The Case for Qualitative Research

GARETH MORGAN

LINDA SMIRCICH
Pennsylvania State University

Debates regarding research methods in the social sciences are linked directly to assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and human nature. After reviewing a range of positions relating to these assumptions, we argue that the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods is a rough and oversimplified one. Contemporary social science is dominated by commitments to research methods almost as ends in themselves, resulting in abstracted modes of empiricism based on both quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative research is an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness derives from the nature of the social phenomena to be explored.

In recent years there has been growing concern regarding the longstanding debate on the adequacy of research methods in the social sciences. In particular, methods derived from the natural sciences have come to be seen as increasingly unsatisfactory as a basis for social research, and systematic attention has been devoted to a search for effective alternatives. This attention was recently highlighted in a special issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* [December 1979], considering research based on so-called qualitative methods within the field of organization theory. In reaction against the way in which organizational research of the 1960s and 1970s has been dominated by the use of quantitative methods, it now seems that a call is being raised in favor of qualitative methods.

While there can be little doubt that a more balanced approach to research in organization theory is required, there are many problems involved in the choice of a method that current debates have failed to explore. In particular, there has been a failure to examine the important relationship between theory and method. There has been a tendency to argue the case for different methods almost as ends in themselves, abstracted from the wider issues that they are ostensibly designed to examine. Whereas the 1960s and 1970s have been dominated by an abstracted empiricism based on the use of quantitative methods,

the threat now is that the 1980s may be dominated by a pendulum swing to an abstracted empiricism based on qualitative methods. There is a danger that one kind of abstracted empiricism will be replaced by another.

In this article, we seek to offset this possibility by exploring the core assumptions that underlie the arguments in favor of different methods. Our basic thesis is that the case for any research method, whether qualitative or quantitative (in any case, a somewhat crude and oversimplified dichotimization) cannot be considered or presented in the abstract, because the choice and adequacy of a method embodies a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and the methods through which that knowledge can be obtained, as well as a set of root assumptions about the nature of the phenomena to be investigated. Our aim is to examine the issues relating to methodology within this wider and deeper context, and in so doing develop a framework within which debates about rival methods in social science might be fruitfully and constructively considered.

We take our lead in this endeavor from the scheme of analysis offered by Burrell and Morgan [1979], which suggests that all approaches to social science are based on interrelated sets of assumptions regarding ontology, human nature, and epistemology. Table 1 provides a general overview of the relationships between ontology,

human nature, epistemology, and methodology in contemporary social science. In order to simplify presentation, and make this article of manageable length, we shall restrict our attention to what Burrell and Morgan have described as the Interpretive and Functionalist paradigms. The social thought embraced by these two paradigms raises a number of important research issues, but they are wedded to ideological perspectives that overplay the tendency to spontaneous order and regulation in social affairs, while ignoring modes of domination, conflict, and radical change. This is a serious omission. A full discussion and critique of contemporary research practice should also consider perspectives characteristic of the Radical Humanist and Radical Structuralist paradigms, within which the qualitative/quantitative research issue would be regarded as an ideological debate of minor significance. With this qualification in mind, we shall now seek to show how assumptions about ontology and human nature, which provide the grounds of social theorizing, are captured metaphorically in ways that define different epistemological and methodological positions. The quantitative/qualitative debate has arisen on the basis of these competing assumptions —which, for the most part, have gone unchallenged.

Assumptions about Ontology And Human Nature

The assumptions about ontology and human nature sketched out in Table 2 amplify the brief descriptions provided in Table 1. In essence, they are intended to provide a rough typology for thinking about the various views that different social scientists hold about human beings and their world. All the views have a distinguished history, are the products of long discussion and debate by their advocates, and their basic ideas are manifested in powerful kinds of social thought. Each has evolved in awareness of the existence of the other points of view, and indeed has to some exent developed in reaction to competing perspectives. As Table 2 seeks to show, most have left their mark on contemporary organization theory, although the influence of approaches represented by positions on the right-hand side of the continuum have been dominant. The transition from

Table 1
Network of Basic Assumptions Characterizing
The Subjective—Objective Debate within Social Science

	Subjectivist Approaches to Social Science					Objectivist Approaches to Social Science
Core Ontological Assumptions	reality as a projection of human imagination	reality as a social construction	reality as a realm of symbolic discourse	reality as a contextual field of information	reality as a concrete process	reality as a concrete structure
Assumptions About Human Nature	man as pure spirit, consciousness, being	man as a social constructor; the symbol creator	man as an actor; the symbol user	man as an information processor	man as an adaptor	man as a responder
Basic Epistemological Stance	to obtain phenomenological insight, revelation	to understand how social reality is created	to understand patterns of symbolic discourse	to map contexts	to study systems, process, change	to construct a positivist science
Some Favored Metaphors	transcendental	language game, accomplishment, text	theater, culture	cybernetic	organism	machine
Research Methods	exploration of pure subjectivity	hermeneutics	symbolic analysis	contextual analysis of Gestalten	historical analysis	lab experiments, surveys

one perspective to another must be seen as a gradual one, and it is often the case that the advocates of any given position may attempt to incorporate insights from others. Consequently, the success of efforts to determine who advocates what may be limited to determining the relative emphasis an advocate gives to one or more adjacent positions. Much time could be spent engaged in this particular sport, but that is not the major objective here. The point is that the scheme provides a useful way for thinking about the kind of assumptions that underlie continuing research and debate within the social sciences, and the thorny problems regarding epistemological and methodological adequacy.

Problems of Epistemology

The different assumptions regarding ontology and human nature pose interesting problems of epistemology. The different world views they reflect imply different grounds for knowledge about the social world. As we pass from assumption to assumption along the subjective-objective continuum, the nature of what constitutes adequate knowledge changes. To take the extremes of the continuum by way of illustration, an objectivist view of the social world as a concrete structure encourages an epistemological stance that emphasizes the importance of studying the nature of relationships among the elements constituting that structure. Knowledge of the social world from this point of view implies a need to understand and map out the social structure, and gives rise to the epistemology of positivism, with an emphasis on the empirical analysis of concrete relationships in an external social world. It encourages a concern for an "objective" form of knowledge that specifies the precise nature of laws, regularities, and relationships among phenomena measured in terms of social "facts" [Pugh & Hickson, 1976a, 1976b; Skinner, 1953, 1957].

At the other end of the continuum, the highly subjectivist view of reality as a projection of individual imagination would dispute the positivist grounds of knowledge in favor of an epistemology that emphasizes the importance of understanding the processes through which human beings concretize their relationship to their world. This phenomenologically oriented perspective challenges the idea that there can be any form of "objective" knowledge that can be specified and transmitted in a tangible form, because the knowledge thus created is often no more than an expression of the manner in which the scientist as a human being has arbitrarily imposed a personal frame of reference on the world, which is mistakenly perceived as lying in an external and separate realm [Husserl, 1962]. The grounds for knowledge in each of these perspectives are different because the fundamental conceptions of social reality to which the proponents of each position subscribe are poles apart.

Science As Metaphor

We thus encounter a fundamental issue that has attracted the attention of social philosophers for many centuries. It is the issue of whether or not human beings can ever achieve any form of knowledge that is independent of their own subjective construction, since they are the agents through which knowledge is perceived or experienced. A strong case can be made for the view that science of all kinds, whether nominalist or realist in its basic orientation, is primarily metaphorical [Brown, 1977; Morgan, 1980; Schon, 1963]. It is through the use of metaphor that scientists seek to create knowledge about the world. The metaphors that theorists choose as a basis for detailed theorizing usually derive from very fundamental, and often implicit, core assumptions about ontology and human nature. In selecting different metaphors for elaborating their theories, they implicitly commit themselves to an epistemological position emphasizing particular kinds and forms of knowledge. Debates about epistemology hinge largely on the advocacy of different kinds of metaphoric insight as a means of capturing the nature of the social world. It is worth examining this point in detail.

Reality as a concrete process As we proceed from right to left along the subjective-objective continuum illustrated in the two tables, the epistemology of extreme positivism, derived from a mechanical conception of the universe as a closed structure, gives way to an epistemology emphasizing the need to understand process and change. It is a change in epistemology that reflects a move away from a conception of the world as a machine, or closed system, to a conception of the world as an organism, an open system. The meta-

Table 2
Assumptions About Ontology and Human Nature

SUBJECTIVE APPROACHES ◄──

	Reality as a Projection of Human Imagination	Reality as a Social Construction	Reality as Symbolic Discourse
CORE ONTOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS	The social world and what passes as "reality" is a projection of individual consciousness; it is an act of creative imagination and of dubious intersubjective status. This extreme position, commonly known as solipsism, asserts that there may be nothing outside oneself: one's mind is one's world. Certain transcendental approaches to phenomenology assert a reality in consciousness, the manifestation of a phenomenal world, but not necessarily accessible to understanding in the course of everyday affairs. Reality in this sense is masked by those human processes which judge and interpret the phenomenon in consciousness prior to a full understanding of the structure of meaning it expresses. Thus the nature of the phenomenal world may be accessible to the human being only through consciously phenomenological modes of insight.	The social world is a continuous process, created afresh in each encounter of everyday life as individuals impose themselves on their world to establish a realm of meaningful definition. They do so through the medium of language, labels, actions, and routines, which constitute symbolic modes of being in the world. Social reality is embedded in the nature and use of these modes of symbolic action. The realm of social affairs thus has no concrete status of any kind; it is a symbolic construction. Symbolic modes of being in the world, such as through the use of language, may result in the development of shared, but multiple realities, the status of which is fleeting, confined only to those moments in which they are actively constructed and sustained.	The social world is a pattern of symbolic relationships and meanings sustained through a process of human action and interaction. Although a certain degree of continuity is preserved through the operation of rule-like activities that define a particular social milieu, the pattern is always open to reaffirmation or change through the interpretations and actions of individual members. The fundamental character of the social world is embedded in the network of subjective meanings that sustain the rule-like actions that lend it enduring form. Reality rests not in the rule or in rule-following, but in the system of meaningful action that renders itself to an external observer as rule-like.
	Humans as Transcendental Beings	**Humans Create Their Realities**	**Humans as Social Actors**
ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN NATURE	Humans are viewed as intentional beings, directing their psychic energy and experience in ways that constitute the world in a meaningful, intentional form. There are realms of being, and realms of reality, constituted through different kinds of founding acts, stemming from a form of transcendental consciousness. Human beings shape the world within the realm of their own immediate experience.	Human beings create their realities in the most fundamental ways, in an attempt to make their world intelligible to themselves and to others. They are not simply actors interpreting their situations in meaningful ways, for there are no situations other than those which individuals bring into being through their own creative activity. Individuals may work together to create a shared reality, but that reality is still a subjective construction capable of disappearing the moment its members cease to sustain it as such. Reality appears as real to individuals because of human acts of conscious or unwitting collusion.	Human beings are social actors interpreting their milieu and orienting their actions in ways that are meaningful to them. In this process they utilize language, labels, routines for impression management, and other modes of culturally specific action. In so doing they contribute to the enactment of a reality; human beings live in a world of symbolic significance, interpreting and enacting a meaningful relationship with that world. Humans are actors with the capacity to interpret, modify, and sometimes create the scripts that they play upon life's stage.
SOME EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH	**Phenomenology**	**Ethnomethodology**	**Social Action Theory**

Reality as a Contextual Field of Information

The social world is a field of ever-changing form and activity based on the transmission of information. The form of activity that prevails at any one given time reflects a pattern of "difference" sustained by a particular kind of information exchange. Some forms of activity are more stable than others, reflecting an evolved pattern of learning based on principles of negative feedback. The nature of relationships within the field is probabilistic; a change in the appropriate pattern and balance within any sphere will reverberate throughout the whole, initiating patterns of adjustment and readjustment capable of changing the whole in fundamental ways. Relationships are relative rather than fixed and real.

Reality as a Concrete Process

The social world is an evolving process, concrete in nature, but ever-changing in detailed form. Everything interacts with everything else and it is extremely difficult to find determinate causal relationships between constituent processes. At best, the world expresses itself in terms of general and contingent relationships between its more stable and clear-cut elements. The situation is fluid and creates opportunities for those with appropriate ability to mold and exploit relationships in accordance with their interests. The world is in part what one makes of it: a struggle between various influences, each attempting to move toward achievement of desired ends.

Reality as a Concrete Structure

The social world is a hard, concrete, real thing "out there," which affects everyone in one way or another. It can be thought of as a structure composed of a network of determinate relationships between constituent parts. Reality is to be found in the concrete behavior and relationships between these parts. It is an objective phenomenon that lends itself to accurate observation and measurement. Any aspect of the world that does not manifest itself in some form of observable activity or behavior must be regarded as being of questionable status. Reality by definition is that which is external and real. The social world is as concrete and real as the natural world.

Humans as Information Processors

Human beings are engaged in a continual process of interaction and exchange with their context — receiving, interpreting, and acting on the information received, and in so doing creating a new pattern of information that effects changes in the field as a whole. Relationships between individual and context are constantly modified as a result of this exchange; the individual is but an element of a changing whole. The crucial relationship between individual and context is reflected in the pattern of learning and mutual adjustment that has evolved. Where this is well developed, the field of relationships is harmonious; where adjustment is low, the field is unstable and subject to unpredictable and discontinuous patterns of change.

Humans as Adaptive Agents

Human beings exist in an interactive relationship with their world. They influence and are influenced by their context or environment. The process of exchange that operates here is essentially a competitive one, the individual seeking to interpret and exploit the environment to satisfy important needs, and hence survive. Relationships between individuals and environment express a pattern of activity necessary for survival and well-being of the individual.

Humans as Responding Mechanisms

Human beings are a product of the external forces in the environment to which they are exposed. Stimuli in their environment condition them to behave and respond to events in predictable and determinate ways. A network of causal relationships links all important aspects of behavior to context. Though human perception may influence this process to some degree, people always respond to situations in a lawful (i.e., rule-governed) manner.

Cybernetics

Open Systems Theory

**Behaviorism
Social Learning Theory**

phor of organism has exerted a dominant influence on the development of open systems theory within social science, providing a mode of conceptualization appropriate to theorizing about the social world as if it were a concrete process evolving through time. This epistemological position stresses the importance of monitoring process, the manner in which a phenomenon changes over time in relation to its context [e.g., Burns & Stalker, 1961; Emery & Trist, 1965]. The metaphors of machine and organism call for different modes of research as a means of generating knowledge; they define different epistemologies, since the knowledge required to examine a view of the world as a closed mechanical structure is inadequate for examining the world as an organismic system.

Reality as a contextual field of information Similarly, the epistemological framework for examining the world as an organismic system proves inadequate for studying the world if it is regarded, in accordance with the next ontological position along the continuum, as a process of information. This ontological position calls for epistemologies based on cybernetic metaphors, which emphasize the importance of understanding contexts in a holistic fashion [Morgan, 1979]. The metaphor of organism encourages the theorist to draw boundaries around the subject of study, elevating it in importance against the wider background. Thus the organization theorist often is concerned with the somewhat arbitrary relationship between organization and environment, structuring the research process and knowledge thus generated around this conceptualization. A more context-oriented epistemology, such as that provided by the cybernetic metaphor, would consciously seek to avoid this abstraction of "figure" from "ground," and search for what Bateson has described as "systemic wisdom." As he points out, it is possible to attempt to explain the evolution of the horse (figure) in terms of a one-sided adaptation to the nature of grassy plains (ground); however, this is to miss the point that the grassy plains have evolved along with the horse and may equally well be seen as an adaptation to the horse, as the other way around [1972, p. 155]. The same is true with "organization" and "environment."

The point is that it is *contexts* which evolve, and that an adequate understanding of the *process* en-

tails grasping the ecological nature of the context as a whole. Epistemologies based on the organismic metaphor are inadequate for this end, and need to be replaced by epistemologies concerned with the mapping of contexts [Gadalla & Cooper, 1978] and facilitating understanding of the patterns of systemic relationships inherent in the ecological nature of those contexts. Thus, as far as research in organization theory is concerned, the contextual approach would stress a need to understand how organizations and environment evolve together, rather than presuming that the adaptation of organization to environment is one way, as the organismic metaphor tends to presume. The contextual approach is not concerned with the notion of causality, which underlies positivist epistemology, because it becomes impossible to find a point at which causal forces begin. The nature of interaction and feedback between elements within a contextual field is such that there are always causes, which cause causes to cause causes [Wilden, 1972, p. 39]. The beginning of systemic wisdom lies in an awareness that relationships change in concert and cannot be reduced to a set of determinate laws and propositions, as positivist epistemology would have it. A view of social reality as a contextual field carries with it distinctive requirements as to what constitutes an adequate epistemology.

Reality as a realm of symbolic discourse The next position along our continuum, which characterizes the social world as a realm of symbolic discourse, implies yet another set of epistemological requirements. Emphasis is now placed on understanding the nature and patterning of the symbols through which individuals negotiate their social reality. It is an epistemological position that rejects the idea that the social world can be represented in terms of deterministic relationships, in favor of a view that knowledge, understanding, and explanations of social affairs must take account of how social order is fashioned by human beings in ways that are meaningful to them. This epistemological position, which often draws on the metaphors of theatre [Goffman, 1959; Silverman, 1970] or culture [Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Turner, 1971], emphasizes how social situations should be researched in a manner that reveals their inner nature. Thus, within the context of organiza-

tions there may be a concern for understanding the roles that language, symbols, and myths play in the shaping of any given reality, and a concern for generating ethnographic accounts of specific situations that yield insight with regard to the way reality works. The epistemology involved here does not hold that the findings thus obtained would be universally generalizable, but it does regard them as providing nonetheless insightful and significant knowledge about the nature of the social world. Such knowledge is inevitably seen as being relative and specific to the immediate context and situation from which it is generated, building what Glaser and Strauss call "substantive theory" [1967].

Reality as a social construction The epistemology that views reality as a social construction focuses on analyzing the specific processes through which reality is created. Here, reality resides in the process through which it is created, and possible knowledge is confined to an understanding of that process. Thus emphasis tends to be on the metaphors of text [Ricoeur, 1971], accomplishment [e.g. Garfinkel, 1967], and language game [e.g. Winch, 1958] as means of generating insight regarding the methods through which individuals make sense of their situation, thus creating and sustaining a semblance of reality. Garfinkel's term *ethnomethodology* aptly characterizes an important aspect of this approach to social inquiry, since the whole aim of inquiry is to understand the *methods* relevant to the production of common-sense knowledge in different *(ethno)* areas of everyday life. The task of epistemology here is to demonstrate the methods used in everyday life to create subjectively an agreed or negotiated social order. As Douglas [1970, p. 18] has indicated, the theoretical orientation that underlies ethnomethodology and other similar approaches to the study of society does not permit the generation of a form of knowledge that meets the demands of positivist epistemology; the ontological position implied here gives rise to an existential mode of social analysis the adequacy of which must be judged on quite different epistemological grounds.

Another Look at Extreme Subjectivism

The most subjectivist position on the continuum presented in our tables also carries with it its own particular grounds for knowledge. As has already been indicated in our general discussion of the nature of subjectivist epistemology, knowledge here rests within subjective experience. The appreciation of world phenomena is seen as being dependent on the ability to understand the way in which human beings shape the world from inside themselves. Epistemologies consistent with this position draw on a number of different sources. Some draw on the phenomenological tradition deriving from Husserl [1962; 1965] and emphasize the importance of obtaining understanding in terms of the nature of a transcendental form of consciousness. Others emphasize the importance of studying experiential learning phenomenologically [e.g., Torbert, 1972, 1976]. Yet others draw on non-Western modes of philosophy [e.g., Herriegel, 1953]. In each case, the grounds for knowledge demand that human beings transcend conventional scientific modes of understanding and begin to appreciate the world in revelatory, but as yet largely uncharted, ways.

It is convenient that we should end our discussion of possible epistemologies with a view rooted in such extreme subjectivism, because it stands in such stark contrast to positivism that many will regard it as antithetical to science. Far from pursuing the ideal of generating "objective" forms of knowledge, in terms of determinate relationships between facts, it denies that such knowledge is possible. Yet we have arrived at that position by merely following the epistemological implications of a gradual change in ontological assumptions. In so doing, we have sought to demonstrate how the whole of scientific activity is based on assumptions. Positivism follows from one particular set of ontological assumptions, as naturally as antipositivist epistemologies follow from others.

The Issue of Methodology

The case for qualitative research in social science begins as one departs from the objectivist extreme of our subjective-objective continuum. The quantitative methods used in the social

sciences, which draw principally on the methods of the natural sciences, are appropriate for capturing a view of the social world as a concrete structure. In manipulating "data" through sophisticated quantitative approaches, such as multivariate statistical analysis, social scientists are in effect attempting to freeze the social world into structured immobility and to reduce the role of human beings to elements subject to the influence of a more or less deterministic set of forces. They are presuming that the social world lends itself to an objective form of measurement, and that the social scientist can reveal the nature of that world by examining lawful relations between elements that, for the sake of accurate definition and measurement, have to be abstracted from their context. The large-scale empirical surveys and detailed laboratory experiments that dominate much social research stand as examples of the principal types of method operating on assumptions characteristic of the objectivist extreme of our continuum.

Once one relaxes the ontological assumption that the world is a concrete structure, and admits that human beings, far from merely responding to the social world, may actively contribute to its creation, the dominant methods become increasingly unsatisfactory, and indeed, inappropriate. For if one recognizes that the social world constitutes some form of open-ended process, any method that closes the subject of study within the confines of a laboratory, or merely contents itself with the production of narrow empirical snapshots of isolated phenomena at fixed points in time, does not do complete justice to the nature of the subject. The very nature of the phenomena under investigation challenges the utility of such methodological closure. Historical change, contextual fields of information, and processes through which human beings engage in symbolic modes of discourse, create their reality, and project themselves from the transcendental to more prosaic realms of experience, can be captured and measured only through means of static techniques and only in the most partial and limited of ways. Different approaches and methods are required for studying these phenomena, and more often than not they focus on qualitative rather than quantitative features of the subject of study. Quantitative techniques may have an important but only partial role to play in the analysis and understanding of the process of social change, and in defining the informational properties of a cybernetic field; however, their utility is much more restricted in the more subjectivist positions identified on our continuum. The requirement for effective research in these situations is clear: scientists can no longer remain as external observers, measuring what they see; they must move to investigate from within the subject of study and employ research techniques appropriate to that task.

Many such techniques offer themselves as a basis for qualitative forms of investigation, each appropriate to different kinds of assumptions about ontology and human nature. These techniques have been forged by generations of social scientists who have long recognized the limitation of narrowly based quantitative methods and the positivist search for determinate laws and regularities as a basis for effective research. Historical methods of comparative analysis for capturing process and change, cybernetic methods for mapping fields of information, ethnography, language analysis, experiential learning, collaborative inquiry, phenomenological reduction and "bracketing" as a basis for appreciating phenomena in consciousness—all have their role to play within the context of the assumptions on which they have been developed. It would be tempting to demonstrate the precise way in which different techniques such as participant observation, content analysis, in-depth interviewing, biography, linguistic analysis, and psychotherapy fit the detailed scheme of analysis presented in Tables 1 and 2. But this would be to oversimplify the issues involved, and serve as a potential disservice, because any given technique often lends itself to a variety of uses according to the orientation of the researcher. For example, participant observation in the hands of a positivist may be used to document the number and length of interactions within a setting, but in the hands of an action theorist the technique may be used to explore the realms of subjective meaning of those interactions. This technique can be made to serve research requirements consistent with many different positions along the subjective-objective continuum. The same can be said of the other techniques referred to above; their precise nature ultimately depends on the stance of the researcher, and on how the researcher chooses to use

them. As Geertz has noted in relation to ethnography:

> From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques, and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is [1973, p. 6].

The virtues of techniques and methods cannot be determined and categorized in the abstract, because their precise nature and significance is shaped within the context of the assumptions on which the social scientist acts. It is for this reason that our presentation of methodological perspectives in Table 1, and in the above discussion, seeks to highlight broad differences in methodological approach rather than the place of specific techniques.

The range of possible approaches to qualitative research indicates clearly that the dichotomization between quantitative and qualitative methods is a rough and oversimplified one. Qualitative research stands for an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness—like that of quantitative research—is contingent on the nature of the phenomena to be studied. Our analysis affirms the need for a more reflexive approach to understanding the nature of social research, with a focus on the way in which favored techniques are often linked to underlying assumptions. It emphasizes a need to approach discussions of methodology in a way that highlights the vital link between theory and method—between the world view to which the researcher subscribes, the type of research question posed, and the technique that is to be adopted as a basis for research. All these issues are related in the most fundamental of ways.

A preoccupation with methods on their own account obscures the link between the assumptions that the researcher holds and the overall research effort, giving the illusion that it is the methods themselves, rather than the orientations of the human researcher, that generate particular forms of knowledge. The development of organization theory, like other social science disciplines, would be better served if researchers were more explicit about the nature of the beliefs they bring to their subject of study. Much of the debate and criticism over methodology involves researchers who are failing to communicate with one another because they hold varying basic assumptions about their subject. When the varying assumptions become explicit, less effort can be devoted to arguing about the relative superiority of this method over that, and greater effort devoted to more basic issues.

Everything that has been said here points to a neglected feature of *all* social research—that it is based on implicit and largely untested ground assumptions. All the ontological positions and views of human nature considered in this article offer plausible, or at least useful, insights with regard to the nature of the social world. Indeed, it is the fact that they do that accounts for their presence and robustness within contemporary social science. The really important methodological issues revolve around the problems of testing the grounds of these rival views. For the most part, social scientists have been so concerned with generating research that articulates a view of the world consistent with their underlying assumptions that the more fundamental need to test these assumptions has passed almost unobserved. Here rests the main challenge of our analysis. We are calling for a focus of attention on the ground assumptions of social theory and research in order to transcend the abstract debate about methodology on its own account and the abstracted forms of empiricism, both qualitative and quantitative, that dominate the contemporary scene.

REFERENCES

Bateson, G. *Steps to an ecology of mind.* New York: Ballantine, 1972.

Brown, R.H. *A poetic for sociology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Burns, T.; & Stalker, G.M. *The management of innovation.* London: Tavistock, 1961.

Burrell, G.; & Morgan, G. *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis.* London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979.

Douglas, J.D. *Understanding everyday life.* Chicago: Aldine, 1970.

Emery, F.E.; & Trist, E.J. The causal texture of organizational environments, *Human Relations,* 1965, *18*(1), 21-32.

Gadalla, I.E.; & Cooper, R. Towards an epistemology of management. *Social Science Information,* 1978, *17*(3), 349-383.

Garfinkel, H. *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

Geertz, C. *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Glaser, B.G.; & Strauss, A.L. *The discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago: Aldine, 1967.

Goffman, E. *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday, 1959.

Herriegel, E. *Zen in the art of archery.* New York: Pantheon, 1953.

Husserl, E. *Ideas.* New York: Collier, 1962.

Husserl, E. *Phenomenology and the crisis of philosophy.* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965.

Morgan, G. *Cybernetics and organization theory: Epistemology or technique?* Unpublished manuscript, 1979.

Morgan, G. Paradigms, metaphors, and puzzle solving in organization theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly,* in press.

Ortony, A. *Metaphor and thought.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Pondy, L.R.; & Mitroff, I.I. Open system models of organization. *Research in organizational behavior.* Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1979.

Pugh, D.S.; & Hickson, D.J. *Organizational structure in its context* (Vol. 1). Farnborough, Hants, Engl.: Saxon House, 1976. (a)

Pugh, D.S.; Hickson, D.J. *Organizational structure: Extensions and replications* (Vol. 2). Farnborough, Hants, Engl.: Saxon House, 1976. (b)

Ricoeur, P. The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text. *Social Research,* 1978, *38*, 529-562.

Schon, D. *The displacement of concepts.* London: Tavistock, 1963.

Schutz, A. *Collected papers I: The problem of social reality.* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962.

Silverman, D. *The theory of organizations.* London: Heinemann, 1970.

Skinner, B.F. *Science and human behavior.* New York: Macmillan, 1953.

Skinner, B.F. *Verbal behavior.* New York: Macmillan, 1957.

Torbert, W.R. *Learning from experience.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.

Torbert, W.R. *Creating a community of inquiry.* Wiley Interscience, 1976.

Turner, B.A. *Exploring the industrial subculture.* London: Macmillan, 1971.

Wilden, A. *System and structure: Essays in communication and exchange.* London: Tavistock, 1972.

Winch, P. *The idea of a social science.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.

Gareth Morgan is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior, College of Business Administration, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

Linda Smircich is an Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior, College of Business Administration, Pennsylvania State University, University Park.