

WORKING GROUP 10

LINKAGES BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN RURAL SOCIOLOGY

RAPPORTS ENTRE THÉORIE ET PRATIQUE
EN SOCIOLOGIE RURALE

BEZIEHUNGEN ZWISCHEN LÄNDLICHER SOZIOLOGIE
UND PRAKTISCHER ANWENDUNG

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CONTRIBUTIONS:

- 1 M. Lerner (Israel): Sociology and Agricultural Settlement in Israel.
- 2 A. Levêsque (France): Sociologie – politique agricole et développement rural.
- 3 A. W. van den Ban (The Netherlands): Relationships between Theory and Practice in Rural Sociology.
- 4 R. Riedler (Austria): Beziehungen zwischen ländlicher Soziologie und praktischer Anwendung.
- 5 S. Haeggbloom (Sweden): Relationships between Theory and Practice in Rural Sociology: Experiences in Sweden.

INTRODUCTION

by

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The papers in this Workshop concentrate on the conditions affecting the utilization of rural sociological research findings by practitioners. A restriction is that papers deal with applied research, and not with pure research, which in the long run can have an important effect on the decisions of practitioners. There are four papers:

- 1 a paper by myself, which gives a theoretical framework, but no empirical evidence that this framework is correct. Unfortunately, this paper is somewhat out of date, because after it was written, I obtained an overview of 4000 publications in this field (Havelock et al., 1969);
- 2 a paper by Lerner, which gives a case study of 15 years of sociolo-

gical research for the Settlement Department of the Jewish Agency in Israel. Experience taught that it was necessary to change the relations between research workers and practitioners considerably over this time;

- 3 a paper by Levêsqe, which describes 10 years experience of a French private research agency in research on rural development for a number of different government agencies and professional organizations;
- 4 a paper by Riedler, based on experience in a mountainous district of Austria, where not much empirical sociological research has been done.

According to my paper, co-operation is necessary between researcher and practitioner. The extent of co-operation depends on:

- 1 the stage in the research process:

STAGE	RESPONSIBILITY
Formulation of the research problem	Jointly researcher and practitioner
Deciding on research methods	Researcher, advice from practitioner desirable
Data gathering	Usually researcher, but sometimes for educational reasons the practitioner under guidance from the researcher
Analyzing and interpreting data	Mainly researcher, but for educational reasons desirable to involve the practitioner
Writing the research report	Usually the researcher with help from the practitioner in critical reading of the draft report; sometimes jointly in order to involve the practitioner in the process
Drawing conclusions for an action program	Practitioners, with advice from researcher

- 2 the extent to which the researcher has previous knowledge of the problems of the practitioner;
- 3 the extent to which the practitioner is already prepared to utilize the research findings.

The advantages of the involvement of practitioners in the research

process are: it enhances the probability that the research is directed towards the real problems of the practitioner, that full use is made of the knowledge of both researcher and practitioner, and it increases the willingness of the practitioner to utilize his 'own' findings in his program decisions.

This co-operation is often not without tensions, because of a lack of appreciation of the other's point of view and method of working.

Practitioners will only utilize research findings to solve their problems in a new way if:

- 1 they realize that they have a problem;
- 2 they define their problem in such a way that it can be solved;
- 3 they believe that research can provide them with the information they need to solve this problem;
- 4 they have confidence in the capability and the motives of the research worker;
- 5 they know and understand the findings;
- 6 they are willing to experiment with new solutions to the problem;
- 7 they are in a social position to do so;
- 8 they believe that they can obtain the money and other necessary resources to do so.

The research worker will only help the practitioners to solve their problem if:

- 1 the researcher has a sincere and lively interest in the problems of the practitioners and their clients;
- 2 he develops a full awareness of the problems of the practitioners, and of the practical alternatives available to them;
- 3 he takes time to build an empathic personal relationship with the practitioners, educating himself to their point of view and them to the value of good research;
- 4 he is sensitive and able to cope with the anxiety he might arouse by his research;
- 5 he cares that his findings are utilized, but accepts that the practitioners may make other decisions than he would have made himself;
- 6 he is willing to invest time in developing better practitioners, who can make future program decisions in anticipation of problems and which are relevant to their causes – decisions which are attuned both to the organizational policy and the principles of social science;
- 7 his superiors or sponsors allow him to spend sufficient time in helping the practitioners draw the correct conclusions from his

study and ideally in guiding the initial implementations of the results vis-à-vis the problems studied. Whether or not these conditions are fulfilled depends partly on the organizational setting in which the researcher is working.

In the natural sciences there are clearly distinguished branches, such as medicine and engineering, which aim to solve problems. In a similar way in the social sciences we might have to develop social engineering as a separate branch in order to be able to solve the urgent social problems of our time.

Agricultural extension officers play an important role in disseminating agricultural research findings. Similarly social science consultants are necessary if we wish to make a full use of the social sciences. They can gather the relevant information from many different sources, convey this information to practitioners, and consult with them about what their problems are, which resources are available, and help them to make objective decisions to solve the problems. More than with the agricultural sciences, the utilization of the social sciences involves not only a change in knowledge, but also a change in attitudes and emotional experiences.

The Israeli case study seems to confirm my opinion in several respects. Mainly, they have experience with three kinds of research organizations:

- 1 research grants by the Settlement Department to university staff members;
- 2 sociologists on the staff of the agricultural planning section of the regional divisions of the Settlement Department, who act as advisers to the regional director;
- 3 the Settlement Study Centre, which conducts theoretical and applied research, mostly of a multi-disciplinary nature, on the subjects involved in rural settlement, and which gives courses on this subject.

One important point, which I had overlooked in my paper, is that the value of the research depends to a large extent on the quality of the staff available. Especially in the regional divisions it is difficult to obtain competent sociologists, because most sociologists have been trained to prefer a position in an academic institution.

The grants to university staff members are no longer given, because their findings were of restricted value to the executive staff members, although helpful to the policy-making staff. The Settlement Study Centre is more promising, but care has to be taken that they do not prefer too theoretical an approach in problem-solving.

The French experience shows that a weakness in my paper lies in the concept 'practitioner'. When research is done for the rural development of a region, it is not merely one man or one agency who is supposed to work with the research findings, but rather a large variety of people and agencies who might have quite different interests.

There are two roles to be fulfilled: (1) the research role, and (2) the role of the animator, who stimulates the practitioners to analyse their problems and to collaborate in decision-making and the solving of these problems.

In the French situation the researcher collaborates closely with practitioners in formulating the problems and in interpreting and implementing the research findings. This collaboration is stimulating to the research worker. Sociologists preferring to work in an academic institution avoid some difficulties, but they might lack the stimulus from the request of practitioners to help them with their real problems.

The animator should be well able to apply group dynamics techniques. He does not make any decisions himself, but uses non-directive techniques to help the practitioners in sound and co-operative decision-making. An important question is whether these two roles of researcher and animator should be fulfilled by the same person, or by two different persons. It might be difficult to find one person who has the training and personality required to fulfil both roles well.

The paper by Riedler shows that there is another weak point in my approach. One of my implicit assumptions was that rural sociological knowledge is achieved by research. I mainly thought of interviewing and similar techniques of data gathering. However, a number of the most important problems are not solved in this way. What, for instance, are the causes of the rapid social change during the last few years in universities, churches, politics, etc.? The future of the family farm in Europe depends to a large extent on the value which farm families attach to independence, income and leisure time. Unfortunately, research techniques for these kind of macro-sociological problems are not yet well developed. This seriously limits our opportunity as rural sociologists to help the practitioners.

Another limitation is that we have not always studied the most important problems. The most serious problem for our farmers in the next decade is that many of them will have to find another occupation, but as far as I know in the past 10 years only two articles have appeared in *Sociologia Ruralis* which touch on this problem (Levêque et

Brohier, 1964, and Capo et Fonti, 1965). Are we sufficiently interested in the real problems of rural society today?

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