

Reason, P. and H. Bradbury (2001). Preface xxi – xxxii and Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration. Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice. P. Reason and H. Bradbury. London, Sage Publications: 1-14.

## Preface

Welcome to the concise paperback edition of the *Handbook of Action Research*. By publishing most of the first edition of the handbook in this form we hope we are making these resources accessible to a wider group of people who are using and developing the ideas and practices of action research.

Since the original publication of the *Handbook of Action Research* we have seen a lot to make us think that the community of action research is flourishing. We see a growing unease with 'ivory tower' scholarship which increasingly is seen as a waste of intellectual and financial resources. We also see an increased recognition of the importance of participation in fields as different as economic development and medicine, not least because participative processes are more impressive in terms of the results they produce. We hope you will feel welcome to make your contribution to this new community.

In these pages you will be able to appreciate the sheer diversity of ideas and practices that makes up the family of action research. As we have engaged in the work of editing both the handbook and the journal *Action Research*, we have increasingly seen them as integrative publications which draw together the many streams of action research. And we have come to regard action research not so much as a *methodology* but as an *orientation toward* inquiry (Bradbury and Reason, 2003) and indeed a *orientation of* inquiry that seeks to create a quality of engagement, of curiosity, of question-posing through gathering evidence and testing practices.

Action research can be described conceptually, but is best grasped through illustration. So, for example, a report from Harvard's Hauser Center, itself an action research think tank, describes the action research of Mohammed Yunus, instigator of the Grameen Bank:

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)

We find this to be a neat account, neat in the sense that it portrays quite non-traditional research in the familiar language of 'hypothesis testing', suggests an orientation to research that is aimed at improving participants' lives. We have learned that Yunus' work resulted from his personal experience. Returning after completing a doctorate in the United States, he was distraught by the poverty and helplessness in his native Bangladesh. He discovered that just a few dollars could change compatriots' lives but sought a sustainable solution. Rethinking the rules of how new enterprises are financed, Yunus went on to develop micro-financing

and the Grameen Bank. In so doing he 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 those who had been heretofore left out of the economy altogether, especially women.

Through examples such as this, and others you will read in this book, action research demonstrates an inquiry-in-action that positively shapes the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people everyday. 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 traditional social science. However, significant action research can be quite small in scope, for example through the personal reflection of one person on their professional practice, or through convening a few people to create and reflect on positive change. As such, action research:

- responds to practical and often pressing issues in the lives of people in organizations and communities
- engages 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 and diverse forms of presentation as we speak to wider audiences
- is strongly value 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 which 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-inquiries both individually and collectively.

We describe 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 forms of research, 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. For some, action research is primarily an individual affair through which professionals can address questions such as, '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 to redress imbalances of power and restoring to ordinary people the capacities of self-reliance and the 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.

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 are available to you and be creative in how you use and develop them.

This of course also means there can never be one 'right way' of doing action research. We have addressed this question in the Introduction and the Conclusion by 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 the choices, and to make those choices clear, transparent, articulate, to your selves, 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, away from validity as policing toward 'incitement to dialogue'.

Those who involve themselves in the action research this handbook 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 'postmodern' 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 wish to address an audience of scholar-practitioners whether they are in or out of 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, 2000b). Indeed the so-called 'campus paradigm wars' in the United States 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 of intellectual and empirical rigour (Reason, 2006).

One might ask, 'action for what?' We want to challenge those who espouse one form of practice, and show that there are many varieties of action research practice on which the practitioners may creatively draw. We want to show that ideas about language, about critical thinking, about democracy, about race and gender are also providing important new perspectives on practice.

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 twenty-first century as the academy seeks additions and alternatives to its heretofore 'ivory tower' positivist model of science, research and practice.

### Synergy with qualitative methods

Action researchers design their projects overall in ways that are often very similar to qualitative designs that are also field based, longitudinal and engaged. Multiple qualitative research methods may be used (for example, interviewing, focus groups, social network data gathering) and combined, as deemed appropriate given the aims of people involved. In the course of inquiry, action researchers might also include network analysis and surveys (or other such quantitative anchors) depending on how best to accomplish practical and other outcomes deemed necessary by those involved in the research.

Action research, qualitative, especially constructivist, approaches to inquiry and critical theory overlap significantly, sometimes to the point of being inseparable. Each research paradigm seeks to empower research subjects to influence decision making for their own aspirations. They share a mandate for social justice and accept considerable rupture among traditional divisions of objectivity and subjectivity. As Denzin and Lincoln put it, contemporary qualitative research:

asks that the social science and the humanities become sites for critical conversation about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community... We struggle to connect qualitative research to the hopes, needs, and goals of a free democratic society. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a: 3)

Key differences also lie in the way in which researchers from each paradigm work with others. In action research the distinction between researchers and subjects may become quite blurred in the course of what is usually a lengthy, collaborative relationship. Additionally, there is a different relative emphasis on the importance of action and its relationship to conceptual insight. These key differences allow for action research to offer an alternative to the trenchant gap between traditional research and its application (Susman and Evered, 1978; Torbert, 1981; Wells, 2000). Most efforts to describe the gap (Kirk, 1979), perhaps ironically, continually re-establish it, by underscoring the disconnect between research and application. Research has traditionally been assumed to occur in a different domain from application and is practised by 'practitioners', who, by definition, are not researchers.

egies for enhancing appropriate use of research stress the importance of new educational emphasis on forging closer bonds between the fragmented spheres of knowledge generation and knowledge application. As action research is research by, rather than *on* practitioners, who in many instances become co-researchers themselves, in effect action research bypasses the traditional, constructed separation between research and application.

### **Accounting for action research epistemology through practice**

itionally science has privileged knowing through *thinking* over knowing through *doing*. The Cartesian foundation for traditional science is based on the insight that, by doubting, a person can know he thinks and thereby know that he exists (i.e., *cogito, ergo sum*). This account of reality privileges individual rationality as the premier vehicle of knowing and lays the centuries deep foundation for the differentiation of knower from what is known. More recent accounts of reality, developed especially in the schools of critical theory and pragmatism (Dewey, 1933; Habermas, 1971; James, 1978; Mead, 1932; Rorty, 1999), privilege experience and action over insight *per se*. They draw attention to knowing through doing (rather than doubting) and emphasize the social nature of all experience and knowledge. For example, drawing particularly on Habermas' theory of communicative action, Kemmis (Chapter 8) draws out the emancipatory function of deliberative democratic dialogue, which is the most common format for action researchers to work, collaborate, gather and reflect on data.

Action research is therefore an inherently value laden activity, usually practised by scholar-practitioners who care deeply about making a positive change in the world. As such it is unlikely that we find comfortable homes inside academia with norms of disinterest (or value on the status quo). Nonetheless, many action researchers work well with the creative tension of the boundary space between academia and practice.

### **First, Second, Third Person Research/Practice**

One way of providing some order within the diverse field of action research is to identify three broad pathways of action research practice (Reason and Bert, 2001):

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 awarely and choicefully, 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. 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 so that ‘rather than being defined exclusively as “scientific happenings” they (are) also defined as “political events”’ (Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996). 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.

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. Although attempts at third person research which are not based in rigorous first person inquiry into one’s purposes and practices are open to distortion through unregulated bias.

Since the original publication of the handbook these ideas have been taken forward in important ways. Judi Marshall and Geoff Mead have edited a collection of papers on first person inquiry and reflective practices (2005). The journal *Concepts and Transformation* published an exchange between Davydd Greenwood (2002) and Bjørn Gustavsen (Gustavsen, 2003a) concerning the unfulfilled promises of action research and its impact on large scale issues and public policy. Gustavsen argued that 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). He argues that to do this we have ‘to use action research in a distributive way’ and that this means it:

becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a ‘case’. Instead of using much resources in a single spot to pursue things into a continuously higher degree of detail in this spot, resources are spread over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible. (Gustavsen, 2003a: 96–7)

This development of this perspective can be seen in work in the broad Scandinavian tradition of action research (Philips, 2004 for example). A subsequent issue of *Concepts and Transformation* (Volume 8 Issue 3) carried the debate forward in a dialogue forum.

However, the counter argument can be made that if we wish to do work of significance and to influence changes in society toward justice and democracy, we need not only to build large scale networks of inquiry but also to engage in transformations of consciousness and behaviour at personal and interpersonal levels. While it is true that we cannot make large scale change on the basis of small cases, neither can we build truly effective and liberating political networks of inquiry.

without developing significant capacities for critical inquiry in the individuals and small communities which constitute them (Reason, 2004).

In a related development Chandler and Torbert (2003) took the idea of first, second, and third person inquiry a conceptual step forward by pointing to the temporal dimension – inquiry can be concerned with past, present, and future – thereby creating ‘27 varieties’ of action research practice which together allow a comprehensive vision of action research practices. What we are seeing in these contributions is debate at a leading edge of our emerging discipline, as action researchers strive in their thinking and practice to integrate the personal and the political, the micro and the macro, voices in the mainstream of policy debate with those from the margins.

As we suggested in the original handbook, structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) allows us to link the individual to social structures such that both are seen to be related as chicken and egg. As in any causal, recursive loop, change to the pattern of interaction can occur through influence either at the more micro, first and second person levels, or the more macro, third person or institutional levels. Following Giddens (1984), and Bourdieu (1977) we suggest that social and organizational realities may be understood to be outcomes of patterns of interaction between the members: in turn, the members’ dispositions and practices are shaped by social and organizational procedures. A structuration perspective therefore offers theoretical support for seeking leverage for desired change at macro levels through intervention at the individual, and dyadic or small group micro levels and vice versa. While we do not naïvely misunderstand the power of systems as coterminous with that of aggregates of individuals, we do believe in the power of conscious and intentional change which can result from the action research work of individual and committed groups. Indeed, to paraphrase Margaret Mead and Jürgen Habermas, perhaps the only way that systemic change does occur is through the committed action of small groups of people.

### **Introduction to the sections and chapters**

This handbook is divided into four sections which we have called *Groundings*, *Practices*, *Exemplars* and *Skills*. We review our purpose for each section below.

While the handbook consists of a series of separate sections, there are important streams of thinking and practice running throughout. One thing we have learned is that it is almost impossible to write about action research without providing examples. And it is equally difficult to provide an example without referring to the theory and practices on which it is based. So while this volume is divided into four sections, the reader will find that the sections on Groundings and Practices will also contain examples, and the Exemplars will continually refer back to theory and method. We have asked the contributors to indicate the links they see as important, and have provided some ourselves (we did this by building a website on which drafts of chapters were posted so each contributor could see how their work related to others).

### *Groundings*

*Groundings* is intended to review the range of paradigms and metatheories, the perspectives, values and epistemologies, that inform the various practices of action research. Action research is informed by diverse streams of intellectual and political thought, which both inform practice and provide underpinnings in the philosophy of knowledge and social action.

The ordering of chapters in this section is to some extent arbitrary. We begin with three chapters which provide us with different historical accounts of the development of action research, and identify some of the key issues to which this historical process has led us. There follow chapters exploring four areas of concern – race, gender, power and epistemology. Finally, the contributions of three different fundamental meta-theoretical perspectives are described – critical theory, humanistic psychology and systems thinking.

### *Practices*

This section includes chapters representing the diverse approaches to action research. While we eschew thinking about action research as a methodology, different ‘schools’ have articulated the action research orientation in different ways as specific sets of practices which emerge in the interplay between action researchers, context and ideas. Action researchers will draw from a range of methodologies, both those described here and, where appropriate, from recent innovations in qualitative and sometimes quantitative research. These chapters offer a sense of the diversity of practices which together constitute the family of action research approaches. It is perhaps unlikely that a reader new to the field will be able to read a chapter on, say, action science or large group processes, and start practising in the terms illustrated; we do hope that by presenting this range of practices readers will be able to make more informed choices about where to direct their further studies.

### *Exemplars*

The chapters in *Exemplars* show how different researchers – both established contributors to this field and relative neophytes – have taken *Groundings* perspectives and *Practices* into their own work. We have tried to provide exemplars which demonstrate both a range of approaches and a range of fields of application. Action research practices have flourished in business organizations and in rural villages; with formally educated people and with those strong in indigenous knowledge; among professionals seeking to improve their practice and with people dealing with the everyday problems of living. We have made two choices here: one has been to show the diversity of practice, maybe at the expense of depth within a particular field; and another has been to devote considerable space to these examples because we believe that action research is best understood as a way of being and doing in the world, informed ideas and formal practices, but



always free to respond creatively to the requirements of context. There is something here of the spirit of Lyotard's description of the postmodern artist:

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and principles are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard, 1979: 81)

One might say that the primary 'rule' in action research practice is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences; we return to these issues in the Introduction and Conclusion (see also Reason, 2006).

### *Skills*

The Section we have called *Skills* begins to address some of the competencies that may be required to make these choices, the nature of the skills that may be needed for the initiation and conduct of action research. We touch here on the personal practices of action researchers, on supervisory practice with graduate students, and on the practice of facilitation in participatory research.

### **Looking forward**

The handbook is addressed to those whose work allows for the integration of first, second and third person research/practice. Therefore it is addressed to individual actors, groups of action researchers as well as to institutions, especially those devoted to higher learning. This handbook is also addressed to the world of political realities outside academia – with the ambition of bringing activists and others drawing on action research into a closer dialogue with interested academic scholar-practitioners.

From the world of pressing political concerns we are moved by these words from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

It is particularly important to emphasise that the truth could not be divorced from the affirmation of the dignity of human beings. Thus, not only the actual outcome or findings of the investigation counted. The process whereby the truth was reached was itself important because it was through this process that the essential norms of social relations between people were reflected. It was, furthermore, through dialogue and respect that a means of promoting transparency, democracy and participation in society was suggested as a basis for reaffirming human dignity and integrity.

Truth as factual, objective information cannot be divorced from the way in which this information is acquired; nor can such information be separated from the purposes it is required to serve. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, 1998: Chapter 5 pt 42 and 44)

As we address individuals and action research groups, and maybe particularly students in the world of academia, we recall the words which John Rowan authored to conclude the Introduction to *Human Inquiry* in 1981:

What we are contending for in this book is that you don't have to settle for second best. You don't have to accept projects you don't believe in and really don't want to do. You don't have to toe the line of an orthodoxy which is in *many* ways quite illusory. You can do research which is worth

while for you yourself and for the other people involved in it. You can do research on questions which are genuinely important.

Thousands of researchers down the years have started on projects they really believed in, and which embodied ideas they really cared about. But too often these projects got pared down and chopped about and falsified in the process of getting approval, and the researchers got progressively more disillusioned and frustrated as they have gone on. Thousands of researchers have ended their research soured and disappointed and hurt or cynical. It doesn't have to be this way. Research doesn't have to be another brick in the wall. It is obscene to take a young researcher who actually wants to know more about people, and divert them into manipulating 'variables', counting 'behaviours', observing 'responses' and all the rest of the ways in which people are falsified and fragmented. If we want to know about people, we have to encourage them to be who they are, and to resist all attempts to make them – or ourselves – into something we are not, but which is more easily observable, or countable, or manipulable.

Someone has got to be the next generation of great social scientists – the women and men who are going to break the ground of new knowledge for human growth and development to the next stage. You, the reader, might be one of them – why not? But you will only be one of them if you care enough about what you are doing, and who you are, and who the people are who you are doing it with... (Reason and Rowan, 1981: xxiii–xxiv, emphasis in original)

We also note that action research practitioners repeatedly criticize institutional structures, especially universities, as being inappropriate vehicles for the kind of inquiry practices we advocate. Good action research, that is truly differentiated from traditional research, brings the re-patterning of institutional infrastructures in its wake, some quite embryonic, some surprisingly robust over the years. Yet the emphasis in the handbook on reinvigorating universities perhaps underscores the importance of the role of the university through the course of the development of action research. Today we find ourselves faced with complex systemic issues, perhaps the most pressing and inclusive of all being the pressure to move toward ways of being that afford more sustainable human, social-economic and ecological ways of living – climate change, ecological degradation, loss of species (see, for example, Worldwatch Institute, 2005; WWF, 2004). At this time, however, we find our universities continuing to increase the fragmentation of knowledge by rewarding specialization unmediated by a concern for 'the whole'. The focus on conceptual knowledge further relegates in importance the primacy of learning to better align our espoused theory with our actual undertakings. This fragmentation through specialization and dichotomizing action and research comes precisely at a time when 'seeing the whole' and acting appropriately in light of the insights is so important. We believe that action research has much to share with traditional ways of engaging with knowledge work and that action research can increase the relevance of universities and better use the marvellous intellectual resources which sometimes atrophy in increasingly fragmenting intellectual pursuits.

As debates about the limits of a 'disinterested' social science continue and while we wait for and work toward a world that is more just and sustainable than the one in which we find ourselves, constructive alternatives to science like the action research you find described in these pages are needed to fill the void.

So we invite you into this handbook, exploring participative inquiry and practice from the perspective of your first person research and practice, attending to what

raws your attention, excites you and meets your developmental needs; your second person research and practice, attending to what will work for and liberate your co-researchers and others with whom you work; attending always to the wider third person cultural and political concerns which frame your work and which call for attention. Moreover we ask that you share your work with the community of your peers. Let us know how we can support you in that.

### Thank you

It's so good to look back on the years since these chapters were painstakingly written and edited and know that the handbook has found a deservedly large and growing audience. Our collaboration – still inter-generational, inter-continental and inter-gendered – remains as productive as ever. In the years that have passed since the original handbook, a new journal of *Action Research* and a new edition of the handbook are coming into being. We each manage to catch the ball when the other drops it and to design all sorts of new projects while waiting to throw it back. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes: a good collaborator is worth their weight in gold. One of our talents is a capacity for inquiry and commitment to 'acompañamiento' or 'accompanying the process' (see Whitmore and McKee, Chapter 28) of others in the action research community. We therefore ask that you share your candid reactions and we hope to see your work pop up in all manner of worthwhile endeavours and your accounts be shared with the community of action researchers.

Peter Reason, Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice,  
University of Bath, England

Hilary Bradbury, Associate Professor  
Organizational Behavior,  
Weatherhead School of Management,  
Case Western Reserve University, USA

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