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## The Relevance of Qualitative Research

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MARTYN HAMMERSLEY

**ABSTRACT** *This paper addresses the relevance of qualitative inquiry to policymaking and practice; against the background of recent attacks on educational research generally, and on qualitative work in particular. It outlines the contribution of the latter, referring to some examples of this kind of work over the past couple of decades. The discussion is organised around the five capacities ascribed to symbolic interactionist/phenomenological research by David Hargreaves in an article published in 1978: 'appreciative', 'designatory', 'reflective', 'immunological', and 'corrective'. It is argued that today there is more need than ever for research serving these functions.*

Recent attacks on educational research have focused, to a large extent, on its alleged failure to serve policymaking and practice effectively (see Hargreaves, 1996 and Hillage *et al.*, 1998). For example, much of the weight of David Hargreaves's critique in his Teacher Training Agency lecture fell upon what he sees as the inability of most educational research to contribute to the work of teachers in the classroom. He argues that many teachers see this work as irrelevant, and that they are right to do so. While he believes that research is an essential basis for teacher professionalism, he regards a great deal of educational research in Britain today as worthless from this point of view [1].

It is significant in this context that a very substantial proportion of recent British research on education is qualitative in character. And qualitative work was picked out for particular criticism in another influential critique of the late 1990s, that by Tooley (Tooley, 1998). Furthermore, as presented in his 1996 lecture, Hargreaves's view of the contribution that educational research should make to practice prioritises experimental method. This is made clear by his appeal to the model of medical research where, in the context of evidence-based clinical practice, the randomised controlled trial is the gold standard (Hargreaves 1996; see also Oakley 2000).

Even more fundamentally, the conception of the relationship between research and practice built into Hargreaves's critique is at odds with many of the ideas about the nature of the social world and how it can be understood which lie behind a qualitative approach. He sees the task as being to demonstrate which of various pedagogical techniques is the most effective; a view which is close to what has come to be labelled the 'engineering model' (Janowitz, 1972; see also Weiss, 1977 and 1980). Janowitz saw this model as inappropriate for social research, arguing instead for what he calls the 'enlightenment model'. This treats research as providing resources that practitioners can use to make sense both of the situations they face and of their own behaviour, rather than telling them what it is best to do. Thus, where the engineering model implies that research findings have inherent and determinate practical implications, or

should have, the enlightenment model treats the effects of research on practice as rather more uncertain and unpredictable, and as by no means necessarily immediate; though this does not imply that they will be negligible [2].

In many ways this enlightenment model matches closely the assumptions about the nature of social life typically adopted by qualitative researchers. They have generally been doubtful about the possibility of discovering psychological or sociological laws, in the sense of deterministic statements about the necessary and sufficient conditions for the occurrence of some event; which is what the engineering model seems to presuppose. They have also pointed to problems with the kind of mechanical metaphor that is implicit in the engineering model, as a way of understanding how different social institutions relate to one another. Instead, they have stressed the diverse orientations of people involved in social activities; the way in which people actively make sense of their surroundings, and how this shapes what they do; the unintended and often unforeseen consequences of actions; and the resulting contingency of most courses of events. Recent emphasis on the narrative character of social life is, in some ways, simply the most recent version of this [3]. Once we apply this view of social life back to research and its relationship to policymaking and practice, it no longer seems surprising that educational inquiry has not generally produced findings which could be, or have been, applied directly and successfully to bring about immediate improvements. At best, such determinate effects would depend on a fortuitous combination of circumstances that are unlikely ever to be brought under anyone's control, least of all researchers'.

The image portrayed by the engineering model—of researchers showing practitioners what it would be best to do—is one that sometimes appeals to both parties; albeit for different reasons. But the problem is not just that it is at odds with the nature of human social life; at least as envisaged by much qualitative, and some quantitative, research. It is also systematically misleading, in giving the impression that practical prescriptions can be derived solely from factual research findings. This has the effect of obscuring the value assumptions that are always involved in the use of research (see Foster *et al.*, 2000).

Against this background, it is interesting to note that, over a long career, much of David Hargreaves's own work has been qualitative in character. His first book, *Social Relations in a Secondary School*, while using some quantitative data, was among the earliest moves in Britain to apply anthropological method to the study of schools (Hargreaves, 1967; see also Frankenberg, 1982; Lacey, 1966, 1970; Lambart, 1976, 1982 and 1997). Moreover, after producing that book he shifted towards a symbolic interactionist/phenomenological position; and, in an article published in 1978, discussed the role which work of this kind could play in relation to practice (Hargreaves, 1978). What he puts forward there is very much in the mould of the enlightenment, rather than of the engineering, model. Furthermore, the five different contributions he sees this type of research making to educational theory and practice provide a useful framework for looking at the value of the considerable body of qualitative work produced since that time [4]. Hargreaves outlines appreciative, designatory, reflective, immunological, and corrective capacities; and I will discuss each of these in turn, providing brief illustrations.

### (1) THE APPRECIATIVE CAPACITY

First of all, Hargreaves draws attention to what he calls the 'appreciative' function of qualitative research. This is its ability to understand and represent points of view which

are often obscured or neglected. Thus, he suggests that such research can display the rationality of pupil conduct to teachers and others. He continues: 'It can also, though this has been done too rarely (a political bias), display the nature, meaning and existential rationality of teacher conduct to pupils' (Hargreaves, 1978, p. 19). We might add that, especially today, there is also value in displaying the rationality of teachers' actions to governors, parents, policymakers, and politicians generally.

The notion of appreciation used here is derived from David Matza's book *Becoming Deviant* (Matza, 1969). It requires that people's behaviour be understood as making sense within the context in which it occurs, where that context includes how they see themselves and their environment. Matza contrasts appreciation with correctionalism, an approach to research that is concerned with what is wrong with the phenomenon being studied, and how this can be remedied or improved. He points out that much work in criminology had failed to grasp the nature of social deviance because it was so closely tied to the perspectives of law enforcement officials. Matza comments: 'A basic difficulty with the correctional perspective is that it systematically interferes with the capacity to empathise and thus comprehend the subject of inquiry' (Matza, 1969, p. 15). One reason for this is that it fails to separate the task of description and explanation from that of moral and political judgement.

Much British qualitative work in education, over the past 30 years, has been concerned with documenting pupils' perspectives, and especially the perspectives of those who are labelled deviant or treated as of low status. Moreover, in doing this, the aim has been to capture the 'logic' of their views rather than seeing them through the blinkers of official educational assumptions. Hargreaves himself made one of the first contributions to this work in *Social Relations in a Secondary School* (Hargreaves, 1967, ch. 6; see also Werthman, 1963; Willis, 1977; Hammersley & Woods, 1984). This commitment to taking children's perspectives seriously has recently been extended more widely (see James & Prout, 1997); and some have suggested that work of this kind can provide an important guide for policymaking in education (see Pollard & Filer, 1999).

Qualitative researchers have also given much attention to teachers' perspectives and strategies (see, for example, Hammersley, 1977; Woods, 1979 and 1980; and Hargreaves & Woods, 1984). In recent years, the focus of such work has often been on the experience of teachers who are on the receiving end of successive waves of education reform. From the correctional perspective of politicians, policymakers and some of the media—who are preoccupied with 'incompetence', 'mediocrity', etc.—much of what this research reveals may appear as no more than 'resistance to change', 'conservatism', or 'a culture of excuses'. However, qualitative work in this area has involved careful attempts to identify the variety of responses to reform, and to understand why these have arisen; not least, to document how teachers have coped with the instability caused by the simultaneous or sequential impact of multiple reforms (see, for instance, Woods *et al.*, 1997; Marshall & Ball, 1999). Here, again, the aim of qualitative work has been to understand, rather than to judge; and, as part of this, to avoid the distortion which comes from a correctionalist perspective[5].

Simply because it seeks to appreciate the attitudes of the many teachers who are at best ambivalent about recent reforms, this research may be seen by politicians, policymakers and the media as of no value; or even as of negative value—as taking sides with teachers against 'modernisation'. Yet, while partisanship is undoubtedly a danger in appreciative research, it is not automatically built into it. There is an important distinction between empathy and sympathy; and Matza and others have warned against

the dangers of romanticism or sentimentalism (Matza, 1969, pp. 16–17; see also Becker, 1967 and Polsky, 1967). By contrast, partisanship *is* built into correctionalism, though this often remains invisible to correctionalists, since they identify their own viewpoint with the public good. Yet, even for those committed to current education reforms, there are sound reasons for not simply dismissing teachers' reactions to these, but instead reflecting on what can be learned from those reactions. Change is unlikely to be successful without such learning; and qualitative research can provide the material which is necessary for this.

## (2) THE DESIGNATORY CAPACITY

In discussing the work of the political thinker Hannah Arendt, Margaret Canovan makes the following remarks: 'One of the functions of philosophers, as of poets, is to articulate experience [...], to enable people to think consciously what they have been only half aware of, to give them names by which to remember experiences that would otherwise vanish without trace'. And she argues that Arendt's contribution to political theory was of this kind: 'not the least important aspect of [her work] is that it provides alternatives to the existing categories in terms of which we experience the world' (Canovan, 1974, p. 7). Social scientists would insist that this is a function that is by no means limited to poets and philosophers. Indeed, finding the most illuminating language with which to describe people's experiences and actions often requires the kind of close investigation of what they say and do that is characteristic of qualitative research; and this is something which Hargreaves emphasises under the heading of the designatory capacity.

He points out how much of the knowledge on the basis of which practitioners work is tacit: it is below their level of consciousness. This is particularly true of occupations like teaching, which operate in settings that have high levels of multidimensionality, immediacy, and unpredictability (Jackson, 1968; Doyle, 1977). Hargreaves argues that by providing a language which conceptualises the tacit knowledge on which teachers rely, qualitative researchers can aid the development of professional knowledge and skills (see also Berlak & Berlak, 1981). Moreover, his own work, with Hester and Mellor, on the ways in which teachers build up typifications of pupils, is a good illustration of what this involves (Hargreaves *et al.*, 1975). More recent work designed to serve this designatory capacity includes Brown and MacIntyre's investigation of teachers' 'professional craft knowledge' (Brown & MacIntyre, 1993; see also Cooper & MacIntyre, 1996). Here the aim was to explicate the nature of good teaching, as identified by both pupils and teachers. Very often, the designations produced are informal ones that individual teachers use, as for example with one teacher's reference to 'the look' and 'the word' as means of maintaining classroom order and pupil attention (Brown & MacIntyre, 1993, p. 42).

## (3) THE REFLECTIVE CAPACITY

The idea behind the reflective capacity of qualitative research is that it can hold a mirror up to the world, and even to our own behaviour. This was one of the main rationales advanced for applying an anthropological perspective to education in the USA in the 1960s and 70s (see Wolcott, 1982). Wolcott describes the aim of the anthropologists involved in this project as to provide a 'mirror for educators' (a notion derived from Kluckhohn's book *Mirror for Man*). Wolcott comments: 'our intent was to help

educators look at themselves in their “infinite variety”, to turn their attention to what *actually* goes on in schools rather than to be so singularly preoccupied with what *ought* to go on in them. [...] If there was a conscious anthropological tilt (mirrors do, after all, have to be placed or held) it was to catch more of the educational context, to help educators see themselves in “holistic” perspective’ (Wolcott, 1982, p. 71).

While there have been important differences between this anthropological work and qualitative research on education in Britain (see Atkinson & Delamont, 1980 and Atkinson *et al.*, 1993), the concern with describing and explaining what actually goes on in schools and classrooms, in detail, has been a shared commitment. By documenting this, rather than what is *thought* to be or what *ought* to be going on, qualitative work can play an important role in highlighting problems that need to be tackled. Equally important, though, it may show that problems have a different character from what is generally assumed. For example, work on attempts to reduce gender differentiation within the school curriculum has shown that simply making subjects previously reserved for one sex available to all, or even making them a requirement, will not necessarily reduce gender differentiation (see, for example, Measor, 1983 and 1999). This research has underlined the complexity and diversity of pupils’ attitudes and behaviour: that they have other concerns besides education, and that they may use the school curriculum as a resource in dealing with these.

While revealing the complexity of what goes on in the education system may not always be welcomed—and indeed may not always be fruitful in practical terms—its general effect can be salutary. This leads indirectly to the next of Hargreaves’s capacities.

#### (4) THE IMMUNOLOGICAL CAPACITY

In discussing this fourth function of qualitative research, Hargreaves begins: ‘Social scientists are often outspoken in describing social ills and in providing prescriptions about how the world might be a better place if only the practical implications of their analyses were implemented. Yet many of these policies fail and nowhere is this more evident than in education, where innovations frequently fail quite disastrously’ (Hargreaves, 1978, p. 20). He sees the remedy for this as lying in qualitative research, arguing that the reason for the failure of many reforms is that we have ‘so little knowledge about the nature of the everyday world of teachers, pupils and schools’ (Hargreaves, 1978, p. 20). The implication seems to be that *with* such knowledge reforms could be planned in a way that would ensure they were effective.

This may be so; but it is significant that here, as in his 1996 lecture, Hargreaves employs a medical analogy. He writes: ‘our attempted grafts (and various forms of major or minor surgery) merely arouse the “antibodies” of the host which undermine our attempts to play doctor to an educational patient’. And he argues that qualitative studies can ‘help to provide us with the necessary immunological understandings; for only when we understand the precise nature of the host body can we design our innovatory grafts with any confidence that they will prove to be acceptable’ (Hargreaves, 1978, p. 20). Here, the idea seems to be that where some part of the body educational is not working properly, qualitative research can provide knowledge which will indicate what is necessary to make treatment effective, despite resistance.

In my view, this medical analogy is potentially misleading. For one thing, it implies that whether the education system, or some part of it, is working properly is a largely uncontentious matter. Yet this is rarely the case; not least because there are diverse conceptions of what counts as education. We need to remember that the body’s

immune system is designed to protect it from infections, toxins etc. Suppressing that system in order to facilitate organ transplantation may be widely (though not universally) accepted as legitimate, but policies designed to suppress resistance to education reforms are much more questionable.

The danger of this medical analogy can be illustrated by reference to a more recent article, where Hargreaves refers to 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' staff subcultures in schools. He comments: 'Healthy subcultures among a school staff do not challenge the school leaders' right to manage nor the right of other colleagues to take a different point of view. Resistance groups [that is, 'unhealthy' staff subcultures] are *counter-cultures*, who are actively subversive of management and intolerant of differences between subcultures. Such a group saps the morale and commitment of the supporters of change, and exasperates the leader(s).' He continues: 'The most effective method of countering the resistance group is simply stated: get rid of them or at least the most active and vocal ones' (Hargreaves, 1999c, p. 60). Hargreaves recognises that such an argument is controversial; and he is surely right that heads may sometimes have to take drastic action. But to formulate the issue in medical terms obscures the value judgements involved, and the scope for reasonable disagreement about what is best for the children in a school, implying that this can be determined on the basis of management expertise[6]. Like the engineering model, the organismic metaphor misleadingly presents society and its institutions as constituting coherent wholes in which all the parts function to serve one another, or ought to do so: and, as a result, judgements about what is right and wrong, and what needs to be done, are presented as technical matters.

However, the immunological capacity of qualitative research can also be interpreted in a rather different way, as relating to the potential for research to immunise us against grandiose schemes of innovation, against raising expectations or setting targets too high; indeed against the 'idolatry of the new' more generally. Some of the work done on the impact of recent education reform at the level of the school and classroom may serve this function. For example, research investigating the impact on teachers of OFSTED inspections, and indeed of the whole recent reform process, has shown that many have been left demoralised (Woods *et al.*, 1997; Jeffrey & Woods, 1998), and a large number have exited the profession, some with stress-related illnesses (Troman, 2000, Troman & Woods, 2000 and forthcoming). Even if one could be confident that the new accountability system was fully accurate, and there seems little reason for such confidence, these effects would be disturbing. They constitute some of the costs of attempts at reform; costs which are easily overlooked in the present climate of 'can do' politics.

Interpreted in this way, the immunological capacity of qualitative research shares something in common with the liberal caution of Glazer (Glazer, 1988), and perhaps even with the anti-rationalism of Oakeshott (Oakeshott, 1962). These authors point to the limits on the effectiveness of state intervention in society, and indeed on all social planning. Moreover, the grounds for their argument are closely related to the view of society that I suggested earlier was implicit in much of the thinking that underlies a qualitative approach.

One formulation of this is neatly captured in the title of an article by Norton Long: 'The local community as an ecology of games' (Long, 1958). Long's metaphor runs counter to two others which have tended to dominate the study of communities. The first treats these as rational collectivities, operating in such a way as to fulfil various functions, and controlling the behaviour of their members to achieve this; an idea that is close in character to the organismic metaphor employed by Hargreaves. The other view treats a community as a collection of individuals or groups each engaged in pursuit

of their distinctive interests, and involved in unremitting conflict with one another. Long's alternative perspective was intended to take account of the diverse orientations to be found among members of a community, but also to recognise the multiple but interconnected patterns of activity (or 'games') in which they were engaged, and how these shape their behaviour. Furthermore, the notion of ecology pointed to the range of different sorts of relation that could operate among members of a community: from conflict, itself usually structured, through competition of various kinds, to cooperation, witting and unwitting. Firestone has applied this metaphor to education policy-making and implementation (Firestone 1989); and it may well help us to explain the complex trajectories that many education policies follow, and the unpredictable outcomes sometimes resulting from them (see Bowe *et al.*, 1992).

##### (5) THE CORRECTIVE CAPACITY

At face value, the final function of qualitative work that Hargreaves identifies seems at odds with the first one. I noted that Matza had contrasted the commitment to appreciation with correctionalism: doing research so as to remedy or improve the world. However, what Hargreaves means by the 'corrective capacity' of qualitative research is rather different: it is correction of macro-theoretical perspectives, rather than of the world. And this function was closely related to the main point of his article: criticism of the way in which the sociology of education at that time seemed to be turning away from an ethnographic, micro-sociological approach and towards an exclusive preoccupation with Marxist analyses of social reproduction.

It might seem that this final capacity is of less relevance today; given that Marxism is no longer the force it once was, even in intellectual circles. But this would be a mistake. The main criticism that Hargreaves made of macro-theory in the 1970s was that it takes too much for granted and neglects the complexity of the world. Much the same could be said today, not just about contemporary 'critical' social theory but also about the ideas that have underpinned the recurrent education reform of the past couple of decades in Britain. This too has been founded on grand theories; albeit not Marxist, and not usually made fully explicit. One important theoretical strand here, one which continues to be influential, is the belief that the market is the most effective resource allocation mechanism; and that, even where it cannot be applied in pure form, regulatory regimes must be established that mimic it. In this context, it is worth pointing out that the superiority of the market is by no means a well-established finding of empirical research. Rather, it is a theoretical assumption of neo-classical economics which has been valorised; and one that has frequently been criticised as a misleading abstraction from the reality of economic life, in that it fails to take account of the full range of motives that shape human behaviour and the way these are structured by institutional contexts [7]. As a result, it may not provide a fully adequate basis even for understanding how markets actually operate, and the diverse forms they can take; and it is very unlikely fully to capture the complex relationships between teachers and parents, or those among schools.

So, given the theoretical underpinnings of recent education reform, there is still a role for the corrective capacity of qualitative inquiry. For instance, there has been a considerable amount of research over the past decade exploring the extent to which the marketisation of education has been achieved, and its effects (see, for instance, Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995 and Woods *et al.*, 1998). This has raised a whole range of questions about the policy. Of course, such work is unlikely to convince those who are blindly



committed to the underlying theory, any more than Hargreaves's critique in the 1970s convinced Marxists. Yet, for those who are willing to stand back from their theories and consider why policies based on them have not had the effects intended, and have had others that were not anticipated, qualitative work can clarify the meaning and validity of the concepts and assumptions built into those theories. In the case of marketisation, it might lead us to ask questions about the similarities and differences between state-funded and privately funded enterprises, and even about the nature of 'economic organisation' and the role of the discipline of economics in public policymaking. That the economic theory of the market has become part of conventional wisdom is all the more reason for research to be done which is designed to look carefully at the nature and effects of 'economic' reforms within the education system and elsewhere. And qualitative inquiry has made, and can continue to make, an important contribution to this.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have used an early article by David Hargreaves—the most formidable recent critic of the irrelevance of much current educational research—to show the ways in which qualitative work *can* be relevant to policymaking and practice. As I have argued elsewhere, his recent criticisms are based on an excessively narrow view of how research may relate to practice (Hammersley, 1997a; see also Hargreaves, 1997 and Hammersley, 1997b). By contrast with this, his early article takes a wider view. It draws on the fundamental insights of interactionism and phenomenology; notably, that the social world is complex and processual in character, so that there is a high level of contingency inherent in any course of action. I have argued that qualitative work is attuned to this, and thereby provides a constant reminder that other people's views and activities are not exhausted, even if aspects of them are captured, by the kind of stereotypes that today's 'modernising' politicians and managers employ. It shows, for instance, that viewing people as though they were simply for or against 'change'—as innovators or dinosaurs—is to miss a great deal. Research on responses to education reform has revealed a much more complex range of adaptations, and has highlighted the ambivalence that characterises many of these. Qualitative research can also be of value through inventing ways of talking about the tacit knowledge that is involved in a complex and difficult activity like teaching, and by showing that what we *think* is happening is not always what is *actually* happening (or is not *all* that is happening). Indeed, in line with notions of immunisation against, and correction of, speculative assumptions, qualitative work in particular, and educational research in general, can remind politicians and policymakers that innovation may have unintended and unforeseen consequences; that what is an improvement is not always a matter of consensus (that there are always diverse perspectives); and that problems often cannot be solved by sheer act of will, by putting in more effort, or through trying to make practices 'transparent'.

In my view, the 'new public management' needs to be closely scrutinised by researchers, rather than their becoming its servant; yet the latter is what the engineering model encourages—at least in the present political climate. Michael Power has argued that the pressure for external audit typically leads to the setting up of internal auditing systems which then become the focus of external attention, rather than what is actually happening 'on the ground' (Power, 1997). Meanwhile, the work of practitioners becomes increasingly geared to 'display', to giving the right impression. Qualitative

work shows how people set up fronts in order to protect themselves from the unwelcome attentions of superiors or other authorities, that rules and policies always have to be interpreted if they are to be implemented, and that in the 'audit society' *how* they are implemented will increasingly be geared to giving the right impression, rather than doing the job in what is judged the best way possible; much as industrial production was structured by the command economies of Eastern Europe (Nove, 1969). It also highlights what is today one of the most important educational issues: the question of whether what is currently taking place is the de-professionalisation of teachers or the creation of a new form of professionalism (see Hargreaves, 1994). And some useful qualitative work has been done on this issue (see Troman, 1996 and 2000; Jeffrey, 1999). Equally important, through adopting an appreciative approach, it can raise questions regarding the assumptions made by policymakers about the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of pupils and parents, those for whom they often claim to speak.

So, Hargreaves's analysis of the capacities of qualitative research is as relevant today as it was when it was published, more than 20 years ago. While his own views seem to have changed in some important respects, what he wrote then has been largely confirmed by subsequent qualitative work; and it provides a basis for affirming the value of that work at a time when it is under attack.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to David Hargreaves for his response to an earlier draft of this chapter. He will still not agree with much of what I say. Thanks also go to Peter Woods and an anonymous referee for comments on the paper.

#### NOTES

- [1] For more recent developments in Hargreaves's views about educational research and its relationship to policymaking and practice, see Hargreaves, 1999a and 1999b.
- [2] There are different interpretations of the enlightenment model, not all of which conform to the outline presented here: see Hammersley, 1999a. It is worth noting that there is a tension within Hargreaves's position between engineering and enlightenment tendencies (see Hammersley, 1997a and b), and this has been marked by his recent terminological shift from 'evidence-based' to 'evidence-informed' practice (Hargreaves 1999a, p. 246).
- [3] And this has been taken up by some quantitative researchers, who have come to recognise that variable analysis can distort our understanding of the social world. See, for example, Abbott, 1992.
- [4] Woods (1996, pp. 73–4) has added four further capacities to Hargreaves's list, but I will not consider these here. While Hargreaves's article is focused on symbolic interactionist/phenomenological research, there is no serious distortion involved in applying his ideas to what is now referred to as qualitative inquiry; even though the character of this has changed somewhat in the intervening period. On the changes that have taken place, see Hammersley, 1999b.
- [5] Some qualitative work has not escaped the effects of correctionalism, especially that influenced by 'critical' approaches. See Hammersley, 1998 and 2000, ch. 5.

- [6] I am not denying the relevance of management expertise, only that it is sufficient basis for such judgements.
- [7] For discussion of the notion of economic rationality, see Tisdell, 1976 and Hollis & Nell, 1975.

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