

**INFLUENTIAL
IDEAS**

Pragmatist philosophy and action research

Readings and conversation with Richard
Rorty¹

Peter Reason

ABSTRACT

Richard Rorty's distinct brand of positivism is explored in relation to action research. Rorty's opposition toward the dualisms which haunt western philosophy is briefly described, his nonfoundationalist, anti-metaphysical pragmatics and his views on the contingency of the language that we use outlined. Since we can neither appeal to universal reason nor to an external reality as foundations for our claims, argument must move through a process of *redescription*. It is argued that just as Rorty is redescribing philosophy, so action researchers are redescribing inquiry. Rorty's ideas are compared with five basic characteristics of action research: practical knowing, democracy and participation; ways of knowing; human and ecological flourishing; and emergent form. Finally, Rorty's notion of the ironist is compared with the action researchers as reflective practitioner. The stimulating quality of Rorty's thought suggests that action researchers must find new language to describe their work, rather than be caught in the old academic metaphors of research.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- pragmatic philosophy
- redescription
- Richard Rorty

Reflecting on Rorty and action research

In the *Handbook of action research* Hilary Bradbury and I articulated five characteristics of action research: it is an approach to human inquiry concerned with developing *practical knowing* through participatory, *democratic processes* in the pursuit of *worthwhile human purposes*, drawing on *many ways of knowing* in an *emergent, developmental* fashion. In the following sections I set out some of Rorty's views relevant to these characteristics, and then turn to draw parallels and contrasts between his views and the perspectives of action research.

Practical knowing

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. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 2)

Rorty's view is that human inquiry, as it ceases to be an attempt to correspond with an intrinsic nature of reality, becomes an exercise in human problem solving:

Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein's words, 'holds us captive' – the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment – doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed. (Rorty, 1999, pp. xxii–xxiii)

Rorty's view is that 'No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality', it is a Cartesian error to think of the mind as somehow swinging free of the causal forces exerted on the body. So we should give up seeing inquiry as a means of representing reality, and rather see it as a means of *using* reality. The relationship between truth claims and the world becomes 'causal rather than representational' and the issue becomes whether our beliefs 'provide reliable guides to getting what we want' (Rorty, 1999, p. 33).

The question of proof (which Rorty the anti-metaphysician sees as an attempt to escape from the world) can be replaced by the demand for imagination:

One should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs. (Rorty, 1999, p. 34)

In conversation, Rorty agreed with me that there appear to be links between his pragmatism and action research. But he was skeptical throughout the interview as to whether this was a form of social science:

What I was dubious about . . . was, do (people) really need a new kind of language or do they just need less talk about what it is they are doing or what our method is? It's as if you are giving them a new meta-discourse instead of just saying skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it.

When you define action research . . . you might just as well be describing democratic politics, it doesn't bear particularly on social science, it is just what people in democratic societies hope to be doing.

This is, of course, precisely the point: action research practitioners aim to remove the monopoly of knowledge creation that has been endowed to academics doing social science, and contribute to the development of inquiry as part of everyday practice. As I wrote with Bill Torbert:

The action turn in the social sciences is a turn toward a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings. (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 7)

Democracy and participation

In the *Handbook of action research* we argued that building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to the work of action research, that action research is only possible *with, for* and *by* persons and communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 2). Similar arguments can be found throughout the action research literature (for example in Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron, 1996; Kemmis, 2001).

Rorty similarly celebrates democracy:

The democratic community of Dewey's dreams . . . is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters . . . Dewey . . . called pragmatism 'the philosophy of democracy' . . . a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind. (Rorty, 1999, p. 20, 24)

Rorty's anti-metaphysical stance leads him to reject final answers and 'redemptive truth'. Rather, he sees philosophy as needing to 'keep the conversation going' (Rorty, 1979, p. 377), a phrase borrowed by Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 86) and applied to action research:

To keep the conversation going is a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is seeing human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately. (Rorty, 1979, p. 378)

Human and ecological flourishing

The fourth dimension of action research we considered in the handbook was that it is intended to contribute to the flourishing of human persons, communities and the ecosystems of which we are part. This raises questions of values, morals and ethics.

Rorty's anti-essentialism leads him to argue that just as we can have truth without correspondence with reality, so we can (and indeed must) have 'ethics without principles'. Pragmatists question the Kantian traditional distinction between 'morality' based on reason and 'prudence' based on self-interest, arguing that 'Moral choice . . . becomes always a matter of compromise between competing goods rather than a choice between absolutely right and wrong' (Rorty, 1999, pp. xxvii–xxix)

As we have seen, Rorty's view is that the whole point of human inquiry is to find better ways to cope with the environment – to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Pragmatists share with action researchers a desire that our inquiry be 'useful':

When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, [pragmatists] have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked 'Better by what criterion?' they have no detailed answer . . . [they] can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked 'And what exactly do you consider good?', pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, 'variety and freedom' or, with Dewey, 'growth'.

They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology . . . but rather than the future will astonish and exhilarate. (Rorty, 1999, pp. 27–28)

In conversation, Rorty again stressed the everydayness of the process of moral choice:

All discussion between human beings, one way and another, is about what's worthwhile. It's about what are we going to do next! I guess what I am suspicious of is the notion that there is a separate activity called discussion of worthwhileness. How could we not be discussing that? . . . Plato thought you could sort of rise above the transitory quarrels of the day and think about worthwhileness as such. Dewey's point was you can't do that. Discussion of what to do is discussion of what it's worthwhile to do. When things get too bad you begin to think radically and ask if the whole project was worthwhile, but you are not going to do that until things go wrong.

Above all, and again following Dewey, moral progress is about increased imaginative power (Rorty, 1999, p. 87), which is why in his later writing Rorty emphasizes the importance of a literary culture, and in particular the novel (see Rorty, 2001). But imaginative power and the ability to see the world from points of view other than ours is not only provided by novels and a literary culture, and it does

seem rather limiting to focus on these. What is important, surely, is that we find ways to develop storied cultures, whether these are in a formal 'literary culture' or oral and vernacular. There are many practices in action research which allow us to see the world from different perspectives, notably the Public Conversations Project which promotes constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views and positions about divisive public issues (Public Conversations Project, nd).

I am attracted to Rorty's argument that the question of value, of what is worthwhile, permeates all our conversations, and that there is not a special form of dialogue about worthwhileness. This position provides powerful arguments against the positivist view that knowledge about the world is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable, and supports action research as a practical form of inquiry in which knowledge and values are intertwined: as we create practical knowledge about our world we also shape that world with our imagination. And the arguments for widening our sense of who is the other chimes with Gergen's view (in this issue) that we must not limit ourselves to the first order democracy of the immediate group but also attend to wider circles of second order democracy. On the other hand, I do think it important that we find a place in action research projects for explicit reflection on what we value and want to enhance in our lives, and articulate this in our writing. As those writing about appreciative inquiry point out, the questions we ask are fateful (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001, p. 189). As Rorty says, moral choice is nearly always between competing goods: how we chose between these must always be part of our inquiry.

However, Rorty was also very clear that he was happy with a human-centred value perspective. When I asked if his perspective ignored our relationship with the non-human world and the environmental issues humanity is facing, he replied:

There is one way of being environmentalist which is saying human beings are going to suffer if we don't pay attention to the environment. And there is another way which says there is something non-human out there to get in touch with. I don't think there is anything non-human out there to get in touch with. I think one should be an environmentalist because it is going to be tough on humans if we are not.

To suggestions from deep ecologists like Thomas Berry (1999) that we need to widen our experience to see ourselves as part of a 'community of all beings' he was dismissive:

I think we are the best thing that evolution ever came up with. I don't really care much about getting in touch with the other critters . . . I think we have so much trouble forming a community of humans, I would like to think about that first.

While I am sure there will be a huge range of views on this within the action research community, I find this narrow humanism frightening.

Sometimes ironists are completely self-involved and unconversable and useless to their fellow man except very indirectly by the books they write, which may catch on 50 years later. I don't see any particular connection between being an ironist in the sense of what I was talking about in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* and being socially useful. Some of them are, some of them aren't.

I think of irony as working better for people alone in their studies than people doing things with other people. I use it as a peculiar cast of mind, so to speak . . . The figure I had in mind was someone obsessed with self-doubts, and that is different from making imaginative suggestions to a group. The same person might do both, but there's no predictability. There are obvious similarities, but I'd like to keep the distinction.

My own view is that there *is* a link between Rorty's irony and reflective practice – and indeed Torbert uses the term 'ironist' to describe one of the later stages in his developmental scheme. I think that a reading of *Contingency, irony and solidarity* would be profitable to any would-be action researcher, alerting them to a range of issues concerning the contingency of language, self and community, and challenging whatever remnants of foundationalist, metaphysical assumptions they retained. As one does this, one must realize that Rorty's argument is framed within a philosophical discourse, it is about *people alone in their studies rather than people doing things with other people*, as he says above.

The limitation of Rorty's view of the ironist, from the perspective of action research, is that he has no account of disciplines of practice; while the reflective practitioner is interested in the congruence or otherwise of their language and theory with their practice. Just as I argued above that action researchers must give good accounts of practices in the development of democratic dialogue, the challenge is for action researchers to show in their behaviour and their accounts more fully and more vividly what they mean by terms like 'reflective practice' and what disciplines of practice might look and feel like (see, for example, Wadsworth, 2001; Whitehead, 1989, 2000). If Rorty's account of the ironist helps in this, so much the better.

Reflections on Rorty and action research

What, at the end of this reflection on Rorty's pragmatist philosophy, might we say are the lessons for action research? For me, whatever conclusions I reach about his views on a particular issue, Rorty's writing on the practical nature of inquiry, on democracy, on justification, on ethics and what is worthwhile is hugely educational and instructive. Above all, he shows how the vocabulary of dualism permeates western thinking, and radically refuses to accept a trace of transcendental, metaphysical thinking, thereby inviting us to scrutinize our own vocabularies and presuppositions. His non-foundationalist perspective urges us

not to put principles above practice, not to attempt an appeal from transitory appearances to a permanent reality.

Through reading Rorty we can also see that while philosophers may be hugely suggestive and challenging, they will not themselves answer the questions that we in the field of action research need to address. As he said, he was glad if his writing was useful, but was concerned that I might think it more useful than it actually was: *skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it!* Rorty is out to de-divinize the world, and certainly doesn't want himself or any other philosopher to become an essential reference point, to take the place vacated by Truth or God. What we can take from Rorty is good questions, suggestive ways of addressing some of the issues that arise for action researchers.

So one of the most important lessons I take from Rorty is that as action researchers part of our task is to re-describe inquiry, and that we must not be limited by the taken-for-granted dualisms that underlie much of orthodox social science, nor over-influenced by the passing fashions of academia. We must fashion our own language, and at the same time, not get ourselves so caught up in the nuances of our language that we start to create new orthodoxies. There is in the field a proliferation of ways of addressing these questions, and we must, I suggest, celebrate and live out our epistemological heterogeneity.

Rorty's skepticism as to whether it is possible to actively create democratic, participative conversations, and his worry about 'big transformational projects' must be taken seriously, but clearly is not the last word. Action researchers have come a long way in learning how to develop mutuality in conversation, collaboration in small groups, and wider networks of participative relationships. Reading Rorty can challenge us to articulate more clearly just what it is we can do to facilitate emergence of communicative spaces, to create more public accounts and practice theories to justify our claims.

Rorty's challenge of the notion of many ways of knowing is at least in part rooted in his deep suspicion of metaphysics, that there can be an appeal to any reality outside human conversation. Even if we don't accept this position, we would do well to honour the tenacity of his non-foundationalism, and take from this a challenge to think through our own underlying assumptions. We can learn to adopt the perspective of ironist, to combine a commitment to our position with continual doubts about the language we use.

Whether this leads us to the humanist position that Rorty adopts, that there can be no recourse except to human imagination and human discourse, remains open to question. As I come to a resting point in my inquiry into Rorty's work I am struck with what seems like an unacknowledged paradox in this position. While he challenges us not to be caught in the dualisms of appearance and reality, finding and making, I can't help feeling that, in the end, he is unable to hold the paradox open and his emphasis on human language creating our world in effect brings his down on the side of appearance (this seems particularly so in the open-

ing pages of *Contingency, irony and solidarity*). This, I believe, leads us to an anthropocentrism which is intolerable given the damage human action is doing to our living space of the more than human world.

It seems to me that the metaphor of participation provides us with an alternative position. Our world neither consists of separate things, nor is it constructed through language, but rather emerges through relationships which we co-author and in which we partake. We can, with Rorty, reject the correspondence theory of truth while holding that experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of our being and knowing, and is prior to language. In this perspective, what is important is not to confuse our meeting with the elemental properties of the living world – the I–Thou encounter with a living tree or person – with our symbolic constructs expressed in language (Heron & Reason, 1997) As Abram has it, ‘underneath our literate abstractions, a deeply participatory relation to things and to the earth, a felt reciprocity’ (Abram, 1996, p. 124).

I think what we share most powerfully with Rorty is a concern for the relationship between truth and justice. As a philosopher, Rorty’s view is that it is not possible to bring these together in one language, hence his view of the ironist. Action research *does* attempt to bring truth and justice together, and action research practitioners are scholar-practitioners, not philosophers, and we may wish to extend the notion of irony to include the self-questioning awareness of the reflective practitioner ‘living life as inquiry’.

So reading Rorty will help us asks ourselves good questions. But in the end each of us, in conversation with those others with whom we are working, have to use our imaginations to come to our own conclusions about the best way forward in the particular circumstances of our inquiry practice. This requires courage as well as good questions, and while Rorty clearly demonstrates courage in asking challenging questions, we cannot take from him the kind of courage required to take these questions into practice, to scrutinize our own behaviour and assumptions and to take the risks of engaging fully with others. The best we can do, in a journal such as this, is to describe those choices and the practices they led us to adopt. If we can do that fully, richly, imaginatively, we will be doing very well indeed.

Notes

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Peter Reason is Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, UK. Address: Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, UK.
[Email: mnsplr@management.bath.ac.uk]