

## BRIEF NOTES ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ACTION RESEARCH

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In S. Becker & A. Bryman (Eds.)(2004), *Understanding Research Methods for Social Policy and Practice*. London: The Polity Press.

Action research has a long history, going back to social scientists' attempts to help solve practical problems in wartime situations in both Europe and America. While many trace its origins to the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s to design social experiments in natural settings, and who is credited with the phrase "Nothing is as practical as a good theory", action research practice draws on a wide field of influence, including critical thinking (Kemmis, 2001), liberationist thought (Freire, 1970), pragmatism (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) and feminism (Maguire, 2001; Stanley & Wise, 1983). While many of the original forms of action research espoused participation, power was often held tightly by researchers. However, more recent developments place emphasis on a full integration of action and reflection and on increased collaboration between all those involved in the inquiry project, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied. Thus action research is conducted *by, with and for* people, rather than research *on* people.

It is important to understand action research as an orientation to inquiry rather than as a methodology. Thus a recent text describes action research as "...a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. " (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:1)

We can see how this 'bringing together' can occur by considering three strategies of inquiry which are highly interdependent. Good action research will strive to stimulate inquiry at each of these levels and to create connections between levels:

- First-person research practices address the ability of individual researchers to foster an inquiring approach to their own lives, to act awarley and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. First-person inquiry skills are essential for those who would provide leadership in any social enterprise.
- Second-person action research/practices such as co-operative inquiry address our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern, usually in small groups. In co-operative inquiry a small group of peers work together in cycles of action and reflection to develop both understanding and practice in a matter of mutual concern.
- Third-person research/practice includes a range of practices which draw together the views of large groups of people and create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who cannot be known to each other face-to-face. Under this heading we include for example practices which 'network' small inquiry groups, the range of large scale dialogue and 'whole system' conference designs, and the 'learning history' approach.

Action research typically involves creating spaces in which participants engage together in cycles of action and critical reflection. However, this basic process has been elaborated in different ways in different schools of practice.

Organizational change and work research. There is a longstanding tradition of action research in organizational settings which aims to contribute both to more effective work practices and better understanding of the processes of organizational change. This approach draws on a variety of forms of information gathering, feedback to organization members, leading to problem solving dialogue. This tradition is well represented in recent publications such as Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996), Greenwood & Levin (1998), and Coghlan & Brannick (2001).

Co-operative Inquiry. A co-operative inquiry group consists of a group of people who share a common concern for developing understanding and practice in a specific personal, professional or social arena. All are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision-making contributes to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience; and *also* co-subjects, participating in the activity which is being researched. A typical inquiry group will consist of between six and twenty people. As co-researchers they participate in the thinking that goes into the research—framing the questions to be explored, agreeing on the methods to be employed, and together making sense of their experiences. As co-subjects they participate in the action being studied. The co-researchers engage in cycles of action and reflection: in the action phases they experiment with new forms of personal or professional practice; in the reflection phase they reflect on their experience critically, learn from their successes and failures, and develop theoretical perspectives which inform their work in the next action phase. Co-operative inquiry groups thus cycle between and integrate four forms of knowing—experiential, presentational, propositional and practical (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001).

Action Science and Action Inquiry. Much attention has been given by action researchers to the relationship between the theories we hold about our practices and what we actually do: to put it colloquially, do we ‘walk our talk’? Action science and action inquiry are related disciplines that offer methods for inquiring into and developing congruence between our purposes, our theories and frames, our behaviour, and our impact in the world. These practices can be applied at individual, small group, and at organizational level. Their overall aim is to bring inquiry and action together in more and more moments of everyday life, to see inquiry as a ‘way of life’ (Friedman, 2001; Marshall, 2001; Torbert, 2001).

Learning History is a process of recording the lived experience of those in an action research or learning situation in which researchers work collaboratively with those involved to agree the scope and focus of the history, identify key questions, gather information through an iterative reflective interview process, distil this information into a form which the organization or community can ‘hear’ and facilitate dialogue with organization members to explore the accuracy, implications and practical outcomes that the work suggests (Roth & Kleiner, 1998).

Appreciative inquiry. Practitioners of appreciative inquiry argue that action research has been limited by its romance with critique at the expense of appreciation. To the extent that action research maintains a problem-oriented view of the world it diminishes the capacity of researchers and practitioners to produce innovative theory capable of inspiring the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct. If we devote our attention to what is wrong with organizations and communities, we lose the ability to see and understand what gives life to organizations and to discover ways to sustain and enhance that life-giving potential. Appreciative inquiry therefore begins with the unconditional positive question that guides inquiry agendas and focuses attention toward the most life-giving, life-sustaining aspects of organizational existence (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001).

Whole systems inquiry. Large group interventions or processes are events designed to engage representatives of an entire system, whether it be an organization or a community, in thinking through and planning change (for descriptions see Bunker & Alban, 1997). What

distinguishes them from other large meetings is that the process is managed to allow all participants an opportunity to engage actively in the planning (Martin, 2001). Rather than aim at a single outcome, in dialogue conference design (Gustavsen, 2001) and whole system designs (Pratt, Gordon, & Plamping, 1999) the role of the researchers is to create the conditions for democratic dialogue among participants.

Participative action research. This term is usually used to refer to action research strategies which grew out of the liberationist ideas of Paulo Freire (1970) and others in countries of the South. Participatory action research (PAR) is explicitly political, aiming to restore to oppressed peoples the ability to create knowledge and practice in their own interests and as such has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people—through research, through adult education, and through sociopolitical action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: they "see through" the ways in which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members.

In keeping with the emphasis of PAR on inquiry as empowerment, specific research methodologies take second place to the emergent processes of collaboration and dialogue which empower, motivate, increase self esteem, and develop community solidarity. Community meetings and events of various kinds are an important part of PAR, serving to identify issues; to reclaim a sense of community and emphasise the potential for liberation; and to make sense of information collected (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selener, 1997).

#### An example

An inquiry that integrates the three strategies and several of these methodological approaches may be found in the research conducted by a group of young women in management (YoWiM), initiated by Kate McArdle as part of her PhD Research (McArdle, in preparation). The YoWiM group was established as a co-operative inquiry, and was thus originally grounded in second-person inquiry practices, meeting together every four weeks for a half-day session to share their stories and ideas from a four-week action phase between meetings. For the YoWiM group one of the most valuable inquiry practices, which developed over the life of the group, was 'really listening' to each other (as something different from 'waiting to speak'), thus opening a space for new conversations about the experience of being young women in management. This helped them become aware of how their voices were largely absent in the organization. Group members brought their observations and concerns to the group, told stories of their experiences, and reported back the outcomes of action experiments which they undertook away from the group, and were encouraged and helped to develop new ways of responding to their experiences. Most important was the creation of a critical perspective, so that problems experienced by group members were no longer always 'their fault' but could be seen as part of the culture of a masculine-oriented organization requiring a creative response.

Between meetings, the group continued to represent a supportive space which supported the members in their first-person inquiring practice. They paid increasing attention to their own behaviour and that of their colleagues and managers, noticed more awarely what was going on from the perspective of young women and allowed themselves time to think through their role alone. They experimented with new behaviours, for example finding ways of speaking out more effectively in the face of patronising and bullying behaviour on the part of male managers and finding new value in more relational forms of behaviour.

As initiating facilitator of the group—and doing this for the first time (McArdle, 2001)—Kate paid particular attention to her own interventions in the group. In particular, she worked to model inquiring behaviour, to make her own action choices transparent to the group, and thus use her own inquiry practice to support and develop the inquiring practices of other group

members. She kept careful records of her experience, in journals, e-mail correspondences, and the transcripts of the group sessions, and reviewed her behaviour 'off-line' (Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001) with colleagues and her PhD supervisor (Peter Reason).

We can see from this how first- and second-person inquiry practices become interdependent: as group members develop inquiring behaviour within the group context, they are more able to apply this working alone in their work situations; and as this first-person practice develops the quality of the narrative brought back to the second-person forum of the inquiry group increases.

In the YoWiM group, the first- and second-person skills nurtured and developed in this way enable more engaged third-person practice. The YoWiM group together held a half-day third-person inquiry with over 50 people, including other young women in the organization and senior women in the company, to enable themselves and others to gain further understanding of issues of interest to women in the company. This may sound like nothing new—workshops happen all the time in organizations! However, because they had developed a second-person community of inquiry over a ten-month period, YoWiM group members were able to create and hold a wider *inquiring space*. They were careful not to re-create the hierarchy that existed 'in normal workshops' in the company, in which people were rewarded for 'knowing the right answers', but through quite simple means, such as arranging chairs in a circle without tables, sharing some of their own experience of inquiry, inviting other young women to tell their stories and really listen to each other, helping them to explore their experience, they countered the prevailing organizational culture and created a quite unusual experience for their peers.

In essence for the YoWiM group, third-person inquiry meant understanding when their moment had arrived, when they had gained sufficient confidence in themselves and in each other to be able to take a step away from each other, but with each other, to engage a bigger group of people in exploring issues they had about a particular topic, in new ways. The depth of meaning created in first- and second-person inquiry over time cannot be re-created in a third-person inquiry of a one-off nature. However, the YoWiM experience shows how giving life to a different kind of fertile space in which others meet, often for the first time, to talk about things that *really matter to them*, sharpened the political edge of first- and second-person inquiry. In this sense, as Martin puts it, "the message sent by the event may have much more significance than the event itself" (Martin, 2001). Running a third-person inquiry of this nature took the YoWiM group into an cycle of inquiry about "How were we/was I able to be in this wider space we created?" This again highlights the dynamic and continually emergent relationship between first-, second- and third-person inquiry practices.

By way of summary we would emphasize that action research is not a methodology but an orientation that shapes methodological practices. There are no right answers, rather lots of choices, and quality of inquiry is shaped by the appropriateness of these choices and way they are made.

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