Introduction

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Action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing. It is not so much a *methodology* as an *orientation to inquiry* that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues. Action research challenges much received wisdom in both academia and among social change and development practitioners, not least because it is a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or less extent as inquiring co-researchers. Action research does not start from a desire of changing others 'out there', although it may eventually have that result, rather it starts from an orientation of change *with* others.

Within an action research project, communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers. Typically such communities engage in more or less systematic cycles of action and reflection: in action phases co-researchers test practices and gather evidence; in reflection stages they make sense together and plan further actions. And since these cycles of action and reflection integrate knowing and acting, action research does not have to address the 'gap' between knowing and doing that befuddles so many change efforts and 'applied' research.

Action research can be described conceptually – and you will find such descriptions in the volume. Action research primarily arises, however, as people try to work together to address key problems in their communities or organizations – some of which involve creating positive change on a small scale and others of which affect the lives of literally millions of people. The scope and impact of action research is perhaps best grasped through illustration from exemplars in this book.

Meghna Guhathakurta (Chapter 35) describes how 'theatre of the oppressed' is adapted in a Bangladeshi marginalized 'sweeper' community in a way that helps the people themselves understand and reflect on issues and problems they experience – both their low status in the wider community and tensions within the community – and thereby to develop a consciousness with the potentiality to transform. The variety of activities based in theatre holds up a mirror to the people, so their experiences can be discussed more openly.

Gillian Chowns (Chapter 39) set up a co-operative inquiry group with children who have a parent dying of cancer, which both directly helped the children understand and manage the stresses they experienced and also brought their voices, usually ignored, to the wider community of palliative care practitioners.

These are examples of engagement with a small community or group. They are important because through such micro-practices people increase their ability to make sense of

their world and act effectively. Of course, from such face-to-face work people also develop the ability to influence a wider context. But in recent years, practitioners have been developing ways of using action research on a much larger scale.

Bjørn Gustavsen and his colleagues (Chapter 4) describe the development of action research in helping develop the quality of working life in Scandinavia over the past 40 years, work that is rooted in national agreements among industry, unions, and government. He shows how practice has developed from individual 'field experiments' working intensively at one site; through establishing development coalitions of several organizations engaged in shared learning; to a current practice of continuous widening of the circle of participating actors to build networks of inquiry and development across whole regions.

Ernie Stringer (Chapter 38) was invited by the government of newly liberated East Timor to use participative action research as a means of both formulating and implementing national education policy. With a new emerging government, very little funding and many schools destroyed in the liberation struggle, this project helped develop effective parent–teacher associations devoted to improving local education, and also worked with a wider group of stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, to develop national policy and to develop democratic capacities.

On an even wider scale, action research projects and programmes such as these can also be seen as part of social and political movements for liberation and development working on a national and international scale. As we finalize our drafts for publication, we celebrate the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Mohammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. While we have yet to more fully understand Yunus' work from the perspective of action research, we quote from the work of our colleague at Harvard's Hauser Center, itself an action research think tank, who describes Grameen as an action research process: 'Yunus tested the

hypothesis that accountability to peers might replace collateral as an incentive for poor borrowers to repay small loans, and helped create the practice innovations for a micro-credit movement that now serves millions of borrowers around the world' (Brown, 2002: 32). Certainly Yunus' work has changed our theory of why loans are repaid and has profoundly influenced the lending practices of global bodies such as The World Bank, as much as he changed the lives of those heretofore left out of the economy altogether, especially women. The Nobel committee's recognition of the work of someone actively engaged with complex and difficult issues is heartening. We see this as an indication of how action researchers may play a part in constructive large scale change. The degree to which participation and partnership ethic was practised – or could be more so in the future – is an important one for the whole micro-credit 'industry' to grapple with as it evolves. From an action research perspective, the challenge to all working with large scale change efforts will be in the extent to which we are able to respond to the challenge of participation – which gets harder, not easier as more people become involved. We must all sit with the question of how to engage stakeholders in a continuing process of participative inquiry and practical experimentation which keep our original visions and partnership ethics manifest.

Action research has influenced and been influenced by civil rights and anti-racism movements, feminisms, community development and so on, and can be seen as reciprocally contributing to the development of such social movements (Gustavsen, 2003a). One means of doing this is to link grassroots activity with the formal structures of international aid and development:

Dave Brown and Rajesh Tandon (Chapter 15) describe how practical efforts at consciousness raising and empowerment of the marginalized people around the world has attracted the attention of policy-makers in international institutions. They point to the importance of coalitions of institutions which

span the 'North–South divide', which are both grounded in local issues and can have access to policy-makers.

The origins of action research are broad: they lie in the work of Lewin and other social science researchers around at the end of the Second World War; in the liberationist perspective that can be exemplified in Paulo Freire (1970); philosophically in liberal humanism, pragmatism, phenomenology, critical theory, systemic thinking and social construction; and practically in the work of scholar-practitioners in many professions, notably in organization development, teaching, health promotion and nursing, and community development both in Western countries and in the majority world. None of these origins is well linked to the mainstream of academic research with its conventional if unsupportable notions of objectivity in either North America or Europe: objectivist, hypothetico-deductive research retains a dominance, and although this has been strongly challenged by qualitative and interpretive approaches to research, the emphasis of the latter has been on *representation* of the world rather than *action* within it (Greenwood and Levin, 2001). Nor has action research always sat easily with Marxist thinking and socialist politics, as Marja Liisa Swantz's account shows (Chapter 2). As a result, the family of practices called action research has inhabited the margins of academia for many years. As Argyris (2003) points out, the pursuit of knowledge in the service of justice and effectiveness has often been held in disrepute. Moreover, Levin and Greenwood point out, the structure and ethos of universities often work against the processes of action research. So those who champion action research often need to build institutions to nurture and support themselves and the practice – coalitions of the kind Brown and Tandon describe; independent institutions such as PRIA (Participatory Research in Asia, New Delhi), RIB (Research Initiatives Bangladesh, Dhaka); government supported institutions like the Work Research Institute in Oslo; community and professional networks such as the Action Research Issues Association that has supported community and university-based

action research in Victoria, Australia over 20 years, and ALARPM (Action Research, Action Learning and Process Management) also based in Australia which has been so successful in sponsoring the series of World Congresses of Action Research; and research centres and informal networks within universities such as those that can be found at Aalborg, Bath, Boston College, Case Western Reserve, Cornell, College of Emek Yezreel, Southern Cross, Pepperdine Trondheim, Southern California and others. Formal and informal institutions such as these are key in giving support to individual reflective practice in a context of supportive collegial relations.

Through examples such as those mentioned above, action research – which may be quite intimate or may seek influence on a large scale – demonstrates an inquiry-in-action that positively shapes the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people everyday around the world. Indeed we might respond to the disdainful attitude of mainstream social scientists to our work that action research practices have changed the world in far more positive ways than has conventional social science. Indeed it is more useful to compare action research to the clinical practice of physicians (and Edgar Schein uses that term for his work, see Chapter 18) than to the work of conventional social scientists. We are intrigued that in the USA the National Institute of Health now regularly calls for 'participative action research' when soliciting grant proposals, and that the World Bank publishes a Participation Sourcebook (see http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/sourcebook/sbhome.htm). And we also note the concerns expressed by Gaventa and Cornwall in Chapter 11 concerning the dangers of the co-option of participation by global institutions.

So a first description of action research is that it:

- is a set of practices that responds to people's desire to act creatively in the face of practical and often pressing issues in their lives in organizations and communities;
- calls for engagement *with* people in collaborative relationships, opening new 'communicative spaces' in which dialogue and development can flourish;

- draws on many ways of knowing, both in the evidence that is generated in inquiry and its expression in diverse forms of presentation as we share learning with wider audiences;
- is values oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the wider ecology in which we participate;
- is a living, emergent process that cannot be pre-determined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers both individually and collectively.

Definitions of action research often emphasize an empirical and logical problem-solving process involving cycles of action and reflection, sometimes going back to Lewin's definition: 'It proceeds in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the results of the action' (1946/1948: 206). Lewin's account of action research was of course much wider than this, emphasizing the importance of practical democracy and education in the practice of inquiry (for a recent review of Lewin's contribution see Bargal, 2006). Our own working definition of action research, adapted slightly from the one we set out in the first edition of this Handbook, remains appropriate:

> action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. 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 paradigm from conventional academic research – because it has different purposes, is based in different relationships, 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. We have found that the five dimensions of action research, which we introduced in the first edition of this Handbook and which are shown in Figure 1, remain a useful way of considering features of practice that are broadly shared, while at the same time accepting that practice is hugely varied.

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
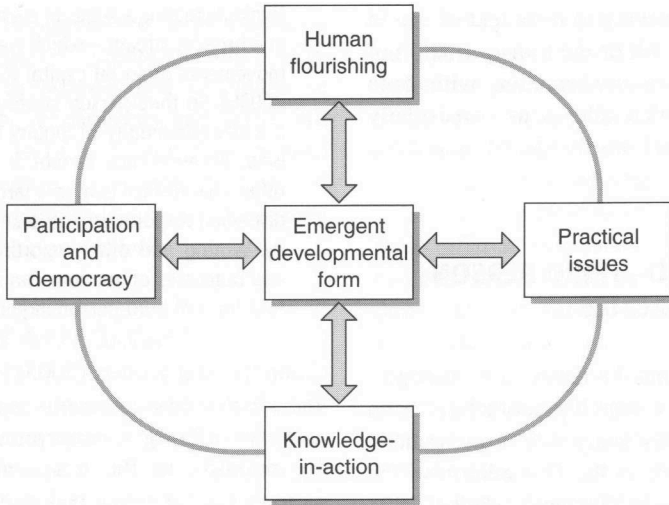
Figure 1 *Characteristics of action research*

research, and in the action which is its focus. And action research without its liberating and emancipatory dimension is a shadow of its full possibility and will be in danger of being co-opted by the status quo.

Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, the process of inquiry can be 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 program is less defined in terms of hard and fast methods, but is, in Lyotard's (1979) sense, a work of art emerging in the doing of it.

These five interdependent characteristics of action research emerge from our reflections on practice in this developing field. Together they imply a 'participative turn' and 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 (for a fuller exploration of these five dimensions see Reason and Bradbury, 2001/2006).

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. We therefore suggest that in action research knowledge may be defined as what

we've learned working in a context of action and that is the result of the transformation of our experience in conversation with both self and others that allows us consistently to create useful actions that leave us and our co-inquirers stronger.

FIRST-, SECOND-, THIRD-PERSON RESEARCH/PRACTICE

We have found that the terms first-, second-, and third-person research/practice have been quickly adopted by many action researchers. We used the terms in the first edition of the Handbook (following Torbert's original 1998 formulation) as an organizing framework. We continue to develop our thinking about them and see them as a helpful way of describing the diversity of action research practices (see also Reason and Torbert, 2001; Torbert and Taylor, Chapter 16).

- First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act choicefully and with awareness, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. First-person research practice brings inquiry into more and more of our moments of action – not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities. In our action research practice, first-person inquiry provides a foundational practice and disciplines through which we can monitor the impact of our behaviour (Marshall and Mead, 2005; this issue is exemplified, for example, in Chapters 3 and 16).
- Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern – for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately. Second-person inquiry starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry and learning organizations.
- Third-person research/practice aims to extend these relatively small scale projects to create a wider impact. As Gustavsen points out, action research will be of limited influence if we think only in terms of single cases, and that we need to

think of creating a series of events interconnected in a broader stream – which we can see as social movements or social capital (Gustavsen, 2003a, 2003b). So third-person strategies aim to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality. Writing and other reporting of the process and outcomes of inquiries can also be an important form of third-person inquiry.

Chandler and Torbert (2003) have developed the idea of first-, second-, and third-person inquiry, offering a conceptual step forward by pointing to the temporal dimension – inquiry can be concerned with past, present, and future – unlike conventional research which is entirely limited to what happened in the past. They also usefully distinguish between first/second/third person *practice* and first/second/third person *voice*. They therefore describe:

1. the subjective, first-person voice;
2. any given particular set of intersubjective, second-person voices; and
3. the objectivity-seeking third-person voice. (Chandler and Torbert, 2003: 140; this framework is extended in Chapter 16).

We suggest that the most compelling and enduring kind of action research will engage all three strategies: first-person research practice is best conducted in the company of friends and colleagues who can provide support and challenge; such a company may indeed evolve into a second-person collaborative inquiry process. On the other hand, attempts at third-person research which are not based in rigorous first-person inquiry into one's purposes and practices is open to distortion through unregulated bias. Thus, to take just one example, Anisur Rahman (Chapter 3), in discussing the sensitization of 'animators' to stimulate and facilitate the process of participative action research, argues that they themselves must go through a process of (first person) self-inquiry in order to fully understand how to facilitate self-inquiry and

self-initiatives in others. They may benefit by joining with others in (second person) collective inquiry for support and challenge in developing their experiences and skills. All this in the service of the wider (third person) purpose of human development and for 'downtrodden people to create their own history [and] their own science'.

A FAMILY OF APPROACHES

We have described action research as a 'family of approaches', a family which sometimes argues and falls out, whose members may at times ignore or wish to dominate others, yet a family which sees itself as different from other researchers, and is certainly willing to pull together in the face of criticism or hostility from supposedly 'objective' ways of doing research. We have come to appreciate the richness and diversity of this family, and our motivation as editors to create communicative spaces where the different members can come together in conversation has increased. We thoroughly agree with Robert Chambers' call in Chapter 20 for an 'eclectic pluralism [which] means that branding, labels, ownership and ego give way to sharing, borrowing, improvisation and creativity, all these complemented by mutual and critical reflective learning and personal responsibility for good practice' (p. 312). For some, action research is primarily an individual affair through which professionals can address questions of the kind 'How can I improve my practice?' For others, action research is strongly rooted in practices of organization development and improvement of business and public sector organizations. For many in the majority world, action research is primarily a liberationist practice aiming at redressing imbalances of power and restoring to ordinary people the capacities of self-reliance and ability to manage their own lives – to 'sharpen their minds' as villagers in Bangladesh describe it. For some the key questions are about how to initiate and develop face-to-face inquiry groups, while for others the primary issues are about using action research to create change on a large scale and influence policy decisions. And for some action research is primarily a form of practice in the world, while for others it belongs in the scholarly traditions of knowledge generation hankering back to Socrates.

Our aim as editors is to honour and value all these different orientations. We want to insist that good action researchers will appreciate and draw on the range of perspectives and approaches that are available to them. It upsets us when we see action research as narrowly drawn; when, for example, we review an article that only sees action research as short-sighted consulting, seems to argue that one approach is the true form of action research, or traces action research back through just one discipline stream to one set of founding (usually masculine) authorities. We want you to delight in and celebrate the sheer exuberance and diversity that is available to you and be creative in how you use and develop it.

This of course also means there can never be one 'right way' of doing action research. We have addressed this question in the first edition of this Handbook and elsewhere (Bradbury, in press; Bradbury and Reason, 2003; Reason, 2006), arguing that this diversity of action research opens up a wide range of choices for the conduct of inquiry. We argue that a key dimension of quality is to be aware of one's choices, and to make those choices clear, transparent, articulate, to yourselves, to your inquiry partners, and, when you start writing and presenting, to the wider world. This is akin to the 'crafting' of research that Kvale (1995) advocates or, following Lather (2001), away from 'validity as policing toward 'incitement to dialogue'.

Those who involve themselves in the action research this book represents are aligned around three important purposes. The first purpose is to bring an action dimension back to the overly quietist tradition of knowledge generation which has developed in the modern era. The second is to expand the hold over knowledge held traditionally by universities and other institutes of 'higher learning'. The examples of action research in

this book show how this can be done. At the same time our purpose is to contribute to the ongoing revisioning of the Western mindset – to add impetus to the movement away from a modernist worldview based on a positivist philosophy and a value system dominated by crude notions of economic progress, toward emerging perspectives which share a 'post-modern' sentiment (in the widest sense of that term). This Handbook offers many grounding perspectives which contribute to this, including our own understanding of an emergent participatory worldview which we articulate in the Introduction.

We address ourselves to an audience of scholar-practitioners whether inside, on the margins of, or outside academia. We clearly want to influence academic practice. Over the past 25 years, post-positivist research has received a great deal of attention in graduate and professional education, as evidenced by the attention to postmodernism and by developments in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Indeed the so-called 'campus paradigm wars' in the USA may be understood as a debate about how social science ought to be practised by inquiring into the role of the intellectual in a postmodern world. We wish to add to this debate by bringing to the foreground the many innovations in action approaches to social science, to delineate the possibilities for a 'turn to reflexive action' (Reason and Torbert, 2001) which offers new understandings of the relationship between ideas and practice. We also want to contribute to the development of new thinking about validity and quality in research, to show that good knowing rests on collaborative relationships, on a wide variety of ways of knowing, and an understanding of value and purpose, as well as more traditional forms or intellectual and empirical rigour.

Bringing scholarship and praxis back together, thereby drawing on long cultural traditions, our immodest aim is to change the relationship between knowledge and practice, to provide a model of social science for the 21st century as the Academy seeks additions and alternatives to its heretofore 'ivory tower' positivist model of science, research and practice.

CENTRAL INSIGHT OF PARTICIPATION: LIVING AS PART OF THE WHOLE

Action research is rooted in participation, which in turn supports key values of purpose and practice in action research efforts. As Kemmis puts it, the participative orientation is about 'opening communicative spaces' (Kemmis, 2001/2006), or as Heron has it, it is a situation in which all those involved can contribute both to the thinking that informs the inquiry and to the action which is its subject (Heron, 1996). This is especially clearly articulated in participatory action research (Fals Borda, 2001/2006) which concerns 'self-investigation by under-privileged people [which] naturally generates action by them' in a 'truly 'subject–subject' relation with the outside researchers' (Rahman, Chapter 3).

Most of us educated within the Western paradigm have inherited a broadly 'Cartesian' worldview which channels our thinking in significant ways. It tells us the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter, operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose or meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans alone have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. This split between humanity and nature, and the abrogation of all mind to humans, is what Weber meant by the disenchantment of the world. As Fals Borda has put it, participation is one way through which we may 're-enchant our plural world'.

Of course, participation is more than a technique. But it is also more that an epistemological principle or a key tenet of political practice. An attitude of inquiry includes developing an understanding that we are embodied beings part of a social and ecological order, and radically interconnected with all other beings. We are not bounded individuals experiencing the world in isolation. We are already participants, part-of rather than apart-from. Writers such as Jorge Ferrer

(2002) and Richard Tarnas (2006) have pointed to this deeper quality of human participation in a creative and intelligent cosmos. We would follow Thomas Berry in arguing that we will not be able to address the ecological devastations wrought by humans until we fully experience the universe and Earth as a community of subjects rather than as a collection of objects. To fully grasp the nature of participation calls for a profound shift, as Senge and his colleagues point out:

> When we eventually grasp the wholeness of nature, it can be shocking. In nature, as Bortoft puts it, 'The part is a place for the presencing of the whole'. This is the awareness that is stolen from us when we accept the machine worldview of whole assembled from replaceable parts. (Senge et al., 2005: 7)

In a more immediately human sense, the critical, systemic, and social constructionist perspectives emphasize a shift from the individual to relationships in which we all participate (Kemmis, Chapter 8; Ison, Chapter 9; Gergen and Gergen, Chapter 10). Thus an attitude of inquiry seeks to recognize the profundity of this active and increasing participation with the human and more than human world.

At a more immediate and practical level, participation in inquiry means that we stop working with people as 'subjects' (which, in actuality means to hold them as objects of our gaze) (following a linguistic twist better illustrated in Orwell's prescient novel *1984*). Instead we build relationship as co-researchers. Researching with people means that they are engaged as full persons, and the exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experience, rather than filtered through an outsider's perspective. Participation is also political, asserting people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and claim to generate knowledge about them. And, in addition to producing knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, it can also empower them at a second and deeper level to see that they are capable of constructing and using their own knowledge (Freire, 1970; Reason, 2005).

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