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## **Action research literature 2004-2006: Themes and trends**

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ARTICLE

## Action research literature 2004–2006

### Themes and trends

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#### ABSTRACT

This review of recent action research books covers the period from about mid-2004 to mid-2006, complementing an earlier review (Dick, 2004). After noting some important recent additions to the action research literature, I address the literature on several different applications of action research including education, community, participatory development, and organizations. There are briefer sections on other topics. Action research journals and special issues of other journals are also identified. Finally, I identify some themes and trends in the action research literature.

#### KEY WORDS

- action learning
- action research literature
- appreciative inquiry
- community development
- educational action research
- journals
- organizational change
- participatory development
- pragmatism
- trends

The action research literature continues to grow. I found keeping abreast of just the past two years a considerable task. This review will therefore necessarily be selective. Omission of a book may say as much about my reading habits as about the books.

I begin by considering some books I regard as mileposts in action research publishing, and some other books which didn't fit under the headings I've used to organize this review. I then address the application of action research to education, the community, participatory development, organizations, and some other topics.

## Mileposts and general works

The *Handbook of action research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) was an important publishing event for action researchers. It reinstated quality as a concern and 'action research' as the umbrella term for participatory and action-oriented approaches. The paperback version (Reason & Bradbury, 2006) now available has been shortened to 32 chapters. Given the high quality of the 2001 edition, culling can not have been easy. The 2001 version is under revision, an entirely new set of chapters is expected with the review process nearing completion.

Bill Cooke and Julie Cox (2005) have made important action research literature easily accessible in their four volume collection *Fundamentals of action research*. The 84 chapters span the history of action research from Kurt Lewin (1944) and John Collier (1945) to a 2004 paper by Michelle Fine and María Elena Torre. Along the way the chapters sample historically important papers, interesting applications, and critiques. This is a valuable contribution. It's a pity that the high price (US\$910) and the lack of an index will discourage some purchasers.

In his book on research in the 'real world', David Gray (2004) devotes a favourable final chapter to action research. While his account is generally positive he warns that action research can be expensive in time and resources. He also repeats the claim (not necessarily correct, in my view) that its findings do not generalize easily. If that were true we would not be able to learn from experience.

Zina O'Leary (2006) also addresses 'real world research' in her clear, chatty, and sometimes prescriptive textbook. Of broad scope, it is sometimes unavoidably superficial – in-depth interviewing gets two brief paragraphs. Action research is given all of Chapter 9, where surprising depth is achieved and several relevant case studies assist novices.

I intended to include *Traveling companions* (Brydon-Miller, Maguire & McIntyre, 2004) in the previous review. Mary Brydon-Miller and her colleagues have gathered together a helpful collection of papers by people who are both feminists and participatory action researchers. Great variety results. Coherence is achieved by a theme of commitment to social action and attention to issues of power and collaboration.

Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin are working on the second edition of their *Introduction to action research* (Greenwood & Levin, in press). Davydd has provided me with an overview, which looks good.

## Educational action research

Educational action research is the busiest area of action research publication. The style of the research varies widely, as does its quality. Some of the literature is inbred, ignoring literature outside education. These factors may explain why it is underrepresented in important action research works such as Reason and Bradbury (2006) and Cooke and Cox (2005).

There *are* recent works of quality in educational action research, sometimes to be found under different labels. David Frost, for example (pers. comm.) points out that the many action research journal articles by himself and his colleagues talk instead about ‘teacher leadership’ and ‘teacher-led development work’.

Viviane Robinson’s (1993) application of Chris Argyris’s action science (Argyris & Schön, 1974) was more understandable than Argyris’s own work. I therefore looked forward to reading *Practitioner research for educators* (Robinson & Lai, 2005). I wasn’t disappointed. It again applies Robinson’s problem-based methodology to the task of improving schools. As before it is clear and practical, skilfully combining people and research aspects.

Three books by Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead are relevant here. All are aimed primarily at teachers who wish to research their own practice. All are practical and readable. McNiff and Whitehead (2005) provide a useful description of the overall process of action research. Written almost in the style of a frequently-asked-questions file the book raises issues likely to trouble beginning researchers, and provides answers. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) provide broader coverage, including some relevant history and philosophy. *Action research: Living theory* (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) addresses the passion which informs much of Jack Whitehead’s work – the evidence-based development of personally relevant theory from personally relevant experience. Informative examples accompany the generally well-written text.

Bridget Somekh (2006a) is another educator who writes with passion and clarity. Her book draws upon her experience in the classroom, and also upon work by herself and others in ‘the South’, health, and business. Beautifully written, the book achieves lucidity and style without denying the complexity of applied research settings. Change, transformation and innovation are themes. Somekh displays the honesty that underpins trusting research relationships and (to reveal my own biases) the combination of open-mindedness and scepticism that I think underpins good research.

The second edition of *Action research for teachers* (Holly, Arhar & Kasten,

2005) has been published. You may be more likely to remember the book from its subtitle of *Traveling the yellow brick road*. It's a fine book, though changes from the first edition (Arhar, Holly & Kasten, 2000) consist mostly of fine tuning.

A CD-ROM from the Enabling Education Network (2005) describes action research and inclusive education. Incorporated into its descriptions are occasional audio and video material recorded in Zambia and Tanzania. The practical activities it describes are organized around Ernie Stringer's (1999) 'look – think – act' cycle. The CD-ROM and other resources can be found at <http://www.eenet.org.uk/action/action.shtml>.

Some other books on classroom research are worth mention. Craig Mertler (2006) has written a practical textbook to help teachers research their own practice. Valsa Kosha (2005) applies action research to professional development and the improvement of classroom practice. Cher Hendricks (2006) emphasizes the benefits of reflection in a book which achieves a balance of theory and practice. Germaine Taggart and Alfred Wilson (2005) offer 50 recipes, some work-book style, for assisting reflection. Maggie McPherson and Miguel Nunes (2004) describe in detail and with examples how to apply action research to online learning. Mary Humphrey (2005) enchantingly describes her use of story to build character and self-esteem in children.

Several books venture beyond the classroom. Judy Durrant and Gary Holden (2006) don't minimize the difficulties in their useful account of approaches to whole school change. Barbara MacGilchrist and Margaret Buttress (2005) explain how five schools used action research to enhance children's self-esteem, learning and thinking skills, and attitudes supporting lifelong learning. Jeff Jones (2005) aims his useful advice at school leaders, covering topics ranging across motivation, performance management and teamwork, among others. Jody Howard and Su Eckhardt (2005) provide a simple and usable overview of action research for school librarians.

## Community applications

Michelle Fine (Fine, Roberts, Torre & Bloom, 2004) takes the school into the community. Fine was executive producer of a DVD to mark the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court decision that was supposed to end segregation in the United States. Thirteen youths explore the history of *Brown v. Board of Education*, express their understanding in poetry and dance, and interview people who had experienced life before and after the court's decision. The DVD shows the students' early endeavours at poetry and dance juxtaposed with their later performance. Extracts from the interviews are interleaved. This is an engaging and often wise account.

I might mention here the special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* (Zirkel, Lopez & Brown, 2004), which also explored the Brown v. Board of Education 50th anniversary. It may be, as Sabrina Zirkel and Nancy Cantor (2004: 3) say, that Brown v. Board of Education was a ‘landmark decision’. Fifty years later, however, it seems that its practical effects are still being worked through.

As James Creighton (2005) says, democracy is a work in progress. Public participation is one of the applications of democracy where new processes for citizen involvement in decision-making are being forged. Creighton describes many techniques applicable to community action research.

The Oxford House project is an encouraging example of participatory action research and community psychology sensitively combined. Oxford House residences are self-managed – because the alcohol users who founded the first Oxford House could not afford to hire a manager or counsellor (Molloy, 1988).

Leonard Jason, Joseph Ferrari, Margaret Davis and Bradley Olson (2006) have edited a book which gives an account of Oxford House. In effect, participatory action research provides a meta-methodology within which careful quantitative studies are used when appropriate. Many lessons can be drawn from this inspiring project: about participatory action research; about productive and collaborative university-community partnerships; and about the characteristics of effective self-management.

Community action research is addressed in the many chapters of the edited collection by Pedro Pedraza and Melissa Rivera (2005a), applied to Latino/Latina education. In the first chapter they (Pedraza & Rivera, 2005b) introduce the National Latino/Latina Education Research and Policy Project. In the final chapter, Pedraza (2005) reflects on the use of collaboration in the project and muses on future directions. The intervening chapters are, for the most part, examples of advocacy. Many are surprisingly optimistic.

‘Street science’, as Jason Corburn (2005) explains it, is participatory action research reminiscent of what Yoland Wadsworth (1997) has described as ‘do-it-yourself social research’. Researchers are community members. This engrossing book builds a well-argued case that there are advantages in the direct involvement of local residents in research. Such research draws upon local knowledge which outside researchers are unlikely to have. Four detailed case studies illustrate Corburn’s argument.

You’ll find a systems approach to community development in Gerald Midgley’s and Alejandro Ochoa-Arias’s book of readings (Midgley & Ochoa-Arias, 2004). Included chapters range from early material from the 1980s up to the current decade.

Randy Stoecker is an academic also active in the community. His 2005 book reflects this dual interest. Stoecker describes as ‘project-based research’ a cycle consisting of diagnosis, prescription, implementation and evaluation. He encourages community workers and members to engage in research while offer-

ing some useful cautions to academics who do community research. The conversational style and occasional humour do not detract from the constructive advice. Stoecker's scholarship and experience is evident throughout.

Stoecker labels his work both 'action research' and 'community based participator research', elsewhere abbreviated to CBPR. CBPR is a fast-growing literature. Many journal articles already exist in a variety of journals, and there is a forthcoming CBPR journal (see later). The email list CBPR (see <http://mailman1.u.washington.edu/mailman/listinfo/cbpr>) is the most active action research email list I know of.

Barbara Israel and her colleagues (Israel, Eng, Schulz & Parker, 2005) have edited a fine CBPR collection. The contributors describe practical methods for doing participatory research in the community, with principles and theory not entirely neglected. In general, the approach is eclectic, borrowing research methods and processes from many different sources. Established processes are translated to fit collaborative community situations. Extensive appendices provide more detail of specific techniques and processes.

Linda Silka (2005) has edited a monograph on community-based research. With many of its chapters authored by members of Community-Campus Partnerships for Health it provides a snapshot of the current state of university-community collaboration in participatory community research in the USA.

## Applications in participatory development

A related field is that of participatory development. The International Development Research Centre has published many relevant books, most available in electronic form as free downloads (see <http://www.idrc.ca/>). Strongly practical, most address specific developmental topics, though a recent three-volume set (Gonsalves et al., 2005) casts a wider net over sustainable agriculture and natural resource management generally.

Earthscan (<http://www.earthscan.co.uk>) publishes several books relevant for action researchers, especially those who do Third World developmental work. A recent addition to their offerings is edited by Meg Keen, Valerie Brown and Rob Dyball (2005). In this book, action learning is specifically mentioned (and action research mentioned in passing) by Jennifer Andrew and Ian Robottom (2005). Elsewhere there is material action researchers are likely to find interesting and applicable.

*Local to local dialogue* (UN-Habitat and Huairou Commission, 2004) is part of the UN's Urban Governance Toolkit Series. Illustrated by case studies, it provides concrete suggestions for engaging citizens in local issues. Britha Mikkelsen's (2005) second edition of her textbook for development practitioners gives more attention than previously to action research and appreciative inquiry.

Julie McCarthy and Karla Galvão (2004) have assembled 140 theatre-based activities for use in participatory development. The activities are grouped together under the four headings of warm-ups, conflict resolution, issue-based work, and evaluation. The descriptions are brief but easily followed. I can imagine myself using them in community work generally, especially with youth.

In early 2005, the Institute of Development Studies hosted a workshop on participatory learning and development, now documented as a monograph (Stackpool-Moore, Taylor, Pettit & Millican, 2006). An associated email list, 'Learning participation', also deals with these topics – see <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/networks/learnparticip/index.html>.

Ethnographic action research (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003) was developed during projects introducing information and communication technologies to the poor. It combines an action research cycle of planning, doing and reflecting with an ethnographic immersion in the research situation.

Nick and Chris Lurch sent me a copy of their book on participatory video (Lurch & Lurch, 2006), including a CD of five videos. The first video is a training film showing how video can be used by novices to give voice to their views. The remaining four are fascinating examples of participatory video. I found the fourth video on the 'Norma' project an informative introduction to the topic.

In Canada a broadband satellite network has helped to overcome the isolation of First Nation communities. The results have been documented in a series of videos available online from <http://smart.knet.ca/> (FedNor, nd). I was informed about this and other video resources by the pelican email list. You can join the list by sending a blank email message to [join-pelican@dgroups.org](mailto:join-pelican@dgroups.org).

## Human services and health care applications

Many community applications of action research are in the health field, where Tina Koch and Debbie Kralik have some informative publications. I'm still waiting for my copy of the second edition of Koch and Kralik (2006), though I believe it has been published.

Ernie Stringer, this time in conjunction with Rosalie Dwyer, adds to his practical action research books with a textbook for human service practitioners (Stringer & Dwyer, 2005). As usual this easy-to-read book is built around a 'look – think – act' cycle. As usual he achieves a good mix of theory and practice.

In community health research there is a spectrum reaching from academic research in the community through to consumers and users doing their own research. Much participatory community research sits somewhere in the middle, though action research can be useful throughout. Yoland Wadsworth, among others, is an advocate for research done by community members. This is perhaps most visible in her 1997 bestseller (Wadsworth, 1997). It is also discernible in her

recent addition to the ALARPM on line action research case studies (Wadsworth, 2005).

Another advocate for a user-centred approach is Shulamit Ramon (2003). She has edited a series of chapters by people using empowering methods in community health research. Her diverse collection ranges across a large variety of research applications.

## Organizational applications

David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick (2005) have revised their 2001 book of advice to people doing insider action research. The book has been extended, with more material on the practicalities of insider research. The presentation is more reader-friendly. Retained from the first edition are the readable style, the attention to both theory and practice, and the useful exercises.

Action learning and action research continue to grow closer together. Both are frequently mentioned in the edited book by David Coghlan, Tony Dromgoole, Pat Joynt and Peter Sorensen (2004). The editors are academics with a practical bent. The other authors are managers who have researched their own endeavours at work. These managers have been able to bring about useful change for their organizations while extending their own skills and gaining a qualification.

Mark Williams (2004) also offers an account of doctoral students researching their management practice with action research. Williams's own writing displays the same features he encourages his students to adopt: novel, interesting and entertaining. Excerpts from four doctoral theses, including his own, illustrate the results of his approach.

Peter Senge's bestseller has been revised and expanded (Senge, 2006). The book is still organized around the five disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. The origins of Senge's ideas in Argyris's action science and Forrester's systems dynamics remain evident. For those who can look beyond the seductive effects of a well-turned phrase, there are many worthwhile insights here.

The book *Action inquiry* (Torbert et al., 2004) is an idiosyncratic, creative and (in this instance) highly readable integration of self-reflection with small group and organizational work. The early chapters describe the different action strategies that characterize a seven-stage developmental typology of personal and leadership styles. Later parts of the book apply the typology to collaborative inquiry and organizational transformation. In his ability to synthesize and extend other work Torbert displays the qualities of the 'alchemist', the final stage of his developmental typology.

Valerie Sessa and Manuel London (2006) have chosen 'continuous learning' as the label for a systems approach to organizational learning. By integrating

literature from individual, group and organizational learning they are able to provide suggestions which many organizations will find advantageous.

*Threads of labor* (Hale & Wills, 2005) gives a workers' perspective on the garment industry's international supply chains. Chapter 4 (Wills & Hurley, 2005) details how the action research was done. The sober language doesn't conceal dismay at how globalization and internationalism have increased worker exploitation.

Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt (2002) didn't come to my attention in time for the previous review. The book describes the application of collaborative interactive action research or CIAR in the pursuit of both productivity and equity within organizations.

Jake Chapman (2004) argues persuasively that a lack of systems thinking in government is creating widespread system failure. To remedy this lack Chapman applies soft systems methodology (using the earlier seven-step process from Checkland, 1981) and complexity theory. I've been recommending the book to bureaucrats.

*Demystifying organizational learning* (Lipshitz, Friedman & Popper, 2006) almost made it to my mailbox in time for this review, but not quite. Knowing other work by two of the authors I expect it to be good. Ned Kock (in press) is editing a book on information systems action research, expected soon.

## **Appreciative inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry is also used more in corporate than in other settings. The literature continues to grow, much of it from the Taos Institute. Several books extend appreciative inquiry beyond its previous applications.

Frank Barrett and Ron Fry (2005), for example, write about increasing the organization's ability to cooperate. Robert Cottor and his colleagues (Cottor, Asher, Levin & Weiser, 2004) describe in step-by-step detail a number of exercises for experiential learning. Jacqueline Stavros and Cheri Torres (2005) explore the use of appreciative inquiry for improving relationships. Tojo Thatchenkery (2005) focuses on knowledge management. I find the techniques and processes they present of value. (The constant praise of 'strength-based' approaches wears thin, though. Most of the action researchers I know are less 'deficit-oriented' than the appreciative inquiry literature proclaims.) The books are slim and readable.

Even slimmer is the 16-page overview (Van Tiem & Rosenzweig, 2006) in the monthly *InfoLine*. A surprising amount of useful information for novices is assembled there. Diana Whitney and colleagues (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, Cherney & Fry, 2005) address team building from an appreciative inquiry perspective. With David Cooperrider (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) she also

provides a new and introductory overview of appreciative inquiry. Richard Barrett (2006) applies appreciative inquiry to cultural change.

David Cooperrider and Michel Avital are series editors for the series *Advances in Appreciative Inquiry*, published by Elsevier, Amsterdam. Two volumes are in preparation. The planned second volume is *Designing information and organizations with a positive lens*. Volume three is to be *Organizational generativity*.

The quarterly electronic journal *AI Practitioner* continues to carry brief and informative articles on appreciative inquiry projects (<http://www.aipractitioner.com>). The *Appreciative Inquiry Newsletter* is available for free download in PDF format from the same site.

## Professional and practice development

The improvement of practice is a theme in Yoshihiko Ariizumi's (2005) book on action research. He encourages total immersion in practice, the use of multiple and complex action research cycles, and constant attention to holistic perception. I found his brief Chapter 4 on dialectic thought provoking.

Evidence-based practice continues as an emphasis in the literature. It's pleasing, therefore, to see some recognition that practice can itself provide the evidence. Several chapters in Hammell and Carpenter (2004) have an action research flavour. Mary Law's chapter on participatory research is instructive. So is the absorbing paper on the study by Candice Schachter and her colleagues, using a combination of action research and grounded theory.

Unfortunately the proliferation of action-research-like processes under different labels continues. Brendan McCormack (pers. comm.) points out that he and his colleagues use the term 'practice development' for their work. They use cyclic, emancipatory, learning-oriented, and person-centred processes which are closely allied to action research and action learning – see McCormack, Manley and Garbett (2004).

## Journals

Action research and action learning journals continue to evolve and develop. There are some newcomers, while others have moved.

*Concepts and Transformation* has changed publisher and become the *International Journal of Action Research*. In other respects it remains the same journal, with a broad perception of what action research is, and with European action research well represented – <http://www.hampp-verlag.de/IJoAR.htm>.

*Educational Action Research* has moved to Routledge, part of Taylor & Francis (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/>). The journal is soliciting articles in the field of

health and social care and expanding its editorial board to support this. A quick browse revealed that the practice of providing free access to earlier volumes has continued.

*PLA Notes* has become *Participatory Learning and Action*. It retains the same practical emphasis on emancipatory development and the tools for achieving it ([http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla\\_notes/](http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/)).

First issued in 2004, the *Journal of Organisational Transformation and Social Change* (<http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/>) invites papers on action learning and action research (Yolles, 2004). In the second issue (which is actually second and third combined) is an interesting article of almost monograph length by Jae Eon Yu (2004) on participatory action research from a post-structuralist perspective.

By the time you read this, the first issue of *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action* is likely to be available (<http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/pchp/>). Community-based participatory research (CBPR), a form of action research, will be an emphasis.

The *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology* should also be available (<http://www.psycsr.org/social-action.htm>). It is a peer-reviewed e-journal published by Psychologists for Social Responsibility and Counselors for Social Justice.

Radcliffe (<http://www.radcliffe-oxford.com/journals/>) publishes *Work-based Learning in Primary Care*, containing many articles which elsewhere might be described as action learning. The avowed aim, largely achieved in the articles I sampled, is to provide information from which primary carers can improve their practice. Reflective practice seems to be a particular emphasis.

The present journal (*Action Research*) seems well established and vibrant. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, the longest-established of the mainstream action research journals, seems also to be doing well (<http://www.springer.com>). *Action Learning* is in its third year (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/>) and continues to carry a mix of academic and practitioner articles. The *Journal of Workplace Learning* (<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/>) often carries action learning and related articles. The final issue for 2005 is a special issue on workplace learning from the learner's perspective.

In the past couple of years several journals have brought out special issues on action research and related topics. I mention them briefly below, including a couple which I didn't pick up in time for the 2004 review.

## Special journal issues

In the field of information systems action research is sometimes used to increase system usability by taking users' views more directly into account. Richard

Baskerville and Michael Myers (2004) introduce a special issue on the use of action research in information systems research. The article in this issue by Pär Mårtensson and Allen Lee, using 'dialogic action research', provides a good illustration of the approach.

The *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* has published a special issue on empowerment and participator evaluation of community interventions, also available as a book (Suarez-Balcazar & Harper, 2003). The articles are written from a community psychology perspective. In my own future practice I expect to make use of some the ideas on evaluating conflict resolution education programs (Benne & Garrard, 2003) and building community capacity for collaborative evaluation (Fawcett, Boothroyd, Schultz, Francisco, Carson & Bremby, 2003), and perhaps others.

Roger Reeb is editing a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community on community action research* (<http://www.haworthpressinc.com/web/JPIC/>). It, too, is to be released simultaneously as a book.

The field of futures studies has been displaying some interest in action research. The journal *Futures* (<http://www.elsevier.com/>) carries action research articles from time to time. A recent issue of the journal is devoted to action research and futures studies. José Ramos (2006a) is editor of the special edition, and also compares action research and futures studies (Ramos, 2006b). Sohail Inayatullah (2006) writes on anticipatory action research, a practical integration of the two disciplines.

Ben Boog, Lou Keune and Coyan Tromp (2003) edited the special issue of the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* on action research and emancipation (<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/>).

A recent special issue of *Teachers and Teaching* features collaborative knowledge production by teachers (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>). There, Bridget Somekh (2006b) writes about the tension between the requirements of publicly funded research and the need for local relevance if action is to result.

*Children, Youth and Environments* about youth participation, is available online (<http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/>). An honour system asks you to donate if you access the resources. An issue edited by Sheridan Bartlett (2005) carried several articles on youth involvement in governance. Caitlin Cahill (pers. comm.) has drawn my attention to an issue on youth and action research and further regional issues which are in preparation.

A special issue of *New Solutions* (<http://www.baywood.com/>) was occasioned by a symposium to celebrate June Fisher's 70th birthday and her contribution to participatory action research. Dorothy Wigmore (2005a) provides an introduction and overview of the papers to follow. Later (Wigmore, 2005b) she summarizes one of the tangible products arising from the symposium – a set of recommendations about how research should take workers into account.

Participatory governance is the topic of Volume 16 Number 1 of the journal *Environment and Urbanization* (<http://eau.sagepub.com/>). The editor of the special issue is Diana Mitlin (2004).

## Other books

I now list briefly some other books which also stirred my neurons. None of them is really action research. All have something thoughtful and useful to say.

Adam Kahane's (2004) account of his use of scenario planning to solve complex problems stands out. He writes lucidly and with great honesty about his successful and unsuccessful assignments in such trouble spots as South Africa, Colombia and the Middle East. Action researchers will appreciate his awareness that complex situations require great flexibility of approach. If he facilitates with as much sensitivity and openness as he writes, I imagine that his own personal qualities contribute much to his successes. I enjoyed the book enormously.

*Synergic inquiry* (Tang & Joiner, 2006) is yet another variety of action research. Part 1 of this book explains the methodology and reveals its affinities to action science, PAR, action inquiry and cooperative inquiry. What synergic inquiry adds to these approaches is a deep exploration of personal beliefs, especially in the context of conflict. I expect it to be quite powerful, and (given a suitable occasion) would use it without hesitation. Ten case studies from a number of different authors illustrate the approach.

Reading grounded theory literature deepens my understanding of action research. Though almost never participative grounded theory is cyclic and like action research is responsive to the data. The theory is emergent. Kathy Charmaz (2006) provides an accessible overview. The title of her book *Constructing grounded theory* is to make clear that theories are constructed – not discovered, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) would have it. Yet I think her approach in practice is more faithful to the data-driven and responsive style of Barney Glaser (e.g. 2003) than is that of many other writers.

There is an action research flavour and a few specific mentions of action research in the eclectic account of community psychology by Geoffrey Nelson and Isaac Prilleltensky (2005). Perhaps this is to be expected: action research and community psychology are driven by similar values.

Iraj Imam and Bob Williams are currently editing an American Evaluation Association volume on the use of systems-based approaches in evaluation (Imam & Williams, in press). The included authors are of high calibre, so this is a book to look forward to.

Among other books, David Farmer (2005) explains why governance and public administration are problems and offers some new ideas. John Gastil and Peter Levine (2005) collect a number of chapters on processes for genuine dem-

ocracy in groups large and small. Bernard Guerin (2005) gives only a page to action research. This is less than you might expect in a book on interventions for change. However, many of the skills and processes described elsewhere in the book are also relevant.

## Themes and trends

What are we to make of this? To judge by the volume of new work, action research is thriving. It seems there has been an ‘action turn’ (Reason & Torbert, 2001), with action research methodologies involved. With some exceptions much of the recent growth has been achieved without sacrificing rigour. If anything quality has improved.

I confess it is with some dismay that I also observe a ‘postmodern turn’. It seems to me that for those of us who are trying to change the world, or at least parts of it, pragmatism is still a relevant philosophy. I was pleased to see Patricia Shields’s spirited defence of pragmatism (Shields, 2003, 2005) and the lively discussion which accompanied it over several years of the journal *Administration and Society*.

The gaps I identified in 2004 in the action research literature still exist. Little has appeared on building theory from experience in action research. Chris Huxham’s paper (Huxham, 2003) remains one of the few practical and coherent accounts, though an article by Anastasia White (2004) in this journal has aroused some interest. Outside soft systems methodology, complexity theory remains largely a promising but untapped field for action researchers. Though there are more recent hints of interest, the most cogent paper on the topic still seems to be the 2002 article by Renata Phelps and Stewart Hase.

Evident in some of the books mentioned above is a proliferation of labels for processes which resemble action research. I wonder how much of this is consultants and academics establishing a brand, and how much marks genuine new initiatives. Less evident is a blurring of boundaries between action research and other research methods. Because this is mostly to be seen in journal literature I haven’t provided examples. When it arises from thoughtful and appropriate design I take it as a sign of growth and health. My view is that good research is designed to fit the situation and the purpose. In a fast changing world, that philosophy suits action research well.

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