APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES, ACTION RESEARCH AND THE RETURNING OF INQUIRY FINDINGS

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Abstract: *This paper aims to highlight some connections between the applied social sciences, action research, and the returning of inquiry findings. Usually, the applicability of a social science is defined by its openness to the complexity of (psycho-) social change as described by the intervention design meant to trigger this change. We will also see how the social sciences collaborate with action research. This is mainly the case in social psychology, a field in which this orientation is largely contained. Through this study we would like to foster the possibility that the applicability of any social science may be strengthened by action research as a specific form of intervention and change. The returning of inquiry findings to the subjects may also be linked to action research as it focuses on involving the subjects of the research in the debate concerning the results. The returing of inquiry findings can be strengthened by connecting it during the research process to the potential of a social science.*

Keywords: *basic science and applied science, action research, participation, return of inquiry findings.*

Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the significant theoretical and practical issues regarding the practical dimension of disciplines such as sociology and social psychology and the role they can play in substantiating the applicability of action research. Returning the results of the research is viewed in this context as a tool for applied research, but also as a means to support the applicability of these social sciences. Interest in such an approach can be linked with what Gwen Stern called scientific research oriented towards the problem (problem-oriented research), as it is useful to make a distinction between an approach in which the role of sociologists is to provide potentially useful information versus an approach in which sociologists participate in solving problems by using information to provide guidance. According to Stern, the second orientation always

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involves two research objectives: 1) to produce new knowledge and 2) to participate and document the process by which such knowledge is used to solve problems. Producing knowledge concurrently with problem-solving is highly important for action research (Stern, 1985: 230).

In sociology discussion about action research is rarely theorized, as the term *intervention* is mostly preferred. In the field of social psychology one can identify special issues dedicated to the connections between *participatory research* in its various forms, and the contribution of the discipline to social change. The terms most often used to describe those kinds of research aimed at changing situations in society, says Senn, are *action research*, *participatory research* and *activist research*. (Senn, 2005:357).

Our experience in the area of action research has been limited in recent years to returning of the findings (Pascaru, 2006; Pascaru and Buțiu, 2007, 2010) and in some studies to promote *territorial intelligence*, the latter defined itself through *a participatory important component* (Pascaru, 2006; Girardot, 2007). We have chosen to present in this paper some of the outcomes of returning the results as a technique and step in a common research design, with potential openings for social change control.

Pure social sciences - Applied social sciences

Applied social psychology and its opportunities

Applied social psychology "is a branch of social psychology that draws on social psychological theories, principles, methods, and research evidence to contribute to a) the understanding of social and problems and b) the development of intervention strategies for improving the functioning of individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and societies with respect to social and practical problems." (Schneider, Gruman and Coutts, 2005: 5-6).

These three American psycho-sociologists remind us that Lewin was the one who in the early 30s conducted research on a variety of practical and social problems, Such as about how people could be led to adopt a healthier diet, or how interpersonal relations and productivity are affected by different management styles. (Schneider, Gruman and Coutts, 2005: 7).

Applied social psychology, as the three specialists note, is oriented both towards solving *social problems* and towards solving *practical problems*. AIDS prevention is an example of a problem with profound social implications, while among practical problems we may mention better cohesion of a sports team, or improving decision making in an organization. It is also considered that social psychology can be theoretically relevant when approaching social issues and practices from all walks of life, from everyday life to the complexity of human communities. (Schneider, Gruman and Coutts, 2005: 14-15).

Basic sociology and applied sociology

As Steele and Price note, all sciences have at least two paths: basic (pure) science and applied science. For the authors mentioned above, in basic science, the goal is to produce

good theory, while in applied science, the goal is to solve real-world problems. (Steele and Price, 2007: 3). Steele and Price agree that applied sociology refers to any use (often focused on client) of a sociological perspective and/or its tools for understanding, intervention and/or enhancement of human social life. (Steele and Price, 2007: 4).

An example of basic sociology and applied sociology seems quite appropriate at this time. We can find it in Steele and Price's work. It is about complex organizations in which specialists seek to understand and initiate projects, primarily because of their own interest in the topic, seeking to build or test sociological theory. But if someone decides to change the organization in which they work, "this becomes a real-world, not only for the person who needs to lead the change, but also for person who lives and works in the organization." (Steele and Price, 2007: 4-5).

The statement made by Steele and Price that applied sociology is not atheoretical but it rather plays a different role in applied sociology as compared to basic sociology seems particularly important. Moreover, when applied sociologists work ro solve client-driven problems, they often find it necessary to create a new theory to fit the circumstances of the problem. (Steele and Price, 2007: 5). For Sullivan, basic sociology refers to sociological research which has as its aim to increase our knowledge of human social behavior with little concern for any immediate practical benefit that may result, while applied sociology "consists of research and other activities designed to focus sociological knowledge or research tools on a particular problem identified by some client with some practical outcome in mind" (Sullivan, 1992, p. 16).

Closely related to applied sociology, clinical sociology is frequently discussed. (Glass, 1979; Sevigny, 1997; Houle, 1997).

Returning to applied sociology, we should retain some of its specific techniques, as presented by Sullivan: 1) program evaluation, 2) needs assessment, 3) social impact assessment, 4) social indicators research, and 5) cost-benefit analysis. (Sullivan, 1992: 140). For Sullivan, program evaluation is the use of "systematic observations to assess whether a social program or practice achieves its goals." These assessments, Sullivan believes, "are a way of assessing whether society's investment in these programs is warranted and wise" (Sullivan, 1992: 141). Needs assessment, according to Steele and Price, can be made using either qualitative or quantitative tools, or often both. Although we aim at objective results, "needs assessment always includes an element of value judgment." (Steele, Price, 2007: 22). In Sullivan's conception, social impact assessment refers to making an estimate of the likely consequences of programs and projects proposed by individuals, groups, neighborhoods, communities, regions, or other social institutions. In this case, sociologists usually "work with economists, anthropologists, and other social scientists on social assessment because the consequences of major projects can be widespread" (Sullivan, 1992: 150). Sullivan, like another experts, see social indicators as quantitative measurements of significant social phenomena. The term social, he explains, "implies that the focus is on the status of and change in social behavior, groups, institutions, or larger social systems." In this regard, the divorce rate, for example, is a way to measure the change in time of social institution of the family. (Sullivan, 1992: 156). For Sullivan, cost-benefit analysis is to compare the benefits of a program with its costs. It is sometimes part of a program evaluation or a social impact assessment and "it

enables program managers and policymakers to weigh whether the benefits are warranted given the cost." (Sullivan, 1992: 161).

Action research and applicability

Being a science of social dysfunction and negative phenomena in the life of human communities, as Miftode writes, sociology essentially aims at transforming the investigated social universe and improving people's living conditions. In this perspective, action research is the main way to achieve those objectives and is also the main sociological method. (Miftode, 2004: 339). The issues addressed by action research are, in Miftode's opinion, the dominant practice identified in the real life of human communities and the implementation of direct intervention as soon as possible. Miftode identifies in Romanian society: 1) offensive poverty and social misery, 2) increasing state violence and crime, 3) increased early school-leaving and illiteracy, 4) excessive unemployment and social parasitism, 5) juvenile delinquency, 6) health and substance abuse 7) social exclusion and self-exclusion, 8) victimization and self-victimization. Investigation of such phenomena, the sociologist considers, cannot remain at the level of knowledge, but rather requires recovery actions or changes in the initial situation. (Miftode, 2004: 339-340).

Action research, as Senn considers, is the oldest of the types of research aimed at social change. (Senn, 2005: 357).

One important theoretical issue is the distinction between intervention and the action research method. Brincker and Gundelach appreciated that intervention methods differentiated themselves from integrative research-action by an insistence on conflict and social change. Another important difference between action research and the intervention method concerns the role of social actors: while the role of research-action is to cause social change, the intervention method does not aim at generating social change as such, but rather aims to create a collective understanding among stakeholders of the potential and role of social change. (Brincker and Gundelach, 2005: 369).

Somekh characterizes action research through its own methodology which "bridges the divide between research and practice" (Somekh, 1995: 340). This is, then, the outline of the main differences between action research and other forms of research: 1) it is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation investigated, based on practical questions that arise in the everyday work, 2) the findings of action research are fed back directly into practice, 3) action research is highly pragmatically orientated, 4) action research is grounded on the culture and values of a social group whose members are both participants in the research field and researchers, 5) action research raises ethical issues, especially when a researcher studies his working environment and thus the behavior of his colleagues. (Somekh, 1995: 340-342).

Finally, action research is a matter of inclusion. Inclusion in action research, according to Stringer, presupposes: 1) maximizing the involvement of all relevant individuals, 2) inclusion of all affected groups, 3) inclusion of all important issues (social, economic, cultural, political) rather than a focus on administrative agenda, 4) ensuring cooperation with other groups, agencies, and organizations, 5) ensuring that all relevant groups will benefit from the activities. (Stringer, 2007: 35).

Returning the inquiry results: supporting its applicability

As noted in other occasions, references to returning the results can be found in late 20th century France, which made considerable efforts towards spatial areas. (Pascaru and Buţiu, 2007). Prior and well made rural surveys, in the view of Roger Mucchielli, become increasingly important as feedback surveys, i.e. returning the conclusions of the survey to the community in which the survey was carried out (where the community itself accepted the survey) can cause an awakening in local dynamism. From this point of view, such a survey is considered to be a decisive event. If specialists were able to get cooperation and permission to start an investigation from residents, and if they were able to engage local leaders, formal and informal, and if they returned the results to the community (and if people recognized themselves in this image of the results), this could represent a decisive moment. (Mucchielli, 1976: 73). Complexity refund is unfortunately rarely addressed.

Though many research textbooks and other methodological guidelines are tools and offer tips for fitness and organization of data collection, in the view of Bernard Bergier, many have also neglected their relationship with their recipients and its impact on sociologists and ethnologists. (Bergier, 2000: 5). The return (*restitution*, in French) has as its intended recipient the interlocutors in the field of the researcher. Bergier defined returning of the results as the act or the dynamic by which the, for ethical and/or heuristic reasons, shares with interlocutors in the field the interim results and/or the final processing of data collected for analysis. (Bergier, 2000: 8). We could even go further and speak according to these objectives about a refund ethics, knowledge or heuristic refund. Bergier advocates for a refund, but integrated into all the activities of the researcher. Integration means that the refund may participate, in certain circumstances, to the production of scientific knowledge and to validate the conclusion. Such reimbursement, he said, requires the subject to be recognized simultaneously both as an object of knowledge and as knowing, that is both an object and subject of research. (Bergier, 2000: 18). *Restitution*, stresses Bergier, addresses interlocutors in the field because it deals with issues that are rooted in their applications. Bergier recommends the oral return of results, which is a return made withthe presence of the intervener and the local system actors, whose presence makes possible a mutual interpellation. This return is formative, with personal guidance. It does not share the scholarly knowledge of the intervener, but produces a recognition of the provisions, motives, intentions, aspirations, and the fears and hopes of individuals. In Bergier's conception, such information must be returned to the representative population groups in the field. *Restitution* is conflictually scheduled. Tensions between the conflicting interests of different groups should be highlighted. (Bergier, 2000: 57-58).

Various studies that have used our results started back in 2000, in a local development project in a mountainous area of Romania. We identified key local problems and development opportunities through extensive sociological surveys in rural communities in the area. Sociological survey results were returned to the participants of the investigation, and other interested local actors. Return refund was made through interviews (individual) and a public debate with broad participation (community members, formal and informal leaders, representatives of public authority departments,

etc.) The refund validated and invalidated some results of the research. In addition, a series of local conflicts (between authorities and citizens, between authorities and local entrepreneurs from different parts of the local communities) was revealed. The problem of solving these conflicts was discussed on that occasion, with a number of solutions being outlined. In the following years, our research was focused on government rural communities. Sociological surveys were conducted among citizens and their results were presented to local authorities. This is what we once called government participation that is sociologically driven. (Pascaru and Buţiu, 2010: 505).

Both of the studies presented above have been, at least partially, action research based, as well as applied research. They belong in the field of sociology, but we can also design research in the field of social psychology where action research, with intervention, defines the applicability of this discipline.

Conclusions

Because in terms of applied social psychology, research-action is a clear concept, we will refer to it in terms of applied sociology and the main points in which it can supportresearch-action. We propose starting from the five specific techniques presented by Sullivan and summarized by us above: 1) program evaluation, 2) needs assessement, 3) social impact assessement, 4) social indicators research, and 5) cost-benefit analysis. Evaluation of these programmes can be done by those who run the program or without them. If the object of the programme is to improve the evaluation and the elimination of errors in the evaluated program roadmap, or in future programs, then a participatory evaluation is preferred. Hence research-action that can bring an added-value to the evaluation that can substantiate the new habits of correct programs becomes useful. Action research can contribute to the strengthening of accountability and of critical consciousness. These needs are the result of the combination of micro and macro trends, and of the interactionist perspective, which cannot be neglected. If, at the macro level, work can be done using other tools of sociology, such as the analysis of official documents, micro-level research-action can develop the needs and the purposes of human rationality deep in their evolution. Where there are needs or social problems, there must be resources and solutions. It is desirable to identify the resources and the solutions to come from the point of view of those who express these needs. Here, research-action can play an outstanding role.

Assessing the impact of a program should be done in conjunction with the process of community development implied by the program, or with territorial communities. Research-community-based action finds its place here. Social indicators reveal the existence or non-existence of social problems. Even if they take the form of abstract statistical rates, behind these are concrete people and real human collectivities, as anyone who supports social issues can identify. And the solutions are not statistics, but are reflected in the policies and the strategies for solving these reported social problems. Research-action can play an important role in ensuring the consistency of policies and strategies by involving the direct beneficiaries. Cost-benefit analyses always have a bookish component, but also a deep human component which is, unfortunately, often overlooked. The costs and benefits of programs are not only financial, but most of the time, are defined by the human capital

involved. This can end up being very important in terms of cost-benefit analysis, and can involve socio-psychological identity, attachment, solidarity, trust, intolerance, and different feelings or frustrations of all sorts. Here research-action may reveal that given an inefficient financial sector, the monetary costs are greater than the benefits, but can also reveal a number of remarkable socio-psychological benefits, such as increasing the capital of tolerance and trust within a community, a benefit that cannot be expressed. But research-action is not easy to implement. It requires more time and emergent design. Because of the remarks of the other authors, Reason and Bradbury claim that research-action information is clearly an evolving process, being "a verb rather than a noun." The consequence is that research-action cannot be defined in quick terms, being rather a "work of art" (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: 2). In these circumstances, returning the results can be used with success in the short term and for more concrete targets.

Thus, in the case of the evaluation of refund programs, the evaluation results can be an opportunity for the promoter's analysis program or, better still, in meetings between the promoters and beneficiaries of a programme, the assessment may point to a sociological survey, and in this case we can use this opportunity to return the survey results as a tool for sociologically priming the adjustment of a programme or the rethinking of future programmes. We can also organize the survey of the assessment of needs in line with other sociological methods (observation, interview, analysis of documents). In this case, returning the results of sociological research can support action in order to identify the resources required to meet the needs identified. The debate over the results can then involve both the authorities and the ordinary members of the concerned communities. Results of the evaluation of the impact of a program can also be returned to the promoters and beneficiaries alike. Communities can also become involved to withstand the impact of a program. If a program is an innovation for the community, then numerous barriers will be removed. For example, by using the refund results, we have identified a series of psycho-sociological barriers to promoting participatory governance at the local level. (Pascaru and Buţiu, 2010). Results of the analysis of social indicators, in the form of major trends they reflect, can be presented to those who develop various social policies on the basis of the indicators analyzed. Such a presentation can be made to the beneficiaries of social policies. For example, indicators on the health of the population may be the subject of debate at the level of government, but at the level of the entities and non-governmental organizations representing patients that promote prevention of sickness or a healthy lifestyle. The same indicators may be debated in joint meetings between the government and the beneficiaries of a health system. The results of cost-benefit analyses, as well as socio-psychological costs and benefits, can also be returned to the beneficiaries and promoters of the programmes a like. A comprehensive approach is needed here. The refund results, paradoxically, may reveal the human sensitivities of costs and benefits, and address sensitivities and comprehensive speech at the same time.

Beyond all these issues presented so far, the connections between the applicability of social sciences and public policy should be stressed here. Both sociology and applied social psychology are open to support or change in public policy, and are not just limited to solving specific social problems. Sullivan himself observed that, in general, applied social research is used both in public policy and by private sector businesses and corporations. The role of applied social research in public policy, Sullivan believes, is to

provide systematic data for evaluating alternatives at the policy level, and this could be carried out in three steps: 1) problem formulation, 2) policy formulation, 3) policy implementation. (Sullivan, 1992: 169-170). When formulating a problem from sociological data one can develop judgments about a situation that should be considered a social problem worthy of public attention. During the policy formulation stage, applied research is used to formulate some feasible and measurable solutions to a given problem. Finally, at the policy implementation stage, according to Sullivan, applied research is a key tool in assessing how well the policy has achieved its objectives, and to identify any positive or negative impact, be it intentional or unintentional. At this stage, "applied research often takes the form of program evaluations or cost-benefit analyses that are designed and constructed explicitly to assess a particular policy." (Sullivan, 1992: 170).

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