

WHAT And WHOM IS RESEARCH FOR?

a presentation

by

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This conference is related to "Youth" and takes place here in the Institute for Complex Social Research of the University of St. Petersburg. However, what general comments I have to contribute about Youth took place in the interesting exchanges on the bus on the way to the palace at Peterhof yesterday and I summarise below in an Endnote.<sup>1</sup>

My own youth and work with youth was a long time ago, and as J.P. Hartley says in The Go-Between: - "The past is another country, they do things differently there".

This is my first time in Russia and in more than one sense, like the past, I too belong to another country. I come not from academia, although I have served my time in a number of academic settings. Primarily I am a social work practitioner, - a practitioner in community participation in social development, social planning, social service delivery, and as an educator for professionals in these fields.

I want to spend the time allotted to me today in talking about research. WHAT and WHOM IS RESEARCH FOR? We live in times when the present is increasingly swiftly receding into the past and where we most certainly and urgently need to learn to do things differently. Social change at this end of the twentieth century is now so accelerated that much of the social research which I read is, more often than not, out of date before it has reached the printed page. We in the social sciences cannot claim (as the physical sciences questionably do), that our researches are value free. What we observe is deeply permeated by culture, geography, history, and is time bound, and therefore can only tell us things within very limited time frames and social parameters. My interest in research is not to seek eternal verities of human behaviour, but in the essential need to discover anything that is better than guess work which will indicate what should, or should not, be done for what ails us, in practice, programme development, or planning.<sup>1</sup>

This conviction took root some twenty-five years ago when I was asked to look at what was being taught in the social development field in Asia. A United Nations conference in 1966 had brought together Asian social work educators and fieldwork supervisors to develop indigenous teaching and training literature. Invited to bring the material they were currently using, no one brought even a single item to acknowledge the existence or condition of the poor.

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<sup>1</sup> "But unlike things in the world of nature, social and cultural phenomena possess local peculiarities that sometimes defy generalisations derived from limited studies elsewhere.... Although in theory the university has the right to pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake, in practice the university in a developing country cannot well afford that traditional privilege, and instead should relate the research as far as it is practicable to the development needs of the country".

A report concluded:

"Poverty, as an observed cultural phenomenon in most Asian countries, is striking because of its pervasive presence in the lives of countless people who exist on the brink of starvation. Yet the handling of poverty in professional social work as an observed cultural phenomenon in Asian case records is more striking in its absence. " (United Nations 1966)<sup>2</sup>.

Who then was all this professional educational activity for?

I spent a year in visiting six countries, sixty educational institutions, and spoke perhaps to six hundred (or, so it seemed, six thousand) educators and practitioners in social agencies. One of the things I had been told to expect as I set out was that in Asia there was an almost complete absence of social research. I took with me a little notebook in which I planned to document any of this scarce commodity when I came across something which could be shared with those who were said to be research-starved. I soon gave up scribbling for it became too time consuming, as there turned out to be an immense number of titles to be entered into my notebook. In the main these were student theses which had been required for University degrees.

I discovered, however, that students were so bored with research and traumatised by the amount of time they had to devote to it, and especially the meaningless and futility of its outcome in the world they lived in, that even the most enthusiastic came to shun research of any kind for the rest of their professional lives. Such attitudes would then stand in the way of their identifying in their subsequent practice vital matters that required careful study and which could be submitted through professional channels to the schools and universities, and be added to the list of urgent research topics.

Research and theses writing was described as:

"...a long drawn-out and painfully debilitating affair which both teachers (privately) and students (clamorously) assess as largely an academic certification ritual".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations (1966)

Report of the Regional Training Centre for Social Work Education and Field Work Supervisors. Part two: Asian Records for Teaching Social Work.  
UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, (ECAFE)

<sup>3</sup> Drucker, D. (1972)

An Exploration of the Curricula of Social Work in Some Countries in Asia, with Special Reference to the Relevance of Social Work Education to Social Development Goals.  
UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East, (ECAFE)/UNICEF Bangkok.



These 'theses' rarely had any meaningful analysis leading to suggested application and more often than not went unsummarised and uncatalogued to gather dust on obscure shelves. Amongst this fossilised material there existed very little descriptive information of what was actually observed as taking place in Asian countries in terms of activities, problems and processes. It was noted:

"Only with a rich base of indigenous description can we contribute to theory.... We must begin to identify the questions we need answered, which spring from our own professional practice, and develop theory which can be derived from it. Social work research must be directed to social considerations...and must not be second-hand in method or subject matter".  
(Drucker, 1977)<sup>4</sup>

Scientific processes must begin with description of phenomena and observations which are of significance within some conceived framework.<sup>5</sup> Let me give a simple example from a recent situation here in Eastern Europe. A student working in an Infant's House (a residential institution for babies and toddlers under the age of three years) observed that the staff who handled the children were kindly and efficient enough in the physical care of their charges but never spoke to the little ones in other than single words - never a sentence. They seemed to have little time or inclination during feeding or cleaning to indulge in the games parents everywhere engage in: tickling and playing "peek-a-boo", "ichy-kichy-koo", "who's my pretty one?", "where's daddy then?", "open up the garage (mouth) then, here comes the motor car (spoon)" and such like. Of course a research project could have been set up, say, to record the number of incidents (or lack) of such stimulation on a thousand infants in residential care, with a control group who did receive such stimulation, and a follow-up longitudinal study to compare the development of each cohort. But without such sophistications, experience tells us that this simple but keen observation indicates the need for very important activities.. such as training of staff, and organisation of staff time to be able to

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<sup>4</sup> Drucker, D. (1977)

The Role of Psychiatric Social Work in Developing Countries.  
and The Scapegoating of Students and Professional/Academic  
Failure in Research Requirements and Activity.

National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences,  
Bangalore, India

<sup>5</sup> "In matters social at any rate valuation....does not follow upon, but must precede the act of cognition Out of the welter and boundless variety of social facts we only study - indeed we only notice - those which have significance according to the system of values with which we approach them..."

"Without a prior notice of what is more or less significant, we could at best become aware of certain facts but we could not know any...."

Werner Stark The Sociology of Knowledge  
Routledge Kegan Paul 1958



give the kind of stimulation which emotional and language development requires.

Another interesting thing is that rarely indeed do researchers return to those who they have interviewed and share with them what their findings are and the implications. By and large the interviewees are people to be counted rather than count at all in taking an active role in the research, responding and commenting on the findings, or planning and participating in its implication and outcomes.

Perhaps the following simple examples might not qualify for what we recognise as "research" in this audience, but let me illustrate what I have in mind.

While I am talking to a midwife in an isolated village, three or four hundred children, some carrying little ones, come to stare at me, the foreigner. I notice the doctor going among the children. He is looking for the scars on their arms checking the smallpox immunisation status. "How long is it going to take you?" I ask. "Perhaps 45 minutes, but it is worth taking the time while we are here". He replies. I persuade him to ask the children themselves each to look at the child next to them and if there is no scar to hold up the arm. Two false starts while the explanation is clarified and soon, with a buzz of curiosity and excitement, 400/500 children inspect each other. I say to the doctor: "From start to finish this activity took only 4 minutes you now have 40 professional minutes saved (for which I shall not ask you for a fee!), to tell them why we are looking, why it is important, what now needs to be done, and anything else that they cannot do or know for themselves". I add: "None of these children had seven years at a medical school or perhaps any formal education at all. Yet they are the experts - experts at standing next to other children and inspecting their arms".

An important point to emphasise is that the "research" of who was immunised and who not, was something they did for themselves and which was clearly for them and directly in their interest.

More elaborate, was the development of a series of "games". One was related to the priority need expressed by the community for an improved water supply and an associated sanitation programme. Who are carrying, splashing, swimming, floating, examining with great interest water (and much else) all the time? Children, using their inherent sense of curiosity, the constant observers, embryonic researchers. In order to survey the area for identifying its surface water, children were organised into teams each with identifying pieces of coloured rag tied on bamboo sticks. Each team spread out over the terrain and "claimed" all conceivable sources of water or damp ground by planting their flag to show they were the first "discoverers" to stake its claim. Then, scratching out a map in the school yard each team located and recorded their claim. From this basic game, rewards could then be given for identifying water polluting risks and big red spots added to the map. The adults seeing the children running about and being so absorbed in these activities soon began to ask what was happening. The children were themselves then encouraged to explain what they had learned "Our village water conditions and what might be done for a clean

water supply". This was developed into a community do-it-yourself research, planning, and implementation process with the whole village.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of research/planning (very briefly outlined here) is a process in which the researched get to know what they know about themselves and their situation and what they are able and want to do about it. The projects emerging from such a process make it clear that what is to be done and the benefits therefrom really belong to themselves and not to some unknown intelligently remote others elsewhere. It might be claimed that this is an example of the democratisation of knowledge and not its private possession by a professional elite. (In fact I have found a reluctance, if not outright hostility by the professionals in many fields to engage the communities in these ways). What is certain is that more, fun and productive earnestness emerges in working this way than in all the other research and planning circles known to me. The level of participation and enjoyment in the process might even be seen as a prognosis of the likely success and sustainability of the planned project.

Of course, all social research does not lend itself to such procedures, but the plea here is for research questions to be focused increasingly on what is crucially needed to be known for dealing with identifiable urgent social matters and that the "experts" in research consider how to engage the lay community (presumably the rightful beneficiaries of our shared knowledge) in an active and productive, genuine, mutually respectful, and appreciative partnership that will bring satisfaction to us all.

David Drucker

St. Petersburg, September 1995

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<sup>6</sup> This planning with the community has been described in David Drucker - Ask a silly question, Get a silly answer - Community participation and the demystification of health care. Community Management - Asian Experience and Perspectives. David C. Korten ed. Kumarian Press, U.S.A. 1987.



Endnote 1. It occurred to me that Youth as an entity, apart from perhaps in classical times, has only recently been invented. My Finnish colleague offered that it emerged as a romantic poetic invention from English public schools. Perhaps not insignificantly this Youth did not include females and certainly not the young people submerged in the labour force of the industrialising society. This glorification of beautiful youth ended I suppose, in the trenches of the first World War when Rupert Brooke, and many of his contemporaries, seemingly nurtured in almost legendary university halcyon days, "...and is there honey still for tea..." lay buried as did so many of that generation in "...some corner of a foreign field, which is forever England." The requiem for that concept of Youth is found in the disenchantment with military glory and the stark realism in the war poems of those beautiful soldier-youths who survived, and for example, in Vera Britten's post-war "Testament of Youth".

There was of course the Boy Scouts (born from the Boer War, which introduced some genteel romance for nature to city dwellers) and the Boy's Brigade. These were organisations of improvement for the lower classes, both of which had strong nationalistic and military overtones.

The inter-war years gave birth to ideological youth ~~movements~~ sponsored by political organisations. The Hitler Youth combined the familiar glory of youthful beauty and a concept of Aryan purity of Wagnerian/Nietzsche romanticism with an ideology of strength and national superiority which was to erupt in unprecedented intoxicating mass rallies, jack-boot marchings and leader-worship, culminating eventually in endorsement of genocide and crescendos of violence, an extreme example perhaps of the emergence of nationalistic manipulation of young people which was to take place in many totalitarian regimes well into the post-war era... China, N. Korea, Kampuchea, and elsewhere.

In more recent times student youth (still a privileged and exclusive class) have begun to demonstrate not in support of political regimes but in opposition to their governments. (Student rebellion became quite fashionable for a time). There are the examples of France at the time of Algerian anti-colonialism, the USA anti-Vietnam, S.Korea, anti-nuclear demonstrations, and most recently environmental movements world-wide. Significantly anti-military expressions of protest have been met with violent suppression. Where students have tried to promote somewhat egalitarian democratic ideas (China again) and carried them to the rural areas (Nepal, Thailand, for example), they too have been disbanded or put down with varying degrees of violence.

One of the papers to this conference is, I understand, to be on the "Reintegration of Youth into Society" (presumably in the context of this conference, here in Russia, "...in the situation of radical economic reforms"). When and how did they get disintegrated in the first place? What society is it envisaged that this still undefined entity of youth is supposed to be reintegrated into? I hope the conference will address such matters. In the bus I asked my colleagues, "Who in the Universities are the professors, educators and role models that the students listen to with excitement and stimulation and provide them with some vision of a

future that they will willingly bend their energies to participate in?" My colleagues were hard-pressed to name anyone!

Other colleagues have documented the surveys that suggest that the young have become cynical of political processes everywhere on both sides of the old cold-war divide, while other colleagues have documented the growing employment void that awaits both graduates and the poorly educated alike. Why then are we considering youth as if somehow such studies will reveal to us something that we do not know only too well - or, at least, I think I do.

The problems of youth in our time it seems to me are but the worrying symptoms of the deep malaise of our societies at the end of the twentieth century. Perhaps the young are totally bewildered that we, the experienced, the educators, provide little guidance or enthusiasm with which they can identify for a better future. They see us instead as having produced the extraordinary situation in which there has been a devastating abandonment of coherent philosophies concerned with socially just societies and humanistic values as the aftermath of the spectacular failures of the past in trying to achieve them. There clearly is a justifiable growing distrust as we witness the increasing helplessness of governments of any persuasion to actively deliver their rhetorical promises and to genuinely involve people in rational ways to meet the most pressing needs of our time. Instead there are offered panaceas without credibility along with a wild expectation that somehow a mystical faith in unfettered "market forces" will lead to some resolution of global problems and create a world in which youth and all of us can take pride and inspiration. It is not only youth that are unbelievers and who no longer recognise realistic goals and realistic ways. It is the human condition of our time for all of us, young and old alike.

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