5

Action Research

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5.1 Introduction

Action research (AR) is a strategy for social research that combines the expertise and facilitation of a professional social researcher with the knowledge, energy, and commitments of local stakeholders in a particular organizational, community, political, or environmental setting. Together, these actors form a collaborative learning community to define the problems, decide the data needed to understand them, and generate hypotheses about the relevant causes. They then engage together in gathering data, recruiting additional stakeholders, and interpreting the results. Finally, they co-design the actions arising from their results to ameliorate the problems, take the actions, and then evaluate the results. They evaluate the results together, and if the results do not meet their expectations, they engage in further cycles of research, analysis, and action until the

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problems have been addressed to their satisfaction. The learning community so created operates according to a set of values that privilege respect for the knowledge and interests of all participants (including the social researcher), democratic dialogue that aims to permit the group to learn from the experiences and commitments of all of its members, and that is premised on the ability of all people to become more effective researchers and to act more successfully on their own behalf. Action research is guided by value commitments that include enhancing democratic participation, increasing people's ability to pursue their own interests, educating non-professional researchers in the use and critique of techniques of social research and in the wise use of professional consultants.[1]

5.2   What Action Research Is Not

Conventional social researchers divide themselves generally into "quantitative" researchers who use numbers and statistical models and "qualitative" researchers who privilege interpretive and symbolic approaches to research. Action researchers reject making such a choice on pragmatic grounds. Our choice of methods and approaches must be dictated by the requirements of the problem being addressed. If an oil spill has polluted a domestic water supply and the oil company denies it, then a quantitative scientific analysis of the geology, groundwater, and related matters is a central part of the research. If public officials are not enforcing zoning laws, satellite imagery, GIS data, tax assessment rolls, and so on form part of the research response. If non-native speakers of the official language in public schools are being patronized and not taken seriously as students, in addition to the educational outcomes data, ethnographic analyses and interviews about race/ethic stereotypes and other prejudices form a necessary part of the work. The professional researcher working with an AR project does not have to be an expert in all these methods, though she must have a solid familiarity with the major alternatives. Rather she must be able to help the group access such research or researchers and guide the process of incorporating these kinds of data in their work.

Real-world human problems are generally multi-dimensional, dynamic, and complex. The conceit of a simplified academic division of labor that tries to treat some issues as appropriate to history, others to political science, others to economics, and so on is useless. Solving real problems in context without oversimplification is a requirement for action research projects.

Action research is not applied research. In applied research, conventional researchers examine a social problem, develop a set of recommendations, and then try to implement a plan of action. They define the problem, they create the recommendations, and they design the intervention, all on the basis of their research and their professional expertise. As Flyvbjerg puts it, they know what "the good life" is (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In action research, the researcher is an important part of the group but also brings academic and experiential knowledge brought from other projects and from the literature. The local participants are experts in their own lives, problems, and situation, and their knowledge of the details of their problem and the possibilities for action is great. It is up to them to decide what the problem is, that "the good life" would be like, and how it is to be brought into being. Their local knowledge is key, and they will have to implement and live with the consequences of their actions in a way that the professional researcher will not.

Action research is not a social theory but a set of procedures for the deployment of a wide variety of theoretical approaches generated historically in the social sciences. Action researchers are opportunistic in using any and all theoretical approaches that promise to be of help in addressing the problems the stakeholders have identified.

5.3   What Action Research Is

Action research is participatory social research in a variety of senses. It opens up research process to non-professional researchers who are stakeholders in the problem at hand. These non-professional researchers not only provide input for the process but engage in the key decisions about the goals, methods, execution, and interpretation of the results. Action

research is about doing research with rather than on people. Because the local stakeholders are directly affected, they have the right collaboratively to guide the process.

Action research is based on the proposition that all significant learning is based on a well-managed interaction between reflection and action. Without reflection, action is incompetently guided but without action, reflection is basically useless. In this way, action research is diametrically opposed to the dominant ideology of the conventional social sciences and conventional applied social research that demands a radical separation of theory and action, of theory and application and accepts the falsehood that it is necessary or possible to theorize without applying the theories in concrete contexts.

Action researchers believe that separating theory and action is the highroad to social science irrelevance and patronizing applied research projects. The irrelevance and public disrepute of much social science is explained by the devaluation of application. It permits academic social researchers to study social problems without taking action and liberates applied researchers from the demands of theoretical sophistication.

Leaving aside the micropolitics of the social scientists, a more epistemologically and methodologically important issue is at stake. Action research is firmly based on scientific methods that require defining problems in an open and clear way, developing a variety of hypothetical explanations for the problem at hand, determining which data are relevant to the analysis of the problem, collecting the data systematically and well, organizing the data, and using the data to test the hypotheses. In the case of action research, as in the case of laboratory sciences, the test of the interpretations is made in context. If the action research–based interpretation of the problem is correct, the actions designed on these interpretations will produce the desired results. If not, the process has to be reiterated, altering hypotheses, collecting different data, working through other interpretations, or all of the above until the outcomes match the expectations.

The contrast between this and social theory developed in the absence of application or applications developed in the absence of theory is stark. Theory without application is mere speculation. Untheorized application is mere guesswork. Of course, separating theory from application makes learning from experience all but impossible.

5.4   The Assumptions Underlying Action Research

The following are some of the key assumptions underlying most action research. Action researchers believe that most important human problems are multi-dimensional, dynamic, and interactive. Therefore, we argue that only multi-dimensional, dynamic, and interactive research strategies can yield meaningful results to such challenges. This involves rejecting the current Fordist division of labor model of the academic world that separates disciplines and expertise into non-interacting silos. These multi-disciplinary successes of the physical, life, and information sciences in recent decades suggest that they have understood these challenges in the same way action researchers do. Not so with the social scientists and humanists.

Action research is based on respect for the knowledge and intelligence of non-academic people. We believe that most people are capable of conducting research, interpreting the results, and designing actions based on these interpretations when the collaborative learning processes are well structured. A corollary of this is that non-academic experience is as important as formal education in conducting efficacious research. The other side of not believing in the knowledge monopoly of academics is for all participants to learn to share their diverse experiences, skills, and hopes and to synthesize this diversity into shared knowledge and plans for action. This is also the foundational belief for democracy. Action research is democracy in action.

5.5   The Origins of Action Research

Action research is not new. It has been around since the beginning of the Western intellectual tradition but it has been increasingly suppressed as capitalism extended its grasp over the global system.

5.5.1   The Philosophical Bases of Action Research

All the key bases for action research are clearly present in the work of Classical Greek thinkers. Aristotle is perhaps the key source of the rele-

vant concepts for action research. His distinctions between kinds of knowing into *epistêmê*, *tekhnê*, and *phrónêsis* has been revisited repeatedly in recent years by Olav Eikeland (2008),[2] Stephen Toulmin (1990), Stephen Toulmin and Björn Gustavsen, Eds. (1996), and Bent Flyvbjerg (*op. cit.*) to show that the contemporary dichotomy of knowledge into theory and application is not only wrong but is a profound dilution of the Aristotelian legacy. *Phrónêsis* is not just an essential ingredient but is also the source of the most valued forms of social knowledge such as clinical knowledge.

A second major ingredient in this philosophical genealogy is the work of the American pragmatist philosophers William James (1948, 1995) and John Dewey (1900, 1902, 1991). Their views about the link between thought and action, collaborative learning, and the testing of ideas in the context of application are a core ingredient in all action research. This connects to the work of Wittgenstein on "language games" (Wittgenstein 1953, Monk 1990), Habermas (1984, 1992) on "ideal speech situations", Gadamer (1982) on hermeneutics, and Rorty (1981) on neo-pragmatism.[3]

Thus there is a very significant philosophical basis for action research, a philosophical basis that most conventional researchers ignore.

5.5.2   The Social Bases of Action Research

Action research has re-emerged at this point in history as a counter-proposal to the hopeless situation of the academic and applied social sciences as currently organized. This problem began with the creation of doctoral programs and professionalization of the social sciences in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Beginning as political economy with Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx, the social sciences were ripped out of this holistic perspective, first by separating history from political economy, then by separating economics out as a discipline and then subsequently by dividing the remaining turf into sociology, psychology, political science, and anthropology. Coinciding with the creation of doctoral programs in the social sciences in the United States from 1880 to 1910 (Cole 2009; Ross 1991; Madoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley 1998), this resulted in the fragmentation and academicization of social research that endure to this day.

This fragmentation creates professional academic monopolies that served the interests of academic professionals but that shed the holism and reformist intent of political economy, converting academic social science into a non-threatening, for-professionals-only set of activities. Even the ongoing policy relevance of economics has been deeply troubling to economists who continue to privilege theory over practice and who exiled welfare economics and institutional economics on their road to theoretical purity (Furner 1975). In the words of Slaughter and Leslie (1997), academic social scientists have organized themselves into mini-cartels that, unlike the cartels of advanced capitalism, mainly produce and consume their own products (graduate students, research projects, and professional books and articles). This activity becomes entirely auto-poetic.

The loss of integration that came with the dismemberment of political economy means that the contemporary social sciences define research problems in the light of their own theories and methods rather than taking the problems on in their real-world contexts and complexities. Then by treating application as anti-intellectual, they wall themselves off from the recognition that either their theories and methods don't work or matter to most people. In effect, this has "de-socialized" the academic social sciences. A sure way to have a failed academic career in the social sciences is to show an interest in activist research (Greenwood 2008).

Conventional social scientists actively contribute to the maintenance of class relations through education, engaging in the social production of elites and elitism. It is no surprise that academic neo-liberalism, such as "rational choice theory", has become the dominant paradigm in economics, sociology, and political science.

5.5.3   Counter-movements

Historically there have been counter-movements against the hegemony of the abstracted, professionalized, disengaged social sciences. The battle between political economy and neo-classical economics raged for a generation or more (Furner, *op. cit.*) and gave rise to academic purges. Reformist sociology was quickly purged of its reformers like Jane Addams (Magoo Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, *op. cit.*). The anti-Jim Crow, anti-American Indian genocide, and anti-immigration quota com-

mitments of the American anthropologists were quickly muted. By the time of the McCarthy era, most academic social scientists knew how to steer as clear of social reform work and engaged in self-censorship to be sure they stayed socially irrelevant (Price 2004).

Despite this many counter-movements have come and gone. Institutional economics with people like Thorstein Veblen and Clarence Ayres had its brief moment. The Human Relations movement in sociology had a similar rise and fall. The founding of the Society for Applied Anthropology signaled a rejection of academic business as usual in American anthropology but it too was quickly domesticated. And history has repeated itself with science and technology studies, feminism, and ethics studies, each starting as a reform movement and then being "disciplined" into conventional socially distanced academic activities (e.g. Messer-Davidow 2002).

Outside of academia, some parts of NGO world have attempted to challenge the hegemony of authoritarian neo-liberal international development agencies like the World Bank, the IMF, and USAID with some small successes. As yet they have not mounted an effective challenge to the hegemony of these organizations that directly promote global capitalist interests. Liberation movements in the global "South", including Catholic Action, Marxist-inspired organizing, adult education, organizations inspired by liberation theology, and even some evangelical groups have challenged business-as-usual in international development and developed significant momentum for some periods (Freire 1970; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Horton 1990; Horton and Freire 1990; Hisdale et al. 1995; Belenky et al. 1997a, b; Park et al. 1993).

5.6 How to do Action Research?

A synthetic presentation of how to do action research is misleading because the sequences, issues to be engaged, and contextual conditions always affect what is possible and what is done. So the following is really an abstract model of processes that, on the ground, often look quite different but that do not violate the general principles articulated here.

AR begins with either the formation of a group of interested stakeholders with a shared problem or with joining an already-existing group of the interested stakeholders. How this happens varies greatly. Sometimes stakeholders seek out an action researcher for assistance. Sometimes action researchers have garnered some resources that could help solve an important problem and go out to create a collaborative group. Once the group is formed, the participants, after getting to know each other and after time spent learning about the pressing problems, engage in a collaborative problem selection process. Often there are more problems than resources (in time and money) than can be dealt with and the collaborative group has to engage in a process of prioritizing among issues.

When the problem to be dealt with has been selected, a process of working through as many possible explanations for the existence and persistence of the problem are examined. This often involves the professional researcher bringing in what is known about the problem from the published literature and from her experience and lengthy discussions among the other stakeholders about their experiences of and understandings of the problem.

From this emerges a set of research requirements that the group must meet in order to deal effectively with the problem. This requires division of research labor among all the stakeholders and the provision of training for the interested stakeholders so they can engage more effectively in the research processes. The research process is planned and then a period of collaborative research ensues in which some people work individually, others in teams, and there are meetings to share research problems and preliminary results.

As the initial research phase closes, the group engages in a comprehensive sharing of results and subjects all the work to critique and interpretation. Problems, oversights, and findings are all evaluated and gradually a vision of the obstacles standing in the way of solving the problems emerges. At this point, the group engages in collaborative design of actions to remedy the problem and a specific action plan for undertaking the change process. From this, the group becomes an action team, applying their action designs to the problem and gathering information about the results. If the outcomes are not what were expected or if new obstacles emerge, the group recycles the action design and implementation process

until a better link between the actions and positive outcomes is achieved. This necessarily involves data collection about the results and a systematic and open analysis of the effectiveness of the actions backed up with data about the results capable of convincing third parties of the credibility of the claims.

Often this process is diagramed as an ascending spiral rather than as a linear plan because cycles of reflection and action often cause modification in the initial problem formulations, interpretations, strategies for action and the group may move various times through problem formulation, research, action design, action, and evaluation (Reason, ed. 1988, 1994).

5.6.1   Role of Professional Researcher

One of the unique features of action research is the role of the professional researcher. Research training, skills in methods, knowledge of theory, experience in research are all essential to AR processes. The professional researcher needs to be a well-trained professional social researcher with a broad multi-disciplinary background. But the action researcher is not the solo researcher who does research on and for others. Rather she is a facilitator of group processes leading to the creation of more effective learning arenas for the other stakeholders and herself. She is a teacher but also a learner from the store of experience and judgment of the other stakeholders. She is a facilitator but also a collaborator who participates in the research process directly and also coaches the other researchers.

As an experienced social scientist, the action researcher already has a good deal of training and experience in organizing data, formulating interpretations, and synthetically writing about what is being learned. But, while it is often too tempting, she does not do all the writing or dominate the representation of the work. She is expected to serve as an assistant in developing texts and presentations based on the shared experiences but also to help others learn these skills in the course of a project. Where the educational level of the other stakeholders is very modest, the requirements that the professional researcher do the writing are greater. But action researchers must always remain alert to the way that rendering

the projects in writing can co-opt the voices and knowledge of others. Thus, even as a solo writer, action researchers are expected to take the writing to the collaborators and explain what is being said about the project and make the modifications they deem relevant.

Action researchers also do write for other action researchers. Reflecting on what they have learned in carrying out projects and generating ideas they want to share to help improve the practice of other action researchers is not just a legitimate but necessary activity. However, this is a separate intellectual task from supporting an action research project team.

Thus the action researcher is not the boss, not the solo intellectual, not the team leader but a specialized team member who brings training, techniques, theories, and methods as needed in support of the group's efforts and who facilitates the collaborative learning process in the group.

5.7   Examples of Action Research Projects

Despite the convenience of imagining that all AR, or any other social research projects for that matter, develop according to an ideal plan, this is never the case. AR project development is as diverse as the projects themselves and the AR strategies used. What they have in common is a commitment to democratizing the research process and creating outcomes that the stakeholders see as positive. In that spirit, I will give two examples from my own experience to emphasize how different projects can be in terms of starting points, goals, kinds of collaborators, and institutional settings.

5.7.1   The Mondragón Project

This project took place within the Central Services department of what was then the FAGOR Cooperative Group in the labor-managed cooperatives of Mondragón (now linked in an overall group, the Mondragón cooperatives. *Mondragón: Humanity at Work* is the current name of the group. Founded in 1956, these labor-managed cooperatives are the most successful in the world, now employing over 75,000 worker-owners in

242 companies on five continents. Because they are so unusual in being competitively successful labor-managed organizations they are the subject of many studies (Thomas and Logan 1982; Whyte and Whyte 1991). One of the researchers, a famous professor of industrial and labor relations at Cornell University, William Foote Whyte, was conducting a study of them (Whyte and Whyte, *op. cit.*) and, in the process, he offered a feedback seminar to his hosts with his critiques of their operations. The head of human resources for the FAGOR Group thanked him for his critique and then asked him how he intended to help them solve the problems.

Whyte knew that I was an expert on the Spanish Basque Country and involved me in what became a funded project with the cooperative members. Since they had immense experience in collaborative group problem-solving, I decided that any attempt to solve their problems should be built on those practices and be consistent with the cooperative approach to collaborative management. To that end, we convened the research stakeholders they chose and I facilitated a long series of seminars aimed at finding out what problems they had that they wanted to solve and then figuring out what research techniques and processes they needed to learn and apply to develop solutions.

Over the course of what became a three-year AR project, they determined their core concern was that they were adding so many new members who were recruited because of well-paying, stable jobs in a good work environment. They worried that these recruits did not share the democratic values of the cooperatives. The research we did subjected this view to examination and we discovered that it was quite wrong. They were right that people were recruited by the good jobs and conditions but they learned that new workers soon came to value the cooperative approach highly. The dissatisfaction and alienation these worker-managers experienced stemmed rather from the hierarchical, authoritarian ways human resources were handled. In effect, the new recruits were disappointed about the failure of the management of the cooperatives to live up to cooperative values. The result was the need for major changes in the mode of operation of the human resources organizations and these changes were put into practice. In addition, the members of the research group also became an internal consulting organization for cooperatives

having human resource problems and used AR as the way of working on change projects. Finally, we together wrote two books about this work (Greenwood et al. 1990, 1992), and the Spanish-language version was used as part of the training program for new hires.

From beginning to end, I combined group process facilitation and consulting on research methods. However, I was also a teacher of methods and social science interpretation and writing, doing some of my own writing but mainly helping the cooperative members develop their own research and writing skills.

5.7.2 Ford Canal Corridor Initiative

The Housing and Urban Development authority of the US government gave out a significant amount of money to try to re-develop the old barge canal system in New York State for the purpose of creating tourism and related employment opportunities. The barge canal system had been the principal transport network for manufacturing in the period before the railroads and interstate highway system and many small industrial towns sprang up and prospered along the canals. However, when that transportation system lapsed, the towns fell into a long cycle of de-industrialization and population loss. The concept of the HUD Canal Corridor Initiative was to restructure the canals as a tourism asset and attempt to create new economic opportunities for these small towns.

After a period of grants, HUD put out a call for proposals to evaluate the results and a group of sociologists, planners, and economists from Cornell University submitted a proposal. The general proposal was of interest to HUD but they insisted on adding an action research dimension to it. The assembled program team had no competence in AR and thus contacted me and Frank Barry, Senior Extension Associate, in the Family Life Development Center at Cornell to help. In return for training the group in AR, we insisted on doing small AR projects in two canal corridor communities on the subject of community development.

In both communities, Frank Barry had prior contacts regarding youth programs. Since opportunities for youth and preparation for adult careers were burning issues in both communities, coalitions of adults and

authorities (mayor, superintendent of schools, bankers, teachers, local religious authorities) all had interests in the development of opportunities for youth. We began with these coalitions and engaged in a process by which they expanded the participation in their coalition to include all the major categories of stakeholders in their communities, including the youth themselves. Each of these groups developed a focal issue for an AR activity and we then convened a two-day search conference (a participatory strategic planning process, see Greenwood and Levin, *op. cit.*) in which they developed their shared history of these problems, their understandings of the assets they have and the obstacles they face, and developed action plans in a variety of areas related to youth opportunities.

We provided ongoing support for these action teams during a year's time and then reconvened the two community groups together for a process of sharing their progress and developing their ongoing plans. In neither community were the results revolutionary but both communities developed more collaborative capacities to work on community projects and better linkages with the various state and other funders to help them push forward their community development plans. One of the communities succeeded in getting additional competitive funding for ongoing efforts.[4]

5.8   Varieties of Action Research

There are as many varieties of AR as there are visions of social change and the ideal democratic society. Morten Levin and I have documented the varieties in greater detail in Greenwood and Levin (2007).

Many action researchers take a reformist approach to social change. That is to say, they are critical of existing social arrangements but they are not revolutionaries. They believe in the possibilities of meaningful reform within the structure of current global capitalism. They are not naive and believe that, even if the larger problems of inequality and exploitation cannot be overcome easily, a great deal can be done to improve the quality of life, work, and communities within the existing structures. Examples of these approaches would be Whyte and Whyte (*op. cit.*), Greenwood et al. (*op. cit.*), Reason (*op. cit.*), Heron (1996), and Flood and Romm (1996).

Other action researchers take a more liberationist approach to these issues. While generally not being declared revolutionaries, they take a more directly confrontational approach to power and exploitation and believe in using AR to build the capacities of the oppressed to confront power successfully. Examples are Freire (*op. cit.*), Fals Borda and Rahman (*op. cit.*), Hall (1975), Hall et al. (1982), Horton (*op. cit.*), Hisdale et al. (*op. cit*).

Still others see AR as working as much within the stakeholders as in the larger society. They emphasize the development of psychodynamic approaches to non-defensiveness, the ability to confront power more directly, and learning to work in groups by both leading and supporting leaders in a variety of ways. Their assumption is that more healthy and effective individuals together can bring about significant changes in their own environments and ultimately in society as well. Examples are Argyris (1974, 1980, 1985, 1993), Argyris et al. (1985), Argyris and Schön (1978), Schön (1983, 1987), and Schön et al. (1991), Belenky et al. (*op. cit.)*, Hirschhorn (1990, 1998).

Another group of action researchers engages problems at the system level. From their perspective, many of the defects of our society come from larger-scale system processes and need to be addressed systemically. Thus they build large-scale regional and national programs that integrate work across many local sites in larger development coalitions that share their learning and strategies and together attempt to move the larger system in a more democratic direction (Gustavsen 1985, 1992; Levin 1984, 1993, 1994; Flood and Romm, *op. cit.*). There are many more varieties of AR but this inventory points out how very different the practices and strategies can be.

5.9   Visions of Authority in AR

One of the significant ways practitioners of AR differ is in their analytical view and attitude toward authority. These views range from the an almost anarchist belief that all authority relations are an obstruction to human development to a therapeutic view of the AR practitioner as a strong leader who liberates human potential for important change processes to

begin. And all the positions in between—facilitator models, team-based cooperation, dialogue leaders, activist organizer models—are represented in the literature (Reason and Bradbury, Eds.). These are differences that make a difference because they affect the way AR processes are initiated, how the collaborators are treated, what kinds of group processes are accepted, what kinds of changes are considered to be significant or worthwhile, and how success is measured. No one of these positions is correct. Knowing the difference matters since at the very least, an AR practitioner has the obligation to understand her own theories and practices of change and to have clear ethical standards that guide her conduct over the course of projects.

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 attempt to capture the implications of some of the key differences in approaches for the practice of action research.

Regarding the vision of social change that inspires the action research project, the tables point to four different views of the key locus of significant democratic social change. Each of these visions tends to correspond in certain ways with the four approaches to action research intervention I have laid out. The reformist/collaborative approach can use diverse approaches but not the "organizer" view that assumes that the outside organizer knows better what local stakeholders need. The systems interventionist practitioner must have a prior notion of the system of which the problem is a part and thus shares some of the vision of the organizer but also sees dealing with particular key processes in the system itself as a central point. The psychodynamically inclined practitioner tends to focus on dialogue and individual psychodynamics as the keys to producing change in a system.

Table 5.1 Vision of social change

Intervention approach	Reformist/ collaborative	Liberationist/ confrontational	Systems practice	Psychodynamic interventionist
Facilitator/ dialogue leader	X			X
Systems interventionist	X		X	
Organizer		X	X	
Psychodynamic	X			X

Table 5.2 Approach to participation

Intervention approach	Input	Consultation	Collaboration	Self-managing group
Facilitator/dialogue leader			X	X
Systems interventionist	X	X	X	
Organizer	X	X		
Psychodynamic	X			X

Regarding participation, these approaches also differ a good deal. The facilitator/dialogue leader emphasizes collaboration and the group's skills at self-management. The systems interventionist emphasizes input, consultation, and collaboration but is somewhat less focused on creating self-managing groups and more on creating healthier systems processes. The organizer wants input and consultation, but because organizers already have a vision of the changes needed, they are less interested in collaboration than in group discipline and not very committed to the creation of self-managing groups that may depart from the organizer's strategy. The psychodynamic approach stresses extensive personal input and the creation of dynamics that lead to self-managing groups that are characterized by healthy psychological attitudes and processes.

5.10 Particular Problems Encountered in AR

While this does not distinguish AR from other forms of social research and intervention, it is important to acknowledge that no AR project ever is perfect. All projects fall short of perfection and participatory processes can always be enhanced and deepened, no matter how successful they are. Since conventional research also rarely goes according to the ideal plan, it is important to explain why this is particularly important in AR. People engaging in AR projects are committed to democratizing social situations, to the ethical treatment of collaborators, and to the possibility of major social improvements in concert with strong ethical beliefs. Given that, the stakes in an AR project are very high for the participants. Not having a project work perfectly and according to plan; having conflicts break out occasionally in the group; and not getting everyone to partici-

pate fully can feel like failure in more than a research project—it can feel like failure in democracy and a lack of integrity. This matters because no AR project is perfect and novice practitioners may become discouraged early in projects when they do not develop perfectly and they may assume they are doing something wrong. AR projects succeed incrementally, on a day-by-day basis, and with backward and forward movements throughout.

Many AR projects never realize the full potential of AR. Sometimes the conditions simply are not suitable. It may be that political conditions militate against it. It may be that there simply are not enough financial resources to carry on. Or a group may simply run out of energy before achieving all of their goals. This is common in AR work but many partially realized AR projects do some real good. People learn new skills, gain new perspectives on important problems, solve some but not all the problems they face. These are all real accomplishments and the incompleteness of the project should not cause the participants to lose sight of what they have accomplished.

The professional authority and professional respect are very much in play in AR projects. Particularly in the early phases, the local stakeholders' confidence that the professional researcher knows what she is doing and has plan for the group is important in developing the kind of group dynamic to enable participants to take control of a developmental process themselves. And yet the professional needs to operate more like a midwife than like a surgeon. The professional needs to be attentive to training other participants in the approaches, in ceding or in demanding that authority be shared (along with responsibility), and in not dominating the air space and the communication about the project. Since conventional professionals are trained to want a high degree of authority, to see themselves in a specialist and technical role that makes them superior to the other participants in certain ways, learning to be professional and not to be domineering requires both practice and self-discipline. Unless the professional actively presses in this direction, the default result is that people defer to the professional, eventually get alienated from the process, and withdraw their interest and participation.

The status of the professional also involves intellectual property issues. The currency of professional activity is a combination of written products and compensation that are the supposed requirements of a professional role. The question of intellectual property is vexed in AR because the intellectual property created by the participants is a joint creation that would not have happened easily without professional facilitation. At the same time, many participants are not interested in or do not feel able to write about what they have done and there is a strong tendency for the professional to be expected to do all the writing.

This is a complex matter. The professional is an experienced writer, someone who has learned how to take a variety of materials, synthesize them and put them into narrative form. The professional also may be learning things in the process that are of interest to other professional colleagues but not to other participants in the project. The best solutions are to be open about the intellectual property issues, to work out agreements about who writes and speaks with whom about what, and what rights of review by the stakeholders and the professional exist. Often this works out reasonably well by means of writing some things together or in mutual consultation for the project and by the professional writing other things for professional colleagues, things not so much of interest to the other stakeholders but over which they have some say in deciding if they have been fairly described. In my own personal experience, one of my richest AR experience came from an ambitious and extended project of writing the results up with the other participants. They varied a good deal in their comfort with writing but the time spent working on drafts, debating analyses, and the rest of the discipline that goes with writing was described by one member of the group as the richest learning experience in the whole project.

Since AR is based on both a respect for diversity and a belief that the diversity of experience, perspective, and capability is one of the most important resources an AR group has, dealing with diversity positively is essential to AR projects. However, dealing with diversity by avoiding any conflict, reconciling all differences by lowest common denominator solutions, and by being politically correct rather than honest can undermine an AR project entirely. All stakeholders have a right to articulate their

views, to debate with others, and to disagree when they sincerely don't agree. But AR projects proceed by leaving contentious issues that cannot be resolved aside and concentrating on those actions that people can agree to take forward. Sometimes an experience of success with a few issues can make it possible for groups to go back to more divisive issues with new energy and confront those as well.

Paolo Freire's goal of "speaking the truth to power" sounds wonderful but needs to be thought through carefully. Sometimes doing so can bring the immediate destruction of a group of stakeholders. In such cases they should avoid confrontations, at least until they have become well enough organized and supported to be able to deal with a direct confrontation. In any case, one rule of AR is not to take risks for other people. Therefore, taking actions in risky situations must be analyzed carefully in the group. Here the facilitator has important responsibilities because some group dynamics lead people to be silent in the face of power and that has to be confronted. On the other hand, another kind of group dynamic can lead people collectively to feel obligated to take risky actions that as individuals they would not take. This is called "risky shift" in social psychology (Wallach et al. 1962). The professional facilitator has a clear obligation also to be alert to this dynamic and to discourage the group from taking more risks than the members who make it up feel comfortable with.

Action research directly confronts the academic social scientists and is obligated to "speak the truth to" academic social scientists about their complicity in the *status quo* through their face-saving distinction between rigor and relevance, between objectivity and engagement, between analyzing and acting. Everything in AR militates against the validity of these distinctions and thus rejects the bedrock of the practices of the abstracted academic social sciences. To the extent one is to be an action researcher, one must be ready to confront the academic establishment and to face the hostility that unmasking the convenient ways the academic social sciences evade action and social responsibility necessarily creates. Conventional researchers oppose AR because AR questions their right to do what they do and questions the reward structures that support their behavior.

Notes

1. For general references on action research see Greenwood and Levin (2007), Stringer (2004), Stringer (2007), and Reason and Bradbury, Eds. (2007).
2. Of these, Eikeland's is the most reliable and fully explained resource and also has the virtue of being written by a philosopher with a quarter century of action research experience.
3. For a critical review of pragmatism, see Diggins (1994).
4. For an analysis of this project, see Schafft and Greenwood (2003).

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