10

Collective action as a research problem

Research and intervention

Empirical research on social movements has been marked traditionally by the legacy of dualistic thinking. In general a set of instruments and techniques has been established, to be applied to two distinct areas of analysis: to the structural variables which determine behaviour, and to the orientations, representations and ideologies of actors themselves. In addition, there have been attempts to correlate both levels of analysis. What is lacking, however, is an approach concerned with action systems. The lack of a methodological tradition in this area is due primarily to the difficulty of capturing these action systems ‘in action’.

In anthropology and experimental and social psychology, research techniques have been developed which are capable of ‘capturing’ action systems in action. In sociology, with the exception of participant observation, research has only begun recently to develop qualitative methods for the observation of action systems. Recent sociological contributions emphasize a more direct intervention by the researcher in the observed field. The role of the researchers is to develop qualitative techniques capable of detecting behaviour in its formation, or stimulating the behaviour in order to observe it under experimental conditions.

As part of the methodological discussion I will refer to the research conducted under my direction between 1980 and 1984 in metropolitan Milano. The research, utilizing an experimental qualitative method, was designed to investigate the processes of
FORMING A COLLECTIVE ACTOR. THIS TYPE OF INVESTIGATION PRESENTED A NUMBER OF SPECIFIC RISKS: 1) THAT THE ACTORS MIGHT REFUSE PROLONGED INTERACTION WITH THE RESEARCHERS; 2) THAT THE LATTER MIGHT BECOME TOO INTIMATELY INVOLVED, BOTH THROUGH AN EFFECTIVE IDENTIFICATION, AND BY TENDING TO BECOME ‘DEMIURGES’ OF THE COLLECTIVE ACTION; AND 3) THAT INVESTIGATION MIGHT TURN INTO AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING, EVEN IF MORE ILLUSORY THAN AFFECTIVE. THESE RISKS Prompted THE RESEARCHERS TO TACKLE NEW QUESTIONS, SUCH AS THE PROBLEM OF THE CONTRACTUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND GROUPS; THE MULTIPLE LEVELS OF ANALYSIS INVOLVED; AND THE POSSIBLE FACTORS INFLUENCING THE RELATIONSHIP OF RESEARCHERS AND ACTORS.

FOLLOWING THE EXPERIMENTAL PRACTICE OF OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES, CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH SEEMS TO HAVE OPENED ITSELF UP TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITATIVE AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE. IN TERMS OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE, THIS DEVELOPMENT CORRESPONDS TO CHANGES IN THE OBJECTS OBSERVED, THE EMERGENCE IN SOCIETY OF A SHIFT TOWARDS QUALITATIVE VALUES (SUCH AS THE QUALITY OF LIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT), INDIVIDUALS’ NEED FOR SELF-REALIZATION, AND THE ATTENTION TO THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS OF EXPERIENCE. IN THIS CONTEXT IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THE KIND OF RESEARCH STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS CONDUCTED BY MYSELF WAS POTENTIALLY MORE SENSITIVE THAN OTHER STUDIES TO THESE NEW ORIENTATIONS.

However, the trend towards qualitative sociological research has no direct link with the analysis of social movements. Touraine is the only author who has proposed a method of research intervention in the field of social movements, but even he does not seem particularly sensitive or interested in these sweeping changes in qualitative methodology. Despite this, in the field of movements research, reference to Touraine is obligatory. His work represents an appropriate starting point for any discussion of the contributions that have shaped the development of my own techniques of empirical research.

Touraine’s method of intervention sociologique tries to reconstruct a movement’s field of conflict (Touraine 1978a, 1980b, 1982a and 1982b). Several stages are involved. First, the researchers assemble a group composed of militants from the various sectors of the movement. Second, the group is observed in a series of confrontations with its adversaries and with other social actors. The researchers’ objective is to identify the issues at stake in the conflict and to communicate to the group an interpretation of its action that reflects its ‘highest’ possible meaning. This initiates a process of self-analysis by the group: the researcher’s task is then to guide the group towards a ‘conversion’, that is, to the recognition (or not) of its true meaning as a social movement. The results of the self-analysis are then announced and compared within the movements at the so-called ‘permanent sociology’ stage.

Intervention sociologique explicitly tackled the problem of creating a research method designed specifically for examining social movements. Moreover it stressed the need to concentrate attention on the system of relations between the actors, drawing from this the meaning of the action. Finally, it pointed out the importance of establishing a researcher–actor relationship which is not based on mutual identification between the parties. These methodological contributions have enormous value and are not vulnerable to the method’s numerous critics.

The real problems, in my view, concern the method’s underlying conceptual framework. The basic assumption is that there exists a ‘high’ meaning of the movement’s action. It is the task of the sociologist, through his or her interpretation, to reveal to the movement the meaning of its action. The group in turn recognizes itself (or not) to the degree to which it becomes a movement. (One is tempted to use a capital M!) The question this method intends to answer is whether or not the phenomenon observed is the central movement of post-industrial society. The central problem of the method – apart from the obvious disproportion between the weight of the question and the empirical field under observation, and a certain missionary spirit on the part of the sociologist – is that it lacks the tools necessary to identify the meanings it sets out to reveal.

In a small group many levels of action operate simultaneously, ranging from affective dynamics to the possible identification of itself as a movement. Even if the group’s action has a ‘highest’ possible meaning (and this is already problematic) what guarantees its emergence unless the ‘lower’ meanings have been identified or kept under control? Touraine’s method pays no attention to the problems of affective dynamics. Furthermore, no instruments are provided to isolate those aspects of action
which are guided by the logic of calculation or exchange. Finally, observation is centred on the group’s verbal output, thereby completely ignoring the grammar of communication, the forms of interaction, and non-verbal communications.

In such circumstances there is no guarantee that the outcome of the ‘conversion’ is not the result of other factors that have little relation to the procedures, but are instead a function of ‘weaknesses’ in the conceptual apparatus. Thus one might imagine a permanent threat from the ‘surfacing’ of those variables not under control (especially the affective dynamic, in an ad hoc group set up solely for research purposes). Another serious weakness is the lack of control over the group–researcher relationship which is taken as a quasi-natural fact. In fact the relationship is founded upon the researcher’s promise to reveal to the group the meaning of its action. The problem here is not, as some critics have suggested, that the researcher may manipulate the group. The real dilemma in establishing such a relationship is that it provides no group autonomy or scope for reflection on the relationship itself. Here again there is no guarantee that what is produced is what the researchers expect (e.g., the ‘meaning’ of the action) and not, on the contrary, the way in which the group gratifies or disappoints the researchers, wins their attention or defends itself against them.

Touraine’s methodology shares the same limitations of the action research approach. In the 1950s, American action research aimed to resolve social conflicts (in particular the integration of ethnic minorities) by field-testing ways of ‘improving the social climate’. By contrast, its current counterpart presents itself as a learning process involving both researcher and actor equally. The only common link between the new and old forms is a few technical aspects (inspired by Kurt Lewin’s type of social psychological theory) and the direct intervention of the researcher in the field. Recent action research, with its emphasis on learning situations, was developed by the post-1968 generation of researchers trained in the atmosphere of German Critical Theory. Action research aims to trigger processes of change in society and transform the field during the research process. The concept of ‘emancipation’ is as central as the relationship between researcher and object.

The limitations common to these approaches, including Touraine’s, concern essentially two points:

1 The missionary–teacher role assigned to the researcher (evident in the concepts of ‘emancipation’ or ‘conversion’) is a respectable ethical option, but as such it is not a valid procedure or a guarantee for methodological rigour. If anything it increases the risk of confusing research with political agitation. As such, it can become a convenient outlet for the frustrations felt by intellectuals who feel ‘cut off’ from reality. In terms of the sociology of knowledge, it is no accident that interest in these methods is cyclical – greater during periods of social turbulence or rapid change.

2 The problem of the researcher–actor relationship is left unsolved. In the case of action research there is a simple identification, while Touraine, though insisting on the separation of roles, provides no instrument to make the relationship a conscious field of analysis. On the contrary, the problem is not even taken into consideration.

The provisional alliance

These limitations can be overcome only by making the relationship between researchers and actors itself an object of analysis, and by defining the researcher’s specific role. The solution to these shortcomings depends upon the recognition of a number of arguments, which in turn can guide the development of a method for analysing the formation of collective action.

1 We cannot study social action as a mere ‘thing’. Action is a process whose meanings are constructed through interaction. Hence the point is not that the actors themselves are the object of analysis; rather, they produce the object of analysis and supply its meanings. The researcher who comes into contact with the field activates a process in which the actors play as significant a role as he or she does. In other words, the researcher–actor relationship is not a problem external to the research.

2 The process of self-reflection is distinct from action. There is
a distance between action and its meaning. The size of the gap depends on the permanent tension between actor and system. The system is something more than the sum of its parts, but it is constituted by their interaction. Actors are therefore always part of a system of relations that gives meaning to their action, but actors also contribute to this definition. Knowledge of the relations of the system is therefore a necessary resource for social actors maximizing the effectiveness of their actions.

At this point the relationship between researcher and actor can take the form of a contractual relationship. Both parties control specific resources. The researcher possesses ‘know-how’, consisting of a research hypothesis and techniques which cannot be verified or utilized without the participation of the actors. Meanwhile actors exercise control over action and its meanings, but they also require reflective knowledge to increase their potential for action: here they may value the researcher’s analysis of their action. The relationship is thus one of interdependence, but not of coinciding or overlapping roles. Indeed, this difference in roles – declared and understood mutually – is the only element that justifies the provisional alliance between the two parties. It is the only factor that gives meaning to the contract.

The contract is therefore founded on a temporary convergence of two demands: the scientific objectives of the researcher; and the actors’ need to respond to problems arising from their social practice. The researcher offers information resulting from the application of concepts and techniques; the actors offer information about their own action. On this basis an exchange is possible which is neither authoritarian nor instrumental.

The contract serves to safeguard the distance that exists between the parties – their non-identification. Each pursues a different goal: the researcher pursues the scientific (or personal, or professional, or political) interests that motivates his or her work; the actors want to learn something about their activities to help them increase their potential for action. The distance is never fixed, but it must be reassessed continually by treating the researcher–actor relationship as a constant object of analysis. Each side thereby maintains control over, and responsibility for, its investment in the relationship. Only in this way can one guarantee sufficient transparency to a relationship that is temporary and open permanently to revision. When it ends both parties can make use of the results for their own respective purposes.

Two further problems concerning the distance between researcher and actor still have to be considered because they have methodological implications for any research practice based on a direct interaction between actors and researchers. These include, first, the role of interactive and communicative processes in which face to face contact with small groups is involved; and, second, the ‘experimental’ character of a research situation that separates the actors from the ‘natural’ conditions of their action. In terms of the first problem, communications are an important level of analysis which cannot be ignored by the research procedures. This is because communications determine the quality of the information gathered: we know, for example, how similar verbal content in a situation of interaction can assume quite different meanings depending on the emotional, interactive and gestures through which it is expressed.

The second problem concerns the inherent artificiality of the research context: in Touraine’s or, in action research methods the framework is intended to recreate ‘natural’ conditions. These methods require the group to act as if it were in the real world; but this is clearly in sharp contrast to the contrived nature of the experimental situation.

It seems impossible to avoid this problem without making an explicit break with the ‘natural’ situation, one that allows the group to assume the experimental framework as its field of interaction, without, however, nullifying the logic of its action. In other words we need to shift our observation from the contents (which can only partly reflect the group’s actual behaviour) on to the process of action which lies beneath the content.

A research process

The provisional alliance between researcher and social actors underlies the procedures employed during the research conducted in the Milano area. Before discussing the problems associated
with a contractual relationship between researcher and actors, I shall summarize the various stages of the Milano project.

1. The first stage of the project involved conducting a survey to identify and locate four movement networks: the youth, women’s, ecological and neo-religious movements. In-depth interviews were then carried out with all groups who had shown empirical evidence of their membership in the network. The interviews, conducted with one or more core members of the group (or sometimes with the entire group), aimed to gather information on the group’s history, composition, structure and forms of action. They also served to select one ‘natural’ group from each network for the experimental part of the research. This meant determining the characteristics of the various groups, their position in relation to the network as a whole and their eventual willingness and/or conditions of participation in the research proposal. This information also served to single out those groups which, by their character or willingness to cooperate, could be used for the network debates (or constructed groups, see below).

2. On the basis of this information, the second stage involved choosing one group from each network. With this group we proceeded to the ‘laboratory’ stage. The tendency was to choose a group occupying a central position in the movement as a whole. If a movement area had polarized or dispersed, then the polar positions were chosen.

It was decided to target research at the grass roots level rather than on the more complex structures of the movement. This focus brought out more clearly the points of tension and plurality of meanings within the movement. These dimensions tended to be obscured by the unifying ideology of the organizations, where the need for integration is paramount. Meanwhile these basic groups were compared easily with other more structured forms and with other definitions of the movement by, for instance, spokespersons, ‘politicians’ and observers.

Working with ‘natural’ groups seemed to temper the artificiality of the laboratory situation, enabling actors to refer to a more or less consolidated collective identity. A particular group always has a separate existence beyond the objectives of the research allowing it to retain, within the experimental situation, a certain autonomy (and at times opacity) in its normal functioning.

This procedure is not without its risks. While a particular group may not reflect accurately the network as a whole, it also can resist the experimental situation (i.e., remain opaque) through recourse to well-practiced rituals, complicity over internal codes and hidden rules. But these limitations can be overcome by comparing information gathered in the natural group with that on the rest of the movement and by special group-leading and observation techniques. In any case, the risks are minor compared to those involved with purpose-built research groups. Touraine’s experimental groups, for example, are formed with militants from different organizations within the movement, and are artificially submitted to prolonged interaction. This prolonged interaction tends to encourage a group identity founded on affective relations generated by the experimental situation. In Touraine’s method the group exists solely as a basis for research and, regardless of the origins of the individuals, this produces internal dynamics that distort significantly the quality of the interaction.

The idea of comparing differences and tensions within the movement nevertheless seemed interesting. Thus we decided to set up, alongside the natural group, a series of network debates, assembling groups composed of activists from different areas of the movement. Interaction was, however, kept brief (one session) and discussion focused on one specific theme. Several debates were held and the composition of the group changed on each occasion. In this way we hoped to practically eliminate the influence of affective dynamics on group interaction, by concentrating discussion each time on a problem crucial for the identity of the network.

3. Drafting a contract with the basic research groups was a particularly delicate stage. As outlined above, the researcher’s objective was to gather – through observation and recording – a mass of information on group behaviour for subsequent analysis. For the actors, meanwhile, interest in the experience (aside from the motives specific to each group) lay in its offering an opportunity for self-reflection. Where a group’s collective
Nomads of the Present

Identity was either forming (as in the ecological and neo-religious groups) or undergoing restructuring (as in the youth and women’s movement), there was a breathing space for discussion which was not immediately linked to action, and which represented a valuable and desirable resource for both groups and individuals.

It was important, however, that the research be presented as an open space, in which the objectives of researchers and actors could meet without coinciding. It also required the possibility for both parties to retain responsibility for their respective investments in the experience. The objectives of the researchers and actors were negotiated at the outset and remained negotiable throughout the experience. The process of self-reflection was not the object of the research. It was in part a methodological tool for gathering information on the object under investigation, i.e., the process of forming and maintaining a collective identity. And in part the process of self-reflection formed the means of exchange for a contractual agreement with the group.

The researchers have no message for the movements. The results of their investigations are placed at the disposal of the participant groups in two ways: first, by direct feedback during the course of the research and, second, through scientific and cultural communications, available to any reader of ordinary scientific output or to the general public.

The experimental stage (to be discussed in detail below) entailed a series of videotaped encounters. The usual sequence was to expose the group to certain stimuli, to select the most significant passages and then to play these back to the group as new input. In a final ‘feedback’ session the researchers presented an edited montage of what the group had produced.

The last stage of the research consisted in analysing and comparing the videotaped material with the other information gathered (interviews and documents concerning the movements, plus data on each movement’s activity in Italy and abroad). The interpretation of the video material took into account the various levels of meaning at issue. Precisely because the group simultaneously had different functions – as part of a larger movement; as a market for a range of interests in which

Appendix

Processes of exchange and decision operate; as a role system; as a network of affective relations; and as a sum of individual motivations – it was necessary to adopt different levels of observation. This included observing non-verbal communication; affective interaction; alliances and conflicts; the use of language; and the motivational aspects of individual behaviour. The alternation between micro- and macroanalysis was adopted according to the researchers’ theoretical hypothesis.

In terms of the procedures adopted in the experimental stage, the groups were invited to participate in a series of sessions in a specially prepared environment. This was an ordinary assembly room with seats arranged in a semi-circle around a researcher who conducted the session. An operator of a mobile VTR recorded the sitting on videotape. Two other researchers, visible but out of shot, acted as observers, taking notes on both the verbal and non-verbal interactions. The videotape followed the speaker, occasionally providing a panoramic view of the group.

Two types of stimulus situations were introduced: first, the who we are situation – the group was asked to define itself. The techniques used attempted to draw out the various faces of group identity of the movement to which they belong; second, the who you are situation – the group was presented with definitions from outside itself.

At each stage a feedback session was conducted in which the group was shown an edited version of the recorded material selected according to the observation levels mentioned above. The playback served as a stimulus for further discussion and the feedback session was itself videotaped. There was a final feedback session recapitulating the entire experience and allowing the participants to take stock.

Let us look now at the various stages in more detail.

1. The who we are phase is divided into three parts: memory, self-representation and how:

a) In terms of memory we are not so much interested in factual content (which can be acquired by other means) as in locating the multiplicity of interacting and contradictory elements – representations, actors, interests and roles – constituting the
NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

reality of collective identity. The group abandons the harmony and cohesion of its customary representations and begins to manifest itself as an action system. The stimuli in this phase are designed to multiply the voices and points of view through which the history of the group (the persons, events and places) can be told.

b) For the self-representation stage imaginary situations are proposed and the group is encouraged to simulate and play games with its identity. Again the object of this stage is to draw out the various components—the systems of exchange and opposition—that make up the collective identity. The game-playing situation and the reference to a medium which projects the group identity breaks down the more explicitly ideological self-image of the group and once again creates a puzzle around its meaning. To begin with, the context for simulation moves from highly exaggerated to more realistic situations. In the imaginary situations, the group is asked to confront situations of adversity and to make choices. The games also allow the group to test their decision-making procedures, exposing the mechanisms through which leadership and other roles are established. As the imaginary situations become more realistic so also do the external constraints on group action. This 'conical' progression is of the utmost importance because the group is in a position to experience the development of its own self-definition as a group when faced with uncertainty under different circumstances.

c) The how phase consists in feeding back to the group the terms it has used to define itself. Significant or recurring terms describing the group or its action are extracted from the taped recordings. From this list of terms actors are asked to indicate those terms which best represent the positive and negative qualities of group action. Each participant is then invited to use his or her chosen words to talk about the group. The degree of convergence or divergence of choices serves to stimulate discussion within the group. The researcher meanwhile reintroduces the remaining terms, which invariably mask submerged difficulties, and asks the group to make use of them.

The three sessions were followed by the first playback, which the group was asked to discuss.

2 In the who you are stage the group compares itself with the

video pre-recorded definitions proposed by three types of outsiders: 'spokespersons', i.e., people who speak on behalf of the movement; 'observers', i.e., people such as journalists who are close to the movement but not involved directly; and by 'adversaries'.

This is followed by a second playback of material from the who you are phase. Finally, the group is shown a montage of material covering all the previous sessions, including discussions of the intermediate playbacks. The entire experience involves eight sessions, each lasting three hours.

Some final clarifying remarks about the research process.

1 The decision to use videotape arose out of a need to record group behaviour as efficiently as possible with the minimum loss of information. In addition, video is an ideal means for providing feedback. However the use of video inevitably implies selectivity in framing and content, and therefore also in the information gathered. One method of ensuring a more or less consistent bias was to use the same professional video operator throughout, with instructions to film the speaker as far as possible. The other corrective measure was the presence of two observers. One attempts to keep the most faithful and complete record possible of the verbal exchanges, noting also the direction of communication and the issues around which discussion is concentrated. The other observes and records several elements of non-verbal communication of the participants (such as their spatial distribution, dress, flow of speech and patterns of silence, positions, facial expressions, glances and gestures).

2 Apart from indirect references by the participants, their observable leadership models, and certain ways in which the interaction is structured, the organizational characteristics of the natural group cannot emerge satisfactorily in an experimental situation. The experimental context must therefore be supplemented with participant observation of the group in its natural environment. The research is thus completed by attendance, before and after the laboratory work, at various group meetings. Movements as a whole are observed at demonstrations and other public mobilizations.

3 Network debates using constructed groups are a valuable
source of additional information. For example, they provide information on the structure of the movement and offer an overview of its ideological spectrum. However these purpose-built groups can only function as ‘movement groups’ as long as their interpersonal dynamics do not predominate. This explains the decision noted above to limit them to single sessions focusing only on one topic. Work with the natural groups reveals the range of problems each movement confronts when constructing its collective identity. Thus for each network we devised a stimulus, which served as a topic of debate and an hypothesis for testing the structure of the movement. The groups were assembled by taking the one or two militants from each group who made themselves available during the preliminary survey (hence always core group members). For each area three groups were prepared with three respective topics: one based on a central problem revealed during the who we are stage with the natural group; and two from the who you are phase (one from a ‘spokesperson’ or ‘observer’ and one from an ‘adversary’). The participants changed with each session, which lasted around three hours.

Actors and analysts

We can now discuss the methodological problems emanating from a research process based on a direct contractual relationship between actors and analysts.

In this type of a research project there are no preliminary or ‘instrumental’ stages, i.e., phases which instrumentalize the actors for the purposes of data-gathering. From the outset, contacts during the pre-experimental phase serve a dual purpose: first, to collate data on the groups belonging to the movement; and second, to present the research project to potential participants and to acquire the information needed to select the natural group and the individuals for the constructed groups. This double objective results in a particularly delicate situation: to keep contact within the limits of the first objective without compromising the second. The problem is to obtain the necessary data without falsifying the nature of the relationship.

APPENDIX

At the same time there is the need to control the field of assessment which remains the professional responsibility of the research team.

This means that the information must be obtained ‘honestly’, without extortion or false pretences, and with the research objectives declared openly. Similarly, the information concerning the research must be congruent with the level of interaction. Thus the very first contacts already contain elements of the second objective and are therefore crucial to the success of any future relationship. In this sense the problem is to assess the extent of the group’s need for self-reflection and to furnish enough information to transform this need into an attitude of co-operation. Much of the information transmitted consists in the behaviour of the researchers themselves; this behaviour reveals the logic that guides the relationship throughout.

The approach adopted therefore involved channelling back, from the outset, analysis to the contact group in exchange for the information it provides. In this way the relationship may be seen to terminate on each occasion with a balanced exchange that leaves nothing hanging in the air, but which at the same time allows room for contact to be resumed at a later stage. Thus the first contacts already anticipate the kind of research relationship and offer a concrete example of it. However, they do not strain the group’s willingness to co-operate at any given stage, but remain respectful of the existing quality of interaction. The openness of the exchange removes all trace of instrumental ‘exploitation’ from the data-gathering process. It also offers the opportunity from the beginning for a contract that may be successively renegotiated into its final form (through participation in the research) or, alternatively, terminated at an earlier stage without leaving loose ends.

Consistent with this orientation, contacts with the networks follow a set sequence of steps leading to the experimental stage: informal contact, in-depth interviews, and then the researcher’s decision to effect or abandon the relationship on the basis of what has emerged so far. The invitation to participate at the experimental stage depends on the assessment of both the information already obtained and the nature of the conditions specified by the participants. Out of this comes the choice of the natural group and the selection of participants for the constructed
groups. This is followed by the contract stage, which involves a detailed presentation of the contents of the research proposal, and decisions about both the environment in which it is to take place and the organizational forms to be adopted. In reality none of these phases is truly 'preliminary' because each one constitutes an integral part of the research and its overall logic.

Another problem linked with a research method based on a contractual relationship between actors and analysts concerns the role of feedback. Feedback remains a constant feature of the entire experimental process. It is manifested most explicitly during the video playback phases, but the exchange of information is a permanent feature of the relationship between the researcher and the group. At the end of every session, both with the natural groups and the network debates (and occasionally during the sessions themselves), the research leader communicates the results of his or her observations of the session. What these feedbacks have in common is the attention given to the how and not to the why: the information delivered verbally plays virtually the same role as the video playbacks. That is to say, it concerns the phenomenological elements of behaviour, which are not subject to causal explanation. Thus every feedback serves as a stimulus for self-examination which makes visible each time the contract between the two parties. During the final feedback the group gives its impressions and assessments of its experience.

The contract between the two parties allows the research procedures to distinguish between two distinct levels of analysis: first, the phenomenological level during the course of the experience; and second, the interpretative level which comes after the experiment.

During the experimental phase both verbal feedback and visual playbacks are designed to nourish self-reflection, leaving the group complete freedom to use these stimuli as it pleases. Obviously, the choice of observations and images to be fed back cannot be entirely neutral; out of necessity it involves some subjective criteria. But this does not mean employing a series of causal hypotheses about the group's action – that is, an emphasis on why the group acts in certain ways. Rather, it relies upon a phenomenological hypothesis about the role played by particular types of behaviour in structuring the Gestalt – that is, in giving coherence to group and/or individual action. Here the question is how the group acts. In other words, the concern is with how the behaviour is structured and what gives the group its collective character. Here we might profitably use the term systems of relevance (Schutz, 1975). Attention shifts from the causes of behaviour to its regularity, pauses and rhythms. What is observed and fed back is conduct which is concentrated or diffused around certain nodes, the breaks and silences in the flow of communication, the capacity for definition, and the position of individual action and the single events in the system of action. 4

This non-causal, non-interpretative orientation frees the researcher from any function as 'midwife' of the movement's meaning. At the strictly methodological level, this orientation also allows the researcher to escape the circularity inherent in research-intervention methods. In these methods researchers continue to speak of research and not of political agitation or militancy, since it is assumed that the goal of intervention is knowledge of the movement's meaning. Indeed it is presumed that any change in the actors must derive directly from the introduction of this knowledge. However, a vicious circle is always produced: if the observer modifies the field under observation, without the tools necessary to control such changes, then his or her knowledge will be worthless. Nothing can assure the researcher that what is observed is attributable to the group and not instead to his or her input, or to chance. Knowledge generates action and the action generates knowledge.

This dilemma is evident in Touraine's method of intervention sociologique. He attempts, through observation of the group in an experimental context, to discover the 'highest possible meaning' of the movement. One of the fundamental points in this experience is the 'conversion', that is, the response of the group to the interpretative hypothesis proposed by the researcher. The result of this conversion – the acceptance or rejection of the proposed interpretation – is itself employed to establish the 'meaning' of the movement, i.e., to establish the basis for the research findings. But nothing can guarantee that the outcome of the conversion corresponds to the 'meaning' of the group's...
action and not instead to the content introduced by the researcher.

Unlike some moralistic critics (see note 2), I am not accusing Touraine of manipulation. This type of criticism implies that the groups in question are unable to defend themselves against the pressures exerted by the researchers. The problem is of a totally different character, and resides on the epistemological plane. What the researcher discovers about the 'meaning' of the movement depends upon what he or she contributes. In this 'constructed' situation, where the purpose of the study is to elicit the 'meaning' of the movement, the researcher adopts a stimulus which has the same character as the thing to be discovered. The stimulus is therefore indistinguishable from its effects. The terms of the experiment are turned on their heads - the stimulus becomes simultaneously both cause and effect. The observed behaviour and the interpretation of the meanings of the movement cannot be interpreted properly as products of group action. At best they may be seen as the result of the interaction with the researcher's interpretative hypothesis. The fact that the group recognizes itself (or not) in the hypothesis tells us nothing about the 'meaning' of its action, but only about how close, in cultural or affective terms, the group stands in relation to the researcher.

The non-interpretative approach (here I am referring only to the experimental phase) would seem to offer an escape route from the vicious circle inherent in any experimental situation where the observed field is modified by the observer and by uncontrolled stimuli. By introducing phenomenological stimuli (the how feedback), self-examination modifies the field of resources and constraints in which the group acts, or better, it modifies the perception of this field. The group redefines the opportunities and limits of its action and makes its decisions not on the basis of contents - specific orientations proposed by the researchers - but on the basis of a redefinition of the field prompted by the feedback process.

This redefinition process remains under the control of the group. It evolves in the experimental situation without receiving any value-laden 'hints' or suggestions about the direction it is taking or should take. Of course, the observed field also changes here, as with any situation entailing a direct interaction between researcher and actor. But in this case we can, to a reasonable extent, control the effects of the stimulus and distinguish between what the group produces and what the researchers introduce. Ideally, the how feedback resembles an open forum, allowing the group the freedom to redefine its field of action as it proceeds by incorporating the contents produced throughout the experience by the group itself. In other words, this type of experimental framework permits us to observe the formation and definition of group action as it develops. The results of the experiment, i.e., the videotaped material, may thus be interpreted as a series of reports on the ways in which the group - by redefining autonomously its field of action through self-reflection - constructs, sustains or modifies its collective identity.

At this juncture the role of interpretative analysis - performed on the recorded material at the end of the experimental stage - becomes clearer. Interaction with the group, and thus the basis of the experiment's validity, are no longer at stake. Causal hypotheses can now be applied to the records obtained to explain the various levels of behaviour by relating them to actor/movement variables or to a wider context.

The failure of current research to distinguish between the content and the process of the observed action generates a third methodological problem concerning research in an artificial situation. To isolate a group from its natural 'habitat' for the purpose of research implies necessarily creating an artificial situation. We cannot begin with a naive assumption about the 'naturalness' of observed group behaviour. Rather, we must develop and improve upon the artificial situation to make it capable of supplying the required information. This occurs only if both researchers and actors accept the experimental framework as the field in which their exchanges take place. For the actors this means accepting the contrived context as a condition of the process of self-reflection, i.e., as a means of acquiring the information resources they seek. For the researchers it certainly does not imply producing a situation which resembles reality; on the contrary, it means giving explicit emphasis to its artificial character. This entails creating a context capable of activating
NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

and revealing the logic of the action hidden behind the specific content, and at the same time distributing among the actors the information that motivates their investment.

The artificiality of the research experience affects the group in several ways. First, the stimuli employed and the use made of the video recordings (e.g., playbacks):

a) changes the object of the group’s attention and facilitates different perspectives of the field;

b) heightens thereby the perception of the resources and limits of action as well as exposes contradictions and crises;

c) stimulates internal interaction, and the circulation and exchange of information (on more than one occasion actors were heard to say: ‘This is the first time we’ve talked about these issues.’);

d) accelerates the group’s normal rhythms: one of the most delicate problems in the laboratory experience is that the acceleration may be too fast for the group’s rate of development. The only guarantee against this possibility is the contract, that is, the opportunity for the group to measure its involvement and set the pace of its own evolution; and

e) feeds the aspect of ritual and play, more than occurs under ‘natural’ conditions.

Second, the self-reflective character of the procedures encourages the group to stand back from and to examine its ordinary action. The practice of self-reflection has a cumulative effect, building gradually upon itself as new elements are acquired and absorbed. The group changes and redefines itself throughout the entire experience. Several common characteristics apply to all the groups that participated in the experimental phase: a) they acquire information which was unavailable previously or was not in circulation among the members; b) the group’s field of action alters between the first and the last sessions; c) they become conscious of the difference between group action in an experimental situation and action in the real world; and d) they recognize the effects of the experience (this was viewed positively by all participants).

Third, the research experience is marked by the absence of the ‘outside world’ which the groups confront in everyday life. In the experimental situation the group is isolated from the external conditions against which it normally measures its action. To reconstruct the external conditions in the laboratory is to attempt the impossible, but there remains the problem of re-creating the system of relations in which the actor is involved. Touraine’s solution of physically producing interlocutors for the group to interact with is open to two main objections.

The first is methodological. It consists in the fact that in face to face interaction personal qualities and affective dynamics tend to prevail over the ‘role’ the interlocutor is supposed to fulfill for the group. What one observes therefore is largely the group’s interaction with person X and not its relations with, for example, an adversary in the social field.

The second objection, of a theoretical nature, is that the adversaries of social conflicts in highly differentiated systems never meet face to face. In complex societies social relations are mediated by the opaqueness and complexity of institutional apparatuses.

In our research project the ‘outside’ was represented by the researchers and the pre-recorded interviews which were presented to the group during the who you are stage. Since the researchers belong to a scientific institution often identified with the establishment, the researcher–group relationship may be read as an indicator of relations with the outside world. The group has direct relations with its immediate environment and only ‘systemic’ relations with the wider world. Thus the individuals selected for the interviews – here there was a degree of arbitrariness which depended upon the researcher’s opportunities and decisions – represented the group’s symbolic field of reference.

The artificiality of the experimental context poses two problems: first, how to encourage the participants to take part in and accept the conditions and rules of the experiment; and second, how to measure the distance or the ‘distortion’ of the artificial situation from the ‘natural’ situation.

The first problem is one of motivation. In our research model the contract between researchers and actors is the only instrument for motivating the participants. In other words, there is no assurance that the experimental stage will produce the expected results. Indeed if the contract is open constantly to review, the outcome will depend entirely on the investment of
NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

the ‘partners’. The information received by the researchers does not follow automatically from the stimuli employed, but from the investment of the actors and their willingness to play the game. By contrast, the feedback received by the actors is not dependent upon the a priori knowledge of the researchers, but on what the group itself is capable of producing within the experimental context.

A group that is reticent or unwilling to have its action questioned soon reaches an impasse: the conditions of the research are such that the proceedings can be terminated at any given moment. This situation never arose with any of the groups, but the degree of involvement varied from one area to another. The natural group from the youth movement was an example: for reasons related to the poverty of internal resources (such as educational level and professional skills) and the anti-institutional culture of the movement, this group showed the most difficulty in adjusting to the artificial research context as a field of action.

This exemplifies another point concerning the researcher–group relationship. In this relationship there is no imbalance of power, but only a diversity of resources. If the researchers have control over certain aspects of the experimental situation, then the group in effect possesses very extensive powers of veto. The researcher’s task (or power) consists of proposing stimuli and of selecting the video footage to be played back to the group. But the discussions at the end of the sessions and the initial presentations of the simulations (which, however, do not reveal the key to the game) reduce continually the researcher’s control. Meanwhile the group is free, merely by absenting itself, to cancel at any moment the entire investment of time and materials made by the researchers. Similarly, the group is always in a position to consciously falsify the information.

A final problem concerns the ‘distortion’ of the results by the artificial context. Stating the problem in this way is obviously misguided. The research situation is intentionally artificial – there is no question of comparing it with a ‘natural’ situation. The experimental context is designed to provide a field in which the group can produce and redefine its action through self-

examination. The real dilemma therefore consists in eliminating (as far as possible) any interference capable of altering the object of observation, i.e., the logic of collective action within a movement. Stimuli are used to focus the group’s attention on its sociological self-definition: the only real threat to the accuracy of the results is that the encounter may turn into an affective relationship or assume a therapeutic dimension.

A fundamental factor preventing this possibility was the control exercised over the actor–researcher relationship. During the research much of the researchers’ energies were directed at this task. To this end, a series of instruments was adopted:

1 training of the research team, which involved the team using itself as an object of self-analysis. Without turning it into a therapeutic situation, and under the direction of a qualified external supervisor, the researchers experimented on themselves with some of the instruments later used with the groups. Each stage of the research – initial contact with the groups, negotiation of the contract, observation of the sessions, selection of video footage, etc. – required the specific skills of the researchers. Steps were therefore taken to measure the researchers’ different capacities, and to heighten awareness of these differences within the research team itself. In this way a training procedure was tailored to the study of interaction, thus minimizing the effects of the various researchers’ individual perceptions or affective qualities;

2 to ensure uniformity in the style and manner of proposing stimuli or presenting feedback, one person – with clinical qualifications, training and experience – was chosen to lead the sessions;

3 analysis of the researcher–group relationship. This level of observation was fundamental for maintaining the exchanges within the boundaries of the established sociological context. At the initial contact stage the researchers had to analyse the group’s demands, while at the same time remaining conscious of their own involvement. For instance, it was discovered that many difficulties arise from the researchers’ own fears and assumptions, rather than from real resistance on the part of the groups, who in fact proved willing and interested in proceeding
with the relationship. At the experimental stage a designated period of time was devoted regularly to analysing how the sessions had been conducted as well as the affective dimensions of the relationship.

Figure 5 presents an overall model of the research procedure and the problems I have discussed. In conclusion, it can be claimed that the experimental situation was kept within the limits of the contract and concentrated on the strictly sociological level of group action – as required by the original objectives of the research. By exerting a reasonable level of control over the effects of the stimuli introduced, and by reducing – if not eliminating completely – the influence of other variables, the research model was capable of reconstructing the intermediate level of action between the system and the actors, between the conditions and the actions, in which the formation of a collective actor takes place.

Notes and references

1 On the comparison between qualitative and quantitative methods and on the search for new research models in the social sciences see Bulmer (1981); Morgan (1983); Zeller and Carmines (1980) and Mehan (1982). For a general discussion of qualitative orientations and research methods see Bogdan, Taylor (1975) and Schwartz, Jacobs (1980). On the 'creative' aspect of this type of research see Morris (1977); Eriksson (1978); and Van Maanen (1982).

Many experimental approaches explore new ways of solving new problems: from 'clinical sociology' which applies clinical methods to observation and the handling of groups (Glassner and Freedman 1979), to 'behavioural sociology', which applies the premises of behaviourism to analysis and intervention on groups (with the intention of social engineering, but sometimes with interesting experimental solutions); see Burgess and Bushell (1969); Kunkel (1975); Hamlin and Kunkel (1977); and Michaels and Green (1978).

Apart from essential contributions by Goffman (1967, 1969, 1971, 1974) and ethnography, renewed interest in the individual, intimate, dimension of behaviour is suggested by the new role of biographical research in sociology. Among the numerous contributors in this area see Chevalier (1979); Williams (1978); and Cavallaro (1981). For an overview of this development see Ferrariotti (1981) and Bertaux (1981). In the area of the re-evaluation of the emotional aspects of individual behaviour are approaches such as 'existential sociology' (Douglas and Johnson, 1977) and
NOMADS OF THE PRESENT

the 'sociology of emotions' (Kemper, 1978; Schott, 1979). For a critique of these approaches see Bogart (1977).


3 See in particular Moser (1977); and Lukesch and Zecha (1978). For a discussion of action research see Oquist (1978); Exner (1981); and Lerbet (1980). See also the 'militant' research techniques applied to the movements evident, for example, in the 'laboratories of the future' (Jungk, 1978), a kind of collective brainstorming through which a social group projects in utopian form the solution to a problem. Following the same direction are certain applications in France of socioanalyse, which is linked with post-1968 gauchiste culture (see note 4).

4 The concern with the relationship between researchers and actors is broached by institutional analysis or socio-analysis. This is a current of analysis and intervention in institutions developed primarily in France by Lapassade (1970, 1971) and Lourau (1969, 1973), with connections to psychosocial intervention and institutional psychotherapy. The fields of application are above all complex organizations, educational and welfare structures, and voluntary associations. For a summary see Hess (1975, 1981). Institutional analysis still maintains a missionary-teacher orientation: the institutions tend to disguise the institutional act that founded them and the task of analysis is therefore to reveal the 'hidden energy' that is opposed to the crystallization of the institutions. The more interesting aspects instead lie with the criteria of intervention: a) analysis of the demand; b) self-management of the applicant; c) the rule of complete freedom of expression; d) the analysis of the role and implications of the analyst/researcher; and e) the identification or construction of analysts, who provoke contradictions in the organizations so as to reveal their deeper logic.

5 The work of Crozier (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977) provides some useful insights. His studies on actors' behaviour in organizational situations are based on strategic analysis. However irrational and contradictory it might appear, actors' behaviour in fact corresponds to an intrinsic rationality, or strategies that the actors set in motion within the system of relations to which they belong. The researcher alternates between two poles: the critical position of external observer and the 'viewpoint' of the actors within the field.

6 Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology on the one hand, and on the other hand the Palo Alto school which draws upon Bateson's work, signalled an irreversible step forward that renders obsolete any qualitative research method which ignores communicative processes. For the initial studies on the development of ethnomethodology see Garfinkel (1967); Garfinkel and Sachs (1970); and Cicourel (1964, 1974). For a discussion of...