

Handbook of action research

Participative Inquiry and Practice

Peter Reason

Hilary Bradbury

editors

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Introduction:

Inquiry & participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration

Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury

I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge—knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself. Marja-Liisa Swantz

Knowledge is always gained through action and for action. From this starting point, to question the validity of social knowledge is to question, not how to develop a reflective science about action, but how to develop genuinely well-informed action—how to conduct an action science.

Bill Torbert

I am not a social scientist interested in more participatory research, but an educator and activist exploring alternative paradigm research as one tool in the multifaceted struggles for a more just, loving world.

Pat Maguire

Practical knowledge, knowing how, is the consummation, the fulfilment, of the knowledge quest... it affirms what is intrinsically worthwhile, human flourishing, by manifesting it in action.

John Heron

The aim of participatory action research is to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence.

Robin McTaggart

Participatory research is a process through which members of an oppressed group or community identify a problem, collect and analyse information, and act upon the problem in order to solutions and to promote social and political transformation.

Daniel Selener

Action Research can help us build a better, freer society.

Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin

We must keep on trying to understand better, change and reenchant our plural world.

Orlando Fals Borda

Action, participation and experience

In this Introduction, we draw together some of the major threads that form the diverse practices of action research, to provide a framework through which the reader can approach this volume. We know that our readership is varied. You may be new to action research, wanting to know

whether it has anything to offer you. You may already be an action research practitioner, maybe with allegiance to one of the schools included (or maybe not included), in this volume, and wondering how we have presented the kind of work you are committed to. You may belong to an academic discipline which draws on more orthodox forms of inquiry, wondering how this action research animal can be understood as science. And of course you may be downright hostile to the idea of action research, and are reading this to show how misguided the editors and contributors are!

There is no 'short answer' to the question 'What is action research?' But let us say as a working definition, to be expanded on in this Introduction and indeed the rest of this volume, that action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. 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.

What we want to say to all our readers is that we see action research as a practice for the systematic development of knowing and knowledge, but based in a rather different form from traditional academic research—it has different purposes, is based in different relationships, it has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice. These are fundamental differences in our understanding of the nature of inquiry, not simply methodological niceties. As we have studied the contributions to this volume over these past two years and more, we conclude that, while the field of action research is hugely varied and there are all kinds of choices to be made in practice, there are five broadly shared features which characterize action research which we show in Figure 1.

--Figure 1 about here--

A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part.

So action research is about working toward practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless. And more broadly, theories which contribute to human emancipation, to the flourishing of community, which help us reflect on our place within the ecology of the planet and contemplate our spiritual purposes, can lead us to different ways of being together, as well as providing important guidance and inspiration for practice (for a feminist perspective would invite us to consider whether an emphasis on action without a balancing consideration of ways of being is rather too heroic).

As we search for practical knowledge and liberating ways of knowing, working with people in their everyday lives, we can also see that action research is participative research, and all participative research must be action research. Human persons are agents who act in the world on the basis of their own sensemaking; human community involves mutual sensemaking and collective action. Action research is only possible with, for and by persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sensemaking that informs the research, and in the action which is its focus.

Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities

of practice. Action research is emancipatory, it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge. In action research knowledge is a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. This means action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods, but is, in Leotard's (1979) sense, a work of art.

These five interdependent characteristics of action research emerge from our reflections on practice in this developing field. Together they imply an 'action turn' in research practice which both builds on and takes us beyond the 'language turn' of recent years: the language turn drew our attention to the way knowledge is a social construction; the action turn accepts this, and asks us to consider how we can act in intelligent and informed ways in a socially constructed world. Later in this Introduction we work toward the articulation of a participatory worldview as a grounding framework for these characteristics, and show how this draws our attention to the kinds of choices that action research practitioners need to make in the course of their work, choices which have implications for the quality and validity of their inquiries.

We start from these assertions—which may seem contentious to some of the academic community, while at the same time obvious to those of a more activist orientation—because the purpose of knowledge-making is so rarely debated. The institutions of normal science and academia, which have created such a monopoly on the knowledge making process, place a primary value on pure research, the creation of knowledge unencumbered by practical questions. In contrast, the primary purpose of action research is not to produce academic theories based on action; nor is it to produce theories about action; nor is it to produce theoretical or empirical knowledge that can be applied in action; it is to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world.

The diverse origins of action research

We doubt if it is possible to provide one coherent history of action research. Many writers on action research trace its origins back to the social experiments of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, through the socio-technical experiments begun at the Tavistock Institute and in particular their application to practices of social democracy and organizational change. (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; see also Gustavsen, Chapter 1 and Pasmore, Chapter 3). While we are clearly indebted to this tradition there are others which deserve acknowledgement.

Others will see origins of action research in the contemporary critique of positivist science and scientism, in the movement to seek new epistemologies of practice—while all the contributions in our Groundings section address questions of the nature of knowledge, they are explored in particular by Park, Chapter 7, Kemmis, Chapter 8, and Lincoln, Chapter 11—as well as later in this Introduction. Eikeland argues in Chapter 13 that these epistemological concerns can be traced back to Aristotle's work on praxis & phronesis. Others will point out that important origins can be found in cultures which Eurocentric scholarship can overlook. Orlando Fals Borda asked in an email exchange

... where are the Maya Aristotles who discovered the Zero and taught how to build the wonderful pyramids in Yucatán? How are their intellectual and technical contributions taken into account in our discourses and narratives?

Pyrch and Castello (Chapter 37) similarly argue the importance of indigenous traditions and their current expression in "grass roots postmodernism" (Esteva & Prakash, 1998). As Hall points out (Chapter 15) participatory forms of inquiry aimed at solving practical problems have existed forever in human cultures, and have contributed to all life-supporting human activities from plant and animal husbandry to political democracy.

We can also trace the evolution of action research back to the Marxist dictum that the important thing is not to understand the world but to change it, through the theorizing of Gramsci and

others and the educational work of Freire, to the participatory research practice of those other working for liberation of the oppressed and underprivileged of this world (Fals Borda, Chapter 2; Hall, Chapter 15; Selener, 1997). This is truly a living movement worldwide for which no one person or community can claim ownership: we see the inspiration of Freire meeting the pioneering work of Marja-Liisa Swantz and her colleagues in Tanzania (Chapter 39), the movement for popular education as expressed for example at the Highlander Centre (Lewis, Chapter 35; Horton & Freire, 1990) and the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (Bhatt and Tandon, Chapter 28). More recently, through practices such as participatory rural appraisal (Chambers, 1997) practices of participative research has become part of developmental institutions—governments, NGOs and supra-national bodies such as the World Bank—which raises important questions about people's participation in relation to institutionalized power (Gaventa and Cornwall, Chapter 6).

Other writers point first to the fundamental importance of liberating perspectives on gender and race as a foundation for action research. As Maguire points out (Chapter 5), feminisms in their fullest sense challenge the structures and practices of domination in all fields. And the feminist practice of consciousness raising can in itself be seen as a form of experiential action inquiry. And Bell (Chapter 4) shows how the roots of action research were deeply embedded in progressive research on race.

Other roots of action research lie in the practices of experiential learning and psychotherapy. T-group training and encounter groups are at their best forms of mutual inquiry into the here-and-now development of group processes (Schein & Bennis, 1965). As John Rowan points out in Chapter 10, some forms of psychotherapy, particularly those informed by existential and humanist perspectives, can similarly be seen as mutual inquiries, as can a variety of forms of self-help groups such as co-counselling. In England humanistic approaches to learning and change led to experiments with learning communities based in humanistic education which directly informed the development of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1971). All this interacted with the evolving practices of organizational development, which many would characterize as a form of action research in which the consultant's role is to facilitate reflective inquiry within the organization, for which Schein coined the term clinical inquiry (Chapter 21) and Senge and Scharmer describe as the development of a community of learning (Chapter 22).

While some approaches to action research have remained resolutely secular, others have seen some spiritual practices as inquiry (Torbert, Chapter 23; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). The disciplines of mindfulness expressed in spiritual teachings from the Buddha to Gurdjieff, and in practices such as Tai Chi and insight meditation, can make an important contribution to our understanding of inquiry—although as Heron (Chapter 32) argues that these teaching and practices are often nested within authoritarian political structures from which they must be liberated.

Action research has been equally promiscuous in its sources of theoretical inspiration. It has drawn on pragmatic philosophy (Levin and Greenwood, Chapter 9; Greenwood & Levin, 1998), critical thinking (Kemmis, Chapter 8; Carr & Kemmis, 1986), the practice of democracy (Gustavsen, Chapter 1; Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996), liberationist thought (Fals Borda, Chapter 2; Selener, 1997), humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Rowan, Chapter 10; Heron and Reason, Chapter 16); constructionist theory (Lincoln, Chapter 11; Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, Chapter 17), systems thinking (Flood, Chapter 12; Pasmore Chapter 3) and more recently complexity theory (Reason & Goodwin, 1999). In its refusal to adopt one theoretical perspective it can be seen as an expression of a post-modern sentiment, or as Toulmin might have it, a re-assertion of Renaissance values of practical philosophy:

Since 1945, the problems that have challenged reflective thinkers on a deep philosophical level... are matters of practice: including matters of life and death... The "modern" focus on the written, the universal, the general, the timeless—which monopolized the work of

