Pekka Sulkunen
AGENT, THIEF, GUERILLA AND CRITIC

Action research in local communities, or what is know as the community approach, caters for a wide range of needs. It may involve trials or projects of an experimental nature where the purpose is to provide justification for social-policy reforms at the national level (as was the case with the 'experiment' in the 1960s to open liquor stores in rural Finland and to study the effects). Secondly, action research may be aimed at achieving visible results in terms of education by making use of the interactional energy that has accumulated in social networks. Third, it may be devoted to promoting the local community's own interests when these are being threatened by social or community planning; this was the most typical setting for ordinary 'action research' in the 1970s.

In a recent article Giesbrecht et al. (1991) review and discuss such projects and studies that belong primarily to the second of these three categories.

In all lines of action research and community studies there has long been going on a debate on the relationship between research and its object -- even though the main concern in the debate has still been with ethical issues and reliability. However, it is important to stress that the researcher's relationship not only to the field but also to the project itself varies widely across different settings. Where trials or experiments are conducted, the purpose is to produce general conclusions about policy alternatives. In the field, the researcher is much like a thief: as far as he or she is concerned the most important outcome is whatever he or she manages to take along and possibly hand over later to policymakers. In the second type of research, the researcher is like a CIA agent in a foreign country, implementing the changes commissioned in collaboration with the local people. In the third type the researcher resembles a guerilla fighter (I owe this observation to Thomas Rosenberg) who applies his skills and knowledge to mobilize resistance and to promote local interests.

Each setting has its social mission. It is important to note, however, that intervention, in this context, may refer to two completely different things. One type of intervention is caused by the project itself, with the researcher forming part of it. Another type of intervention is sociological, in which the researcher adopts a critic's view as an outside observer. The objectives are not taken for granted as in the above-quoted article by Giesbrecht et al. (1991): "The primary purpose of these projects should be to reduce the prevalence of alcohol- and drug-related problems and to control the factors that contribute to these problems. In the authors' view, all other goals and objectives are secondary to this purpose." Instead, the sociological intervention calls into question those objectives and the conventions that are adopted and that are set for each other by both the field and the 'project'. In normal situations people are not directed in their activity by one single hierarchy of goals, nor is the same hierarchy shared by all actors. Social workers do not necessarily represent the 'system' vis-à-vis their clients, but on the contrary often work against the system and for the client. We cannot take it for granted that all administrators and officials who are working with the alcohol-abuse problem are seriously devoted to solving that problem. For the most part they are interested in the problem of deprivation, which

(for various reasons) just happens to be best defined as an abuse problem. There are plenty of examples, and the problem is certainly well-known to researchers.

There is no irreconcilable contradiction between sociological intervention and the agent's investigation. On the contrary, a good agent will often start out precisely with an analysis of the field which uses interventionist means. This requires two types of theory: on the one hand a good background theory to explain what is going on in society in general; and on the other hand a theory of how we should analyze and interpret what people say. Nevertheless there still remains the risk that the researchers identify themselves too closely with the 'project', which is what has happened in the article by Giesbrecht et al. (1991). This is basically a result of the increased dependence of North American alcohol studies on 'hard' financing for specific projects. And it is for this same reason that American alcohol studies -- which just ten years ago were still flourishing -- have now become utterly boring and uninspiring. We must take precautions to make sure that the same disease does not spread to Finland, neither in the form of local research projects nor otherwise.

Instead, 'projects' should be devoted to the search for structural factors and other reasons related to our conventional ways of thinking -- such as the division of labor among the authorities, the cultural meanings of alcohol, etc. -- which stand in the way of rational action even when there is consensus about the goals. A project helps to generate movement in the field, and it is easier to study a moving object than a stationary one. The logic of sociological intervention requires that (the field's) voice must precede (the researcher's) view. It should be easy to arrange this in action research at the local level -- as long as the voice of the project, the voice of the field and the view of the researcher do not become mixed up with each other.

Pekka Sulkunen
LIGHT-MINDED VS. SERIOUS-MINDED

Last summer I took part in an international congress in York, England. The congress was about consumption and material culture. We had gathered there in order to make plans for a comparative study and to send a letter to the EC in which we would ask for the money we needed.

The researchers who came to the meeting had studied all sorts of things that had to do with consumer goods, fashion and taste. A sociologist from Vienna wondered why mothers were now buying vacuum cleaners as wedding gifts for their children; a Norwegian ethnologist was concerned about the indoctrination of small children to a consumerist way of life; an English specialist in the sociology of design had prepared a fabulous catalog for an exhibition in which we saw how different social classes decorated their homes. Another British sociologist had found out who holds the remote control (in different social classes, of course). A Swedish ethnologist demonstrated the great symbolic importance of Christmas to the people's home, an American had a long list of things that people collect and of how this has been studied. The Finnish participants surprised no-one by presenting theories of all sorts of things -- at least of the use of alcohol. It was all great fun and quite interesting as well.

So we started working on the research plan. I hadn't given much thought to the title of my own paper that I had brought along; it was something like "Consumption risks and the prospects for controlling them in European society at the turn of the century". I thought that if we wanted funding for our project, then at least it should address a specific problem, an existing or at the very least a perceived risk.

I am still quite pleased with the paper; after all consumption <u>does</u> involve many risks and problems. The health care system is facing a serious crisis with a growing clientele of heavy service consumers; how should we go about prevention, about health education? Can we explain the differences in risk consumption and different trends in development? And yes, it is also a problem that the making of distinctions has become impossible, at least in Finland where the girls down from the factory are learning all about fine wines and where middle-class people easily outbrag the blue-collar laborer when it comes to drinking stories.

There was dead silence in the auditorium when I finished. Finally, someone (I think it was Orvar Löfgren) said: "I suppose it's quite interesting to see consumption as a problem. But we're more interested in the user perspective, in what people convey through consumption. Consumption is primarily fun; the risks are a secondary concern." I must say this really knocked me sideways: Why does the sociological profession define everything it studies in problem terms? After all, not all that we know about people is of interest because it is a problem. The study of language is motivated only partly by the problems involved (mostly in learning); history is interesting even though there is nothing we can do to prevent or cure the past; the study of literature, theology, folklore, music or philosophy hardly prevents or eliminates problems, even though many mistakes of earlier studies are corrected in the process. But it is still interesting, just as the discovery that mums in Vienna are now buying vacuum cleaners.

The sober and sombre approach of problem research may seem very serious in comparison with the work of philatelic scientists, but does this difference

really boil down to seriousness or is it more a matter of narrow, constrained perspectives? The Swedish people's home ideology is a perfectly serious matter, even when it is explored by studying the celebration of Christmas -- or as Löfgren himself said, through the kitchen door. Alcohol is also a serious problem and for many people an extremely heavy one. But we're hardly making things any easier by throwing more stones on the camel's back. Couldn't we take a broader view for a change and look behind the joy and pleasure that must have preceded the problem stage: relationships between men and women, the liberation of children, the glory and defiance of individualization, the pleasure of convivial company, national self-esteem. All of these things are of interest not only to the professionals of defining problems, and Finnish alcohol research has a long history of bringing them to the fore. Adherence to these issues is a client-centred service research, light and serious.

P.S. I almost forgot. The light-minded ethnologists eventually decided on the following title for the research plan: "Consumption, style and taste -- the problem of identity in the new Europe". It has not yet been decided which of the problems -- the light-minded or serious-minded -- the project is going to address and suggest to the EC.