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**CREATING USEFUL RESEARCH WITH  
ORGANIZATIONS: RELATIONSHIP AND  
PROCESS ISSUES**

**CEO PUBLICATION  
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CREATING USEFUL RESEARCH WITH ORGANIZATIONS:  
RELATIONSHIP AND PROCESS ISSUES<sup>1</sup>

by

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Concern about the usefulness of organizational research exists in both the academic and practitioner communities. The reasons for this are many, including the societal need to find better ways to manage and design organizations and the potential for theory-guided practice to contribute to basic knowledge. This paper examines the characteristics of research which generate information that is useful to organizations, while at the same time being useful for theory. This paper is based upon the view that the same research can be useful to both the academic and practitioner communities. The focus is on the relationship between the researchers, members of the research site, and other groups relevant to the research endeavor. The major thesis of the paper is that useful information cannot be produced for organizations, but must be generated with them. This change in the casting of the subject requires fundamental changes in the conduct of organizational research.

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<sup>1</sup>Rather than use sentence-by-sentence references, we would like to refer the reader to a small number of key references which support the thinking presented in this paper. They include: Argyris, Inner Contradictions of Rigorous Research. New York: Academic Press, 1980; Emery, F.E. and Trist, E.L. Towards a Social Ecology. London, Plenum, 1972; Lewin, K. Field Theory in Social Science. New York: Harper and Row, 1951; Mitroff, I.I. The Subjective Side of Science. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1974. and Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. and Jackson, D. Pragmatics of Human Communication; New York: W.W. Norton. 1967.



## WHAT IS USEFUL INFORMATION?

Useful information can be defined as knowledge which serves an actor's purpose, such as contributing to decision making, guiding behaviors, and solving problems. This implies that usability of information can only be determined relative to particular users and their purposes and consequently two key questions must be clarified in addressing the usability issue: (1) Useful for whom? and (2) useful for what?

Useful for Whom? Research endeavors generally have multiple stake-holders--i.e., individuals, groups, and other social aggregates who have a potential interest in the findings and the use to which they are put. Generally, one set of stakeholders resides in the research community and consists of researchers, research institutions, and academic disciplines. Another set comprises the user community and includes a myriad of people and groups who have a potential interest in research results, ranging from individuals and interest groups within organizations to the communities and societies within which organizations are embedded.

Stakeholders judge the relevance of organizational research according to its perceived usefulness in contributing to valued outcomes. Stakeholder values define whether research findings are useful or useless; more implicitly, those values determine the initial choice of subject matter and methodology of research. Stakeholders in the research community typically derive their values from science, and they attempt to maximize those values through research which is scientifically rigorous and contributes to a body of fundamental knowledge. Within those overarching values, however, there is considerable diversity among researchers and disciplines in the

preferred form and content of research and in the manner in which research should be used. Stakeholders in the user community generally derive their values from the social groups to which they belong and are committed, and research is supported and judged useful to the extent that it promotes those groups' values. To the extent that there is a diversity of stakeholder groups within organizations and their task environments, there are likely to be divergent judgements about whether research is useful or useless. Similarly, differences in stakeholder values between the research and user communities can be expected to generate conflict over the utility of research findings.

Useful for What? In organizations, research can be considered useful if it contributes to learning. Generally, research findings promote organizational learning in two major ways: by helping organizational members gain a better understanding of the existing situation or by providing information to guide organizational change. This suggests a distinction between research which is aimed at depicting the current state of organizations and research which is concerned with action. Moreover, action-oriented research can further be differentiated in terms of its relation to the existing situation or status quo. It can essentially accept the status quo and provide information to improve or refine it; alternatively, it can reject the current state and generate knowledge to transform it, and/or more generally, to learn how to change status quos. This latter distinction is of logical levels, where learning how to change states requires a higher level of knowledge than that needed to change from one organizational state to another.

The above discussion suggests that research can contribute to organizational learning in four distinct ways which are illustrated in Figure 1. These contributions of organization research imply different

research content, methodology, and usage patterns, as well as differences in the underlying values for judging the utility of research results. Perhaps most important, the four learning contributions suggest that a wide diversity of research can be useful to organizations depending on the kind of organizational learning desired. Research which is competently conducted in any of the four categories is potentially useful to organizational stakeholders which share the orientation of the research.

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Figure 1 about here  
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#### WHY RESEARCH INFORMATION IS SEEN AS USEFUL

Most organizational researchers can locate their research efforts within one of the four usage patterns shown in Figure 1. Presumably, much of this research is competently executed, at least from a scientific perspective. Why then, is there so much concern with usefulness? Apparently, organizations and concerned researchers do not perceive the products of organizational research as contributing to organizational learning. We propose that research will be useful to the extent that it is accepted by organizational members. To understand the linkage between acceptance and perceived utility, it is helpful to consider commonly-voiced protests about academic research from organizational users. These protests typically embody several themes:

1. The legitimacy, competence and intent of the researcher are questioned. Researchers are described as naive, ignorant of the "real world", biased by their own theories, and unaware of the trouble they cause.

2. The findings are discounted. They are perceived as ambiguous, overly negative and/or irrelevant to the particular organization.



3. The importance of the study is questioned. Researchers are accused of examining unimportant issues, ignoring important variables and discovering the obvious.

4. The presentation of the findings is attacked as boring, full of jargon, poorly written or too technical.

These criticisms clearly suggest that where usefulness is involved, research is judged on more than its technical scientific quality. Users do not look at the scientific adequacy of the research and then decide whether or not to use it.

Acceptance of research information is influenced by attributes of the information itself as well as by attributes of the communication process between researcher and user. Table 1 lists these factors. Five distinct attributes of the information are factors in user acceptance. The salience of the content to the user will determine whether the user is motivated to attend to the research results. Users are usually not aware of what the "hot" research issues are and thus may not find the same research topics interesting as do researchers. Source credibility also has an impact on attention to information. The credibility of academics in the eyes of potential users is determined by the "track record" of the particular researcher and by the level of credibility attributed to academics in general. Credibility of the data and clarity of presentation can affect user willingness to accept research findings. Credibility and clarity must be judged relative to the sophistication of the user and the kind of information which is expected and valued. Sophisticated statistical treatment of quantified data may be compelling to certain audiences; however, other audiences may find it a distraction from the qualitative aspects of a situation. Audiences may judge validity using standards different from those used by the

scientific community. Finally, people are more likely to attend to information that is congruent with their values. The orientation of the research to the status quo and its implied definition of effectiveness may conflict or fit with the values of major stakeholders in ways that directly determine acceptance of the research results.

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Table 1 about here  
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The nature of the communication process between researcher and user can also impact user acceptance of research findings. Information provided by research may be experienced by organizational members as feedback about how the researchers have experienced the organization. Such data feedback can be expected to evoke defensive reactions similar to those evoked by interpersonal feedback unless it is presented skillfully. Organizational members are more likely to attend to research which is solicited, which is sensitive to the way they view their world, which provides ideas for change, and which gives the receiver a sense of choice.

Much organizational research provides users with accounts of what organizations do wrong from an academic perspective, and suggests solutions abstractly with unclear implications for practice. Furthermore, much social science research is embedded in methodology and theory which views man as reactive--as the recipient of social influence processes rather than as the initiator of change. Research is typically designed to preclude intentional subject influence over results; it also tends to utilize theory which views human behavior as deterministic. Organizational researchers often depict organizational behavior as reactive, while judging it against rational, problem-solving standards. The implication is that researchers are able to exercise choice and

solve problems, but subjects are not. This approach to research not only makes man appear foolish, but also leads researchers to view the utilization of "their knowledge" as a social influence challenge. Researchers are then faced with the dilemma: "How can we get organizations to solve problems utilizing the knowledge we have generated?"

In examining the characteristics of organizational research which can affect user acceptance of research information, only the first attribute in Table 1, "salience of the research topic", pertains to the actual content of research. The other characteristics relate to the values underlying the information, and to the relationship between researcher and user. This suggests strongly that the reactivity of the research information itself has a major impact on whether that information is accepted as useful by organizations. So far, considerable attention has been directed at the reactivity of research methods in the social sciences, with relatively little concern for the reactivity of the research results. Because such reactivity is embedded in the relationship between researcher and user, the nature of that relationship impacts both the conduct of organizational research and whether the research findings are subsequently accepted as useful by organizational members.

The remainder of this paper examines the transactional context within which organizational research occurs, particularly the nature of the relationship between researchers and organizational members.

#### ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH AS TEMPORARY INTER-SYSTEM LINKAGE

Producing useful organizational knowledge often involves members of one organization (a university or research center) operating within another organization (a host or subject organization). To the extent that research requires cooperation between two or more organizations,

inter-system linkages must be created and maintained. Within the context of those linkages, the relationship between the researcher, subject and ultimate consumer of knowledge is defined, and the purpose and nature of the research are determined.

Temporary inter-system linkages established for organizational research have two major aspects: a content component which involves the specific research subject, methodology and task, and a relationship aspect which includes the structures and processes which are necessary to create and sustain the social linkage between researcher and user organizations. Traditionally, researchers tend to focus on the content aspect of the linkage, particularly on the requirements for rigorous, publishable research. It is assumed that research which is not publishable cannot be disseminated, and information which is not disseminated is not useful. Concentration on content, however, cannot proceed independently of concern with the relationship part of the inter-system linkage. The very entry of researchers into an organization requires some negotiation, often done implicitly, about how the research will proceed and what is expected from both parties. Unfortunately, the criteria for such relationship decisions are often rather narrow, typically favoring the researcher organization. Research relationships are generally designed to minimally disrupt the host organization and to maximally promote the scientific integrity of the research content. It is not uncommon to find in such situations that many relationship issues are resolved superficially or simply ignored.

Failure to attend to the relationship aspect of organizational research can have negative consequences on both the research content and the subsequent utilization of the research by the user organization. It can result in incomplete exchange of information that may be vital to

the researcher's understanding of the research content, and to an inadequate grasp by the researcher of the interests and needs of the host organization with respect to the study. Insufficient communication with organizational members can result in invalid and incomplete data; organizational members may not provide the researcher with open and complete information in the absence of a relationship based on mutual understanding and trust. Ill-will, unmet expectations, and institutional stereotyping may result from a poor or ambiguous relationship between the researcher and host organization, leading to involuntary alterations in the research content or early termination of the research relationship.

Attention to the relationship aspect of organizational research can benefit both the research and organizational communities by contributing to scientific knowledge and by yielding practical learnings. Organizations are more likely to provide privileged and sensitive data and to commit the time and energy of organizational members if they feel they are receiving benefits in return. This requires a "professional relationship" between the researcher and the host organization, where the researcher provides services in return for privileged access to organizational data. Valid and complete information can be expected to the extent that organizational members trust that the researcher is acting in their interests. When trust is not present, organizational members generally feel that the researcher is mainly interested in publishing results, and by implication exposing organizational short-comings. The anxiety inherent in that kind of relationship can be expected to conflict with the researcher's need to collect valid data.

Maintaining and nurturing the relationship part of research linkages is difficult for several reasons. First, the temporary nature

of the inter-system leads both parties to try to minimize the time spent on the difficult process of establishing trust, common goals, and commitment. Second, research relationships generally include diverse values and interests. The institutional need of the research community to contribute to the larger, scientific body of knowledge may conflict with the need of the organization to obtain knowledge that can be put to immediate use. The career needs of the researcher who is concerned with professional advancement, and of the user who is concerned with organizational advancement often conflict not only with each other, but also with the maximization of output of the temporary research system. These political issues tend to be smoothed over or ignored in organizational research. A third reason that inter-system linkages are difficult to maintain is that both researchers and organizational members tend to focus on the research content as the implicit "figure" in their linkage with research relationship serving as the "ground". There is little precedent for reversing that perception and viewing the relationship aspect of organizational research as the key variable even though it contributes heavily to research failures. The long-term maintenance of the inter-organizational relationship may require as much or more time and attention than the research content of the linkage. Accepting this constitutes a significant redefinition of the researcher's tasks.

In summary, many of the critiques of organizational research result from the historical tendencies of researchers and users to give insufficient attention to the inter-system context of their work. The remainder of this paper examines some key content and relationship issues which are critical to the establishment of effective inter-system linkages for organizational research.

Content Issues. Research content concerns the substantive and purposive component of the inter-system linkage--i.e., its primary task or mission. Two questions asked earlier in the paper concern the two major dimensions of research content: For whom? and For what? The answers to these questions affect directly they type of researcher and user relationship needed for providing useful knowledge, and must be dealt with early in the research process.

For whom? Despite the existence of multiple stakeholders in any research endeavor, most research is conducted to satisfy limited interests. Within the research community, basic researchers have generally pursued research to meet their own scientific needs, while applied researchers have conducted research to meet the needs of client organizations. Some of that applied research has included multiple stakeholders, with the post World War II action research projects and the government-sponsored social science research of the 1960's being prime examples. In general, as more stakeholders become acknowledged and involved in organizational research, these efforts become more complex and consequently have greater need for supporting structures and processes to manage the relationship among stockholders. The reasons for this are multiple and include the fact that different stakeholders often vary in their commitment to the research, the uses they wish to make of it, and even the topics they wish to cover. Thus a successful multiple stakeholder research project must build a system which resolves conflicts among the stakeholders.

For what? It was suggested earlier that research varies in its orientation toward action, and toward the status quo and four research orientations were illustrated in Figure 1. Research designed to depict the status quo can often be conducted within a relatively short time

frame and with relatively low psychological intensity in the relationship between the researcher and subject. However, explanation-oriented research which involves causal time-series analyses and/or investigates dynamic processes and stage theories generally requires a long time commitment, although the level of psychological intensity remains low because behavioral change is not implied.

Research efforts designed to help refine the status quo imply changes in behavior. Change always involves temporal commitment between researcher and user, and introduces psychological intensity because one party is suggesting needed behavior change for the other.

Research concerned with transforming organizational states into new forms based on different assumptions and guiding principles entails a sharp escalation in both time and intensity of researcher and user linkages, and is a much more complex type of research to carry out. Here, organizations are considering novel forms, testing innovative approaches, and trying out different assumptions, while researchers are participating in the exploration of uncharted waters. The risk of failure and the importance of the stakes are magnified for both parties.

Finally, organizational research aimed at how an organization can learn to transform itself implies fundamental changes not only in organizational form and processes, but also in the definition of an organization. Researcher and organizational members are together attempting to transcend thinking about organizational forms as discrete entities, and are building the capacity for self-directed evolution of form and function. This type of research is rarely done, probably because extreme time and intensity are involved in such research efforts. The roles of researcher and of organizational member become blurred, and the inter-system linkage reaches further into the core



activities of the organization and involves a more varied set of researcher activities.

In summary, as research proceeds from a concern with explanation of the status quo to learning how to transform organizational systems, both temporal commitment and psychological intensity between researcher and user increase.

Relationship Issues. Research content determines the level of complexity, temporal commitment, and psychological intensity of the inter-system linkages needed for organizational research. Those dimensions in turn place certain demands on the relationship aspect of the linkage--i.e., the structures and processes required to maintain the social linkage between researcher and user organizations. We can identify particular relationship issues by simultaneously examining the answers to our content questions: For whom? and For what? Diagram A depicts these two continua as intersecting axes. The vertical axis represents "for whom" and varies from a single to multiple stakeholders; complexity of linkage increases as research includes greater numbers of stakeholders. The horizontal axis signifies "for what" and varies from explanation of organizations to changing them; temporal commitment and psychological intensity increase as research becomes more change oriented.

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Insert Diagram A about here  
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The upper left quadrant in Diagram A represents research for a single stakeholder which is intended to explain the organizational status quo. Much basic research and such applied research as opinion surveys and market surveys are intended to meet the needs of one party, either the researcher or the organization. Here, research findings are

likely to be rejected because of the nature of the information, including low salience, lack of credibility and lack of clarity of presentation. Organizations are liable to discount basic research for these reasons, and researchers are likely to discount applied research for the same reasons. A solution to these problems is to involve multiple stakeholders in the research process, in an effort to create research findings which both contribute to scientific knowledge and are used by organizations for learning. Much government-funded research of the 1960's tried to stimulate research which meets the needs of multiple stakeholders as shown in the lower left quadrant.

The upper right quadrant is action-oriented research performed for a single stakeholder. Developmental and evaluation research and much of what passes for action research fall into this quadrant. The beneficiary may be the organization, as in the case of research/consulting, or the researcher. Research in this quadrant is often rejected by organizations for reasons which involve the feedback variables presented in the paper. Organizational members are likely to discount developmental and evaluation research if they have not solicited the information and/or do not find it helpful in addressing their problems. In order to gain acceptance of research findings, it is necessary to move toward a multiple stakeholder research model, where various interested parties have a role in determining the nature of the research. This shift would take us into the lower right quadrant, where action-oriented research is fully participative, involving multiple stakeholders.

In examining Diagram A, a clearer distinction can be made about the differential usefulness of different types of organizational research. Research which lies in the top half of Diagram A might be explained as research "for" organizations; however, there is a high probability that

the findings will be rejected by organizational members because they have not participated in the definition of the research. The bottom half of the table represents research "with" organizations. In this case, both organizational and researcher interests are addressed, and both are likely to see the research as useful.

Further, The left side of Diagram A illustrates research concerning the organizational status quo. Because there is no explicit concern with action, organizations will likely see the findings as irrelevant or as not suggesting how things could be done differently. User complaints that a study has told them what they already know exemplify this failure to transcend the status quo.

The implication of this analysis is that if there is a serious concern that the research be useful for both practice and theory, research will gravitate to the lower right quadrant of Diagram A. This research allows multiple stakeholders to influence the content and conduct of the research. It is also concerned with action, and is likely to contribute understanding of causation. Knowledge of casual relationships is of interest to both practitioners who hope to make their organizations more effective, and to researchers who wish to make their theories more accurate.

In the lower right quadrant, the complexity, commitment, and psychological intensity of researcher and user linkages are high, and it is necessary to design relationship structures and processes to manage those characteristics. Specifically, action-oriented research involving multiple stakeholders requires shared control and decision making among the parties. This need for jointly determined research can better be understood in contrast to the more traditional researcher-controlled organizational inquiry.

The behavioral sciences have generally modeled the physical sciences in the stress of tightly-controlled research. The researcher designs the study to reduce error, insure validity, and enhance the power of the measurement devices to detect variance and relationships. The natural events and idiosyncratic social definitions within the research site are important to the researcher because they have the potential to interfere with the design and measurement system. Consequently, subjects are typically kept unaware of the intent and underlying hypotheses of the study in order to minimize response biases.

Researcher-defined research is generally useful from the researcher's viewpoint, assuming that subject compliance can be secured. Usefulness to organizations, however, depends on the salience of the research topic, the practical significance of the theoretical framework within which the research is conducted and the variables are defined, and the quality of data collected. The researcher has the responsibility to translate and interpret the findings using language that conveys meaning within the organizational setting.

We propose that researcher-controlled inquiry may be an impractical model for organizational research both because of the poor quality of data collected when such a framework is used and because organizations will be increasingly reluctant to cooperate with such researchers. If researchers are seriously concerned about the interests of multiple stakeholders, an alternative approach is required involving the joint definition and control of research by all parties involved. Issues must be partially field-determined, with the social scientist reinterpreting field events, concerns, and definitions into a theoretical framework, taking care to capture the richness and the variety of meanings in the field. When this is done, the issues will be of high salience to the

practitioner because organizational members will have a key role in their definition. Moreover, the research findings will have high relevance to researchers because the richness and quality of data will contribute to a more realistic and practical body of knowledge. Clearly, considerable time and attention are needed to establish a jointly-controlled relationship and to define and guide the study.

#### CONCLUSION

The case has been made that if organizational research is to be useful, researchers and organizational members must become partners in the research effort. Such research should be action-oriented, jointly controlled, and involve relevant stakeholders from both researcher and user communities. Attention must be directed at the transactional context of the research. This will require explicit concern both for the subject matter and methodology of the research content, and for the structures and processes which are needed to create and sustain the social relationship between researcher and user organizations. Management of such a research system linkages requires multiple roles. The scientific expertise of the researcher is no longer sufficient, but must be supplemented with skills for managing the linkage, coordinating the research, and working out the political and exchange aspects of the research relationship.

The institutions which can conduct such research must be sanctioned at a level high enough to resolve the conflicting interests of the divergent parties and to enlist the services of diverse participants. This scenario implies considerable alteration in the prevalent concept of organizational research and in the way it is conducted. It is beyond the scope of this paper to described in any detail what this type of research system looks like. Indeed, there is probably no one best way

to create it. Research is needed on the effectiveness of different approaches to creating these inter-system linkages. Hopefully, this paper makes the direction of the change toward useful research clearer, and the path easier to travel.

USEFUL FOR WHAT?

Stance vis-a-vis  
The status quo

Action Orientation

Accept

Explaining and Understanding the Status Quo

Depiction

Improving and Refining the Status Quo

Reject

Transforming the Status Quo Action

Action

Learning to Transform the Status Quo

Figure 1

## Factors Affecting the Acceptance of Information

- A. Attributes of the information itself
  - 1. Salience of Subject to User
  - 2. Credibility of Source
  - 3. Credibility of Data (Perceived Validity)
  - 4. Clarity of Presentation
  - 5. Value Congruence
  
- B. Attributes of the feedback process
  - 6. Solicited
  - 7. Responsive to Perspective of Users
  - 8. Contains Ideas for How to Change
  - 9. Provides Choce



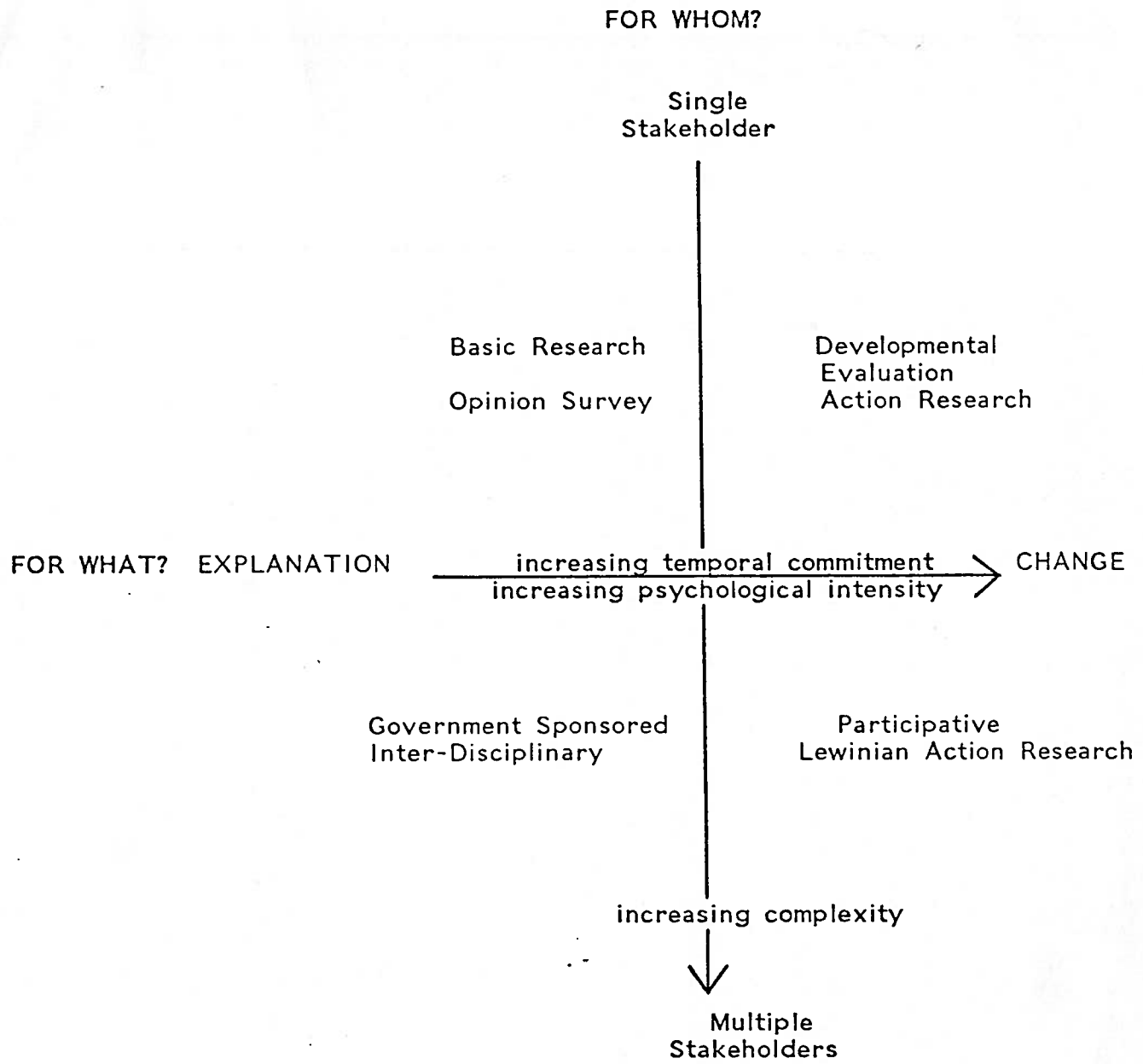


DIAGRAM A