

THE INFORMED PRACTITIONER: COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

This paper examines interaction processes and knowledge exchange between social scientists and practitioners. We conducted semi-structured interviews with practitioners working in specified fields of practice who have been involved in sociological research projects—as subjects of investigation or as experts. These research projects focused on social integration and disintegration in different sectors of German society. The interviewed practitioners were working in sectors under scrutiny by the researchers, such as public administration, social work, and labor relations. Therefore, we assume that social scientists and practitioners are concerned with similar aspects of society—the social scientists from a more theoretical point of view and the practitioners from a more practical point of view.

In this paper we focus specifically on the process of knowledge exchange between social scientists and practitioners described above. In four case studies we present findings that elucidate the practitioners' understanding of the social scientists' research and reveal whether they regard the research as valuable for their work. We describe dimensions that have an influence on interaction and knowledge exchange: interest and approach to the topic under investigation; the motivation of social scientists and practitioners to cooperate with each other; the conditions under which contact is established; and the position of both groups in their own fields. Finally, we look at what expectations practitioners have of scientific knowledge and identify some obstacles to interaction and knowledge exchange.

Keywords: interaction, knowledge exchange, practitioner, social sciences, case study

1. Introduction

In this project we investigate to what extent knowledge exchange takes place between social scientists involved in various research projects and practitioners working in different social fields. In choosing to look at knowledge exchange rather than knowledge transfer, we wish to emphasize that the subject of our investigation is not only the transfer of scientific findings into practice but also the flow of information or knowledge derived from practice into academic research.

Here, social science and practice are treated as two separate social systems, with differing rationales, rewards systems, and operational logics. They are not, however, perceived as standing in a hierarchical relationship (Luhmann 1984, 1993; Neidhardt 1993). The concept for our project is based on a long tradition of analysis, in particular on the *knowledge utilization research* practised in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, which, in turn, had its origin in the approaches of Charles Lindblom (*muddling-through theory*) and Nathan Caplan (*two communities theory*) (Beck and Bonz 1984, 1985, 1989, 1991; Caplan 1979; Lindblom 1959). At the same time, we also consider these different forms of cooperation between social scientists and practitioners in the light of more recent debates in the sociology of science, which sees in them the possible emergence of a new type of knowledge production, *Mode 2* (Gibbons et al. 1994; Weingart 1997).

In addition, we also seek to consider the changes that the so-called *knowledge society* has brought about in the work of practitioners and the corresponding new forms of work it has engendered (for example, the *knowledge worker*). An interesting question here is whether the perceived increase in the significance of information and scientific knowledge for everyday practice has also had a tangible effect on attitudes to researchers and research findings.

In the following we first provide an overview of our methodological approach and then outline four case studies. In conclusion we present some preliminary findings.

2. Methodological Design

We chose nine social science research projects from a variety of disciplines (see Table 1) and subjected them to closer study. The selection was based on the principle of a “most-similar-most-different sample” with regard to the

practitioners involved in order to be able compare research projects being carried out in both different and similar social settings (see Table 2).

Table 1 Research projects

Projects chosen for analysis
A: Recognition relationships among school pupils (education) a ¹ : quantitative subproject a ² : qualitative subproject
B: Group conflicts among teenagers (politics/sociology) b ¹ : regional subproject eastern Germany b ² : regional subproject western Germany
C: The processes of joining or leaving the skinhead scene (education)
F: Disadvantaged neighborhoods (sociology)
G: Images of Islam in modern society (psychology)
H: Insecure employment relationships (sociology)
I: Integration in sport (sociology)
J: EU – eastern enlargement (psychology/sociology)
K: Neighborhood interethnic violence

Table 2 Overview of guided interviews – Interaction phase

Projects	Interviews with researchers	Interviews with practitioners		Σ
		No.	Type of practitioner	
a ²	5	3	School principals, teachers	8
b ¹	3	2	Social workers	5
b ²	2	3	Social workers, local government administrators	5
C	2	3	Social workers, police	5
F	3	3	Local government administrators	6
G	3	3	Teachers, managers	6
H	3	4	Trade unionists, teachers, management consultants	7
I	2	2	[sports] association staff	4
J	1	0	-	1
K	2	1	Local government administrators	3
Σ	26	24		50

The study was divided into two analytical phases: 1) the interaction phase and 2) the dissemination phase. During the first phase we studied interactions that took place between researchers and practitioners during the research process. In the second phase we looked at the dissemination of scientific findings into practice and how they were received and used by institutions engaged in practice. In conclusion the two phases were compared.

The study was characterized by a multi-method design. We used both qualitative and quantitative methods in the expectation that a combination of different approaches (known as triangulation) would yield solid findings (Flick 2004; Kelle and Erzberger 1999). The guided interviews in the interaction phase were based on the concept of hypothesis-led qualitative research (Hopf 1996; Strobl 1998). The aim in both phases was to construct meaningful models, so that when the two phases were compared more profound information about the attitude of practitioners to the findings of social scientific research and the integration of practical responses into research could be obtained (Kluge 1999).

Currently we primarily have findings from interviews with researchers and various practitioners. In the following we will report on the cases marked in gray in Tables 1 and 2 in the form of case studies. Since the study has not yet been concluded, the findings must be regarded as preliminary.

3. Case Studies

3.1 Case Study a² – Practitioners as objects of study

This research project involved research in schools and had a qualitative project design. The project focused on the development of a democratic culture in schools, and looked at the relationships between teachers and pupils and among pupils. It examined the emergence of democratic behavior, such as tolerance and a considerate attitude to others, and also addressed the reasons for opposite tendencies, such as violence and a right-wing political orientation among pupils.

The research project used a qualitative design and on-site field research—in other words, researchers went into schools and participated in classes and other activities for a period of several weeks. This situation gave rise to certain basic premises for contact between practitioners and researchers. First of all, the various groups involved in the life of the school—the teachers, the school principal, the school administration, the parents, and the pupils—had to give their consent to the project. Second, the researchers' continuous presence in the school over a longer period of time, which included attending classes, posed a danger that the research project would become a burden for the practitioners and make daily work in the school more difficult. The researchers therefore had to guarantee that they would not disturb the teaching. The practitioners' anxiety on this point constituted a major barrier to entering the school as an institution.

These premises—a major barrier to entering the school as an institution in the first place and the subsequent intensive contact with the practitioners involved (i.e., the school principal and the teachers) over a long period of time were primary features of this case. The special thing about it was that the teachers played a dual role as both objects of research and experts to be consulted on educational questions.

The individual motivation of practitioners, in spite of these fears, to allow the study to take place in their own school was different in the two schools we looked at. In School A, the principal suspected that extremist political tendencies would spread among pupils and wanted researchers to investigate this assumption. School B, by contrast, had a reason for participating in the study that went beyond the concerns of the school itself. It hoped, namely, that the findings of the study would be disseminated via the research community to the public and would also be used in teacher training. Here the research community is perceived as a medium that can be used to help portray this type of school (Hauptschule, or secondary modern) accurately to the public. Thus, the motivation of School A was individual and school-specific; the motivation of School B was more general—i. e., the hope that the research would result in an improvement in the social image of this type of school. What both had in common was that they hoped to derive benefits from the study for their own school and for their professional situation. There was no general feeling of social obligation to make themselves available for scientific study.

In both schools expectations regarding the findings focused primarily on individual feedback. Observations about the school and about individual people and situations were of particular interest to both schools. In other words, they expected “to have a mirror held up to them,” that is, to obtain qualified external evaluations of their school situation. In addition, individual teachers expected to receive feedback about their teaching. Both schools emphasized that they were interested in more profound, substantial findings about their own school, including critical ones.

The expectations of the research findings were also of a general nature: School A expected the findings to outline structures and parameters that would improve the democratic culture in the school. It hoped that a concept would be elaborated for ideal models of “a good school,” that could serve as operational models for educational practice. In School B expectations were focused on the publication of the findings, especially in relation to teacher training.

In conclusion one can say that the schools participating in this research project were surprised in a positive sense by the effects of the field research. Primary positive factors in their evaluation were that the presence of the researchers did not have a negative effect on the day-to-day life of the school, that they were able to benefit in a tangible way from their discussions with the researchers in the school, and that they also hoped to receive individual feedback comparable with professional supervision. The main premise for this was a willingness to accept criticism and an open attitude to research findings on the part of the practitioners. For its part, the school expected the researchers to respond in an adequate way to its concerns and to report back on the results in a timely fashion. Together with the amicable relationships that developed between the people involved, these factors led to a very positive result in this case. An evaluation of the final results of the study by the practitioners has yet to emerge.

3.2 Case Study C – Practitioners as a group

In project “C” a qualitative longitudinal section was used to investigate what function certain features of skinhead culture play in skinheads' joining or leaving the extreme right-wing scene. Here teenagers and young adults who were either about to join or about to leave the right-wing skinhead scene were interviewed several times at length. It was extremely difficult for researchers to gain access to this milieu, since most of its activities take place in conspiratorial circles away from public view. Establishing direct contact with the interview subjects was practically impossible. In addition, this area of youth culture changes very rapidly, so that any information obtained quickly becomes out-of-date. For the researchers it was therefore very important a) to obtain contacts with the skinhead scene via mediators who had the trust of this group, and b) to be informed of changes within the scene in a timely and reliable fashion. Studying a

closed-off milieu of this kind, some of whose activities are illegal, is almost impossible without the cooperation of practitioners.

Both the researchers involved had extensive personal practical experience. For this reason they lacked the distance to practice observable in other researchers. It should also be mentioned that the project was located at a university of applied sciences.

A special feature of this project was that in order to fulfill the requirements mentioned above (access to the field / up-to-date information), the practice-partners were closely integrated in the research work in an institutionalized group. This "circle of practitioners," which consisted of the staff of public-sector youth programs, social workers, NGOs, and the police, met three times for several days while the project was going on. Using the contacts of its various members the group was able to find people for the researchers to interview. In some cases the practitioners even did the interviewing themselves, since the teenagers shunned contact with the researchers. Certain interviews were discussed and interpreted during the practitioners' meetings, providing the researchers with new ideas and additional information about the object of their study that would have been inaccessible without the help of the practitioners. The practitioners gave detailed and specific evaluations of the field and of relevant developments, so that the researchers were able to focus on current problems rather than on those already described in the literature.

We studied three of the practitioners in this group more closely: a member of the regional criminal investigation department, a social worker who works with imprisoned skinheads, and a charity organization which does educational and advisory work on right-wing extremism. By participating in the project, the practitioners hoped to obtain practical information that they could integrate in their everyday work. Of particular importance for the practitioners was that their contacts with the researchers raised the status of their own work. This happened in two ways: first of all, they gained personal esteem from the recognition of their achievements by the researchers and in this way obtained very extensive feedback. The opportunity to discuss their own views with other practitioners and with renowned researchers was generally seen as very helpful. At the same time, the very fact of their participating in the project raised the status of their work and provided an additional argument for obtaining public money for projects and fields of work that generally receive only short-term funding.

All in all the practitioners doubted that the research process would yield new information for them. More important was the opportunity to make many new contacts and to receive confirmation of their own viewpoint. With regard to the new contacts, they were optimistic that the practitioners' getting to know both each other and the researchers would be useful in dealing with future problems.

In comparison with other projects, the interaction of the practitioners with the researchers was intensive and constructive, but the informational content of the interaction only moderate. The practitioners received little new information and mainly played the role of "gatekeepers" for the research field. The researchers were only able to provide a certain amount of new information, since the practitioners involved were already familiar with the individual case histories. The intensive cooperation was primarily a research tool. For the practitioners it was the spin-offs from the cooperation (personal contacts, formation of networks, personal esteem, legitimation of their own work) that were of direct importance. Whether participation in this working group produced direct learning effects for their everyday practice cannot be ascertained at this point.

3.3 Case Study H – Interest-centered cooperation via institutions

This project studied employees in industrial enterprises and service companies. Qualitative interviews were carried out in traditional industries and in large financial services organizations. Both the regular staff and the personnel employed through employment agencies were interviewed. The focus of the study was how individuals responded to changes that make employment conditions more precarious, such as agency temping, temporary contracts, and mass layoffs. The central question was whether these changes made employees more inclined to adopt right-wing political views.

The project was located at a non-university research institute with a reputation in the field of occupational and industrial sociology. The institute is practice-oriented and has good contacts in the field. The majority of the practitioners involved as partners in the project had a trade union background. They included a senior union official and people working in the field of adult education, some of them in a trade-union context. All of those interviewed were social science graduates.

In all cases those interviewed were motivated to cooperate in the project either a) because their institution had long-term contacts with the other institutions concerned (the research institute, the trade union, or the educational facility) and they were personally acquainted with other participants and/or b) they were engaged in work that addressed similar themes and had similar aims. The educational expert, for example, is herself concerned with right-wing extremism and with current trends in the field of employment. She is familiar with several publications by the researcher in question. She expected the project to give her new ideas for developing her own work and considered it particularly important for trade unions to find out how society is coping with the disappearance of traditional career paths.

At the time he was interviewed the trade union official was engaged in launching a long-term project on improving the quality of work. Through his leadership function he maintained close contacts with social scientists and engaged in

scientific exchange with several pertinent research institutes in the field. The scientific community was important for this trade union project in two respects: a) the trade union sought out the contact at the beginning of the project and invited pertinent scientists to a workshop in order, in this “zero hour,” as he put it, to discuss the new challenges and main themes to be focussed on in the trade union project. Based on this first fundamental workshop a form of continuous cooperation developed, whereby researchers were invited to conferences and workshops staged by the trade union and asked to attend meetings of the union executive to give their overall view and evaluation of social developments. b) As the trade union project proceeded, concrete issues and perspectives emerged that required more detailed elucidation. For this purpose the trade union commissioned further research from independent research institutes, with which it continued to maintain close contacts.

The person interviewed with a background in adult education had close personal contact with the research institute, which was also geographically close. Cooperation with researchers took place in the context of further education and adult education, with researchers being invited as speakers to events organized by the educational facility. The intention here was for social scientists “to bring knowledge to the people.” In this context, knowledge, particularly scientifically founded knowledge, was perceived as valuable and enriching in its own right and thus worth listening to and discussing without any particular aim in mind. The researchers’ willingness to collaborate was taken for granted, since it is based chiefly on personal contacts and a common social environment in a small town.

What all those interviewed had in common was that through their institutions and as individuals they came into regular contact with social scientists, with whom they had both a close personal relationship and shared professional interests. The two adult education specialists interviewed reported that it was nonetheless difficult to integrate cooperation into a normal working day, owing to time pressure and the lack of an institutional framework. Cooperation was therefore based primarily on personal acquaintance and amicable relationships between researchers and practitioners. Nevertheless, they also reported a certain alienation between the two fields of work and fear of contact with social scientists, who (unlike historians) were accused of using incomprehensible language. The practitioners also found the objective and value-neutral approach to research questions and the distance to the object of research irritating. The trade union official, by contrast, felt more at home with researchers and took a confident attitude to scientific knowledge and methodology.

All those questioned had the same basic expectations of research: namely, an analysis of social developments in a broader context, enabling a more profound analysis of social processes. An important element here was the identification of trends, so that issues and themes relevant to the future could be put on the agenda. In other words, all those interviewed expected the research to provide orientation for themselves and their field of work by identifying and classifying present and future social developments.

3.4 Case Study I – Scientific cooperation

Project “I” was devoted to assimilation and integration processes among immigrants in the context of soccer. Taking a qualitative approach, researchers sought to describe these forms of social integration (soccer clubs, teams, groups of fans, and sports classes in schools) in more detail. The study focused on a number of different objects: amateur soccer clubs (ethnically mixed and non-mixed), a professional soccer club, a fan club, the perspective of the referee, the perspective of the umbrella organizations, a pilot project of a regional sports association, and school sport. Of particular interest here was the pilot project, since it involved very close cooperation with researchers, who took on the role of providing scientific support for the project.

Neither the project staff nor the leader had any particular prior knowledge or experience of the field of practice, other than an interest in soccer. However, the working group did consist of people with proven expertise in the scientific community in this kind of methodology and in the field of assimilation and integration.

The project gave a dual definition of its practice-partners: a) the studied and interviewed actors in the field, b) the experts in the various associations. This broad definition, in which the objects of the study (in particular the soccer players with an immigrant background in the amateur clubs) were also regarded as practice-partners, is to be found in only a few other projects. It remains, doubtful, however, whether the practice partners in the first category (a) really played any further role in the research process than that of study objects. By contrast, for those defined as practice partners in the second category (b) this was certainly the case. Indeed, the project staff themselves emphasized their cooperation with the regional sports association (LSV) and the pilot project connected with it. For this reason we also focused in our analysis on this model project and its connections with our research project.

The basis for this cooperation was a chance, long-term friendship between a member of the research team and an employee of the LSV, who knew each other from their student days. This originally private contact provided the researchers, at the beginning of the project, with fundamental information about the world of organized sports, which as a rule is difficult for outsiders to obtain. The person charged with carrying out the project was thus able, through preliminary discussions with the LSV project group, to reconsider the aims and possibilities of his own research project and where necessary to use the expertise of the practitioners to correct them.

In return the LSV had the opportunity to subject a project of its own on the subject of integration to external scientific analysis and thus to obtain an additional evaluation from the point of view of an expert on immigration and

integration. Although the sports association has extensive and highly professional expertise in the fields of sports theory and sports education, it has neither the time nor the opportunity to address more profound or comprehensive social aspects of sport. What is more, the central office of the LSV has very inadequate data for judging the success or failure of measures and initiatives of individual clubs. From this point of view the cooperation with the researchers was helpful for the club. Thus, the practitioners had a fundamental interest in “the trained eye” of the theoretician and his or her scientific expertise.

It was significant that the cooperation did not assume a formal character and was confined to a framework of informal discussions and a few lectures by the researcher. Unlike many other practice-partners the project group of the LSV itself takes a very scientific approach, i.e. it has to use scientific information and findings in order to design its own programs, subprojects etc. It is thus accustomed to using scientific findings in its work and takes a professional approach. The interaction was based in strong measure on the actors’ own interests, even though in the interaction phase it was mainly the researchers who benefited from the cooperation while the practitioners were still uncertain about exactly what the benefits of the cooperation were. The interaction tended to be sporadic and informal, but the informational content was high in comparison with other projects (above all through the lectures delivered by the researcher and the fundamental information provided by the LSV). The two sides were brought together by their mutual interest in comprehensive scientific analyses on the subject of integration through sport.

4. Analysis

There are a number of analytical dimensions that influence whether interaction occurs between researchers and practitioners and the form it takes.

These are first, the *subject matter* itself. It would appear that an interest in the subject being studied on the part of the practitioners is useful but not essential. A basic distinction must be drawn between a) whether the practice-partners are simultaneously the object of the research without, however, having a primary interest in the subject or b) whether they are motivated to cooperate with researchers by a common interest and a preoccupation with the same subject matter.

The *personal acquaintance* of researchers and practitioners enhances mutual trust, thus facilitating interaction. More significant, however, is that in many cases it is this personal acquaintance that makes cooperation an option in the first place.

If a researcher is *well-known and has a reputation* this lends him or her credibility and authority. By the same token, researchers tend to seek cooperation with institutions that are well known in their respective fields of practice.

In cooperating with researchers, practitioners often pursue goals that do not correspond with the researchers’ original interest in the projects. The practitioners’ *expectations* toward the researchers for the most part determine the structure of the interaction. These can be divided into two groups: practitioners who had an intensive interaction phase with the researchers (Projects A and C) are primarily interested in individual feedback and a scientifically informed appraisal of their everyday work. They hope that the “outside view” of the researchers will provide useful tips and suggestions for their working practice. Here the practitioners see the researchers mainly as playing the role of professional supervisors. In this respect they probably value scientific confirmation of their actions more than criticism or suggestions for change. For these practice-partners more generalized findings of the analysis leading to scientific conclusions that go above and beyond individual cases are of secondary importance. Indeed, there is a certain amount of skepticism regarding the relevance of such findings for their own field of work.

The two projects in which the interaction was more sporadic (projects I and H) also involved a more intensive exchange of scientifically qualified content. Here the practice partners had a stronger interest in the “traditional” transfer of research subject matter and findings. Their interest was to gain access to the researchers’ superior knowledge and to make use of it for their own work, albeit in different ways: a) by integrating expertise offered by the findings on a specific case into their own large body of knowledge about their field of practice; b) by using findings to gain primary access to a new thematic field and thus to approach a problem in a new way; or c) by regarding scientific knowledge as valuable in itself and using it for educational purposes. The practice-partners’ basic assumption here is that social scientists can identify and analyze social developments and future changes. The knowledge advantage of the social scientists is thus conceded and made useful for practice.

From the point of view of the researcher the practitioner has a special role to play as a *gatekeeper* for a specific field of research. Interaction or cooperation with practitioners can in such cases often be merely a means to an end and has no value of its own for the research project.

4.2 Obstacles to Cooperation

The greatest obstacle to cooperation between practitioners and researchers is that such cooperation is often seen as burdensome by practitioners, primarily with regard to time. Practitioners’ time is generally already filled with their own regular work responsibilities. In addition there are access obstacles to strongly integrated organizations like schools, where researchers need to win trust before embarking on a project and to signal a genuine interest in order to gain access to the institution.

Practitioners involved in research projects expect a timely transfer of findings. They should not have the feeling that they are being used merely to collect data without drawing any direct benefit from the cooperation. A common interest in the findings is therefore of central importance. This entails an attitude of openness and a willingness to accept criticism on the part of the practitioners, since if research findings are to be taken seriously, they may well call into question the practitioners' established routines and ways of doing things—in other words, they may suggest that change is necessary.

Practitioners also frequently accuse social scientists of failing to address their audience adequately in presenting research findings and of using obscure language in their scientific publications. Practitioners thus see room for improvement, for they are particularly interested in a target-group-specific evaluation of research findings.

5. Conclusion

All the people interviewed said they attached great value to cooperation with researchers for a number of different reasons. Nevertheless, the burdens of everyday work, communication difficulties, and the differing expectations of the two sides stand in the way of such cooperation. For this reason it is often limited to a sporadic and chance exchange of information and is based to a large extent on personal contacts and on a feeling of affinity between those involved. The only case to demonstrate a systematic and strategic approach to cooperation on both sides was the project involving the trade union. Fundamental here was an interest in a common theme as well as intellectual and material resources on the part of the practitioners.

If one wishes to make the findings of social science research useful for professional practice, it is advisable to create enduring structures and institutions—in other words, interfaces facilitating the exchange of information—for becoming acquainted with scientific developments and with the issues and requirements of professional practice and following these up requires time and expertise. This responsibility cannot be shouldered either by individual practitioners or by researchers alone. Special competencies and resources are required in order to organize an exchange of knowledge on a long-term basis. Here a system needs to be set up for accomplishing this task at the interface between research and practice in a professional manner.

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