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## Action Research: An Opportunity for Revitalizing Research Purpose and Practices

Hilary Bradbury and Peter Reason  
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ARTICLE

## Action Research

### An Opportunity for Revitalizing Research

#### Purpose and Practices

**Hilary Bradbury**

*Case Western Reserve University, USA*

**Peter Reason**

*University of Bath, UK*

#### ABSTRACT

In this overview the authors describe the underlying principles of action research as: (1) grounded in lived experience, (2) developed in partnership, (3) addressing significant problems, (4) working with, rather than simply studying, people, (5) developing new ways of seeing/theorizing the world, and (6) leaving infrastructure in its wake. We refer to the role of social workers as frontline implementers of important social policies and suggest how action research can be used to both implement and also influence the creation of such policies. We offer examples of action research efforts that can be applied to the social worker's practice-scholarship repertoire.

#### KEY WORDS:

action research

participation

research methods

useful research

Action research is best considered a *family* of approaches and practices. The core concern for action researchers is to develop practical as well as conceptual contributions by doing research *with*, rather than *on* people. We include illustrations intended to help social workers consider how an action research orientation might add to their current repertoire. We then reflect on what constitutes quality in the practice of action research more generally.

In a recently published edited volume, entitled *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001), we defined action research as:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview. It seeks to reconnect action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. More generally it grows out of a concern for the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001: 1)

Examples of action research practices have changed the world in great and small ways. For example, a recent report from Harvard's Hauser Center 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). This 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 USA, 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-loaning. 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.

This example suggests core, ideal elements of action research. Action research is grounded in lived experience, developed in partnership, addresses significant problems, works with (rather than simply studies) people, develops new ways of seeing/interpreting the world (i.e. theory), and leaves infrastructure in its wake.

## ACTION RESEARCH AND QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Action researchers design their projects overall in ways that are often indistinguishable from qualitative designs that are also field based, longitudinal and engaged. Multiple qualitative research methods may be used (e.g. 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 (Lincoln, 2001). 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.

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 (Wells, 2000). Most efforts to describe the gap (cf. 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 practiced by 'practitioners,' who, by definition, are not researchers. Strategies for enhancing appropriate use of research stress the importance of new institutional emphasis on forging closer bonds between the fragmented spheres of knowledge generation and knowledge application. As action research is research with, 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.

## THE FAMILY OF ACTION RESEARCH

Generally speaking, all action researchers must strive to align the interests and agendas of all involved in a project so as to be able to work in collaboration. Reason (1994; 1998; 2001) stresses cooperative small group inquiry as a way to transform individual experience through group reflection aimed at enhanced practice. Action researchers in the Participative Action Research (PAR) tradition (e.g. Bhatt and Tandon, 2001; Fals Borda, 2001; Gaventa and Cornwall,

2001; Hall, 2001; Lykes et al., 2001; Swantz et al., 2001) have developed a body of scholarship and practice concerned specifically with engaging oppressed groups. Action research with more elite members of society is also common, perhaps especially in the business and organizational world (Argyris et al., 1985; Bradbury and Mainemelis, 2001; Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Schein, 1999; Senge et al., 1994; Torbert, 1991). Some action researchers (e.g. Schein, 2001) go so far as to say if one is not explicitly invited by the research subjects to help, one cannot work as an action researcher. Others see their work starting with less action focused, qualitative approaches, and as relationships and insight develop, a more action research approach becomes possible. Sometimes an action research approach is simply impossible, e.g. where researchers and research subjects do not explicitly try to collaborate over time, action research cannot be said to be taking place.

## ACCOUNTING FOR ACTION RESEARCH EPISTEMOLOGY THROUGH PRACTICE

Traditionally science has privileged knowing through *thinking* over knowing through *doing*. The Cartesian foundation for traditional science is based on the insight that, in doubting, a person can know he thinks and thereby know that he exists (i.e. '*dubito, 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 school of pragmatism (Dewey, 1938; Habermas, 1971; James, 1908/1978; 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 action. For example, drawing particularly on Habermas' theory of communicative action, Kemmis (2001) 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 an inherently value laden activity. As noted above, Yunus, who 'invented' the practices behind micro-lending, was pained by the poverty and powerlessness of people who seemed to need less than a dollar. His motivation for action research sprang from his personal experience. This is the case with most action researchers. Some action researchers come as 'issue oriented,' recognizing that certain inerasable challenges simply require participation, if structural conditions which shape how we act are to change. Regardless of approach, our work in the domain of action research consciously begins with questions of purpose and audience, i.e. for whom is this research?

## FRAMING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION RESEARCH AND SOCIAL WORK

Social workers are frontline implementers of important social policies (Baldwin, 2001). Some may also wish to influence the creation of those policies. One way to frame action research efforts is to see these two activities as evoking fundamentally different types of discourse. The first is implementation focused and as such is 'single loop,' meaning that it refers to work which operates with accepted values and seeks to maximize activity in congruence with those values. The second involves policy efforts and is therefore 'double loop,' meaning that it refers to work in which the values themselves are opened to questioning. We use these cybernetic terms to connect with a long tradition of systems or relational thinking. The terms 'single loop' and 'double loop' were made popular in the action research work of Chris Argyris, (cf. Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman, 2001). Double loop action research is necessarily oriented to opening places for dialogue and conversation where there was none before. Single loop action research may be expressed in terms of cycles of action and reflection with testing in practice. Both single and double loop action research may be, and frequently are, interwoven in one action research project.

Action research is best described with illustration rather than conceptual elements alone. We offer three illustrative examples. Each example has a primary focus on *first-person*, *second-person* or *third-person* action research practice (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Torbert, 2001; Varela and Shear, 1999; Wilber, 1998).

*First-person action research/practice* skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act choicefully and with awareness, so as to assess effects in the outside world. *Second-person action research/practice* addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern and engage with others productively. *Third-person research/practice* builds upon the practices of first and second person to create a wider community of inquiry involving a whole organization or community. We have come to believe that action research that integrates at least two of these modes is best placed to develop work that creates impact. For each type we offer illustration for how a social worker might act, both as a frontline implementer and in a more strategic capacity.

### FIRST PERSON RESEARCH PRACTICE: DEVELOPING ATTENTION IN THE MIDST OF LIFE FOR BETTER ACTION RESEARCH

In discussing first person work we draw especially on the work of William Torbert, an early and strong proponent of the importance of self observation and inquiry, within the larger context of action inquiry (Torbert, 1976; 1991;

2001). In essence action inquiry refers to efforts to remain in inquiry during the flow of activity in our lives and work. Being responsibly conscious about how we are acting (be it in framing our activity, strategizing, performing and/or assessing) is suggested as a way to allow us freedom from becoming fixated on certain interpretations which close down, rather than open up, inquiry in the midst of action.

First person inquiry is a foundation for inquiry that can liberate us from worn out ways of seeing and acting in the world. 'I' frames, assesses and performs. 'I' is the instrument of activity in action inquiry and indeed all forms of social research. This 'I' is analogous to the microscope or any other instrument in the physical sciences upon which large sums of money are spent to maintain precise operation. We might wonder how often we 'tune up' our own capacity for inquiry or whether we have become lazy with our interpretations of the world and therefore lazy in our interpersonal performances.

Torbert's work draws on a number of traditions which together offer different perspectives and suggested exercises for the development of attentional inquiry. These range across spiritual–philosophical (e.g. Quaker, Buddhist, Gurdjieffian) and philosophical–practical (e.g. Platonic, Argyrisian) schools of thought and practice. The effort here is to develop some sort of inner meditative work, establishing the regular company of 'fellow seekers' and framing one's work and life as an opportunity for action inquiry. Clearly this form of first person work evolves into second person work from which enduring third person practice is more likely.

How does one actually do it? Both Torbert and other proponents of specifically first person work (e.g. Judi Marshall; cf. Marshall, 2001) suggest the regular practice of journal writing to establish an inner dialogue through which one's habits of thought and indeed one's habits of the heart can reveal themselves slowly, over time. Torbert encourages deliberate exercise rituals (the eastern tradition suggests many from Tai Chi to Yoga which can be combined with more western practices of running or lifting weights) and engaging mindfully with the regular yet emergent opportunities of daily life, e.g. how, if at all, do I present myself as I answer the telephone when it rings out of the blue and I do not really wish to answer it at all. Together these allow one's entire day to become suffused with conscious efforts to be in inquiry, which, in turn, can be reflected upon in one's journal. As the logic for one's action increasingly welcomes inquiry and mutuality, friends and family present even more of an opportunity for consciousness in the midst of mutual action and organizing. While this all sounds doable, it is too rarely actually done. Our social science tradition overlooks individual responsibility for self preparation as a result of its vestigial belief in objectivity – if we are objective then we do not bring 'I' as an instrument of interpretation. Torbert warns:

Reading about it does not generate the capacity for doing it. Reading about it does not even necessarily generate a very reliable wish to generate the capacity for it. (Torbert, 2001: 251)

Action researchers are invited, if not sooner then later, to understand that they are the instruments of their own research. As such we must individually bear responsibility for the quality of attention, consciousness, and interpersonal interaction that we generate around us. Next we turn to the type of inquiry that is generated together, namely, second person inquiry.

## **SECOND PERSON INQUIRY: WORKING IN THE MIDST OF DIFFERENTIAL POWER**

The first illustration of second person inquiry, i.e. inquiry in small groups, comes from the work of action research oriented social workers Bessa Whitmore and Collette McGee (2001) whose work in program evaluation showed particular concern with relational participation. The second comes from the work of the first author in which critical theory is put into the practice of organizational learning (Bradbury and Mainemelis, 2001).

There are important differences in how we address power differences in small groups, both among and between co-researchers, depending on the population we are working with. In the first illustration we have a more traditional social work context. Here action research is taking place with street kids, i.e. some of our society's least empowered members. We see that work with such a population, when there is a true commitment to action research, requires that considerable effort go into developing people's capacity for engagement. The second illustration in this section describes work with some of our society's more empowered members, i.e. organizational and corporate leaders. Perhaps ironically though, we see that the actions of the researcher are not so very different. In both cases, action research practices and skills are aimed at allowing voice to be expressed.

### **Working with Street Youth**

Social work action researchers Bessa Whitmore and Collette McGee write of their work in evaluating the services of a center for street-involved youth in a Canadian city (Whitmore and McGee, 2001). Thus they begin as front line implementers of social policy, in a single loop mode.

The center's mission and clientele were controversial. Some people felt that a safe place to 'hang out' met the initial needs of street-involved youth and allowed staff to reach out informally, build trust, and intervene effectively in crises. Others wanted more structured activities and stricter rules, while still others thought the center would attract 'high risk' youth to the

area and wanted it shut down completely. Whitmore and McGee approached the evaluation from the perspective of *acompañamiento* or 'accompanying the process' – a phrase used by Latin American development workers to describe a relationship with communities, groups, and individuals that fosters mutual support, trust, a common commitment, and solidarity (Clinton, 1991). Implicit in this are the concepts of 'empowerment' and participation, the imperatives for dialogue, working with salient stakeholders, pragmatic orientation and energy derived from worthier aspirations. In their approach they note six principles which are very much in keeping with the spirit of action research discussed above, but more nuanced for working with a much less empowered population:

- 1 *Non-intrusive collaboration.* Decisions, however different from our own, must be respected; the host retains ownership of the process and the results.
- 2 *Mutual trust and genuine respect.* All people have the ability to understand and deal with their own realities. With time and patience, trust can be built among people from different cultures, classes, races, or ages.
- 3 *Solidarity.* All humanity is connected in a common journey and a shared destiny.
- 4 *Mutuality and equality.* All participants in a collaboration should make their interests, agendas, and goals explicit. Everyone's interests are important.
- 5 *A focus on process.* A partnership requires emotional as well as intellectual involvement, informal interaction that goes beyond a detached working relationship and respects others' cultures, ways of relating, and construction of time.
- 6 *Language as an expression of culture and power.* Language is not just a technical matter; it is a way of understanding and dealing with the world.

These principles formed the basis of the team's work and guided them through the inevitable ups and downs of the process. The youth needed considerable support at the beginning, but decisions were made by consensus and the process gradually became theirs. It took time to build trust and a collaborative relationship. They were able to reach a level of solidarity, an understanding that the group depended on all of us supporting and taking care of each other. They began by having each person declare their interest and why they wanted to be part of this project. They focused on process: using 'check-ins' and 'check-outs,' (an opportunity for each to speak uninterruptedly about whatever is on her/his mind), paying attention to individual and collective needs, building in incentives, abandoning the day's agenda when necessary to deal with pressing emotional concerns. And they paid attention to language, avoiding words that mystified or excluded and appreciating the power of words to respect or offend. In effect they brought alive the concerns mentioned above by seeking to improve significant organizational and life problems, working for change with (rather than simply studying) the stakeholders, developing new ways of seeing the world (i.e. metaphors or mental models),

grounding themselves in lived experience premised on worthier aspirations about how life could be, inviting inclusion and dialogue and leaving concrete evidence of pragmatic action with possible infrastructure for the future in their wake.

Ultimately it was indeed the kids' process and the researchers acted in full consciousness of their role as supporters and teachers – not abandoning claims to authority, but understanding the partiality of those claims and thereby making space for the authority of the kids. They note how hard this is to do in practice, because it is so easy to slip into taking over, especially when others are insecure, inexperienced, and impatient with the process. In the end the keys to success lay in insisting that sufficient time be given to the process (thereby risking some funding), securing adequate resources, abandoning rigid rules around measuring 'results,' offering consistent presence of trusted staff, and a solid commitment to 'pass the stick' to the youth.

In doing their work these social workers begin to shift from implementation of outsiders' views of what needs to be accomplished to give voice to insiders' views. Their work may be said to move on a continuum from single loop to double loop action research in that formerly taken-for-granted values and practices are increasingly opened to reformulation over the course of their work together.

### Learning History

More clearly aimed at catalyzing double loop inquiry, a *learning history* (Kleiner and Roth, 1997) is an organizational intervention effort aimed at bringing members to consciously consider how to achieve a desired organizational future (Bradbury and Mainemelis, 2001). The intervention is shaped by notions of '*praxis*' that, in the left Hegelian tradition, is usually defined as 'reflection on action for emancipation,' (e.g. Freire, 1992). In the critical tradition of organizational scholarship, *organizational praxis* was defined by Benson (1977) as 'the free and creative reconstruction of social arrangements on the basis of a reasoned analysis of both the limits and potentials of present social norms' (Benson, 1977: 16).

As Lewin (1951), sometimes referred to as the father of action research, noted over fifty years ago, autocracy remains the norm in most industrial era organizations. The design criteria for a learning history are therefore aimed at getting more 'collective wisdom' brought to rethinking sometimes dysfunctional organizational practices so that a new and better future can be enacted. The learning history intervention has several phases that will be illustrated from the work of the first author with a globalizing organization called 'The Natural Step,' originally based in Sweden and devoted to educating policy makers and corporate leaders about environmental sustainability.

### *1. Understanding the Context through Developing Good Working Relationships with Insiders*

Phase one requires action researchers to develop a team of insiders to work as 'co-researchers,' doing 'insider-outsider' research (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). The first author, herself engaged with the environmental activist community, proposed that The Natural Step leaders might benefit from reflecting on their own successes and failures as they moved forward in the international domain. The help of staff at the Stockholm headquarters of The Natural Step was crucial at first for securing interview opportunities. Over the course of the action research, time spent over coffee and later beers, at off sites and as a guest in staffers' homes, along with conversation with the co-researchers importantly shaped the way research was framed.

### *2. Following up on Emergent Contradictions*

All interviews, conversations and regular reflections (usually captured following an interview) were taped, transcribed and distilled. Efforts at distillation were geared toward highlighting what was 'exciting,' that is, what appears to give life to the interviewee with regard to The Natural Step. For example, one of the key leaders, an executive, described his high degree of commitment to the work as follows: 'I got the sad news that I was sick with cancer and I decided soon thereafter that I wanted to dedicate as much work as I could to the Natural Step.' This quote when set alongside other interviewees' explanations of their involvement suggests the initial source of energy in the organization came from people's desire for meaningful contribution in the wake of environmental problems.

Additionally a second round of interviews was arranged for further exploration of what appeared to be two emerging contradictions. The first concerned the paradoxical influence of the charismatic founder in what was rapidly going to have to become a more decentralized, global organization. The second concerned the lack of diversity. There appeared to be only men in charge, which also boded badly for what would need to become a quite global, networked and diverse organization.

### *3. Development of a Jointly Told Learning History*

In phase three one develops a text whose function is to promote dialogue about the past so as to inform future policy making. The learning history process has at its core the development of a textual, 'jointly told tale' (Van Maanen, 1988). The presentation of this learning history text is in a two column format, with sidebars and full text to support that. The right hand column is exclusively for primary data, which is mostly interview material. The left hand column represents the author's comments, questions, interpretations, attributions and summary.

#### 4. *Dialogue about 'Undiscussibles'*

The dissemination of the document is intended to allow for dialogue over sensitive issues in addition to catalyzing general reflections on what works well in an organization. The dissemination was designed to allow alternative voices into the conversation, given their presence in the text. All interviewees were invited to participate in a dissemination meeting some months after the interviews. All had offered written comments on the document, editing it for more clarity. Thus a group gathered in Stockholm having read the manuscript. A neutral facilitator, a Danish man, fluent in both Swedish and English, was asked to help facilitate the all day workshop.

To foster a concrete engagement with the text and to signal that this is not a regular meeting, the workshop began with an invitation to cut out parts of the learning history that resonated and stick them on a collective sheet of newsprint. Participants were then invited to walk around the newsprint and reorder them in a way that was explained might capture the collective wisdom of the group present. Dialogue about the selections people had made was deliberately orchestrated to allow all to have voice, which supplanted the usual dynamic of the founder speaking far more than others.

Contradictions were aired. Both the themes of the centrality of the leadership and the gender imbalance, in what came to be described as a very masculine organizational culture, were allowed to emerge. The gender imbalance was discussed in its relationship to the issue of masculine leadership styles. To a degree this was seen as inevitable given the lack of women at higher levels of science and management. However, the conversation itself allowed for much conversation into the way this taken-for-granted absence of women was being replicated inside The Natural Step. Insiders struggled with what it might mean to let this go and whether the work of getting something off the ground was indeed masculine work which could be then augmented by a more feminine approach 'after the heavy lifting' had been accomplished. Discussion about the centrality of the leader noted the existing paradox. The founder is experienced as a charismatic leader. Yet such reliance on one man was also seen to be unsustainable, while the difficulty of finding equally talented trainers was underscored.

#### 5. *Dissemination to a Wider Audience*

The point of a learning history is to provoke new policy inside an organization but also beyond it. Having a text that can be updated and shared over the Internet with interested parties allows for insights to be shared far from the original context that created the document. In the case of The Natural Step, groups in other English speaking countries found the learning history helpful in terms of making decisions about how to organize national offices of The Natural Step. For example, emphasis was placed on addressing issues around

diversity. Increasingly women have begun to play leadership roles in the organization, especially with regard to developing educational materials.

### Suggestions for Social Work

Social workers might become learning historians in arenas in which strategy or policy needs to be reconsidered by those in power. The learning history breaks with traditional social science by requiring the active role of the learning historian in seeking to assist change efforts, bringing to those the clarity and balance between advocacy and inquiry that is central to good social science, but leaving aside an avowed value free stance. The creators of a learning history might best think of themselves not as 'change agents' per se, but, historians or 'change enzymes,' who themselves are educated and changed in the process, which is essentially future oriented. The context of the work should define the type of documentation that is most useful. For example in a kindergarten where this work has been applied, coloring book type pictures were used far more frequently than would have been appropriate in the Swedish context described.

## THIRD PERSON ACTION-RESEARCH: DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUSTAIN LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

Large-scale effort to convene dialogue groups for people who never meet or speak, but whose work is nonetheless interdependent, is a typical focus of third person research practice. Gustavsen (2001) offers an example of this when he writes of cross-institutional democratic dialogues in Sweden for the development of 'learning regions.' Senge and Scharmer (2001) who refer to their similar work as 'community action research' describe it as:

- 1 fostering relationships and collaboration among diverse organizations, and among the consultants and researchers working with them;
- 2 creating settings for collective reflection that enable people from different organizations to 'see themselves in one another;'
- 3 leveraging progress in individual organizations through cross-institutional links so as to sustain transformative changes that otherwise would die out.

A number of efforts to bring the theory of community or participative action research to life have taken root around the world. For example, Rajesh Tandon's efforts in India are ongoing with the development of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) (cf. Bhatt and Tandon, 2001). PRIA is a voluntary organization providing support to grassroots initiatives in India which champions the cause of building organizations and the capacities of the marginalized through their knowledge, learning and empowerment. L. David Brown's theory of practice concerning PRE (Practice Engagement Research) based at the

Hauser Center at Harvard University (cf. Brown, 2002) brings together academics and practitioners to think together about best actions to alleviate global problems. Peter Senge et al.'s efforts with SoL (Society for Organizational Learning) based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (cf. Senge and Scharmer, 2001) does likewise focusing on the business arena of society, acknowledging the importance of business as a social institution and its capacity for becoming an agent of world benefit. Carolyn Lukensmeyer's organization 'America Speaks' represents an effort to bring technology to support the participation of ordinary citizens in deliberative democracy. Often hosting meetings of many thousands of people, using laptops at small tables to relay participants' input, concrete decisions can be voted upon with the result that democracy comes alive in the presence of key decision makers.

All have in common a commitment on the part of a group of organizational practitioners from diverse organizations, field-consultants/organizers and researchers to work together and share insights across the entire community and beyond.

Our final illustration (based on Lewis, 2001) offers insights about how such third person action research develops from small group inquiry to become institutionalized. The example is intended to suggest a possible transition between working on the front lines of social deprivation and seeking to make a more lasting impact on the lives of the disenfranchised through leaving infrastructure in the wake of action research efforts so that the original gains can be sustained.

#### **Highlander Research and Education Center (Highlander), Tennessee**

Highlander Research and Education Center (Highlander), Tennessee is an adult education center located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of the USA and has been a resource and gathering place for grassroots groups in Appalachia and the rural South since 1932. In the 1980s and 1990s work at Highlander involved groups not only in Appalachia and the South but extended nationally and internationally. The work has also included environmental issues, community based development, effects of globalization, issues of economic justice and democratic participation. Highlander's pedagogy, based on the experiential knowledge of participants, included democratic, participatory educational methods similar to what is now called Participative Action Research (PAR). The Bumpass Cove story, one of many examples, brings their work alive.

Bumpass Cove, a former zinc and manganese mining community, is in a fairly remote, mountainous area of east Tennessee. The last remaining mine shut down in 1961 leaving residents either unemployed, living off the land or traveling long distances to work in factories. Residents were pleased in 1972 when a company, called Bumpass Cove Environmental Control and Mineral Co.,

announced plans to resume mining and to backfill the mined areas with a household garbage landfill. The landfill meant a few jobs for valley residents – working in the company office or driving the trucks that brought the garbage to the site. The mining never happened.

### *Highlander Empowerment Program*

Soon after the landfill began operations, people in the valley began to notice frightening occurrences. Most problematic was that people who lived beside the only road up the Cove began to suffer new and serious illnesses. With jobs at stake people could not believe that the Government would allow any serious threats to their health, though a crisis finally precipitated action.

Later scientists from the State Health Department would admit that hazardous chemicals had been placed in the landfill, in spite of its licensing only for domestic garbage. The chemicals had already begun leaching out of the landfill into groundwater and the creek.

Soon after the community organized and stopped the landfill from operating, a small group of residents came to a Highlander workshop which brought together people from communities across Tennessee who were experiencing hazardous waste problems. Several residents came to Highlander to use the library facilities with the goal of compiling a list of chemicals that had been placed in the landfill during its operation. In order to find out what the potential health effects were of the list of chemicals they went to chemical directories, medical dictionaries, and Websters dictionary. Some of the people conducting the research were high school drop-outs. None were trained health scientists. They would have been regarded as scientifically illiterate by the 'experts' employed by the State Health Department. But they had the incentive to struggle with difficult material. Their health was at stake.

The Health Department agreed to sample water in several drinking wells in the Cove, which were close to the landfill. An inspector then visited the citizens' organization to report on the findings at one well in particular, which was only 200 yards from the landfill. The citizens pulled out their copy of a chemical directory that the Highlander staff had sent home with them, looked up the names of the chemicals, and challenged the inspector. 'This book says this chemical may cause liver damage; that one affects the central nervous system . . .' The inspector left speedily, and the citizens, while disturbed by the nature of the information they had found, felt empowered to have been able to challenge an 'expert.'

### **Lessons for Building Action Research Infrastructure**

- 1 It is important to include the use of communities' cultural expressions in their gatherings and celebrations as an affirmation of their identity. A community's old songs and stories are also a window on their past and present fears and beliefs. Highlander's

tradition, acknowledging and respecting people's culture, helps develop and recover local knowledge. Residents overcame dominant knowledge structures through oral histories that have been denigrated or suppressed. Bumpass Cove discovered that songs and poetry written about the pollution problems helped organize and educate around the problem.

- 2 Scientists must learn to acknowledge and respect indigenous knowledge. The process of people gaining control over knowledge and skills normally considered to be the monopoly of the experts is empowering and produces much more than information. One of the lessons from Bumpass Cove is that people who must live with toxic chemicals may recognize their effects long before scientists ever get around to studying them, and that they do so through observing changes in phenomena well known to them. They may see their children's health or the wildlife and natural environment becoming endangered. Residents may not know these phenomena in the same way as scientists, or use the same concepts and language to describe them, but they do understand them.
- 3 People's recognition of their right to speak out on what they know can be facilitated. Bumpass Cove shows that the prevailing myth of science as the domain only of trained experts may discourage many people, persuading them that what they know is not valid. The belief that science is politically neutral persuades people that scientists would not allow bad things to happen to them. Such beliefs and deference to the experts allow science to be used to buttress political power and to disempower ordinary people.

When people begin to research their own problems they begin to feel that they have some control over the information, a feeling of power vis-a-vis the experts. They strengthen that feeling when they confront the experts such as the Health Department or other government officials and discover they knew what the scientists did not.

Prior to work in Bumpass Cove Highlander staff had done research on chemicals and their health effects *for* people and given them the results, but had not systematically taught them how to gain access themselves to the information they needed. When people learned how to do their own research, Highlander shifted to an action research stance, recognizing that experts are not necessarily objective, unbiased, disinterested purveyors of truth.

## INTEGRATING FIRST, SECOND, THIRD PERSON RESEARCH/PRACTICE

In the course of our work we have come to believe that first person inquiry is the foundation for all good action research; however, second person inquiry is the arena where the most energy and practical opportunity for really impacting practice occurs – while third person work is, finally, the most important, as it affects the conditions which ultimately shape the future context in which first and second person work can occur. Keeping an eye to integrating the three

modes, and always being concerned with working in at least two modes, is especially important.

The reader can see for her/himself the issues and practices that are common across the research modes we have mentioned. We highlight the following:

- Understanding how first, second and third person research build upon one another, thereby building capacity or infrastructure.
- Moving to engage other people/relevant stakeholders for desired outcomes.
- Working with the emergent nature of research.
- Making sure the work is based in and aimed at practice so as to be useful, actionable and valuable.
- Taking 'right timing' into account, i.e. keep an eye on the future and the nourishing of overall growth.
- Recognizing and including more than 'rationalistic' data.
- Deriving new theory of, or new ways of looking at, activity which can be shared.

## EVOLVING CHOICE-POINTS FOR QUALITY IN ACTION RESEARCH

Clarifying choice points for quality should, on the one hand, allow us to avoid practice that is poorly articulated and, on the other hand, prevent our borrowing uncritically from traditional, yet inappropriate, quality standards. We need our concern for quality to move from 'policing' to stimulating dialogue that gradually generates communities of inquiry within communities of practice (Argyris et al., 1985) in each research site. While we find the French post-modernist movement often absurdly disconnected from practice, we do suggest that there is something of the spirit of Lyotard's description of the postmodern artist in the practice of action research. Because there can be no pre-established rules:

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 therefore say that the primary 'rule' in approaching quality with our practice of action research is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences. We suggest as a first principle that *the action researchers explicitly address the qualities they believe relevant to their work and the choices they have made in their work, both in regard to creating communities of inquiry and in regard to reporting about them.* Moreover, since there is also considerable scholarship about the nature of quality both in action research and more broadly in critical,

constructionist and qualitative inquiry, we might suggest also that *the action researchers explicitly connect their own judgments to discussions in current literature.*

One such exploration of quality is our own in the Introduction and Conclusion chapters of the *Handbook of Action Research*. Briefly, we argued that good action research will:

- be both aimed at and grounded in the world of practice;
- be explicitly and actively participative: research *with, for* and *by* people rather than *on* people;
- draw on a wide range of ways of knowing – including intuitive, experiential, presentational as well as conceptual – and link these appropriately to form theory;
- address questions that are of significance to the flourishing of human community and the more-than-human world;
- aim to leave some lasting capacity amongst those involved, encompassing first, second and third person perspectives.

We argue that no piece of inquiry can accomplish all these equally and that judicious choice needs to be made. It might be that in one inquiry what is most important is to create new forms of emancipatory dialogue while in another it is to carefully check how claims to effective practice match descriptions of the external world. We would expect a PhD thesis using action research to contain a review of the strengths and weakness of the work in relation to these issues. On the other hand, a facilitator of an action research project will wish to share this work with his or her inquiry colleagues; the role here is educative, to explore the issues with them so they can together decide which are most relevant. Of course, in a participative inquiry which has emerged in its fullest sense as not *with* people but research *by* people, responsibility for exploring these issues will rest with the action research participants as a whole.

## WHERE IS ACTION RESEARCH HEADED?

Willis Harman (1996) writes of the need to question over-reliance on normal science. He argues that the rules of normal science developed out of a cosmology of random evolution, a practice of dominating our companion creatures and the natural world, and an economic logic of resource maximization. He rejects this worldview and posits in its stead the idea that consciousness is co-evolving and creative. According to Harman, not only is it important on a personal level to think about engaging in alternatives to the dominant form of science, but it is also important, on a planetary level, to question its modes and means. Thus the scientific endeavor must explicitly include personal experience and inter-personal dialogue to multi-personal research, especially since a researcher's consciousness is co-creating what is perceived.

Research from a relational perspective has its weaknesses. Action research like other dynamically objective approaches are much harder to generalize than traditional quantitative work, requiring new standards of validity, reliability, and trustworthiness (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Erlandson et al., 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This is even more true in participatory research, where the validity of the research is in some ways defined by the context of researchers/participants, as opposed to a (so-called) independent group of scientists. In this case, abstract generalizability, once assumed to be the quintessence of scientific value, is de-emphasized while other criteria such as the generation of usable knowledge that concretely generalizes to a growing proportion of an individual's or institution's life are offered in its place (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Schwandt, 1996).

We also note that action research practitioners repeatedly criticize institutional structures (Senge and Scharmer, 2001), especially universities (Levin and Greenwood, 2001), as being inappropriate vehicles for the kind of inquiry practices we advocate. Good action research, that is truly differentiated from traditional research, seems to require the re-patterning of institutional infrastructures in its wake, some quite embryonic, some surprisingly robust over the years.

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 we have described in these pages are needed to fill the void.

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**Hilary Bradbury** is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, USA. Her research and teaching focus on organizational change, the human and organizational dimensions of sustainable development and action research. She co-edited the *Handbook of Action Research* with Peter Reason and currently is co-editor of the peer reviewed Sage journal, *Action Research* with Peter. Address: Case Western Reserve University, Weatherhead School of Management, Department of Organizational Behavior, Cleveland, OH 44106, 10900 Euclid Avenue, USA. [email: hilary@po.cwru.edu]

**Peter Reason** is Professor of Action Research/Practice and Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice in the School of Management at the University of Bath, where he has pioneered graduate education based on collaborative, experiential and action oriented forms of inquiry. His most recent major publication is *The Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* (co-edited with Hilary Bradbury; Sage 2001). His major concern is with the devastating and unsustainable impact of human activities on the biosphere, which, he believes, is grounded in our failure to recognize the participatory nature of our relationship with the planet and the cosmos.