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978-0-521-37848-2 - Putting Social Science to Work: The Ground between Theory and Use Explored through Case Studies in Organisations

Lisl Klein and Ken Eason

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In this book, Lisl Klein and Ken Eason look at the various issues involved when attempts are made to make use of the theories, methods and findings of the social sciences in practical affairs. They consider how human and social considerations may be successfully integrated with technical and economic ones in the design and development of organisations and work.

Their study is both empirical and theoretical. Its core is the examination of fourteen case studies from manufacturing and service organisations in Britain and Germany. The various projects were carried out by units within the organisations themselves, by university departments, commercial consultants and an independent research institute. Outside the field of organisations the authors consider the background and strategies of a number of individual practitioners, and also an attempt at national level (in Germany) to make systematic use of research. Their study is informed by their own extensive experience as researchers and practitioners of social science.

The book concludes with a discussion of what contributes to successful practice. Its findings will be invaluable to all social scientists interested in the application of their disciplines as well as to potential clients in the world of business and industry.

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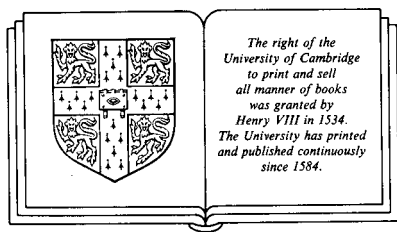
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Putting social science to work

The ground between theory and use explored through case studies in organisations

LISL KLEIN and KEN EASON



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Preface: why bother?

This book begins where *A Social Scientist in Industry* (Klein, 1976) left off. The research it includes is self-contained. However, the impetus behind that research was the need to follow the detailed description and analysis of a single, five-year-long experience in making use of the social sciences in an industrial organisation (Esso Petroleum), contained in the earlier book, with a comparative study of a number of such cases.

The question at the head of this preface is therefore being posed in two senses: why is it important to bring the social sciences to bear on organisations? And why is it important to investigate this process?

To deal with the second question first: experience, including the Esso experience, has shown that relating the social sciences to practical affairs, which to some of us seems such a self-evidently necessary and good thing to do, turns out to be extremely difficult. Different kinds of social science make different contributions and are hard to relate to each other, 'expertness' in matters concerning human relations can be experienced as threatening and is resented, sponsors do not stay in post long enough to see work through, consultants compete with each other or are played off against each other, no-one is sure how to handle the boundary between science and ideology – the list of problems seems endless, with the result that experience does not match expectation and there is much disappointment.

Moreover, these problems have been experienced for a long time. At a discussion of a Task Force on the Practice of Psychology in Industry, published in 1971 by the American Psychological Association, the comment was recorded 'You know, I have a tremendous feeling of déjà vu. I have been having the same discussions with you same guys for twenty-five years' (Task Force on the Practice of Psychology in Industry, 1971).

The work in Esso exemplified many of these issues and problems. It began to put them in a research framework, so that the present enquiry does not start from first principles. Three findings from the earlier work may be recalled in particular, as they form the starting assumptions of the present one.

Firstly, models of the use of social science which assume that it is a

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matter of transferring help or knowledge from a 'resource' system to a 'client' system are inadequate. These are the models underlying much of the work on the utilisation and diffusion of knowledge. They leave out of account, on the one hand, the fact that social science has needs as well as resources, both as regards its institutions and as regards its individual professionals; and that some of these needs are fulfilled, overtly or covertly, by the client or the field site. On the other hand, they also leave out of account the fact that clients – both institutions and individuals at the receiving end – have resources as well as needs. It is therefore a matter of relating the new input to the resources – personal or institutional – which already exist as well as relating it to a problem directly. This leads to the second starting assumption, which is that making use of social science depends on successfully relating the content of the work done to its context, in both the client system and the resource system. This is frequently called 'politics', and our third starting assumption is that the politics are part of the data.

One way of looking at and summarising the situation is to say that in the social sciences the 'Development' part of the 'Research and Development' continuum has been substantially neglected and there is a serious gap between the world of research and the world of practice. By tracing in detail the stories of a number of attempts at utilisation, and by making explicit the dynamics involved, the aim of the research was to make a contribution towards filling this gap.

There is, however, the other question to be answered. Why? If it is all so difficult, why does it matter? Why did one of us, after a long, difficult, sometimes painful and fairly inconclusive attempt, come to the conclusion that 'there is nothing for it but to keep trying'? (Klein, 1976, chapter 14).

The reason lies in values. While recognising that one research team cannot claim to speak for professional peers, it is necessary to say something about the values that underlie our pursuit of this topic. They are about reality, about development, and about integration and synthesis.

Organisations are complex and, like all institutions, have intended (manifest) and unintended (latent) consequences. The methods and concepts of the social sciences have much to contribute in making the latent consequences visible. From this also follow considerable possibilities of prediction. The question, 'If you set it up in this way, the consequences are likely to be of that kind – is that what you really intend?' is one of the key kinds of contribution.

Making administrators aware of the consequences or likely consequences of their policies and actions should not be confused with telling them what are desirable and undesirable consequences. The concern is not *in the first instance* about 'making things more human' or making people behave better towards each other. It is first of all that things should seem to

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be what they are, that actual policies and operating procedures should match, in their consequences, the values that managers, trade unionists, administrators of all kinds express.

In practice, once the consequences of policy or action are made explicit, inconsistencies between the expressed and actual operating values in an organisation sometimes become obvious. At that stage, the trap is to tell people that they ought to be doing one thing rather than another. It is more important to help them to recognise and work through the discrepancies. Social scientists, like everyone else, have the right to try to influence policy. But it is undemocratic for them to claim special rights, in their role as social scientists. If it turns out that 'tougher' values are in fact the real ones, social scientists may well want to express views about that; but if they have first demonstrated that their concern is for reality, whatever this turns out to be, they will have made clear the distinction between their professional role and their views as citizens, and they will also have earned a greater right to have their opinions taken seriously. As professionals they must know that reality is the only basis for doing anything that will take root. Some of our best friends have fallen into this trap. We recognise that this view may not be shared by all social scientists, but this is where we stand.

Thus the first set of values underlying the pursuit of this subject is about reality. The social sciences have great power to get at how things really are, both through research and through eliciting the dynamics of situations. Without a clear and honest understanding of the realities of an institution, no genuine development can take place.

The second set of values we then wish to lay on the line concerns action, i.e. the direction in which to move from understanding. What do we mean by development? Here our reasons for continuing to believe that the use and application of social science is important concerns the integration and synthesis of different value systems in society and the consequences for mental health – including institutional and societal mental health – if splits and contradictions are denied or ignored.

In many ways Western industrial society has not come to terms with being an industrial society at all. It continues to struggle with conflicting value systems, all of which are important, but which are difficult to reconcile and integrate, and which have internal contradictions. In particular there is one value system concerned with economic growth, development and expansion; there is a second one concerned with the intrinsic value, autonomy and personal growth of human beings; and there is a third concerned with research, the development of knowledge and the exercise of skills for their own sake.

Industrial society has tended to cope with the differences between these values, and the difficulties that may arise in reconciling them, by pursuing

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them in separate institutions, which have little to do with each other, and it has gone a very long way down that road. Yet it takes no more than a moment's thought to realise that it is simply not true that industrialists are the only people who care about money (and that they care about nothing else), that only social workers care about people, only academics care about knowledge (and that they do not care about anything else), only artists about beauty. All members of society share all of these value systems to some extent; all are in some sense less than themselves while nothing is done about bringing different values in relation to each other, not only between institutions but within the institutions in which we spend our time. It is in possibilities of synthesis and integration that the contribution of the social sciences lies; and that is why this undertaking, with all its difficulties, remains important.

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Social science practice in organisations can only emerge to the extent that they are prepared to test what it has to offer. For reasons of confidentiality we have not revealed the names of the many organisations in the United Kingdom and Germany who were the clients of social science in these studies. We are grateful to them, as well as to members and staff of the Commission for Economic and Social Change in Germany, for opening their doors and letting their experience inform the work.

We owe much to friends and colleagues in the world of social science practitioners. First and foremost there are those whose work, ideas and approaches feature in the case studies. We have adopted the practice of not identifying the particular practitioner in any case study (sometimes there were, of course, more than one); but, since our debt is so great, we do wish to acknowledge their contribution and thank them for sharing their experience. Those involved in the British work were: Harold Bridger, Bryan Calvert, Leela Damodaran, Christine Edwards, Penny Jones, Denis O'Donovan, Sue Pomfrett, Wendy Pritchard, Derek Pugh, Jim Rose, Alison Rowe, Brian Shackel and Steve Smith.

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Abbreviations

CESC	Commission for Economic and Social Change
CSC	computer steering committee
CUSSR	Centre for the Utilisation of Social Science Research
DP	data processing
ESPRIT	European Strategy Programme of Research in Information Technology
MbO	Management by Objectives
NEDO	National Economic Development Office
NIIP	National Institute of Industrial Psychology
OD	Organisation Development
O and M	Organisation and Methods
PDD	personnel development department
R and D	research and development
RKW	Rationalisierungskuratorium der Wirtschaft
TCI	Theme-Centred Interaction