scientific-attitude.

As we said above, Schutz notes that the scientific attitude (within which scientific descriptions of society are produced) is a modification, a selective suspension of the natural attitude. Thus, while scientific descriptions of society may *selectively* replace common-sense ones, the replacement cannot be thoroughgoing. Any particular purportedly objective description cannot be understood without drawing upon all the common sense understandings that surround it, that contextualise it, that give it meaning and that were not suspended during its production. What we are saying is that researching and describing (organisational) phenomena is the prerogative of *every* ordinary member of society. The researcher/analyst can claim no special scientific privilege for his/her own explanations.

One of the problems, insofar as such claims are made, is what Zimmerman and Pollner (1971) call the confusion of *topic* and *resource*. For example, a social science researcher sets out to describe, say, organizational structure with the view to establishing how it impacts on other organizational 'variables', say, performance. However, in order to identify and describe structure (the topic), he presses into service all the common-sense understanding that he shares with other members of society, as an unquestioned resource, about what constitutes structure. Structure, that is, is only identifiable as a phenomenon on the basis of the common-sense understandings that members of society share. The would-be scientist of (in this case) structure cannot do without these understandings (resource) which he shares with members. Thus, at the risk of being ironic, we simply note that throughout the social scientist's enquiry, s/he unsystematically and uncritically draws upon knowledge of that very same thing which is supposed to be being systematically and critically examined.

What this implies, then, is that if the researcher wishes to talk about structure, which of course, s/he is perfectly entitled to do, s/he does so as a member and forgoes any claim to a special or distinctive status in what s/he has to say about structure (or any other abstraction such as culture, performance or efficiency) unless s/he can define structure (etc.) objectively, without recourse to the unexamined understandings which give meaning to these concepts. Hence, because enquiry into social phenomena is so enmeshed in the very nature of the social itself, does it not follow that it is fruitless to engage in such enquiry? No, it does not. What it does mean is that the relationship between the researcher and researched is an intrinsically more subtle affair than the majority of textbooks would have us believe. As Cicourel (1964) showed, the procedures they offer for avoiding bias, guaranteeing objectivity, achieving replicability, validating measures and so on are wholly inadequate. Cicourel therefore set out procedures which would go some way towards genuinely meeting these objectives, his point being to demonstrate that they could not practically be achieved. Following Cicourel, we are proposing, therefore, a more modest set of objectives,

seeing social research more as a process of understanding and explicating—that is, making explicit—how people create and maintain patterns and regularities in their lives, rather than trying to provide global descriptions of and theories about these regularities and patterns. In essence, its purpose is to explicate how members do whatever it is they do; how they in fact create structure and all those other phenomena—culture, performance, efficiency etc. in which we all have a legitimate interest.

AN INTERSUBJECTIVE CONCEPTION OF OBJECTIVITY

In the workshop session now reported, the researcher engaged in the URD research expressed doubts about the role he should adopt since he had been invited by some senior managers to take an active part in the change process that the URD is undergoing. Would the new role undermine his objectivity? What problems would there be in playing both the researcher and practitioner roles?

Our view is that doing research fieldwork is the same as doing any social activity; one learns the norms and conventions that are in operation in the setting being researched and complies with them. In this view, the researcher uses her/his standard, common sense repertoire of skills for finding things out. And these are first and foremost social skills. Thus, any organizational setting involves people with different personalities, backgrounds, interests, objectives; doing different jobs with different responsibilities, authority and so on. Anybody who participates in it, in whatever capacity, is expected to comply with the norms and conventions that pertain there. Though these are highly subtle and complex, they are also commonplace and unremarkable; they are matters of common sense. We learn how to find out what is going on, what is expected of us; how to do our job, how to relate to people doing other jobs and so on. In addition to learning the routines—who does what, who is ‘in charge’ etc.—we also learn, for example, what concessions are to be made to newcomers and outsiders. We learn how to manage and resolve ambiguities and conflicts occasioned by membership of different social groups. We learn what norms of, say, confidentiality, civility, politeness, honesty and so on are operative in a particular setting and need to be complied with if one is to participate in that setting.

A researcher entering any such setting, whatever his/her specific aim—to find and report what goes on there, to look for ways in which efficiency may be improved or change brought about—*participates in, is a part of, and helps create that setting*. In doing so, the same rules about how she should conduct herself apply as they do for any other participant. There are, in short, no special or generic methods available to the researcher for finding out about that setting over and above those we use as an integral part of living our everyday lives: we ask people questions about what they do, we observe them doing it and we consult records of what they have done. However, there are, in common with any other job(s) a person may do, any number of practical problems which need to be managed and resolutions to which are to be found in that setting.

Important questions for the researcher were: What does the URD want him to do? What do they want him to produce? What does he need to do in order to satisfy the requirements of academic research? We suggest that the standard approach, as evidenced in Buchanan & Boddy, would see satisfying these different requirements as being fundamentally at odds. In this view, academic research is about discovering the truth; the fundamental (real) patterns which underlie the appearances of which

different people are only variously and partially aware. In contrast, the former, which might be characterised as consultancy work or action research, is seen as inevitably compromising the achievement of this knowledge. The researcher himself expressed this view in the workshop. The problem, as he posed it, is that something is going on that it is the researcher's task to reveal. Hitherto, he felt that, as an outsider, he had not been involved and therefore has been able to preserve the objectivity and neutrality which would allow him access to the underlying reality.

Our alternative, which we put to him, was to bring his findings and analyses to a research workshop such as the present one and to expose them to the various points of view expressed there. In this manner a measure of objectivity, a measure of distance from the research setting can be established. This process is itself entirely social and the objectivity established is inter-subjective. There is nothing remarkable in this, objectivity is always inter-subjectively established: the test of the objectivity of an account is whether it is accepted as such by others (by supervisors, examiners or peer reviewers, for instance). Our intention is to make this a much more explicit part of the research process.

For example, the researcher anticipated that the senior members of URD will want him to produce some kind of report whose credibility will lie in his having adopted conventional research methods which claim to guarantee objectivity. He brought to the workshop a report, prepared by an independent consultant on UR. It contains a fairly bland 'objective' assessment of URD's performance and a great deal of demographic data. The researcher had concluded from discussions about his new role that this is the kind of thing that URD wanted but he also observed that, as far as he could tell, very little use had been made of *this* report. He was challenged on how he had come to know this. Workshop members quizzed him on what evidence he had for it: how has the report *actually* been used?

Further questions then emerged. How had the report been compiled? What were its sources of data? In this manner, the nature of the report—as a situated phenomenon that people in URD respond to in different ways—emerged. Some ignore it because it is not germane to their purposes. Others select from it for other purposes and so on. Anything that the researcher produces will be similarly treated. All he can do is describe as accurately as he can what he sees and hears. He cannot see and hear everything. Still less, whatever role he adopts, will he be able to provide a version of what is going on that is truer than that which any other member of the organisation could produce. The sole difference is that he will be *recording* (documenting) the kinds of thing that others take for granted and which, normally, they have no reason to record.

In achieving this kind of record or data, there are certainly practical problems to overcome: you need people to talk to you; you need to get them to let you 'hang around' with them. In order to achieve this, you must take into account the fact that different people have different inhibitions, worries, concerns and so on. What people say to you, what they allow you to do, inevitably reflects what they take you to be, what you are going to do with the information they give you, and so on. And of course, what people are able to tell you reflects their different experiences of the organization.

Also present at the workshop was a researcher who is working as a quality engineer in a contracting organisation. He expressed the opinion that he was able to find out much

more because he was an 'insider' and because he was respected for doing clearly identifiable work. He summed up his point of view in this manner:

You get greater credibility from doing the job well, rather than saying I'm a researcher from the University.

He saw no reason why the URD researcher should not similarly accept an insider role. The URD researcher strongly disagreed, however:

As soon as I get in there I'll be in the middle of the politics. I'll be given like a label, for example, improvement officer. [And people will say], 'he's part of that and we don't talk to them'.

Two important points emerged in the discussion of this issue. First, that a researcher cannot know for sure what his or her bias is. Indeed, it is his/her lack of awareness of that bias that makes it such a problem. Secondly, there is no generic method for proceeding with research which will automatically be effective in all cases. For some purposes, in some research settings, it may be better to be perceived as a member of the organisation, for other purposes, in other settings it may be better to be seen as an outsider.

CONCLUSIONS

We have examined and criticised a notion of objectivity which we believe to be the dominant one in construction management research. In contrast, we have presented our own, more modest notion of objectivity as inter-subjectively achieved. Taking a methodological problem from the work of Buchanan and Boddy, we have shown how, in part, this problem is generated by their conception of objectivity. Using material from one of our own workshops we have illustrated our own notion of objectivity and the process by which it is achieved.

REFERENCES

- Buchanan, D. and Boddy, D. (1988) Getting in, getting on, getting out and getting back, In: Bryman, A. (Ed), *Doing research in organizations*, London: Routledge.
- Cicourel, A.V. (1964) *Method and measurement in sociology*, London: Free Press.
- Morgan, G. (1986) *Images of organization*, London: Sage.
- Schutz, A.J. (1962) *Collected papers 1: the problem of social reality*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Stewart, R. (1989) *Studies of managerial jobs and behaviour: the way forward*, *Management Studies* 26(1).
- Watson, T.J. (1994) *In search of management*, London: Routledge.
- Zimmerman, D.H and Pollner, M. (1971) *The everyday world as a phenomenon*, in DOUGLAS, J. (Ed), *Understanding everyday life*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.