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# Social Status of Researchers And Professional Practices in the Field of Research Aimed at Social Intervention in France

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

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# Social Status of Researchers And Professional Practices in the Field of Research Aimed at Social Intervention in France<sup>1</sup>

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During a governmental mission to France in March of 1988 the author evaluated the effects of the status and professional practices of researchers on their work in the field of 'social research'. This type of research is largely financed by sectorial ministries and private associations formed under the provisions of the law of 1901. I examined the socio-political and scientific milieu of knowledge production in this field of study.

Such research on social aspects of health, social problems and income security raises fundamental epistemological questions regarding its legitimacy, specificity, scientific validity, and applicability. A traditional theoretical orientation in social science research, lack of interest in funding this type of research at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche scientifique) and scientific ministries, and the precarious status of young researchers all characterize this new field of study and also constrain its development. However a new momentum is under way, due to recent initiatives by the Mission de Recherche et d'Experimentation (MIRE), the Ministère des affaires sociales et de l'emploi, and to political lobbying by public bodies and private organizations with the goal of revitalizing social research aimed at finding concrete and innovative solutions to contemporary problems through the application of research.

*A l'occasion d'une mission gouvernementale en France en mars 1988, l'auteur a évalué le statut ainsi que les pratiques professionnelles des chercheurs effectuant leurs travaux en recherche sociale ("sur le social"). Ce type de recherche est financé, en bonne partie, par les ministères sectoriels et les associations privées constituées*

*en vertu de la Loi de 1901. L'auteur cherche à révéler les conditions socio-politiques et scientifiques de la production des connaissances dans ce champ d'étude.*

*Ce type de recherche sur les aspects sociaux de la santé, les problèmes sociaux et la sécurité du revenu soulève des questions épistémologiques fondamentales se rapportant à sa légitimité, sa spécificité, sa scientificité et son applicabilité. Les traditions théoriques de la recherche dans les sciences sociales, le peu d'intérêt qu'accordent le Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) et les ministères scientifiques au financement de ce genre de recherche, la précarité du statut des jeunes chercheurs qui définissent ce nouveau champ d'étude sont autant de facteurs qui freinent son développement. Pourtant, toute une dynamique nouvelle est en train de se créer grâce aux initiatives récentes de la Mission de Recherche et d'expérimentation (MIRE) du ministère des affaires sociales et de l'emploi et à une volonté politique de la part d'organismes publics et d'associations privées pour donner un second souffle à la recherche sur le social avec l'intention, par le transfert des connaissances, d'apporter des solutions concrètes et novatrices aux problèmes de la vie moderne.*

## 1. THE OVERALL PERSPECTIVE

At a time when social research in Quebec<sup>3</sup> is working to refine its major orientations, to define its boundaries with greater precision, and is in the process of acquiring a sharper focus, it is appropriate to look at what has been done in a similar field of study elsewhere. The rationale for such a comparison rests

on the necessity to identify the transcultural historical contexts of development of this field of observation and action, the social policies of the granting bodies, and the various fields of investigation of the researchers themselves.

The Research Council (Conseil Québécois de la Recherche Sociale), which I chair, felt that such a comparison could be made with France, where research institutions, models for social practices and linguistic patterns are quite similar to those of Quebec. This was the context when I was asked to head a special study and cooperative mission to France in March of 1988. The Mission's mandate was defined as follows:

"Social research must be examined from the standpoint of its specific object, its main themes, its observational methods and analytic procedures, its financial and human resources needs, its institutional frameworks in regard to promotion and diffusion, its relationship to professional practices and interventions in the various settings, as well as from the point of view of its relationships to the power structures and of the sociopolitical issues at stake" (Tremblay, Picard et Boisvert 1989:10).

As can be seen from the previous statement, the mission objectives were stated broadly enough to fully benefit from the professional experience and expertise of our French colleagues active in this field of study. These colleagues belonged to three categories: *promoters* (administrators of granting bodies); *producers* (heads and members of institutions producing social research; and *users* (heads and social actors in organizations engaged in social intervention with individuals or groups of different social categories in the health and welfare fields). Through the inclusion of selected representatives of these three categories from diverse institutions — some with a public status, others with a private one; some located in metropolitan Paris, others in northern and southern France — we felt that we could cover a wide range of actors and that we could encompass, in a single field operation, a study of both the planning and administration of social research as well as the infrastructural and contextual backgrounds of knowledge production and of the users of research results (knowledge transfer). Through the examination of the full spectrum of research in the field of social intervention<sup>4</sup> within a spatiotemporal perspective (from the center to periphery and from the post Second World war period up to 1988) we attempt to reveal the status of social research within the power structure, the epistemological issues stemming from its endeavours, and the sociopolitical forces at play.

It is well known that France is a country where research traditions are solidly established not only in the experimental and natural sciences but also in the social and human sciences. Yet, even more so than in Quebec, social research confronts major barriers in effectively penetrating the field of social policies and practices. Research producers, an important contingent of them young social scientists without a secure job or a permanent research position, frequently experience serious difficulties in carrying out their research activities. How does one go about explaining the flagrant contradiction between the existence of a well-established and a well-financed scientific institution (Le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, The CNRS) and the precarious status of research in applied human sciences as a field? The complete answer to such a question, to be sure, is a complex one. However, let me invoke two series of factors which stand out in order to begin to gain some insight into it. The first group relates to epistemological questions within the field of social action; the second stems from the structural and social conditions underlying knowledge production in that particular research domain. Let us discuss first the epistemology and then proceed to the infrastructures of research production.

## 2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Research on the psychosocial and sociocultural aspects of health, on the social problems related to social inequalities and social marginality and on income security<sup>5</sup> raises basic epistemological questions with regard to its legitimacy, its specificity, its scientificness and its applicability.

### 2.1 LEGITIMACY

One says of an action that it is legitimate when it is fully grounded, justified and perceived as reasonable. Research on problems requiring social intervention in France is generally judged as reasonable and useful by professional social workers and other first-line users of research products who must invent ways and means to resolve social problems which confront individuals and groups seeking help, being offered advice or given services. But, as a research field, it does not possess a fully-recognized social status, endorsed by government authorities, administrators of public funds and the scientific community. The Mission for Research and Experimentation (the MIRE<sup>6</sup>) is exceptional, inasmuch as it is under the authority of a sectorial ministry (The Ministry of Social affairs and Labour) rather than a scientific one (such as L'Education Nationale or Le Ministère de la Recherche) and uses

its meagre funding to promote research in the field of social intervention. As a new field of investigation, research on social and health problems is not invested with an historical legitimacy, nor has it been successful in defining its object of study. Moreover, up to now, the scientific community has not been fully convinced of its relevance.

## 2.2 SPECIFICITY

Members of the established scientific community in France still ask themselves in what way social research differs from social science research and from research in the behavioral and human sciences. As a consequence, a large majority of them disagrees that it is a separate field of research. They raise fundamental questions. Can the promoters of research aimed at social intervention identify a distinctive, well-delineated field of study, pinpoint its particular conceptual perspectives, describe its corpus of data, and characterize its instruments of observation? Has it enabled a recognized group of social practitioners to achieve a high professional status in the scientific arena? The newness of this field of study and social experimentation, which is at the interface of the biological, psychological and cultural sciences due to its multidisciplinary nature<sup>7</sup>, possesses undefined peripheral zones and central areas which superimpose and intersect the boundaries of well-established disciplines such as ethnology, psychology, sociology and social psychiatry. These peculiar contexts make it problematic and controversial to specify the core elements of what constitutes the field of research aimed at social intervention.

## 2.3 SCIENTIFICNESS

In disputing the legitimacy and the distinctive character of research on social intervention, its detractors have taken various approaches in challenging its scientific nature. In the North American context, the research and action field is identified with "action research" (Gélinas 1985, Goyette 1985) aimed at solving concrete problems through a process of feedback. It is a field which studies research questions such as these: How does one reduce unemployment and constrain the trend towards job precariousness? What kinds of social policies and professional practices could reduce the incidence of violent and criminal acts? Can we prevent suicide by devising special measures of social support? How does one go about helping drug addicts, and facilitating their social rehabilitation? How is it possible to attenuate the physical and psychological barriers which preclude persons with functional deficiencies from social integration? This list of questions is

illustrative of the kinds of topics being chosen by producers and users of research on social problems. The opponents of such research observe that conceptual frameworks and empirical procedures of investigators working on social issues run the risk of being tarnished by their utilitarian objectives. Science, they suggest, must remain 'pure': it should have no sensitivity, nor does it have colour. These views, in my estimation, are outmoded. They mask a conception of science rooted in the experimental model where every variable, outside the ones being measured, is supposed to be fully controlled or assumed to be homogeneous. In such a model the research results are portrayed as unmistakably sound and reliable. It seems to me that there is a confusion of kinds here since there is no distinction being established between a rigorous procedure (be it quantitative or qualitative in nature) and an ideological one where the full details of the outcome are already engraved in the premises.

## 2.4 APPLICABILITY

At a later stage than in North America, Europe was influenced by a utilitarian ideology that had a major impact on the emerging field of study called social research. This occurred in France when planners working at The Commissariat Général du Plan<sup>8</sup> were in the process of writing the Sixth Plan (1969-1973). They established a planning perspective that corresponded to the economic and social objectives of French society at that time. Research designs and programmes of social investigators had to derive from the political, economic and social objectives articulated in the Plan. However the specific applied orientation of the Sixth Plan was neither reinforced nor maintained in subsequent plans, with the consequent result that social scientists returned to their theoretical work, dealing with more traditional issues of explanation and understanding rather than action-oriented research interests. But a reversal of the situation occurred with the entry into the market place of a generation of young graduates with precarious statuses. As early as the mid-seventies they took it upon themselves to revive and give credibility to the applied concerns of the sixties. Their research initiatives arose outside the conventional institutional frameworks of scientific production. Their research activities were in essence action-oriented. The combination of their non-institutional status and action-orientation made it difficult for them to gain appropriate recognition as researchers and to see their research recommendations become accepted either by organizations providing social services or by the public.

While this overview of epistemological questions has been very broad in scope and overly simplistic in its analysis of the situation, nonetheless, it has the merit of pointing out the main questions which have been raised in France in regard to research "sur le social". At the same time, it leaves the onus on specialists engaged in the field of action research to provide us with adequate responses to transcend the obstacles identified here to the legitimacy of that complex field of activities centered upon social action and social protection. At this point therefore I set aside questions on the foundations of knowledge in order to proceed to examine the sociopolitical conditions of knowledge production.

### 3. THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONDITIONS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

In this section, I will examine modes of production of research on social action according to the two operational pathways privileged in France: research apparatus (the 'dispositifs'), and research programs (the 'incitatifs'). First, however, it is imperative to spell out the types of constraint on that kind of research. The three major ones are:

- the research needs of the funding body related to corrective functions;
- the selection by the granting bodies of research priorities;
- the administrative standards regulating the production process.

*Constraints related to the needs of the funding body:*

Every observer of the research enterprise in France is struck by the wide variety of research production modes, and by the vigilance on the part of the granting bodies to ensure that the most productive formulae are used to fulfil their specific needs. If those who provide the financial assistance and who require a particular kind of research product, for instance, are of the view that it is preferable to fund research that is exploratory in nature and is carried out on a short term basis, the results of which are going to acquire some utility for a particular target group immediately, they will avoid promoting studies in depth, with long-term horizons (the results of which might eventually gain some utilitarian value). They demand short-term returns for financial investments in research. Such regulatory measures, which are consistently imposed on research producers on health and social problems, have practically no impact on investigators engaged in fundamental research.

*Constraints related to research priorities for granting agencies:* The second type of constraint is the

specification of priority research areas defined by the granting bodies. These priority themes flow from research needs. The research priorities of the MIRE in 1987-1988, for instance, included three distinct areas of study: work, health, and social services. Each of these has specific axes which differ from those enunciated by the Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales (the CNAF), the Centre Technique National d'Etude sur les Handicaps et les Inadaptations (the CTNERHI) or the Ministry of Justice. These distinct research orientations have some logic, since each of these administrative bodies has distinct responsibilities in regard to particular target groups that require specialized professional skills. From time to time, the perceived needs of these organizations may overlap. In such cases, joint research ventures are developed.

*Administrative and procedural constraints:* The third type of constraint imposes further restrictions on researchers in the field of social intervention. In general, it relates to research procedures. Not only do researchers have to agree to focus their research on the identified research themes, they are also compelled to replicate production modalities which flow from administrative, financial and technical norms according to rigorous temporal deadlines. For example, they might have to undertake empirical observations on particular groups of individuals with special health or social problems and build operational strategies as well as appropriate research instruments capable of yielding concrete solutions to be implemented in a short period of time. Moreover, in some cases, social investigators may have to find complementary financial resources from private sources.

#### 3.1 THE APPARATUS OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INTERVENTION ('LES DISPOSITIFS')

One of the two operational pathways privileged for research in France is the 'dispositifs', or research apparatus. The apparatus of research on social intervention includes infrastructures of research production as well as mechanisms for diffusion of results and knowledge transfer. Let us focus our attention on the frameworks of knowledge production according to four different modalities:

- research laboratories and associate research teams of the CNRS;
- research teams;
- research groups;
- lone researchers who carry out their work either on university campuses or with some non-profit private association established according to the Law of the First of July 1901<sup>9</sup>.

In the CNRS research laboratories, one finds schol-

ars engaged in the production of new knowledge using standard scientific procedures such as documentation, observational methods, conceptual analysis and theory building, validation of indices and instruments, critical stands, et cetera. Researchers in these settings are employed on a full-time basis and are career-oriented. They have secured tenure in their positions through competitions which accredited their theoretical and methodological competence in a specialized field of study. In the pursuit of their research work they do have to abide by administrative and professional regulations. However, they enjoy a wide degree of freedom in the development of a research question within their specialized area. The quality of their research production is assessed by academic criteria such as invitations to give conferences or lectures at prestigious foreign institutions, publications (scientific books, specialized monographs, articles written for a highly specialized public that acts as peer referees), active participation in international learned societies and the like. They represent a very special class of researchers. In Patricia Thomas's terminology (1985), they are guided by a knowledge-driven model. In addition to being financed for their research projects on a continuing basis (as long as the criteria of quality assessment are met), they execute their research endeavours with complete freedom of movement.

Members of the *associate teams of the CNRS* have practically the same kinds of privileges as full-fledged members of the CNRS. There are, however, slight differences in their respective status which are worth mentioning. Such research teams are accredited by the CNRS after the scientific work of their members has been adjudicated as top quality, and they get special financial resources from the CNRS. Since these researchers are located in a university setting, they usually have teaching and tutorial tasks, with graduate and undergraduate students. At times, they may also perform administrative functions in their academic units. Although they devote a large proportion of their time to research or research-like activities, they cannot be considered as full-time researchers. Members of the associate teams do not have any form of tenure in their association with CNRS since theirs is a parallel career stream. However, they have the same degree of freedom in shaping their own research problems.

There are two kinds of *research teams* which do not have the same scientific status and do not profit from the advantages reserved to government laboratories and associate teams of the CNRS. They are the monodisciplinary research teams housed on university campuses, and those associated with private or semi-public organizations. In the university setting,

it is possible for a number of faculty members with related disciplinary backgrounds to group themselves in order to submit research proposals to government ministries, semi-public institutions and private funding bodies. In this context, research is an integral element for training purposes and career advancement. Academic recognition and tenure are only granted to the best, and competition is fierce. In such an intellectual climate, research efforts have to lead to knowledge advances and serve the training of graduate students as well as the scholarly development of faculty members, and have to garner scientific recognition for the university. Research teams established outside academia, on the other hand, are usually the result of undertakings tied to special requests and needs. In contrast to the preceding ones, non-institutional researchers do not have a permanent job status and they are generally fully committed to the goals of the target groups. Their work must yield concrete solutions for various actors in diverse fields of intervention (e.g. social protection, delinquency, mental health, violence, drug addiction). Researchers' salaries are paid through research contracts. These contracts have to be periodically renewed, and, at times, secured from new sources, with all the uncertainties that such a search for funds entails. Thus, the professional status of investigators carries little, if any, financial security. Moreover, they have to produce high quality results within short periods of time. In brief, then, the career profile of researchers in the applied field relies, in large measure, on team productivity (measured by the same criteria used for the CNRS researchers), relevance of recommendations to client agencies, and the usefulness of results from the standpoint of these funding bodies.

*Research groups* also operate both in university settings and in the private sector. They are to be distinguished, however, from research teams in terms of size, scope (they are multidisciplinary), the nature of research tasks being undertaken (they are less diversified and are carried out within shorter periods of time), and the mobility of researchers.

*Lone researchers* are also found in both universities and private organizations. The latter, who usually carry on their work in action-oriented environments, have a precarious employment status, and must produce findings that can be readily implemented within short periods of time.

The preceding paragraphs reviewed the infrastructures of production of research on social intervention. As indicated above, the second component of the apparatus of research in this area is the mechanisms for diffusion of research results and know-

ledge transfer. Investigators have access to a number of different modes: book collections, scientific journals, monographs, local magazines, monthly letters, seminars in which producers and users participate, specialized training sessions, and a variety of other mechanisms. Selection of a mode of diffusion is usually determined by the characteristics of potential users (social workers, specialized teachers, recreational monitors and agents of intervention in the field).

### 3.2 RESEARCH PROGRAMS ('LES INCITATIFS')

Complementing infrastructures of knowledge production and knowledge transfer (research apparatus, 'dispositifs'), are the other operational pathway privileged in France: research programs ('incitatifs'). The dominant program of research on social intervention in France flows from research grants. There are three major types of grant modes:

- statutory grants;
- grants awarded through a public competition;
- negotiated contracts.

*Statutory research grants* are given to individuals who have secured permanent status in a research institution or in a professional organization engaged in action programmes. The CNRS people, for instance, or those working for governmental research institutes, receive each year the financial resources required for their specialized research. Renewals are based on peer judgments of quality of the researcher rather than the full justification of a specific financial request<sup>10</sup> for a project. The objective being pursued is the development of a particular field of knowledge, the intellectual prestige of the institution for which the researcher works, and career development. Such a stand is derived, of course, from an elitist model that privileges research that is (mono)disciplinary in nature. This model extends to all fields of human knowledge (the training process being excluded). In such a model the diffusion of research results to the non-specialized public is not considered relevant. It also places no particular value on finding solutions to the concrete problems facing society. Such research professionals hold a very special status which entails numerous advantages<sup>11</sup>. The description of such a well-known phenomenon is provided to establish the contrasts that exist between social science researchers at the CNRS and investigators engaged in research on social intervention issues, whose social statuses are precarious; whose financial resources are problematical; and who function under various modes of administrative control that reduce the scope and at times the quality of their research findings. CNRS researchers,

one has to remember, have made meager contributions to the birth and development of research on social problems requiring public intervention.

*Grants open to competition* are usually awarded according to peer group assessment. In France, however, this evaluative process carries a special coloration. It has been customary for a number of granting bodies to call upon their board members to become actors in the peer assessment procedures. Up to a point, that policy denotes the equal value, if not the superior weight, of research relevance over the scientific quality of the research submission being evaluated. Researchers who belong to university teams stand greater chances of becoming 'winners' than university investigators working as lone wolves, or those isolated ones located in the kinds of organizations that are the main users of research products.

Competitions are usually carried out within general research areas (family, mental health, handicaps, or delinquency, for instance) or on more specific issues (priority research fields, specialized research themes). When competitions bear on wide research topics rather than priority themes, the criteria for quality assessment are: scientific rigor, the originality of the project and the research competence of the applicant. In such cases research procedures acquire a fundamental colouring and allow the grantee to pursue his or her research project over a period of years. Conversely, when competitions bear on a priority field (single-parent families, family violence, neglected children, desinstitutionalized psychiatric patients, or youth unemployment, for instance) assessment criteria differ and are likely to be associated with questions of opportunity. The funding body will select the best proposal (or a few among the very best according to available funds), keeping in mind, of course, the degree of correspondence that exists between research applications and the publicized call for tenders, the logic of the scientific overview being provided, the practical scope of expected results, the competence of the research applicant, the concreteness of budgetary estimates, the realism of temporal deadlines and the ethical constraints of the undertaking being envisioned.

*Contractual research* is almost always commissioned by policy-making bodies and is tied to a pressing need or problem to be solved in a short time. It is a research request handed over to a research team (or a single researcher) according to diverse modalities. Space limitations here prevent me from spelling them out (see Tremblay, Boisvert, Picard 1989 :112-114). The ideal type of such contractual research is a well-defined call for tenders which

conforms to high quality standards in regard to its conceptual and methodological formulations as well as to its technical, administrative and financial requirements. Once a party 'bidding' for a contract has been successful, the work can proceed with some sense of security in regard to financial resources and methodological procedures. The MIRE, for instance, through its call for tenders, allows a large number of interested parties that work on social problems or psychosocial aspects of health to initiate research on particular topics in areas considered important, with some continuity. This kind of continuity, to be sure, bears no comparison to the security of the well-established researchers. The 'call for tenders' technique is a highly-structured one, where there are concerns for the most efficient use of financial resources and where research expectations of the funding bodies are spelled out. The requests for bids are written with great care. I have examined a number of them and most, if not all, (those of the MIRE<sup>12</sup>, the CNAF, the CTNERHI and of the ministry of justice, for instance) could be published as research notes in refereed journals. In the end, it is the most astute bidders who stand the best chances of success in such competitions. The contract between the researcher and the granting body specifies the conditions under which particular research is to be conducted, defines its particular phases and spells out the main chapters of the expected research results. Such a contract may be awarded for one or two years. In the latter case, however, the contracting party will be obliged to produce a number of progress reports. Studies of an exploratory nature and those which bear on a 'knowledge contract'<sup>13</sup> have to be carried out within one year. In France, a distinction is made between a study and a piece of research. The study bears on a less complex topic than research, can be completed within a shorter period of time, and is relevant to existing or anticipated social problems.

There are other types of research done under contractual agreements, which do not have the same importance as the calls for tenders of the major public institutions. They are usually contracts offered to small groups of young researchers by private organisations concerned with the implementation of research findings. Most of the time, these research undertakings lack an appropriate scientific framework and encounter serious difficulties in reaching the objectives set at the start. It is in this specific kind of situation that mission members perceived most clearly the kinds of difficulties associated with establishing closer ties between universities and social work agencies, and understood most clearly the weaknesses of this type of contractual

work for researchers who aim at acquiring better research skills and greater professional competence.

In concluding this section, let me add that a few other kinds of contractual arrangements are sometimes made with respect to operational research<sup>14</sup> and action research aimed at bettering the socio-economic status of particular groups or at reducing the negative impact of social problems. These are usually financed by the technical and sectorial ministries as well by semi-public and autonomous organizations pursuing goals related to their respective mandates.

#### 4. PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES IN RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INTERVENTION

A wide range of factors and sociopolitical conditions retard the development of research on major social issues in France. A small sample represents the expanse: the epistemological questions to which we alluded above; the theoretical and institutional research traditions in the social sciences; the lukewarm interest in research on social intervention by the National Center For Scientific Research (the CNRS) and by the scientific ministries; the unpredictable outcome of political changes and the precariousness of the professional statuses of young investigators in the field, especially those who carry their research work outside the traditional contexts ("les chercheurs hors institution"). Yet there are new dynamisms appearing in the field of research on social problems which are visible through recent formal initiatives of the MIRE, the political will of the socialist government second wave, and the strengthening of concerted efforts of public institutions and private organizations<sup>15</sup>. Efforts made by the three partners (researchers, policy makers and administrators, and funding bodies) are converging, and are directed at giving vitality to research on social problems, in line with the parameters of the move towards administrative decentralization initiated to stimulate the search for concrete and innovative solutions to problems associated with modernity. This wide overview of professional practices in the social action field underscores the vectors which will now be the focus:

- structural contingencies
- limitations of the funding arrangements
- the main research themes

##### 4.1 STRUCTURAL CONTINGENCIES

There is a marked lack of unity in the understanding of basic tenets of research on social intervention in France, which derives as much from the



diversity of the research tradition of participants as from contesting views on social issues. This situation, it seems to me, arises from the diversity of conceptual models for research on culture, on groups, and on people — different ‘schools of thought’. It also reflects various political ideologies which range from the extreme right to the extreme left. This was demonstrated during the visit of our mission in France, which happened to coincide with the presidential elections. Therefore we were in a position to observe the great uncertainties that existed with regard to the future of such research. Feelings of anxiety were expressed as frequently by research planners and administrators as by researchers and interveners themselves. *Who, from the left or from the right, would become president? What would be the political affiliation of those holding key power positions? What would the new scientific policies look like? As far as research is concerned, what kind of influences would the individuals in key positions have on institutions financing research aimed at social interventions?* Each of these questions occupied the minds of these people.

Distance is another significant structural factor. In sharp contrast to basic scientific research, research on social problems has so far been carried out mainly by investigators outside of Paris. As a result of the geographical dispersion, the main promoters of this kind of research experience serious difficulties in attempting to establish functional networks, which are an essential component in the strengthening of action-oriented research. This reflects the relatively recent growth of social research aimed at solving problems and is also related to the background of researchers. Some have academic backgrounds, and have the same skills for research as traditional researchers. Others have been trained as social workers, which in France is not studied on university campuses; their professional training is action-oriented rather than research-oriented. With non-university backgrounds, these people seldom have the opportunity to acquire skills in basic research. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that this part of the research community has difficulties in establishing bonds with university researchers. Conversely, university-based researchers are not usually inclined to work as team members with intervention professionals who are situated in a variety of organizations with the aim of providing a wide range of specialized social services. As a consequence, there are several sorts of ‘distancing’ between researchers who are theoreticians on social issues and those who are engaged in action and the provision of social protection.

Disciplinary compartmentalization is another

difficulty encountered in France by researchers on social issues. In North America, it is a well-established principle that those who are going to work on health and social problems have to establish multi-disciplinary teams. In France, some research groups working on social problems are mono-disciplinary, which limits understanding of multidimensional problems. At this time Sociology occupies a dominant position.

#### 4.2 FUNDING BODIES

As I mentioned earlier, the development of research on social problems in France has not been the result of efforts initiated by the scientific institutions financed by the research ministry or by the ministry for higher education, or by statutory researchers (though some, such as Robert Castel and Michel Chauvière, have carried out pioneering work of high quality). Instead, sectorial ministries such as Social affairs and Justice, which has devoted limited funds on a regular basis, have been instrumental in allowing for the expansion and maintenance of the field. In the French context, that fact carries both advantages and disadvantages. While financial commitments on the part of government and administrative bodies (other than scientific ones) represent an undeniable positive contribution to research on social issues and social intervention, they also have negative consequences. First, they entail controls through the restricted priority areas: researchers are funded only as long as they can demonstrate that their research findings serve the needs of individuals and target groups. In the French socio-political context, one must also add uncertainties from changes of government, frequent turnovers in ministerial responsibilities, shifts in administrative heads of para-public agencies, and abrupt changes in areas of research priorities. There are some counterparts to these limitations for the researchers working in this area in traditional settings; if financial resources made available to them through the ministry of research are secure and consistent, this may lead to research which is conservative in style, lacking the innovative stimulation crucial for high quality results. This situation engenders ‘fundamental’ research at the expense of applied social research.

#### 4.3 MAIN RESEARCH THEMES

The comments here should be considered only as illustrations of patterns in research themes<sup>16</sup>; since our mission’s data gathering process did not involve a rigorous research design or well-designed sampling model, an attempt to analyze the research themes on social and health problems in France could lead to misinterpretations. Although it is not

a comprehensive account of the social research being carried out in France, the following information does reflect the major orientations of a number of principal institutions, and of researchers who are leaders in the field. Because of the length and diversity of the list of prominent themes I have grouped them according to their commonalities. This revealed two major classes of research themes. The first one includes four major categories:

- phenomena related to deviance, intolerance and social marginality;
- policies, services and professions of social action and social protection;
- family structure, functions and values;
- dynamics of population health and the process of aging.

Of lesser importance, the second class of themes is comprised of three priority areas:

- work, employment and poverty;
- urban studies;
- social structures and various kinds of solidarities.

It should be noted that the priority research areas of the Québec Council for Social Research (the CQRS) are in the first set. The similarities in research orientations apparent in France and Québec should be interpreted in a triple manner. First, social mutations and transformations of occidental society have much in common in France and in Québec. Second, the negative consequences of these similar patterns on population health and social relationships lead to research initiatives in both countries aimed at finding appropriate programmes which translate themselves into caring patterns and social services. Finally, this situation creates for Québec an opportunity to establish cooperative undertakings with France, through joint efforts in research, leading in the end to comparative studies.

## 5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This report does not provide us with an exhaustive overview of research efforts in France in the social research field. Such a goal would have required an increase in the number of granting bodies visited, meetings with a larger number of research producers in the various French regions, and more systematic coverage of the various intervention agencies and institutions. The mission's objective was exploratory in nature and its main goal was a broad picture of social research in France based on meeting representatives of three professional categories directly involved in research "on the social", (planners and managers, producers, and mediating

agents in the workplace). The comparative information gained from an analysis of the various strategies and processes involved was to be applied in devising a three-year development plan for the Québec Research Council; it proved extremely useful.

As I mentioned, our visit to France coincided with the period immediately preceding the presidential election. As a result, some people were not available for meetings. While disappointing, this fact was also informative; it helped us to grasp better the uncertain state of the research enterprise during the election campaign. That uncertainty was especially acute in the social research field and could not be dissociated from the unhappy political experience of the cohabitation of the left and right wings during the last few years of the Mitterand government. That political experience had meant budgetary cuts to research funds, the freezing of new permanent openings and replacements, the unavailability of funds for research equipment and the inability to provide researchers with clear guidelines. It is well known that one of the most important disappointments for French researchers during the last decade was the delay in implementing the recommendations of the Godelier Report, which proposed reforms of Le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique.

Another striking element, to which I also referred earlier, relates to the great similarities that exist in the strategic fields for social research in France and those singled out either by the Rochon Commission or by the Québec Council for Social Research. These homologies are associated in both Europe and America with rapid social changes transforming social institutions and behavioral patterns. While the terms used in France to designate the undesirable consequences of rapid changes are not necessarily identical to those of North America, they cover the same general phenomena: new types of families; the new poverty ("la précarisation" in France); youth unemployment; marginal groups; various manifestations of violent behaviour; risk factors to health, et cetera. In the April 23, 1988 issue of *Le Figaro*, the former minister of Social Affairs and Labor (Philippe Séguin) identified the two major challenges facing France in the years to come in the social policy field: social exclusion and aging of the population. In his view, the major principles that have to guide action programmes are social solidarity and close personal interrelationships.

The Québec Council had arrived at a similar position when it defined the research field under its responsibility with the main concepts of social participation and social solidarity. Strikingly, the the-

matic areas of social exclusion and aging emphasized in France cover a wide spectrum, requiring social programmes covering "problems of unemployment, of health and social protection" and the fighting of "discriminatory risks against women, the handicapped, the immigrants" (ibid). Problems faced by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in Québec are analogous, and research and action programmes being established to tackle them are similar in many ways to those in France.

This article has argued that one of the major drawbacks of the social research field in France is rooted in epistemological issues related to its definition, legitimacy, meaning; its articulation with the power structure; and, indirectly, its relationship to the sociopolitical issues at stake. It is a new disciplinary field, mainly populated by young researchers in precarious work status (contractual work and research assistantships) or with tenure at the lower echelons of the professional scale. Social research holds a subordinate status and is not as yet recognized as a "true research field". Moreover, there is sharp disagreement among theoreticians and those engaged in action programmes regarding its legitimacy and specificity and its theoretical foundations and pragmatic implications. In recent years drastic cuts in research budgets have meant that available research funds have become scarce, intensifying competition among researchers without a permanent status. In particular there have been complaints on the part of social workers who could not be supported financially because of the lack of funds. There is a further cleavage within the field accompanying the one on theory and practice, relating to the split between sociologists and psychologists. The former are reproachful of the latter and accuse them of 'psychologizing' social work and social programmes. Sociologists argue that this places the accent on interventions centered on individuals rather than living conditions and institutional structures.

The meagre financial resources devoted to the social research field in France (when contrasted to those invested in social studies of a fundamental nature) reinforce its marginality. Whereas in Québec a special ministry is responsible for most of the costs of social research, in France it is fragmented among numerous ministries and institutions that impose different guidelines and operational procedures. While this diversity allows for the expression of a wide spectrum of social interests tied to the respective granting institutions, it creates numerous difficulties in the establishment of concerted efforts and renders conceptual unity almost impossible. On the

other hand, a larger number of individuals are able to initiate programs in various regions of France.

As is the case in Québec, social research in France is at the heart of many economic and social issues that create public debates and confrontations in regard to the sharing of resources. One of these, as can readily be imagined, is related to getting new financial resources for the development of this research field. Another issue stems from the necessity of establishing multidisciplinary research teams that would both widen perspectives on the subject, create settings amenable to the needs of young researchers and ensure continuity in sources of funding and in research outlets and endeavours. Quite often social research in France is undertaken under contractual agreement by young researchers who are looking for a permanent research position, following a call for tenders. Under such circumstances it is difficult to establish a research network and to sustain inter-institutional cooperation.

A challenge which has been successfully met in France relates to knowledge transfer from research producers (university and non-university) to work environments. Efforts are currently being undertaken to decentralize decision-making processes; this will further enhance the knowledge transfer process by facilitating the participation of local groups in defining the most urgent problems, targeting funds required by regional research projects, and the rapid assessment of current research undertakings, all of which will contribute to successful knowledge transfer. A number of programs provide strategic and operational support to innovative efforts in research dissemination: focussed training of researchers aimed at the use of research products, seminars and colloquia devoted exclusively to the publicizing of special research results, information bulletins for wider audiences affected by a particular research project, financing of institutions acting as mediators between research settings and work environments, and calls for tenders for 'state of the art' contracts.

There are two other initiatives that deserve mention here since they are instrumental for the development of this research field in France. The first is the existence of a specialized journal (*Les Cahiers de la recherche en travail social*), which publishes theoretical and methodological research results. The other one is the appearance in 1987 of a directory of researchers active in the field (*Annuaire de la recherche sur le social*). Both publications contribute to efforts in France to more clearly define the research field and identify those researchers who are making significant contributions to its development.

## 5.1 LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE FRENCH SOCIAL RESEARCH FIELD

The visit to France has allowed me to better understand the field of social research there through the identification of ministries, institutions and social organizations that are active in the field either as promoters, producers or users of research product. In the light of meetings held with key individuals I gradually became aware of the impact of the socio-political contexts on the growth and development of the field. I also discovered that some French sociologists who had had the opportunity to carry on research in Québec (Claude Martin, Marc-Henry Soulet and Michel Chauvière, for instance) had developed some expertise on the nature and scope of the social research field in Québec. Parallel expert knowledge on the same field in France was, of course, practically nonexistent prior to mission. The members of the mission have been successful in establishing closer ties with visited institutions and key researchers and in devising various forms of cooperative undertakings.

In regard to cooperative ventures, I wish to highlight those relating to the information and documentation processes. It was agreed, for instance, to exchange information on current research programmes and research projects being financed by the Council. Moreover, it was understood that the Québec Council would deposit all of its research reports at the CTNERHI, which has a documentation center serving both researchers and the public throughout France. It was also agreed that pertinent research reports could be sent, upon request, to those institutions requiring them. On the other side, the Council will receive research reports that will contribute to fulfilling its triple mandate. At the time of our visit, the MIRE was hoping to send a government mission to Québec in the near future in order to consolidate existing ties.

A number of other avenues for cooperation were examined and discussed, particularly relating to collaborative efforts on team projects and research programmes. These remain in a preliminary phase since such shared activities would necessitate important changes in current research and administrative practices. The following questions were discussed with some institutions and teams: harmonized themes (even in the absence of joint planning some of these already exist: mental health, aging and violence); comparative themes (a comparative analysis of the state of social research in several European countries); complementary themes; joint or complementary research projects; harmonized research programmes and senior fellowships, et cetera. Questions were also raised in regard to offering

affiliations to researchers during their visits, and the joint organization of symposia that would allow for the direct exchange of research results among researchers. These are some of the many forms of research cooperation that are possible between France and Québec. From the Council's standpoint, relevance, feasibility and productivity are the criteria that should be used for assessing them and establishing priorities.

## NOTES

1. This article was first presented as a paper (in French) at one of the workshops of the Canadian Association of Medical Anthropology (CAMA/ACAM) held in Ottawa in May 1989. It uses data gathered during a mission in France in March 1988 by a group of three individuals who produced a report (Tremblay, Picard, Boisvert 1989). This report is available upon request at The Conseil Québécois de la Recherche Sociale (the CQRS), 1088 Raymond Casgrain, Québec, free of charge.

2. I wish to express my thanks to the mission colleagues Gilles Picard (a research administrator in the Ministry of Health and Social Services) and Jean-Claude Boisvert (General director of the Québec Council for Childhood and Youth) whose contribution to the mission's success is of major importance. It is more than appropriate to thank Jean-Marc Nicole, at the Délégation générale du Québec in Paris who designed our program of visits and made the appropriate contacts with institutions and individuals to organize a convenient time schedule. I also acknowledge our debt of gratitude to individuals who agreed to meet with us and answer our numerous questions; I want to let them know how much it was appreciated. In particular I wish to express my thanks to Robert Castel and Michel Chauvière of the Groupe de recherche et d'analyse du social et de la socialité and of the Institut de recherche sur les sociétés contemporaines; Jean-Noël Chopart of the Laboratoire d'études et de recherches sociales at Rouen; Claire Guignard of the Commissariat au Plan; Bernard Guibert of the Caisse nationale des allocations familiales; Christine Patron of the Centre technique national d'études et de recherche sur les handicaps et les inadaptations; Jean-Michel Lacroix of the Association française d'études canadiennes (Bordeaux); Jean-Claude Guyot, Pierre Guillaume, Daniel Cerezuelle and Francois Vedelago of the Centre de recherche en sociologie de la santé (Bordeaux); Alain Grenier of the Institut d'adolescents mixte (Macanan); Marc-Henry Soulet and Claude Martin of the Centre de recherche sur le travail social (Caen); Labastida Martin del Campo and Mr. Benachenou of UNESCO; Stephen Mills of the Conseil international des sciences sociales; Mrs Lepaire of the Association française pour la sauvegarde de l'enfance et de l'adolescence; Lucien Brams and Paul Durning of the Mission Recherche et d'Experimentation; Lucien Houlemare of the Centre international de l'Enfance; Jean-Sébastien Morvan (university professor); Alain Girardet of the

Ministère de la justice and the research team at the Centre de recherche inter-disciplinaire de Vaucresson. Finally I wish to say how helpful, in so many different ways, the work of Rémi Gilbert, the Secrétaire du Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale has been, as have the personnel working in the secrétariat. None of them, of course, is responsible for the errors or misinterpretations that this article may contain. The author is President of the Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale and Professor of Anthropology at Laval University. The observations and ideas expressed here are solely his responsibility.

3. The concept of social research as used by the Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale, which is under the responsibility of the Québec ministry of health and social services, has a narrower definition than research in the social sciences. It covers the psychosocial and socio-cultural aspects of health problems, broadly defined, as well as the whole spectrum of social problems. In more positive terms, it refers to social participation and social solidarity. The latter "are to be understood from the standpoint that every person, every family or any other group must profit from social protection as well as from services required by their health status and condition, must have an equitable access to services, must have the ability to participate in community life but also count on the support of the community in their efforts devoted to bettering their quality of life and that of the immediate social environment. Social participation and solidarity prevent and reduce illness, isolation, poverty, dependency on social welfare, violence, discrimination and every other social condition creating social marginality" (Brochure 1991-1992, CQRS). This type of research can be fundamental or applied. Just about any scientific methodological procedure can be used. Under certain conditions, relative to each kind of research, the endeavour itself could be clinical, etiological, epidemiological, evaluative and experimental. It could be focussed on actors, problems or resources. Thus, individuals, practices and their epistemological grounds are all legitimate objects of social research (Ibidem).

4. There is an epistemological debate in France surrounding the labelling of social research with the aim of distinguishing it from the broader research endeavours in the social sciences and from the type of fundamental research being carried out in traditional settings such as university campuses and research institutes. Therefore, the term that is used in France to describe the social reality being covered here under the label of social research is "la recherche sur le social". I have translated this notion here by concepts such as research in the social intervention field, research aimed at solving social problems, research on social issues and the like, with the hope that it does not distort the meaning attached to it in France. The French concept is well reflected and explained in a number of books and scientific journals published in the last decade (Consult especially: Lion 1980, Barel 1982, Tachon 1982, Castel et Soulet 1985, Martin 1985, Soulet 1985, Vuillaume 1986, Chauvière 1989).

5. Here in Québec, income security no longer falls within the mandate of the Ministry of Health and Social Services, since a new ministry has been established to take on that special responsibility. In France, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour covers the entire domain, including income security, thus conferring to "recherche sur le social" a greater extension than the concept of "recherche sociale" being used by the Québec Council.

6. The Mission de Recherche et d'Expérimentation, the MIRE, is in France the institutional counterpart of the Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale, the CQRS.

7. The great majority of its main promoters have been trained in the behavioral and the social sciences.

8. The Commissariat Général du Plan was established to promote the economic and social development of France shortly after the Second World war period.

9. New legislation, in France, does not necessarily abrogate prior corresponding laws. In the research field, it has meant that some researchers have been successful in finding loopholes which legitimate activities which would otherwise be considered irregular. For instance, the Law of 1901 has allowed a number of voluntary organizations (les associations) to use some of their financial resources for research objectives, thus creating job openings for junior researchers interested in research aimed at social intervention.

10. It is a completely free system where individuals are engaged in research pursuits perceived as creative and conducive to career advancement. They contribute to disciplinary sophistication and at the same time they consolidate their respective research interests and goals.

11. Despite its deficiencies, clearly established by the Godelier public inquiry (Godelier 1982), the CNRS has been and continues to be the pride of France in the research field. Through its regular activities, it has always promoted research excellence in all domains of scientific inquiry. France has always felt that giving freedom and financial resources to the best and most competent brains would yield commensurate results. As a consequence, the CNRS status has always been a highly-valued one. Open competitions are held, from time to time in various fields of inquiry and young PhDs with research experience never fail to enter a given competition even if they stand little chance of being selected (since the number of openings usually available is low). Once the door is open, however, the new status holder is gratified with the financial and security rewards that this formal function entails. In recent years, however, there has been a relatively small number of openings due to limits in the financial resources and the public has begun to question France's science policies and the lowering of France's scientific stature among leading nations of the world.

12. See the 1984 call for tenders of the MIRE on "Economic changes, social bonds and social insertion of groups and individuals", the 1985 one on "Structural issues in the social field" and the 1987 one on "Policies and social interventions of help to the family in its educational duties" In Chauvière 1989:121-142.

13. 'Knowledge contract', as the term is used in France, is somewhat similar to what we call here a "State of the art" endeavour. In the terminology of the Conseil québécois de la recherche sociale, it largely corresponds to a "recension des écrits" (inventory of writings) which is a critical assessment of the nature and value of available documents in a field of study, coupled with the identification of strengths and weaknesses and the identification of new research vistas to be tackled.

14. Operational research, as used here, is the kind of research "aimed at tackling an ongoing problem within some organisational framework, but which does not include or involve an experimental action" (Thomas 1985:10).

15. Michel Chauvière has undertaken in 1986 an inquiry into a large number of geographical areas of France (twelve of them) with the view of gathering "the largest quantity of information possible relating to the scientific potential engaged in research 'sur le social'" (Chauvière 1989:81). The results are presented in a chapter on Decentralized research (Chauvière 1989:81-107) and constitute the most comprehensive inventory to date in France on research aimed at social intervention. Chauvière analyses the organizational structures of local environments, relationships to professional training (social work), the implication of central and local administrative structures, the problems of financial resources and funding bodies and the social recognition of research results which are of direct use either to the government and to social organizations with action-oriented programmes.

16. For a more complete discussion, see Chauvière 1989:81-107.

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