

UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH

*DISABILITY RESEARCH: POLITICS, POLICY AND PRAXIS*

*by*

*PROFESSOR MIKE OLIVER*

Bournemouth  
20-22 November 1998

## **DISABILITY RESEARCH: POLITICS, POLICY AND PRACTICE**

Social research has long had a bad press. While, as an activity, it has existed for nearly 200 years, for almost as long questions as to its status, value and usefulness have been raised. The most recent question has been posed as a consequence of a government sponsored evaluation of education research which found that

“These researchers collected evidence from a wide range of funders, researchers and potential users and concluded that research relating to schools is largely irrelevant and inaccessible, rarely informing practice. This unhelpful situation is the responsibility of all parties concerned -the funders, researchers, policy makers, teachers and publishers/editorial teams.” (Clarke 1998.2)

The statement was made by Charles Clarke, MP Minister of State at the DfEE, but could have been a comment made by similar evaluations going back over many decades.

For too long all of us involved in the social research enterprise have either ignored comments such as these or merely tinkered with our own practices in order to allow us to carry on unhindered. In this session I want to call into question the purpose and value of the whole research enterprise. In so doing I will use my own experience both as a researcher and as a research subject and I will focus on research on disability as the substantive area in which to explore my argument. For those of you interested in following my argument in more detail, I have written about it in the following three papers which should be read chronologically in order to understand the changes in my own thinking.

Oliver M (1992) "Changing the Social Relations of Research Production" Disability, Handicap and Society Vol 7 No 2

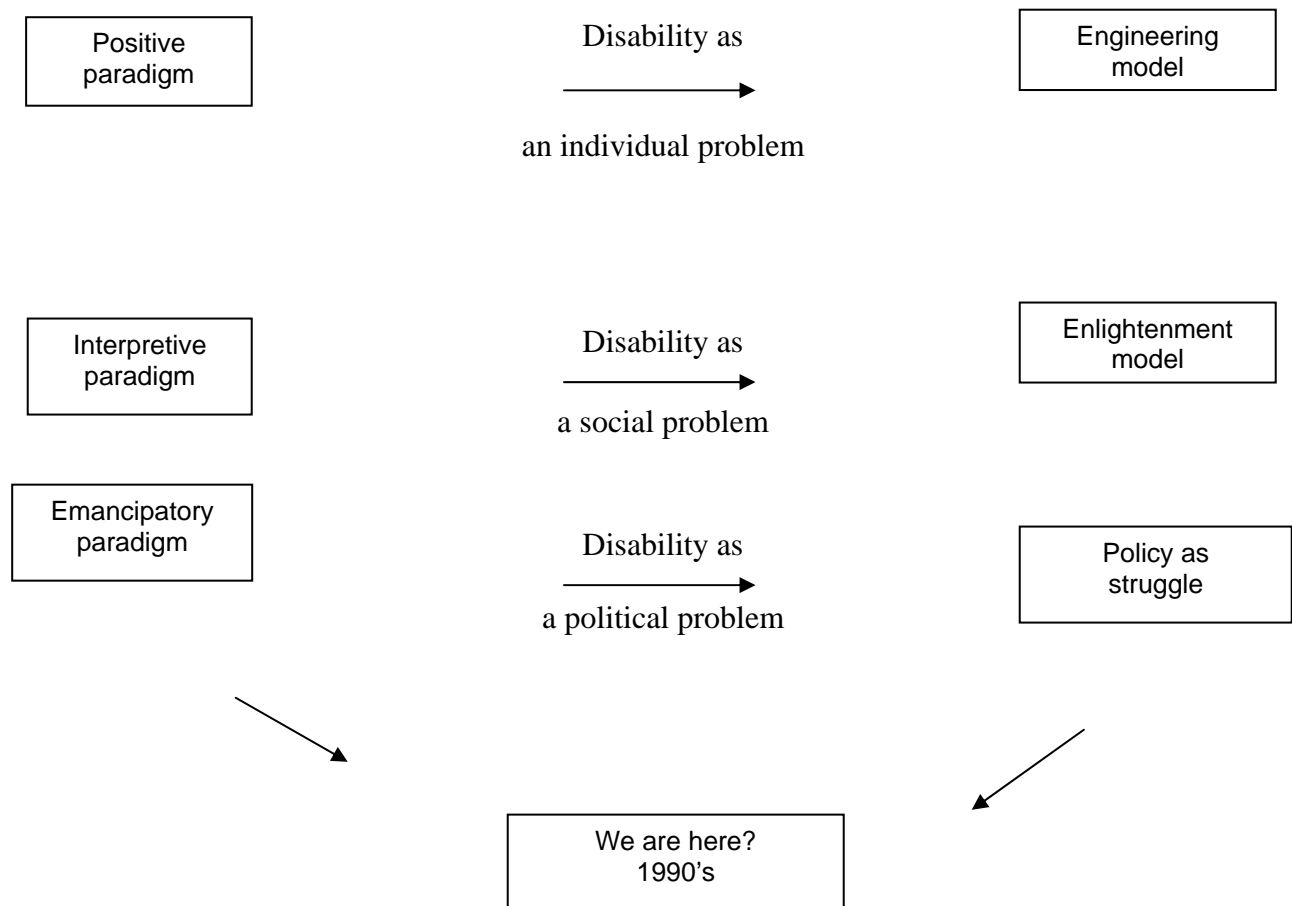
Oliver M (1997) "Emancipatory Research: Realistic Goal or Impossible Dream?" in Barnes C and Mercer G (Eds) Doing Disability Research Leeds, The Disability Press

Oliver M (1998) "Final Accounts and the Parasite People" in Corker M and French S (Eds) Disability and Discourse Buckingham, Open University Press

## Disabling research

In looking at the history of research on disability, it is easy how it mirrors the history of social research more generally. Previously (1992) I have argued that research has essentially failed disabled people on at least three counts. Firstly, it has failed to accurately capture and reflect the experience of disability from the perspective of disabled people themselves. Secondly, it has failed to provide information that has been useful to the policy making process and has contributed little to improving the material conditions under which disabled people live. Thirdly, it has failed to acknowledge the struggles of disabled people themselves and to recognise that disability is not simply a medical or welfare issue, but a political one as well.

This situation can be summarised as follows:



The result of this situation is that many disabled people have become alienated from both the process and product of social research. In this I would suggest that they are not alone. In recent years other minority or oppressed groups from women, black people, the poor, gay men and lesbians and people from other parts of the world have all voiced similar criticisms in one way or another. While this situation has been recognised in some parts of the academy and by some researchers, it remains true that governments and funding bodies still require research to be churned out in the old disabling ways. From the fetishism on methodology that still haunts the ESRC to government obsession with scientific validity, the positivistic approach to social research continues to dominate its funding.

Charles Clarke, in the article referred to above, while accurately diagnosing the problem, still only comes up with the old, well-tried and failed solutions. Firstly he suggests re- focusing research funding which is code for giving more money to fewer organisations. How such elitism both in the production of research and the training of researchers is going to make research more accessible and useful is the subject of his second proposal; a specialist information centre to disseminate research findings. The third proposal appears to contradict the first as it calls for greater user involvement at all stages of research production but this is not an anti-elitist attempt to involve research subjects in research about them rather for users he means funders and policy makers.

### **Changing the social relations of research production**

There are no simple or magic bullet solutions however and even some of the suggestions from oppressed groups themselves border on the naive. For example, standpoint theorists who suggest that all that is needed is for researchers to identify with their research subjects in order to produce accurate accounts of experience. The harder version of this position goes further and argues that shared experience is essential; in other words only women can research women's experience, black people the black experience, disabled people the disability experience and so on. But as Norman Denzin has recently pointed out

"The standpoint theorist presumes a privileged but problematic place in her own textuality ... a romantic, utopian impulse organises this work: the belief that if lived experience is recovered, somehow something good will happen in the world. A politics of action or praxis is seldom offered".

(Denzin 1997.54)

My own view is that the crucial issue in developing more useful alienating research is that of control, not that of experience. Not all research based on experience accurately reflects that experience and not all 'objective' research fails to accurately

capture experience even if the general criticism has some validity. This is not to deny the value of research which gives voice to those previously denied it, but to question whether, by itself, giving voice can ever be enough. If it were, then the work of Mayhew and Engels, let alone Townsend and Abel-Smith, would have resulted in the disappearance of the poor.

If such research is ever to be useful, it must not only faithfully capture the experience of the group being researched but also be available and accessible to them in their struggles to improve the conditions of their existence. This isn't just about making researchers more accountable but of giving over ultimate control to the research subjects. Elsewhere I have referred to this as the 'changing of the social relations of research production'. This does not mean that researchers have to give up researching but that they have to put their knowledge and skills in the hands of research subjects themselves. It also implies that we need to develop a language (or discourse) which does not continue to maintain the artificial distinction between researcher and researched. We do not, as yet, have a language which enables us to talk about research not premised upon the researcher/researched distinction.

### **Politics and praxis in research**

My argument however is not intended to replace one naive solution with another - away with experience and on with control, so to speak. The world (of research) is far more complex than that: indeed it is far more complex than many researchers recognise when they reflect on the relationship between their own politics and their research practice. David Silverman, for example, has recently suggested that researchers can choose one of two roles in relation to their own work; what he calls the scholar or the partisan.

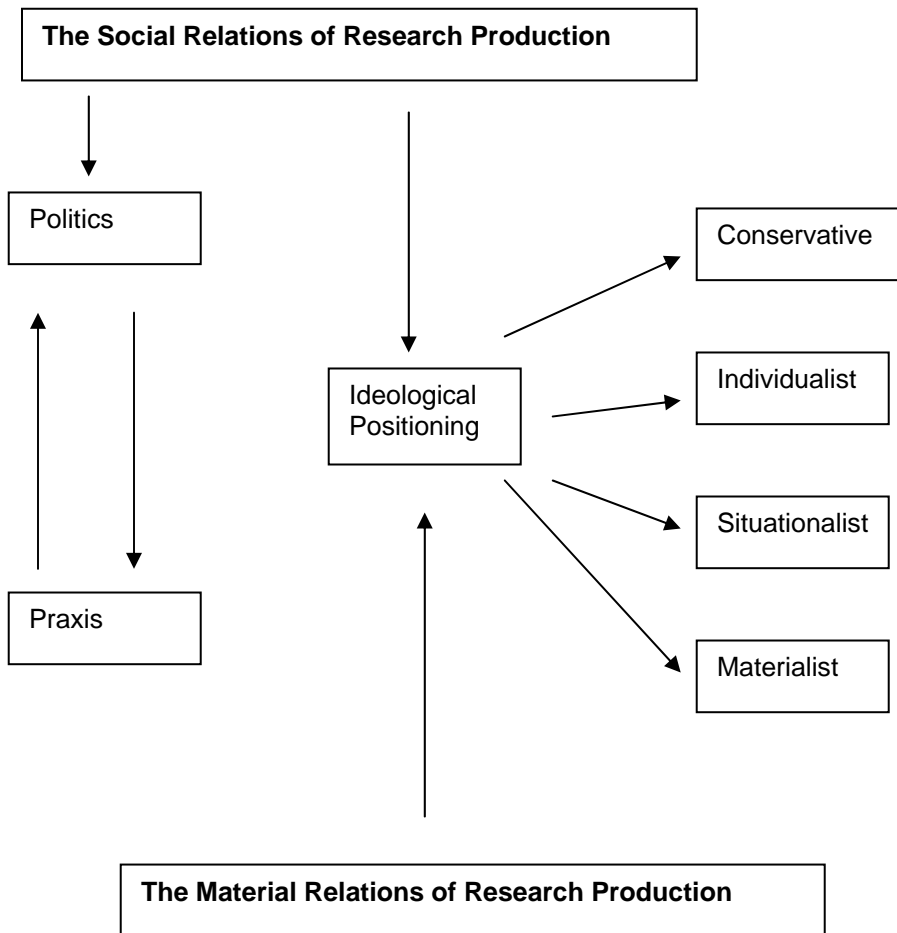
“The partisan is often condemned to ignore features of the world which do not fit his or her preconceived moral or political position. The scholar goes too far in the other direction, wrongly denying that research has any kind of involvement with existing forms of social organisation. Both positions are too extreme and thus fail to cope with the exigencies of the actual relationship between social researchers and society”.

(Silverman 1998.93)

It is not simply a matter of researchers choosing whether to adopt partisan or scholarly positions because researchers themselves are not free to make such simple choices.

Researchers, have suggested elsewhere, are trapped between the material and social relations of research production; between the way research is organised and funded and the way it is actually carried out. The following table graphically reflects not just

the positioning of researchers but some of the solutions to the difficulties this positioning creates.



While we all have to make our own choices in respect of our own ideological positioning, I would suggest that it is our duty as researchers to make clear where we are coming from rather than to hide behind spurious notions of objectivity or to suggest that such issues are beyond our control.

### **Research as production**

We can only maintain the position that these wider issues are beyond our control if we remain committed to the idea that social research is an act of scientific investigation of the social world. Increasingly this position is coming under attack from a variety of post-modernist and post-structuralist positions to the point where a view of research as production is becoming increasingly influential. Norman Denzin, in his recent book, puts the moderate version of this position

"...the worlds we study are created, in part, through the texts that we write and perform about them".

(Denzin 1997.xiii)

In my own research career I am conscious that I have now made that transition from seeing research as an attempt to investigate the world into seeing research as action involved in producing the world. I began the recent study of the disability movement (Campbell and Oliver 1996) believing that we were investigating the self organisation of disabled people in Britain but I can now only make sense of that experience by seeing it as an act of production, not one of investigation. Once one takes that cognitive leap, not only is research never the same again but neither is the world itself. Having made this cognitive leap, I have decided that I will not undertake any further research myself for a variety of reasons, some personal and some professional. At a personal level I no longer have the intellectual energy and commitment to begin again and at a professional level I no longer need the rejections that would undoubtedly follow in the increasingly competitive research world in submitting proposals that seek to produce rather than investigate the world -just imagine the responses of most of the major funding bodies!

### **Conclusion**

In arriving at this point, the juncture of history and biography as Wright Mills might have said, I have not become anti-research as others have suggested when I have presented this argument before. Far from it, I genuinely believe that research has a crucial role in producing the kind of world we would all like to live in but, if it is to fulfil this role, the whole research enterprise has to be deconstructed and reconstructed to fit itself for this historic task.

The deconstruction must recognise, to return to Norman Denzin, that

"The list of writers who have broken promises and betrayed those they have been intimate with is endless, and we do not live in a perfect world".

(Denzin 1997.287)

and further that

"This will not end but the guilt quotient should be raised because it is no longer morally acceptable to do as we have done in the past".

(Denzin 1997.287)

In saying what I have, it has not been my intention to disavow the research enterprise entirely but instead to provide a basis for its reconstruction. I fully recognise that as someone coming to the end of his academic career, I can be dismissive of research in ways that those at earlier stages cannot. But deciding not to undertake any further research myself is not the same thing as saying that all social research is a waste of time. In fact, despite what I have said today, I still believe in the potential of research in the same way I did at the start of my academic career.

For this potential to be realised, I believe that we must do three things at least;

- Shift fundamentally the social relations of research production
- Be open, honest and explicit about the politics and praxis involved in our own research
- Recognise that because our research helps to produce the world we are studying, we have to take some responsibility for its impact upon that world.

If we can indeed do these things, then perhaps we can build a research enterprise which will liberate not only those we study but ourselves as well and in so doing collapse the distinction between us and them.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Campbell J and Oliver M (1996) *Disability Politics : understanding our past, changing our future* London Routledge

Clarke C (1998) "Resurrecting Research to Raise Standards" *Social Sciences* October Issue 40

Denzin N (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnography Practices for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* London Sage

Oliver M (1992) 'Changing the Social Relations of Research Production' *Disability, Handicap and Society* Vol 7 no 2

Oliver M (1997) 'Emancipatory Research: Realistic Goal or Impossible Dream?' in Barnes C and Mercer G (Eds) *Doing Disability Research* Leeds, The Disability Press

Oliver M (1998) 'Final Accounts and the Parasite People' in Corker M and French S (Eds) *Disability and Discourse* Buckingham, Open University Press

Silverman D (1998) "Research and Social Policy" in Seale C (Eds) *Researching Society and Culture* London Sage