Researchandaction.doc

# RESEARCH AND ACTION: A SOCIAL/CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE[#]

**Jacqueline J. Goodnow**

**Macquarie University**

"Research and action" is a topic written about by many social scientists, including several present at this conference. The debate is sometimes oriented toward how to guide research, sometimes toward how to guide action. I shall focus on the latter direction: on action. I shall also focus on some particular occasions (times when people do not argue on why, how, or when to act), and on ways to consider both the general nature of interconnections and some specific ways forward.

Some of the material I shall cover is also specifically focussed on action intended to benefit children. That is not always the case, however. I shall draw also on material that picks up general issues relevant to research and action addressed towards adults, children, or the communities and social settings in which they live.

As a starting point, I shall take Shonkoff's (2000) description of interconnections as "3 cultures in search of a shared mission". In that description, the three are "science, policy, and practice". The "search for a shared mission" is made complex by their often "not speaking the same language". To take a concrete example, researchers and policy-makers often have different goals, time-lines, views of funding, costs, evidence, or reasonable arguments. The way toward a shared mission, several have argued, calls for researchers to change: learning to make clearer statements (drop the "ifs" and "buts"), to think in "investment" terms (e.g., action now will reduce costs later) and in terms of

---

[#] Draft for conference: Imagining Childhood: Children, Culture and Our Community, September 2005 (Alice Springs) short-term results (announceable before the next election) (cf. Collins et al., 2000; Goodnow, in press; McCall & Groark, 2000).

The expansions I propose on Shonkoff's (2000) description are of 3 kinds:

- The first is *a move from 3 groups to 4 groups*. The fourth group consists of those expected to benefit: the group often thought of as the "target" group, although that term restricts their possible role.

- The second looks more closely at the phrase *"search for a shared mission"*. Interconnections are often thought of as one-way in their direction, and as based on moves toward agreement. Directions are better thought of as more varied. And the more common state is likely to be the presence of tension, with moves toward negotiation, compromise, or stalemate.

- The third starts from *"cultures with distinctive languages"*. Groups do often differ from one another. We need, however, ways to specify differences and to ask when and how they matter. For that major step, I shall turn to contributions from several fields: social psychology, anthropology, and – with an eye particularly to action in the form of "early intervention" – developmental psychology.

## Expansion A: Why Consider Four Groups?

The Shonkoff trio consists of "science, policy, and practice". I shall start by converting that to groups of people (researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners) and by noting that the interconnections most often written about are between the first two: researchers and policy-makers.

Adding the third group (the people who implement a policy or a program) has stemmed from the recognition that any conversion into action depends on them. They can ignore a policy or alter its translation into practice. Many an educational researcher, for example, has had to worry about "program fidelity": about what actually occurs, in the classroom, to a tightly designed teaching program.

Adding the fourth group may also stem from recognising that they can reject, ignore, or alter what is proposed for them. To that reason for inclusion, however, has been added the recognition that research and action are most likely to be effective if this group is involved from the start: in planning the research, developing the policy, evaluating the outcomes. Added also have been reasons based on issues of respect and rights.

Recognising the need to consider groups 3 and 4, however, is not in itself a sufficient way forward. We now need to ask:

- Why are people in groups 3 and 4 often ignored?
- How can their input or "participation" be achieved?
- What input do they see as most important?

A start on those steps can now be seen in several analyses of participation in research. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2005), for example, covers the results of several seminars on "user" participation. Participation by children and youth is the subject of a paper by Cashmore (2003). Of particular relevance to this conference's concerns, I suggest, are two sources that refer to Indigenous groups in Australia. One is a report by Robyn Penman (2005) on what was learned about doing research with Indigenous communities in the course of discussions with adults in several communities. The other is Marcia Langton's (1993) account of the involvement of Aboriginals in film and television production: making their own and defining the nature of collaboration with other producers.

## Expansion B: "In Search of a Shared Mission"

That phrase suggests a high degree of agreement among people. They have similar goals. The only need is to find a path. Once located – by any group – all will recognise it as the way forward. Suggested also, in Shonkoff's (2000) description of progress, is a particular direction to search, with researchers taking the lead.

That kind of picture needs two expansions. For the first, I shall borrow a concept from anthropology that often goes by the name "*multiplicity and contest*". No society, the argument runs, is "monolithic". There is, instead, more than one way of thinking or acting: more that one form of medicine, schooling, religion, ideology. These several forms do not simply lie side-by-side. They compete with one another. They form alliances, try to co-opt, or try to suppress others in a variety of ways. (They may, however, agree that the methods adopted should only go so far.)

Does that kind of expansion have implications for research and action? We would do best, it implies, to accept "multiplicity and contest" as the natural state. If co-operation occurs, we should welcome it. What we should more often expect, and study, is the occurrence of persuasion, resistance, negotiation, and compromise in a variety of forms. What we should also be alert to are the contest methods regarded by various groups as acceptable or unacceptable, as persuasive or off-putting, and ask when tension and contest are most likely to be prominent. Times of gaining research consent and times of evaluation, for example, may provide especially useful focal points.

The second expansion has to do with any assumption of *unidirectionality*. It is tempting to think of research and action as proceeding from researchers to policy-makers to practitioners to those expected to benefit. In reality, directions are more varied. We need to ask about the forms they take and the consequences of particular directions.

Take, for example, the presence of some reverse directions. I am, for instance, currently a member of an observing group for a planned longitudinal study of Indigenous children (Footprints in Time, Family and Community Services). That research will start from Group 4: in this case, not the children themselves but the adults in their community and their views of what the research needs to cover if it is to be of benefit to their communities. How that starting point influences what is done will be of major interest. (Penman's, 2005, report, is the beginning of that analysis).

The effects in that case, however, are yet to be known. Let me add then one where a particular effect has been singled out. The direction in this case starts from the preferences of policy-makers. Policies are supposed to improve conditions in a community. That is what funding is given for. Researchers, it has been proposed, then become inclined to find or to emphasise the conditions that need to be fixed, the “problems” that need to be addressed. The end result becomes one of research that is more likely to emphasise the negatives, the “deficits” rather than the “strengths” of the communities where research occurs (Hayes-Bautista and Rodriquez, 1996, cited by Zepeda, 1997).

## Expansion C: On Different “Cultures” and Distinctive “Languages”

So far, I have suggested expansions in (a) the number of groups seen as involved in “research and action” interconnections and (b) the kinds of interactions and directions involved in any “search for a shared mission”. Each of those expansions could be made more detailed or taken further. I wish to give particular space, however, to the third. This has to do with where we can take the notion of “different cultures” and “different languages”. How can we specify the nature of differences? When do they matter? What “difference” do they make?

Those questions are essential for the guiding of either research or action. To explore them, I wish to outline contributions from several disciplines, asking in each case about their implications. The contributions noted will necessarily be highly selective. From social psychology, however, I wish to pull out material on how people in different groups perceive one another, noting especially the “blind spots” likely to occur in those perceptions. From anthropology, I wish to pull out several ways to specify the nature of “cultures” and differences among them. From developmental psychology, I wish to pull out some contrasting views within a discipline: views about the nature of “early instruction”.

### *Contributions from Social Psychology*

This discipline encourages us first of all to consider any society in terms of groups of people and the ways in which they think about themselves and others. (The term “culture” is then anchored in concrete fashion). All thinking is seen as involving some “mental shortcuts” that enable us to make quick judgements and that also lead to “blind spots” in our perceptions of others. From several analyses, I single out three of these, asking for each what implications they hold for the way “reasearch and action” proceed.

*The tendency to place people in categories or boxes, and to assume that others use the same boxes*. Ah, we say, you are an Anglo, a woman, a child, a psychologist etc. It is extremely difficult to avoid using categories or boxes when we think about people. It also seems difficult to accept that our boxes may be different from those that others use. We are taken by surprise, for example, when people draw distinctions among their relatives that we give little attention to.

For that blind spot, two corrective steps can be suggested: both influencing the effectiveness of research and action. One is that we work from the categories that others use. We can, for example, be alert to the distinctions that people draw among themselves, or we can ask them to identify themselves. Those are, for instance, the kinds of corrections offered to offset a tendency, among teachers in California schools, to class as “Asian” pupils who may come from anywhere between India and Samoa (Cooper et al, in press).

The second recommendation consists of asking: What is the worst category error I could make? What is the worst “placing in the wrong box” that I could commit? That suggestion is prompted by research on what are called “category errors” or “social errors” (e.g., Fiske, 1993; Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991). Some errors are definitely worse than others, and part of acquiring “cultural sensitivity” must surely consist of coming to know where those “worst errors” are.

*Outgroup homogeneity*. We readily see “others” – the people we think of as “them” – as being all alike. To Anglos, to take an old form of this tendency, all Chinese look alike. To Chinese, all “Europeans” – in itself a “lumping” term – look alike. In all cases, of course, we know that “we” are splendidly diverse and we react negatively to being lumped together with a bunch of other people.

For that blind spot, we can again ask about worst errors. What forms of “lumping” are felt to be most objectionable?

*Assuming that “our” ways are of course “better”*. Any change, it follows, should be in the direction of people coming to understand “our” ways and becoming more like “us”. It is then a major shift when the reverse direction is considered: When, for example, someone in a non-Indigenous group suggests that change should be toward Indigenous ways of thinking or acting.

For this blind spot, two correctives may be useful. One is to recognise that the assumption cuts both ways. Others are also likely to see their ways as better than ours. The second is to remember history. The history of intervention is often one of corrections to the assumption that “we” know best.

For that history, I shall take only one example. It has to do with language, with ways of speaking. More specifically, it has to do with the question: Why do African-Americans tend to do less well in school than “Anglos” do? Early accounts of this difference were in the conventional language of “lack” or “deficit”. African-Americans, it was said, lack language or “good” forms of language. They may also lack verbal “stimulation”. Some intervention programs then concentrated almost entirely on the teaching of particular forms of speech, with an emphasis on grammar or syntax. In effect, the possibility that these children might have different forms of strength rarely emerged.

Fortunately, research moved forward. African-Americans, it was established, were far from being “non-verbal”. Outside the classroom, they were in fact highly fluent speakers (e.g., Labov, 1972). The problem was school language, and school situations. In addition, the nature of language came to be reconsidered. Language, it was increasingly pointed out, covered pragmatics as well as syntax. That is, what matters is skill in using language (body language or verbal language). Being bi-lingual also came to be seen more often as a value or a strength rather than as an inevitable handicap or a barrier to clear thinking. What may be most useful in school life or social life, to make the point by a different phrase, is skill in "navigating the borders" (Phelan, Davidson, Yu, 1991).

### ***Contributions from Anthropology***

I shall again outline a selected set of contributions, chosen because of the implications for action that are suggested or that have been taken up.

*Differences in "cultural capital"*. The term comes from Bourdieu and Passeron (1973). Boiled down, it may be thought of as "knowing how the system works". The children of academics, to take one of Bourdieu's examples, may not be strong on "economic capital". They usually have a good grasp, however, on how the educational system works. It is precisely that kind of knowledge that even the most "aspirational" parents from other backgrounds may lack (cf. Jackson and Marsden, 1966).

An ongoing study by Catherine Cooper and her colleagues provides an example of a translation into action (Cooper et al, in press). This research group started with two observations: (1) A narrowing "pipeline" (fewer and fewer children from minority groups appeared as schooling moved to higher levels), and (2) A lack of prerequisite knowledge (knowledge of what was needed in order to get from level A to B etc). Their study is now directed toward providing that knowledge: charting the paths that can be followed, and how to do so. It is also directed toward having students see those paths as part of their possible futures, their "possible selves".

*Differences in "frames"*. "Frame" is a term that came originally from an anthropologist (Gregory Bateson) and is now appearing in analyses of research and action (e.g., Gilliam and Bales, 2001). The term refers to particular ways of defining or interpreting events, often varying across groups of people. Gilliam and Bales (2001), for example, have pointed to the way news stories about teenagers are predominantly "framed" in terms of "trouble": stories of risky driving, juvenile crime, substance abuse, being "irresponsible". Less frequent is the more positive frame of teenagers involved in sports or community activities, or being in general "responsible". It then becomes difficult, Gillian and Bales (2001) continue, to develop or "sell" policies that invite input from youth or that build on their strengths rather than their "problem" behaviours. The way forward, they argue, needs to be one of trying to "reframe" the way events or involving teenagers are presented, with a shift in news stories and in television narratives as one possible way to do so.

Reframing, it is now suggested, may be the goal to keep in mind when we seek to change the views of others. What research may best provide is not a larger and larger collection of pieces of evidence, but an altered way of looking at what is possible, drawing on evidence but also on images and narratives that embody the altered view. Are there examples of reframing that can alter a number of decisions? Let me quickly note three.

- *Frames for difficulties in school*. The usual frame sees them as difficulties in competence, ability, or skill. We then proceed to specify the needed skills and try to build these. Emerging now, however, is a view of difficulties as lying also in a lack of "engagement". Children may be physically in school, and able to do the work, but not "there" when it comes to interest or involvement. With that shift in frame, attention may then turn to promoting involvement, with the relationships to teachers now given a stronger place (e.g., Blumenfeld, in press).

- *Risk factors*. The usual frame for these is in terms of particular single factors e.g., being a single parent, being poor, being away from one's own place or one's own people. The alternate frame is one in which what matters most is the number of risk factors, the "cumulative disadvantage". That reframing is a help when it comes to making changes. It is difficult to change all those factors. Reducing any one, however, may be helpful. It makes sense then to change what you can.

- *Multiple attachments*. I draw particular attention to this frame because of its relevance to decisions and judgements about foster care, childcare, kin care, or multiple carers of any kind. The usual frame is an emphasis on single attachments, with all others seen as potentially weakening the strength of the primary one. We now know, however, that children can form multiple attachments and that these can have enriching rather than "subtractive" effects. What counts is the sense of being safe and being cared for, and that can come about in a variety of ways. That shift in frame, as Kelly and Lamb (2003) detail, can alter a variety of decisions by courts and social workers.

*Cultural models, cultural practices*. This is the third and last contribution to be noted from anthropology. The term "cultural" in this case is used to refer to ways of thinking or acting that are "shared": held to by all or most people in a group and likely to be seen as "natural" (change may be seen as "absurd" or even "heretical").

The difference between the two terms is that "models" refers to ways of thinking, or ways of looking at the world. "Practices" refers to ways of acting: e.g., ways of speaking, ways of dividing space, tasks, or rewards, ways of "doing gender".

Does that distinction matter when it comes to research and action? One aspect of significance lies in the choice of where to put the emphasis when we wish to introduce change. The bias when it comes to "parent education programs", for example, is toward changing "models": changing parents' views of what children are like, what can be expected at various ages, or why children act as they do, mainly by providing parents with information.

The better place to start, some analyses of practices argue, may be with practices: with the everyday, taken-for-granted, routine ways of acting. If these are altered, a change in the ideas held may follow in time. If not, you will at least have altered what people actually do and that in turn may produce further changes.

Approaches to gender provide an example of action directed toward practices. It may be very difficult to undo the deeply seated ideas people hold about men and women. You may then do best to change some everyday practices e.g., ways of using terms such as "he" or "everyman" to cover both males and females, divisions of space, or divisions of jobs. Some of those changes may come about by persuasion. Others may need to be regulated by law. (Those changes in practice, often uncomfortable at the start, then help create an awareness that an issue exists and that change is sought. In time, they may also come to be taken-for-granted and seem natural.

We are some distance, I suggest, from knowing when to direct action toward models, practices, or a combination of the two. Beginning to ask when one might be a more effective form of action than another, however, is itself a way forward.

### *A Contribution From Developmental Psychology*

I shall take from this field only one contribution. It goes back to the concepts of "frames" and "contest". The difference between groups, however, is now between segments of what may seem at first to be one homogenous group: "developmentalists". In fact, segments of that group may hold a range of views, sometimes promoting different forms of action.

The area of action known as "early intervention" provides an example. It has been interpreted as meaning only "early in life", with an emphasis on the years 0-3 or 0-5. That view may then be expressed in phrases such as "the brain is cooked by age 4" or "if at first you don't succeed, you don't succeed" (the latter was the actual title for a promotional film on a preschool program).

An alternate frame sees the early years as important but not as all that matters. To take a phrase from Shonkoff and Phillips (2000),:"life is not a rocket launch", following a path set from the start. It follows instead paths marked by detours, loops, recovery routes, turning points or transition points. "Early intervention" can then refer to "early in a pathway": close to a transition point at any age. At these transition points, interest in possibilities is likely to be greatest, and ways of thinking or acting are usually not yet entrenched. In addition, “intervention” is thought of as covering “prevention” but as not limited to that. Building in recovery routes and encouraging returns become equally important. So also do the ways in which a way of thinking or acting comes to be sustained or to weaken. What matters is not only how to get something started, but how to keep it going, to help people “stay on track”.

I am myself very attached to this second view of “early intervention”. It is also the frame that a group of us, acting as a consortium, brought to an analysis of juvenile crime (Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium, 1999). I use it now, however, as a last illustration of differences among the several groups that have an interest in decisions about actions or interventions. Taking a cultural perspective toward these differences, I suggest, helps both to specify them and to ask about ways in which to move forward.

## REFERENCES

Blumenfeld, P. (in press). Engagement in school. In C.R. Cooper, C. García Coll, T. Bartko, H. Davis, & C. Chatman, (Eds.), *Hills of gold: Rethinking diversity and contexts as resources for children’s developmental pathways.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.) *Knowledge, education and social change*. London: Tavistock.

Cashmore, J. (June 2003). *Linking research, policy and practice: Including children’s input*. Paper presented at Children’s Issues Centre Conference, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Collins, W.A., Maccoby, E., Steinberg, L., Hetherington, M.H., & Bornstein, M. (2000). Contemporary research on parenting: the case for nature *and* nurture. *American Psychologist*, *53*, 218-232.

Cooper, C.R., Dominquez, E., & Rosa, S. (in press). Soledad’s dream: Diversity, children’s worlds, and pathways to college in democracies. In C.R. Cooper, C. García Coll, T. Bartko, H. Davis, & C. Chatman, (Eds.), *Hills of gold: Rethinking diversity and contexts as resources for children’s developmental pathways.* Mahwah, NJ. Erlbaum.

Developmental Crime Prevention Consortium (1999). *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime*. Canberra, Australia: Attorney-General’s Department.

Fiske, A.P. (1993). Social errors in four cultures: Evidence about universal forms of social relationships. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 24*, 463-494.

Fiske, A.P., Haslam, N. & Fiske, S. (1991) Confusing one person with another: What errors reveal about the elementary forms of social relations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60,* 656-674.

Gilliam, F.D. Jnr, & Bales, S.N. (2001). Strategic frame analysis: Reframing America’s youth. *Social Policy Report, 15* (3), 3-14.

Goodnow, J.J. (in press). Contexts, diversity, pathways: Linking and extending with a view to theory and practice. In C.R. Cooper, C. García Coll, T. Bartko, H. Davis, & C. Chatman, (Eds.), *Hills of gold: Rethinking diversity and contexts as resources for children’s developmental pathways.* Mahwah, NJ. Erlbaum.

Jackson, B. & Marsden, D. (1966). *Education and the working class*. Middlesex: Penguin.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2005) *User involvement in research: Building on experience and developing standards*. See http://www.jrf.org.uk/redirect.asp?url=findings/socialcare/1075

Kelly, J.B., & Lamb, M.E. (2000). Using child development research to make appropriate custody and access decisions for young children. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review, 38*, 297-311.

Labov, W. (1972). The study of language in its social context. In W. Labov (Ed.), *Sociolinguistic patterns* (183-259). Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

Langton, M. (1993). *Well, I heard it on the radio, I saw it on television*. Sydney: Australian Film Commission.

McCall, R.B., & Groark, C.J. (2000). The future of child development research and public policy. *Child Development, 71*, 197-204.

Penman, R. (2005). *Doing research with indigenous communities*. Report to the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children. Canberra: Family and Community Services.

Phelan, P. Davidson, A.L., & Yu, H.C. (1991). Students' multiple worlds: Navigating the borders of family, peer and school culture. In P. Phelan & A.L. Davidson (Eds.), *Cultural diversity: Implications for education* (52-88). New York: Teacher's College Press.

Shonkoff, J.P. (2000). Science, policy, practice: Three cultures in search of a shared mission. *Child Development, 71*, 181-187.

Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A.E. (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Zepeda, M. (1997). Perceptions from between a rock and a hard place. *SRCD Newsletter*, 40 (2), p.2 & p.9.