Qualitative Research and Outcomes in Health, Social Work and Education

Ian Shaw
Cardiff University
School of Social Sciences

The purpose of this paper is to outline ways in which qualitative research has a contribution to make to research on outcomes in Health, Social Work and Education. It is a methodology paper with a practical purpose. Large tracts of inquiry work (a broad term to cover research, evaluation, policy analysis, and practitioner research) are concerned with questions about the benefits of a given policy initiative, programme, service or intervention – benefits that are likely to be couched in terms of outcomes, merit and so on.

An appraisal of the possible contribution of qualitative research to such endeavours is important for several reasons. First it is to plausible claim a deepened methodological strength in qualitative research. If this is the case, we should be developing rigorous approaches to qualitative applications to outcomes research.

I believe it is a desirable aspiration for social work, health and education researchers to support social science research that seeks to integrate rigour (substantive and methodological) and relevance[i]. If we are to avoid reinforcing conventional wisdom about what I will call a 'horses for courses' approach to methodological choice, then we need to take an intellectually principled position on the relationship between different methodologies. Quantitative researchers are already addressing these issues[ii].

External developments also underline the timeliness of this discussion. Even the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is talking routinely of 'evidence-based policy and practice'. There are widespread initiatives to facilitate the integration of research into professional practice, which are echoed in research and development initiatives that bring health and social care into working proximity. Developments such as 'Research in Practice' in social work www.rip.org.uk 'aim to be a catalyst in the development of evidence-based practice'. While these are welcome developments, there is a risk that advocates of conventional outcomes research may too heavily influence debates about evidence. Finally, government support for 'joined up' policy initiatives illustrates that we cannot fence research into professional or disciplinary ghettos.

I will[iii]:

1. Briefly say where I stand on the relation of paradigms and methodology.
2. Consider the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods especially in relation to evaluative research.
3. Draw some conclusions regarding the contribution that qualitative research can make to outcomes research.

Paradigms and methodology

Where we stand on this much-discussed issue will influence our response to methodology issues in outcomes research. I simply want to unpack the general question of paradigms, and summarise where I stand on the issue. (I have tried to develop this more fully elsewhere, Shaw, 1999a; 1999b Ch 3; Shaw and Gould, in press, Ch One).

There *are* paradigms, in the sense of 'a basic set of beliefs that guides action' (Guba, 1990: 17). The question is about whether meaning is relative, and if 'the meanings of terms…have to be grasped hermeneutically, that is in relation to …*frames of meaning*' (Giddens, 1993: 149).

However, it is probably *not* true to say that there taken for granted assumptions shared by communities of scientists, where rivalries within the paradigm are on relatively secondary matters, and the activity of researchers can be described in Kuhn's terms as puzzle-solving 'normal science'.

Third, paradigms should not be treated as 'closed systems', such that it is logically impossible simultaneously to hold aspects of more than one paradigm position, or to stand outside a paradigm and assess it. It is ironic that the most enthusiastic advocates of paradigm-driven explanations of social science research seem able to embrace the paradoxical position of evaluating the strengths of competing paradigms.

Fourth, there are recognisable paradigms within health, education and social work research.

Finally, do paradigms guide the action of 'science' or research in more or less direct ways, and do we need to conduct our research within one paradigm only? My position is that there is a *real* but very *imperfect* linkage between paradigm and method. I concur with Greene when she concludes that 'epistemological integrity does get meaningful research done right' (Greene, 1990: 229). I reject both strong paradigm positions of the kind advocated by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, but I also reject the claims that the relationship between philosophy and methodology is relatively insignificant, or that the real differences between researchers only exist at the level of methods.

Numbers and qualities

> 'These two purposes of evaluation research, process versus outcome studies, may be best respectively addressed by qualitative versus quantitative methodologies' (Thyer, 2000).

Thyer captures in this single sentence the most common image of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative research, and links it to the related question of how such research should address issues of process and outcomes. The two sets of relationships have often been expressed either in terms of a functional division of labour – what may be described as a *horses for courses* approach - or in terms of a relationship of hierarchy, where aspects of one methodology are alleged to be intrinsically superior to the other. Macdonald advocates the latter position in a contribution to a book that claims to seek a rapprochement between quantitative and qualitative approaches. In discussing the case for randomised control trials (RCTs), she concludes that it is 'essential that *all* research designs deployed in outcomes research pay heed to the sources of internal validity that RCTs are best able to control' (Macdonald, 1999: 101). Commentators who adopt the horses for courses position also occasionally slip into a hierarchical mode. For example, Chelimsky refers to the randomised control trial as the 'gold standard, the Rolls Royce of evaluation approaches' (Chelimsky, 1997: 101).

The roots of these debates go back at least to the work of Campbell and Cronbach from the 1960s onwards in America. Their work, and the debates between them on issues of internal and external validity, process and outcomes, and rationality, has not been sufficiently taken into account by the current generation of evidence-based evaluators and supporters of scientific practice. In some cases, they have not even been acknowledged.

Critiques of the position represented by Thyer are well established. Cronbach remarked that it is 'rationalist to the point of unreality' to proceed on the basis that evaluation starts from agreement on goals (Cronbach et al., 1980: 129). All social programmes, he argued, have broad and vague goals, even supposedly targeted programmes. This is not escapism, as the rationalists would argue, but reflects the nature of programmes as operating within a climate of political accommodation. 'The first rule of the successful political process is, "Don't force a specification of goals or ends"' (p. 130). House correctly concludes that the traditional formulation 'is not the world of social programmes and, in general, is not the social world at all' (House, 1993: 135).

The lesson has been hard learned. Silverman, in his study of HIV counselling, still found grounds to complain of the ways in which what he calls the Explanatory Orthodoxy of counselling research leads to a focus on either the causes or consequences of counselling. This approach 'is so concerned to rush to an explanation that it fails to ask serious questions about what it is explaining' (Silverman, 1997: 24), such that the phenomenon of counselling 'escapes'. Traditional formulations of causal inputs and outcomes need at the very least to be delayed until we have understood something of the 'how'. For sound evaluative reasons we will want to ask the explanatory 'why' questions. 'There is no reason not to, provided that we have first closely described how the phenomenon at hand is locally produced' (p. 35). A qualitative approach to evaluation analysis will start from the premise that 'the ends of the goals should emerge from the process, not the other way round' (Sherman, 1994: 152).

The inadequacy of conventional outcome designs arises in part from the extreme difficulty of isolating inputs. Abrams' paper on the problems of measuring informal care summarised the position as follows:

> 'The resistance of informal social care to experimental evaluation has entirely to do with the problem of breaking down the intractable informality of the treatment; of reducing informal caring relationships to the sort of units, factors, events, variables, items needed if specifiable inputs are to be systematically related to specifiable outcomes' (Abrams, 1984: 2).

The 'sheer weight and diversity of the "quasi-inputs" which appear to intervene between effects and their presumed causes' means that 'the fine web of conditions within which social action occurs is discovered in the course of the research instead of having been provided for in the research design' (p. 4).

Qualitative research, especially that of an interpretive cast of mind, has also been criticised. For example, Giddens complains that interpretive sociology sits too close to philosophical idealism. Hence it is marked by:

- 'A concern with "meaning" to the exclusion of the practical involvements of human life in material activity'.
- 'A tendency to seek to explain all human conduct in terms of motivating ideals at the expense of the causal conditions of action'.
- 'A failure to examine social norms in relation to asymmetries of power and divisions of interest in society' (Giddens, 1993: 163-64).

Fortunately, there have been constructive, if cautious, dialogues regarding the relative merits and characteristics of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For example, in social work research, from the quantitative side of the case, Reid in the USA and Sinclair in Britain have developed mediating positions. Reid seeks to 'redefine the nature of the mainstream so that qualitative methodology is a part of it not apart from it'. He regards quantitative research as strong when dealing with linkages, control, precision, and larger data sets, while qualitative research is able to depict system workings, contextual factors, and elusive phenomena, and provide thorough description. 'Neither method is superior to the other, but each provides the researcher with different tools of inquiry' that can be set against a single set of standards (Reid, 1994: 477).

Sinclair adds significant points when he says that qualitative methods are in many ways 'more adapted to the complexity of the practitioner's world than the blockbuster RCT'.

> Qualitative research draws attention to features of a situation that others may have missed but which once seen have major implications for practice. It counteracts a tendency to treat the powerless as creatures with something less than normal human feelings. It contributes to an ethically defensible selection of outcome measures. And, in combination with simple statistical description, it can lead to an informed and incisive evaluation of programmes in social services. (Sinclair, 2000: 8)

He turns common assumptions on their head when he concludes that,

> Quantitative social work research does face peculiarly acute difficulties arising from the intangible nature of its variables, the fluid, probabilistic way in which these variables are connected, and the degree to which outcome criteria are subject to dispute. (pp. 9-10)

Qualitative researchers have also addressed the relationship between different methodologies in ways that fruitfully extend the debate (eg Bryman, 1988; Greene and Caracelli, 1997), and have explored the relative contributions different methodologies make to evaluation studies of process and outcomes.

It would be highly premature, however, to conclude that the debates should now be closed. For example, it is sometimes tacitly assumed that using multiple methods will lead to sounder consensual conclusions in an additive fashion – rather like realist versions of the logic of triangulation. One of the most insightful discussions of the problems raised by this assumption is Trend's early classic account of an evaluation of a USA programme designed to test the effectiveness of direct payment of housing allowances to low income families (Trend, 1979). In one case study, the *quantitative* data suggested that the programme was producing major improvements in housing quality. Yet all the *qualitative* data indicated the programme would fail. The major part of Trend's paper records his assiduous sifting of the data in an attempt to discover a plausible explanation that did not simplistically cut the Gordian knot, either by prioritising one kind of data above the other through paradigm arguments, or by premature syntheses. His conclusion still stands as a warning against such easy solutions:

> The complementarity is not always apparent. Simply using different perspectives, with the expectation that they will validate each other, does not tell us what to do if the pieces do not fit. (1979: 83)

His advice is:

> That we give the different viewpoints the chance to arise, and postpone the immediate rejection of information or hypotheses that seem out of joint with the majority viewpoint. (p. 84)

He quotes approvingly Paul Feyerabend as saying 'It seems that it is not the puzzle solving activity that is responsible for the growth of knowledge, but the active interplay of various tenaciously held views' (p. 84).

The inter-relationship of qualitative and quantitative methods is not only, nor even primarily, about choice of methods. It is about the following questions.

FIGURE 1.: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Single cases or comparison.
Cause and meaning.
Context as against distance.
Homogeneity and heterogeneity.
Validity and the criteria of quality in social work research.
The relationship of researcher and researched.
Measurement.

It is also inextricably relevant to issues of the politics and purposes of social research, values, participatory forms of research, interdisciplinary research, and the uses of research.

How we understand the relationship between different methodologies will, of course, be closely linked to the position taken on paradigms. Hence, we have already anticipated our likely direction. There are three broad positions (the terminology is that used by Greene and Caracelli, 1997). The *purist* position argues that different frameworks of inquiry embody fundamentally different and incompatible assumptions about the nature of social reality, claims to knowledge, and what it is possible to know. Multi-methods at the paradigm level are not an option. The *pragmatic* position is best represented by what we have described as a functional division of research labour. The position that is likely to prove most creative for social work research is that described by Greene and Caracelli as *dialectical.* This position accepts that philosophical differences are real and cannot be ignored or easily reconciled. We should work for a principled synthesis where feasible, but should not assume that a synthesis will be possible in any given instance. This represents,

> a balanced, reciprocal relationship between the philosophy and methodology, between paradigms and practice. This…honours both the integrity of the paradigm construct and the legitimacy of contextual demands, and seeks a respectful, dialogical interaction between the two in guiding and shaping evaluation decisions in the field. (Greene and Caracelli, 1997: 12)

One possible undesirable consequence is that an emphasis on the value of multiple, integrated methods may lead to a dilution of one or the other – a lowest common denominator position. It may also lead to a tendency to treat qualitative methodology (or quantitative) in an unduly homogenous way. As a corrective to this, I believe there is also a need to develop the case for a dialectical mix of methods *within* qualitative research. This will need to proceed through the development of a set of critical features of knowledge for different qualitative methodologies. A helpful starting point for this is the paper by McKeganey and colleagues, in which they discuss the benefits and limitations of interviewing and observation methods as part of a study of professional decision-making when people may be offered a place in a home for the elderly (McKeganey et al., 1988; cf Shaw, 1999a: 145-146). This initial analysis needs to be extended to a full range of qualitative strategies, and tied to the critical features of the associated knowledge claims (Greene and Caracelli, 1997: 12-13).

Process and Outcomes

To make progress on this issue we need to cover two points by way of preamble. In the first instance we should clarify what we mean by 'outcomes'. Second, we need to rethink the assumptions we make about how evaluative reasoning proceeds.

Outcomes

Taking health as an example, we need to distinguish between general outcomes, health outcomes and health service outcomes (cf Long, 1994). Research findings, or policy implementation, are examples of outcomes in general. 'health outcomes' includes the effect on health of any type of process, including not only health services but also informal care, social care, housing, education and so on. 'Health service outcomes' refers to the effects of health services. These will be mainly health outcomes, but by no means exclusively so. We should also distinguish between final and intermediate outcomes, and what can be called process-based outcome measures.

There is no implicit valuation of good or bad in the concept of 'outcome' and valuation of outcomes thus becomes a major issue. An outcome is more than a technically measured end point. It involves a valuation of that end point. These points become relevant when we make decisions about the methodology for researching outcomes.

Evaluative judgements

Second, there has been insufficient attention to philosophical contributions to the field of evaluation logic.

> Everyone agrees that information somehow informs decisions, but the relationship is not direct, not simple. Often the more important the decision, the more obscure the relationship seems to be. (House, 1980: 68)

House goes as far as to say that, 'subjected to serious scrutiny, evaluations always appear equivocal' (p. 72). He argues that evaluations can be no more than acts of persuasion. 'Evaluation persuades rather than convinces, argues rather than demonstrates, is credible rather than certain, is variably accepted rather than compelling' (p. 73). Evaluators have too frequently underplayed the role of judgement and hence of argumentation. This has resulted in an unduly technical, methods-oriented analysis, an over-confidence in quantification, and a tendency to represent knowledge in an impersonal, objectified form. Those who fail to accept the 'compelling' conclusions drawn from the evaluation are dismissed as irrational. If results are unequivocal then those who fail to accept them are 'wrong'.

There have been several attempts to take a different approach to thinking through the reasoning process involved in constructing justified evaluative arguments. These typically emphasise the complex connection between evidence and conclusions, and commence from the differences between formal and informal reasoning. Whereas formal reasoning assumes a tight fit between the premises and conclusions within an argument, informal logic 'deals with ordinary, everyday language, where rules of inference are less precise and more contextual' (Fournier and Smith, 1993: 317). The key question is whether good but non-deductive reasoning is possible - ie reasoning that is not logically valid. 'The consensus among informal logicians is that there can be logically good, but nonvalid reasoning' (Blair, 1995: 73).

This philosophical argument has direct practice implications because much evaluative reasoning is non-deductive. For example, we may sometimes engage in good all-things-considered reasoning, where there are reasons for and against a point of view but where the pros outweigh the cons. The paper by House cited above falls in that category. Also, there has been growing acceptance of the circumstances in which it may be legitimate to reason from factual evidence to evaluative conclusions, where there can be no logical relation of implication for such an argument. Finally, informal logicians have concluded that much reasoning is dialectical. Reasons for a claim are seen as a move in an argument – an attempt to persuade offered as part of an actual or possible exchange between parties who differ.

Qualitative research and outcomes

Following that preliminary ground clearing, we now sketch our views regarding the ways in which qualitative research and evaluation can address outcome questions.

- First, there are design solutions analogous to designs, which entail a degree of control.
- Second, the shift of emphasis from internal validity to questions of external validity and generalization, has led to a greater sensitivity to the micro-processes of practice and programmes.
- Third, developments in symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology have been applied to outcome questions.
- Fourth, the impact of scientific realism has led to a radical rethinking of notions of causality.

Campbell and 'theory-infirming' case studies.

Qualitative design solutions have been pursued actively by those who have worked on the borders of qualitative and quantitative methodology. For example, Donald Campbell's early position was that 'one-shot' case study designs are uninterpretable with regard to causal attribution. However, through exchanges with Becker and Erikson, he came to the position that the analogy of degrees of freedom provides a major source of discipline for interpreting intensive, cross-cultural case studies. The logic entails testing theories against the predictions or expectations it stimulates, through a general process he describes as pattern matching, based on the premise that 'experimental design can be separated from quantification' (Campbell, 1978: 197). He suggested a paradigm which entails a whole-hearted commitment to both ethnography and comparative studies. Campbell's approach has been developed in Yin's account of case study research (Yin, 1994; cf Shaw, 1999a, Ch 7).

Micro-processes

William Reid has been attracted by the potential of 'change-process' research. He does not reject the role of controlled experiments but concludes that 'practical and ethical constraints on experiments necessitate a reliance on the naturalistic study of these relations' (Reid, 1990: 130). This entails a focus on the processes of change during the period of contact between the professional helper and the client system. Rather than relying on aggregated, averaged summary measures of outcomes, this approach returns to the content-analysis tradition in social research, through a greater focus on micro-outcomes.

Reid applies his ideas to social work, although the logic would presumably apply to other forms of change-oriented professional service. A systemic view of intervention is at its root, in which professionals and service users are viewed in a circular, mutually influencing interaction. In this model 'conventional distinctions between intervention and outcome lose their simplicity' (p. 135). 'It then becomes possible to depict change-process research as a study of strings of intermixed i's and o's' - interventions and outcomes (p. 136). While Reid seeks to defend experiments, he suggests a more naturalistic stance when he says that 'averages of process variables that are devoid of their contexts at best provide weak measures' (p. 137).

Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism.

Two examples will serve to illustrate our point. Miller's work enriches our understanding of the importance of context in qualitative research. He discusses ways that institutional texts constructed to explain past decisions inevitably gloss over the openness and complexity of the decision-making process (Miller, 1997). He gives the example of evaluation research on a bowel-training programme in a nursing home. The evaluation consisted of counting when and how patients had bowel movements. The programme was judged to have a successful outcome if patients used a toilet or bedpan and ineffective for those who continued soiling beds. One patient had soiled her bed. However, observation methods enabled the researcher to view a nursing aide contesting the definition of this as 'failure' on the grounds that the patient knew what she was doing and had soiled her bed as a protest act against staff favouring another patient. This illustrates how mundane, everyday life is illuminated by observing the context of text construction. This would not have found a way into the formal outcome record. Text production in institutions is 'micro-politically organised', and this includes textual outcome records.

Second, Denzin's interpretive interactionism has also had a surprising impact on thinking about service outcomes (Denzin, 1989; Mohr, 1997). Mohr, for example, extends Denzin's argument to the evaluation of clinical outcomes in health research. She argues that the method strives to inspect the relationships between personal difficulties, experiences, policies, interventions, and institutions. 'Interpretive interactionism permits intensive scrutiny of the ramifications and outcomes of various interventions' (1997: 284). It can:

1. Sort out different ways problems are defined.
2. Show how patients experience care. What it is about interventions they find helpful or not, and in what circumstances.
3. Identify 'secondary causes' e.g. contexts, culture, and the meanings patients bring.

'Strategic points for intervention can be identified by contrasting and comparing patients' thick descriptions, and these can be used to change, to improve, or to negotiate and renegotiate interventions' (p.284). It is valuable when 'an outcome may not be readily apparent, and the intervention is something that only the patient and not the professionals can define' (p.285).

Cause and causal models

The fourth qualitative line of approach to the methodological problems posed by outcome evaluation is rather different. It stems from the stimulus provided by changed thinking regarding the nature of cause, and the corresponding models of causal hypotheses which flow from that thinking. The central idea is of underlying causal mechanisms which cannot be understood by surface workings and measurement. Hence, 'events themselves are not the ultimate focus of

scientific analysis...Reality consists not only of what we can see but also of the underlying causal entities that are not always discernible' (House, 1991b: 4). The underlying reality produces actual events, of which we have empirical experiences and sense impressions.

This is often described as a *generative* concept of causality.

> When we explain an outcome generatively we are not coming up with variables or correlates that associate with one another; rather we are trying to explain how the association itself comes about. The generative mechanisms thus actually *constitute* the outcome. (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 408)

The conventional concept of causation as regularities and associations is dismissed in favour of causal entities which have 'tendencies interacting with other tendencies in such a way that an observable event may or may not be produced' (House, 1991b: 5). House quotes Manicas and Secord saying that, 'For the standard view of science, the world is a determined concatenation of contingent events; for the realist, it is a contingent concatenation of real structures. And this difference is monumental'. Hence, instead of merely documenting the sequence and association of events, the realist seeks to *explain* events.

While this view of cause does not necessarily require a qualitative methodology, it does clearly lend itself to such methods.

> Qualitative studies are not designed to provide definitive answers to causal questions...(but) it can still be an appropriately qualified pursuit. (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 136, 138)

Miles and Huberman are even less reserved. 'The conventional view is that qualitative studies are only good for exploratory forays, for developing hypotheses - and that strong explanations, including causal attributions, can be derived only through quantitative studies'. They describe this view as 'mistaken' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 147), and insist that qualitative evaluation research can,

1. identify causal mechanisms,
2. deal with complex local networks,
3. sort out the temporal dimension of events,
4. is well equipped to cycle back and forth between different levels of variables and processes,
5. analytic induction provides a way of testing and deepening single case explanations.

Causal accounts will be local and 'now-oriented' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 141). Miles and Huberman develop analytic methods which address causal attribution in both single and multiple case explanations. For example, they advocate the use of field research to map the 'local causal networks' which informants carry in their heads and to make connections with the evaluator's own emerging causal map of the setting. Such maps start from 'causal fragments' which lead on to linked building of logical chains of evidence. Such causal networks

> are not probabilistic, but specific and determinate, grounded in understanding of events over time in the concrete local context - and tied to a good conceptualisation of each variable. (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 159)

Much of this reasoning was anticipated by Cronbach's arguments regarding causal models. Rejecting the idea of causation as events that can be predicted with a high degree of probability, Cronbach developed twin arguments. First, he argued that causes are contingent on local interactions of clusters of events. More than one cluster may be sufficient, but no one cluster is necessary. Second, he accepted that there are usually missing events or conditions that affect the outcome of a given programme, but about which we know little. He was the first theorist to produce a plausible explanation of contextual factors in evaluation. Hence, he concludes that 'after

the experimenter with his artificial constraint leaves the scene, the operating programme is sure to be adapted to local conditions' (Cronbach et al., 1980: 217). Furthermore, 'a programme evaluation is so dependent on its context that replication is only a figure of speech' (p. 222).

> Qualitative evaluation cannot resolve the problems of causal conclusions any more than quantitative evaluation, but it can assess causality 'as it actually plays out in a particular setting' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 10).

Qualitative evaluation shares with qualitative research the recognition of the irony of social causes and consequences. Much of the sociology of deviance was based on just this sense of irony, with its exploration of deviant roles as doing necessary 'dirty work'. In evaluative terms, we may ask the question what functions are served by a particular practice that would not be served by its absence. In less functional terms we may ask what are the typical results of this phenomenon in this setting, and what ends are served thereby? Lofland and Lofland make the important observation that causal answers are by and large based on *passivist* conceptions of human nature. Qualitative inquiry has often steered away from causal accounts, not because the methodology is weak in that area but because of a commitment to an *activist* conception of human nature. The Loflands argue that an activist conception will lead to a focus on questions that address both structures and strategies. This will involve 'deciphering and depicting exactly what sort of situation the participants are facing' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 146), and understanding the 'incessantly fabricated' strategies people construct to deal with the situation.

Take for example, Silverman's work on HIV counselling. He is right to conclude that 'it is usually unnecessary to allow our research topics to be defined in terms of…the "causes" of "bad" counselling or the "consequences" of "bad" counselling' (Silverman, 1997a: 34), insofar as such topics reflect the conceptions of social problems as recognized by professional or community groups. Nonetheless, this does not require the abandonment of causal inquiry in qualitative evaluation. Inquiry into the ways in which professionals incessantly fabricate service forms and structures does promise a better way to understand causes.

Causal networks exist at the level of the individual case. Miles and Huberman also develop ways in which ordering and explaining can be tackled through cross-case displays of data. They are confident of the ability of qualitative inquiry to go beyond the problems of inferring from association ('the weasel word of quantitative researchers', p. 222). They summarise the process as follows.

> *Cross-case causal networking* is a comparative analysis of all cases in a sample, using variables estimated to be the most influential in accounting for the outcome criterion. You look at each outcome measure and examine, for each case, the stream of variables leading to or "determining" that outcome. Streams that are similar to or identical across cases, and that differ in some consistent way from other streams are extracted and interpreted. (p. 228)

They spell out the steps to accomplishing this analysis, but suggest that it may not be feasible for either larger or very small samples.

Example: Causal maps: participant models for a rural activity centre

Shaw and colleagues describe an evaluation of a rural activity centre for people with learning disabilities. They observed and interviewed project participants, parents, carers, management group members, key workers and other professionals. Project records were analyzed.

When describing and explaining the workings of the centre, the people who were interviewed appeared to draw on one or more of three different models of the scheme. These were a 'training for work' model, a 'personal and social growth' model, and an 'education for life' model. These operated in part as causal maps which entailed an array of model-specific positions on the aims of

the project, optimal target groups, desirable programme patterns, staffing requirements, future development strategies, and likely or desirable project outcomes.

TABLE 1 STAKEHOLDER MODELS OF A RURAL ACTIVITY CENTRE

	Training for Work	Personal/social growth	Education for life
Aims	Credible work skills for independent/ sheltered work	Personal and social growth	Alternative occupation to enhance the quality of life
Target group	Demonstrable ability to benefit; younger	Wide range of age and ability	Wide ability range; younger
Programme	Time limited stay; skill learning; assessment and review; contracts; move-one facility; integration into work	Open stay period; small project; small-group activities; counselling; liaison with carers and social work agencies	Loosely held time limits; the best learning context; interest-led contracts; community based activities and outside links; craft work and home making skills
Staffing	Education and special needs employment skills; plus volunteers	Social and group work qualifications; plus expert consultants	Education and social work qualifications; plus volunteers
Outcome	Regular throughput; work placements; normalization of work patterns; skill learning	No clear distinction between programme and outcome	Wide range of social skills; integration into community networks; change of attitudes on the part of outside community members

Source: Shaw, Williamson and Parry-Langdon (1992)

Qualitative research also facilitates the task of *valuation of outcomes*, and is opposed to the technicalisation of outcome research. This is not exclusively the province of qualitative research, but more conventional, and strictly evidence-based varieties of outcome research tend to treat such issues as technical matters. This links to the broader question of value and political issues.

> Evidence on effectiveness and outcomes and an emphasis on health gain and health outcome provide an apparently value-neutral, rational approach and means for rationing health and social care. Beneath the range of technical issues in assessing outcomes are political and social values that need to be explicit. (Long, 1994: 175)

Concluding issues

We have argued for ways in which qualitative research offers a distinctive and probably indispensable element in outcomes research in the fields of education, social work and health. There are a number of problems and opportunities that come into focus through this discussion.

Empirical: the focus on examining claims made in argument rather than starting from theoretical arguments, direct our attention to how researchers (and practitioners) actually do reason.

Research uses. Conventional quantitative research on outcomes is linked to a model of direct utility of research. The problem with this – long since recognised by writers from Carol Weiss onwards – is that it does not square with evidence on how research is actually used, and it misunderstands the nature of the policy making process. It is based on a rationalistic model.

> The rationalist model of policy making sees it as a series of discrete events, where each issue to be decided is clearly defined, and decisions are taken by a specific set of actors who choose between well-defined alternatives, after weighing the evidence about the likely outcome of each. Finch, 1986: 149-150)

Over against this, there has been development of the enlightenment model of research use. 'It offers far more space for qualitative research, through its emphasis on understanding and conceptualisation, rather than on providing objective facts' (p. 154). The enlightenment model, while valuable for its realistic depiction of research use, is not a universal description of how research information use operates. For example, practitioner research is likely to proceed on a more immediate instrumental view.

Values: the strategies discussed earlier tend to favour an incremental approach to social change. This is also the case of the enlightenment model of research use, which assumes a piecemeal, social engineering position. This raises in turn the general question whether qualitative methods are especially congenial to advocacy methods in research. My view is that there is no necessary relation between the two, but in practice they have proved mutually reinforcing.

Theorising: qualitative approaches to outcomes research tend to give greater prominence of theorising. Finch argues,

> First, that a concern with theory is quite compatible with qualitative research; second that a blend of theory and data is the hallmark of good qualitative work; and third, that this particular blend produces precisely the kind of work which is likely to make an impact upon policy because it offers theoretical insights grounded in evidence. (p. 174)

References

Abrams, P. (1984) 'Evaluating soft findings: some problems of measuring informal care' in *Research, Policy and Planning* 2 (2) 1-8.

Blair, J. (1995) 'Informal Logic and Reasoning in Evaluation' in New Directions For Evaluation, No 68 *Reasoning in Evaluation: Inferential Links and Leaps*, ed D. M. Fournier, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bryman, A. (1988) *Quality and Quantity in Social* Research London: Allen and Unwin.

Campbell, D. (1978) 'Qualitative knowing in action research', in Brenner, M and Marsh, P. (eds) *The Social Context of Methods*, London: Croom Helm.

Chelimsky, E. (1997) 'Thoughts for a new Evaluation Society', in *Evaluation*, 3 (1): 97-118.

Cronbach, L., Ambron, S., Dornbusch, S., Hess, R., Hornik, R., Phillips, D., Walker, D., and Weiner, S. (1980) *Toward Reform of Program Evaluation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Finch, J. (1986) *Research and Policy: the Uses of Qualitative Methods in Social and Educational Research.* London: Falmer Press.

Fournier, D. (ed) (1995) *Reasoning in Evaluation: Inferential Links and Leaps*. San Francisco: American Evaluation Association/Jossey-Bass.

Fournier, D. and Smith, N. (1993) 'Clarifying the merits of argument in evaluation practice' in *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 16 (4): 315-323.

Giddens, A (1993) *New Rules of Sociological Method* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Greene, J. (1990) 'Three views on the nature and role of knowledge in social science', in Guba, E. (ed) *The Paradigm Dialog*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Greene, J and V Caracelli (1997) *Advances in Mixed Method Evaluation: the Challenge and Benefits of Integrating Diverse Paradigms*. New Directions For Evaluation, No 74, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Guba, E. (1990) 'The Alternative paradigm dialog', in Guba, E (ed*), The Paradigm Dialog*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Holland, S (1999) 'Discourses of Decision making in child protection: conducting comprehensive assessments in Britain' *International Journal of Social Welfare* 8: 277-287.

House, E. (1980) *Evaluating With Validity.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

House, E. (1991) 'Realism in research', in *Educational Researcher*, 20 (6) 2-9.

House, E. (1995) 'Putting things together coherently: logic and justice', in Fournier, D. (ed) *Reasoning in Evaluation: Inferential Links and Leaps*. San Francisco: American Evaluation Association/Jossey-Bass.

Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. (1995) *Analysing Social Settings*. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Long, A, (1994), 'Assessing Health and Social Outcomes' in J Popay and G Williams eds *Researching the People's Health*. London: Routledge.

Macdonald, G (1999) 'Social work and it evaluation' in F Williams, J Popay and A Oakley *Welfare Research: a critical Review* London: UCL Press.

McKeganey, N., MacPherson, I. And Hunter, D. (1988) 'How "they" decide: exploring professional decision making' in *Research, Policy and Planning*, 6 (1): 15-19.

Miles, M. and Huberman, A, (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: an Expanded_Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Miles, M. and Huberman, A. (1988) 'Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: toward a shared craft' in Fetterman, D. (ed) *Qualitative Approaches to Evaluation in Education*. New York: Praeger.

Miller, G (1997) 'Contextualizing Texts: Studying Organisational Texts' in Miller G and Dingwall R (eds) *Context and Method in Qualitative Research* London: Sage

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) 'An Introduction to scientific realist evaluation', in Chelimsky, E. and Shadish, W. (eds) Evaluation for the 21st Century. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Reid, W. (1990) 'Change-process research: a new paradigm?', in Videka-Sherman, L. and Reid, W. (eds) *Advances in Clinical Social Work Research*. Silver Spring, MD: NASW Press.

Reid, W. (1994) 'Reframing the epistemological debate', in Sherman, E. and Reid, W. (eds), *Qualitative Research in Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Shaw I. and Gould N. (in press) (eds) *Qualitative Social Work Research* London: Sage.

Shaw, I. (1999a) *Qualitative Evaluation* London: Sage.

Shaw, I. (1999b) 'Evidence for practice' in Shaw, I and Lishman J (eds) *Evaluation and Social Work Practice* London: Sage

Sinclair, I. (2000) 'Methods and Measurement in Evaluative Social Work' Theorising Social Work Research seminar. http://www.nisw.org.uk/tswr/sinclair

Thyer, B. (2000) Review of I. Shaw and J. Lishman (1999) (eds) 'Evaluation and Social Work Practice' in *British Journal of Social Work* 30 (3): 401-402.

Weiss, C. (1988) 'If programme decisions hinged only on information' in *Evaluation Practice*, 9 (1): 15-28.

[i] This point is especially important in Britain, where the future of mainstream Social Policy undergraduate and postgraduate degrees is under serious threat. New alliances are necessary between social work researchers and sociologists who take the position on rigour and relevance mentioned in here.

[ii] I have in mind the work of people like Sinclair at York, Reid at Columbia, realist researchers such as Mel Mark at the University of Pennsylvania, and evaluative researchers' questioning of assumptions regarding the relative weight we should give to Type I and Type II errors in statistics. The core of this paper will appear in Shaw I and Gould N (2001) *Qualitative Social Work Research* London: Sage, Chs 1 and 11.