

Action Research and Organization Development

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We approach this writing from opposite ends of our careers in action research and organization development. Peter's first engagement with organization development was in the late 1960s, when he moved into an internal consulting position to help implement a formal change management strategy within the UK-based multinational ICI, which was at that time a leader in the field. In contrast Kate's early forays into organization change through action research have been explicitly formed by the literature and practice of a range of action research approaches during her doctoral studies with young women in management a multinational company.

From these contrasting points in our careers we have two kinds of purpose in our writing. Firstly, we want to contribute an action research perspective on organizational development – one that encourages continual inquiry, development, and curiosity in our selves and in those we work with – rather than seeing OD as 'a set of techniques'. Secondly, we want to assert that at their best - through creating processes and structures for collaborative inquiry - action research and organization development can be profoundly emancipatory.

We both bring to our work a strong bias that action research and organization development are both pragmatic and rooted in democratic values: they aim to change things 'for the better', through engagement of all those concerned (including, of course, deciding what needs to be changed and what 'better' might mean). They are, at their best, ways of reaching toward a world 'worthy of human aspiration', encouraging values of inquiry and learning, mutual respect for other people and for the wider ecology of which we are all a part (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a). We start with a brief sketch of the history of organization development and action research,

and of their relationship. We then move to some examples of Action Research practice and some suggestion of how we might frame these as organisational development interventions.

In some ways, early organization development was quite sober and business-oriented, as with the Blake and Mouton (Blake & Mouton, 1964) argument that organization success could be reached through '9.9 management' -- integrating a concern for people with a concern for production. But it also reflected some of the liberationist and utopian spirit of the 1960s, holding the possibility that individual could flourish while contributing to organizational purposes. Further, it was often argued organisations would only be effective if they fully engaged the skills and motivations of their members; and that as people became better educated and expected more from employment, organizations would only recruit and retain the people they needed if they offered much more rewarding and challenging experiences of work. OD practitioners of the day were strongly influenced by motivation theories of McGregor, Maslow, and Herzberg. OD was therefore often defined as the democratic mobilization of information, energy, and resources present in the organization -- but currently diverted to unconstructive channels -- for organization improvement. Action research is similarly rooted in the view that we cannot generate valid understanding about human persons unless we engage with them fully as persons, as we discuss below.

A second significant influence shared by action research and organization development in the early days was T-group training. The maybe-apocryphal story is that a group of human relations trainers holding a staff meeting to discuss the progress of their group were asked by some of the trainees if they could join in. The ensuing discussion made evident people could learn hugely about their own behaviour in learning to inquire together into the process of a group and their own contribution to this. T-groups were not simply about training in human relations, they were about developing a capacity for self-reflective learning and the invitation to relate to others in more open, authentic and equal relationships. However, there were significant difficulties in transferring the genuine learning from T-grouping to a work situation and OD specialists often struggled with the ideal of authentic relations in the face of unacknowledged power differentials, as action researchers

sometimes do today. Sensitivity training however contained the seeds of an important idea - that people could learn to become researchers of their own life situations, an important parallel with action research.

While one important origin of action research is the work of Lewin in the 1940s, modern action research has a long and diverse history, with origins in applications of social science to practical problems of wartime situations in both Europe and America (Trist & Bamforth, 1951); in the social-democracy of work research in Scandinavia (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996b), in critical thinking (Kemmis, 2001), in liberationist thought and practice (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970), in pragmatism (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason, 2003d), in social construction (Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993), in systemic thinking (Flood, 2001(Pasmore, 2001)); in political activism of feminist (Maguire, 2001; Stanley & Wise, 1983), anti-racist (Bell, 2001) and other liberationist movements. There are further links to psychotherapeutic thinking, group dynamics theory, and broadly to democratic traditions of social change going back to Tom Paine (Paine, 1791). Action research is best understood not a methodology or set of techniques, but as an orientation to inquiry - a move to re-vision our understanding of the nature of human knowledge by re-integrating the dualisms that have haunted Western approaches to knowledge (Reason, 2003d; Rorty, 1999) splitting apart theory and practice, researcher and subject, everyday experience and academic knowledge.

Action research is a practice for the systematic development of knowing and knowledge, but based in a rather different form from traditional academic research. It has different purposes, is based in different relationships, it has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice. We can define it broadly 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 bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a:1)

This definition brings together five dimensions of action research: it is *pragmatic*, concerned with addressing practical issues and making links between theory and practice; it is *democratic* both in the sense of involving people and in being liberationist - seeking to enable all people to create their own knowledge in learning organisations and communities of inquiry; it draws on an “*extended epistemology*” (Heron 1996) of many ways of knowing, valuing the experiential, narrative and aesthetic, alongside the propositional and conceptual; it is *value oriented*, asking how we can contribute to the flourishing – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and of the wider ecology of the planet; and it is *developmental*, evolving over time from tentative beginnings toward more significant influence (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a).

Varieties of Action Research

Action research typically involves creating spaces in which participants engage together in cycles of action and critical reflection. However, this basic process has been elaborated in different ways in different schools of practice. We outline some of the major ones below.

Organizational change and work research. There is a longstanding tradition of action research in organizational settings which aims to contribute both to more effective work practices and better understanding of the processes of organizational change. This approach draws on a variety of forms of information gathering and feedback to organization members, leading to problem solving dialogue. This tradition is well represented in recent publications such as Toulmin & Gustavsen (1996a), Greenwood & Levin (1998), and (Coghlan & Brannick, 2004)

Co-operative Inquiry. A co-operative inquiry group consists of people who share a common concern for developing understanding and practice in a specific personal, professional or social arena. All are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision-making contributes to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience; and *also* co-subjects, participating in the activity which is being researched. Co-operative inquiry groups

cycle between and integrate four forms of knowing – experiential, presentational, propositional and practical (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001).

Action Science and Action Inquiry. These related disciplines offer methods for inquiring into and developing congruence between our purposes, our theories and frames, our behaviour, and our impact in the world - to put it colloquially, they ask us 'do we 'walk our talk'?'. These practices can be applied at individual, small group, and organizational level. Their overall aim is to bring inquiry and action together in more and more moments of everyday life, to see inquiry as a 'way of life' (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Friedman, 2001; Marshall, 2001; Torbert, 2001).

Learning History is a process of recording the lived experience of those in an action research or learning situation. Researchers work collaboratively with those involved to agree the scope and focus of the history, identify key questions, gather information through an iterative reflective interview process, distil this information into a form which the organization or community can 'hear' and facilitate dialogue with organization members to explore the accuracy, implications and practical outcomes that the work suggests (Roth & Kleiner, 1998).

Appreciative inquiry. Practitioners of appreciative inquiry argue the extent that action research maintains a problem-oriented view of the world diminishes peoples' capacity to produce innovative theory capable of inspiring the imagination, commitment, and passionate dialogue required for the consensual re-ordering of social conduct. Devoting attention to what is positive about organizations and communities, enables us to understand what gives them life and how we might sustain and enhance that life-giving potential. Appreciative inquiry begins with the 'unconditional positive question' that guides inquiry agendas and focuses attention toward the most life-giving, life-sustaining aspects of organizational existence (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001).

Whole systems inquiry. Large group interventions or processes are events designed to engage representatives of an entire system, whether it be an organization or a community, in thinking through and planning change (for descriptions see Bunker & Alban, 1997). What distinguishes them is that the process is managed to allow all

participants an opportunity to engage actively in the planning (Martin, 2001). Rather than aim at a single outcome, in dialogue conference design (Gustavsen, 2001) and whole system designs (Pratt, Gordon, & Plamping, 1999) the role of the researchers is to create the conditions for democratic dialogue among participants.

Participative action research. Usually used to refer to action research strategies emerging from the liberationist ideas of Paulo Freire (1970) and others in countries of the political 'South', participatory action research (PAR) is explicitly political, aiming to restore to oppressed peoples the ability to create knowledge and practice in their own interests and as such has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, another, to empower people at a deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge so they "see through" the ways in which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members. PAR practitioners emphasize emergent processes of collaboration and dialogue that empower, motivate, increase self-esteem, and develop community solidarity (see for example Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selener, 1997).

Art, storytelling and theatre as action research. Action research is increasingly linking with contemporary movements in a range of artistic practices in the community. Practices drawn from community art, theatre and storytelling offer starting places for inquiry based in presentational ways of knowing (Hawkins, 1988; Mienczakowski & Morgan, 2001).

Public Conversations. The aim of the public conversations movement is to foster a more inclusive, empathic and collaborative society by promoting constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views, and positions about divisive public issues. This might include activists in adversarial relationships who are interested in talking with each other directly, rather than through the media, in ways that reduce stereotyping and defensiveness; groups and networks who seek to more effectively collaborate despite differences of identity or perspective; civic leaders, political officials, and educators who seek to build community and enhance democracy.

(See <http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/index.asp?catid=54>)

Strategies of action research

Action research has encompassed the individual, the small group, and wider organization and social entities. At an individual level it has addressed issues of personal and professional change, of 'living life as inquiry' (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002); and questions such as 'how can I improve my practice?' (Whitehead, 1989, 2000). Within small groups, action research has allowed people come together to address a common problem: to redesign work practices (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996b); to explore issues of race and gender in organizations (Douglas, 2002); to pioneer professional change (Charles & Glennie, 2002; Reason, 1988); and so on. At the wider social and organizational levels action researchers have explored a variety of large group processes as vehicles for action research (Martin, 2001), and at the time of writing there is lively debate amongst action research practitioners as to how action research can go beyond the singular and local to influence societal discourses and address issues of policy formation at regional and national level (Gustavsen, 2001, 2003). Torbert refers to these three strategies when he asks:

...how may we intentionally enhance the effectiveness of our actions and the destructiveness of our inquiry (destroying illusory assumptions, dangerous strategies and self-defeating tactics)? How may we do so individually, in our face to face groups and in the larger organizations and collectivities to which we belong? How may we do so in the very midst of real-time actions of our every day lives - here and now? To what degree need such inquiry be explicit to ourselves and to others at each moment? (Torbert, 2001:250)

We have found it helpful to refer to these three broad strategies as first-, second-, and third-person inquiry practices, and to see these as mutually interpenetrating. Both action research and organization development involve an interplay between 'me' (my own experience and behaviour), 'us' (our immediate peers) and 'them' (the wider organization) and encourage attention to be paid simultaneously to all three perspectives. We shall explore in some more detail what we mean by each of these strategies, and then move on to illustrate them in practice.

First-person research practice

First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:xxv-xxvi)

Early work on first-person inquiry can be found in Argyris and Schön's now classic *Theory in Practice: Increasing professional effectiveness* (1974) and Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983). Much of this work centres around the distinction between espoused theories and theories in use—between what people say they do and what they actually do. Argyris called this work 'action science' (Argyris et al., 1985).

The goal of action science inquiry is to help practitioners discover the tacit choices they have made about their perceptions of reality, about their goals and about their strategies for achieving them... [B]y gaining access to these choices, people can achieve greater control over their own fate... If people can find the sources of ineffectiveness in their own reasoning and behaviour, or their own causal responsibility, they then possess some leverage for producing change. Data are collected first and foremost for the purpose of helping people understand and solve practice problems of concern to them. (Friedman, 2001:160)

Torbert distinguishes what he calls 'action inquiry' from Argyris' 'action science' by seeking congruence not just between espoused theories and behaviour but between four 'territories' of attention. He argues that any acting system, including an individual inquirer, requires valid knowledge of its purposes, thinking, behaviour, and the outside world. While this may seem obvious, in practice this requires a significant developmental effort. Our attention doesn't register a great deal of what occurs; we are rarely aware of our own behaviour and others reactions as we act; what we know about the outside world is ordinarily about the past and is rarely tested in the present (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 2004). Essential to the notion of action inquiry is 'collaboration': in acting more awarely and inquiringly we

seek to increase *mutuality between persons*, to develop communities of inquiry within communities of practice.

Torbert draws on developmental theory to articulate parallel stages of personal and organizational development. An individual's frames of perception and action are relatively narrow in early stages of development, focussed on social membership and technical competence. Similarly the early life of organizations is often focussed on survival and efficiency, only later and rarely emphasizing processes of learning and development. However, in later stages both individual and organization become more concerned with the learning process itself - the way perceptions and practices are articulated and revised in interactions; and how more people can be engaged in mutual learning and inquiry. These later stages can be called 'post-conventional' in that the intellectual and emotional processes they represent are infrequently found among those who have not undergone some form intentional personal development, which might include spiritual practice, meditation, martial arts, and the process of action inquiry itself. Torbert argues that late stage organizations are unlikely to arise without late stage leadership.

Judi Marshall has contributed to inquiry as an everyday practice in a series of papers (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2004) which have led her from articulating research as personal process through research as political process to inquiry as life process. The idea of *Living Life as Inquiry* is that very little in life is fixed, finished, clear-cut, and the inquiring practitioner is living continually in process: adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question. This means attending to 'inner' and 'outer' arcs of attention' which on the one hand seek 'to notice myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out and so on' and on the other to one's own and others' behaviour and the organizational context in which this takes place (Marshall, 2001:431).

It is one thing to write about first-person inquiry and quite another to engage with it. It can be transformational to the point of being deeply disturbing. When Carlis Douglas explored how she, as a Black woman, could not only survive but thrive in British organizations, she "uncovered ways in which my survival strategies colluded in maintaining my oppression rather than in negotiating my liberation" and in

consequence “experienced feelings of vulnerability and of being de-skilled” (Douglas, 2002:252).

The practice of first-person inquiry is an ongoing life-practice which can take place at the very moment of acting (on-line reflection) or at later point (off-line reflection). Reflecting on-line is very challenging for most people as it demands a multi-levelled attention whilst acting: attending to what you are doing/how you are being, noticing what you believe is this is enabling/constraining in the situation, deliberately making changes to your behaviour to shift this, attending to how this shift feels and so on. Reflecting off-line or ‘after the event’, puts time and space between our action and our reflection on it. Tracking these reflections and the learning that comes from them in a journal is a popular method, as is arranging regular conversations with a trusted friend or colleague. This is distinct from engaging others in inquiry. Kate describes it thus: ‘Sometimes I need to hear my own voice articulate what I am thinking about – the act of speaking is one which helps me to do my figuring out. [With others I] talk myself through’ (McArdle, 2004:57). Some people use quite structured approaches such as the ‘learning pathways grid’ (see Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001) to encourage rigour and avoid the trap of ‘not noticing what I am not noticing’ which we might easily fall into when inquiring alone. Others find less conventional methods more useful, seeing activities such as running as part of their reflective practice (McArdle, 2004; Roberts, 2003).

At the first-person level the sense that is made, both on- and off-line, is only ‘my’ sense. This obviously shifts at the second-person level where we make our ‘sense’ evident to others and invite mutuality in deciding ‘what is going on’ and how we might change it for the better. Whatever the approach, the point is that some kind of more-or-less systematic process is adopted – it is this that makes the practice a discipline, rather than just an anecdotal account of ‘what I remember’. And in addition, these practices are intended to be challenging, and their usefulness is dependant upon our willingness to confront ourselves and to experiment with changed behaviour as a result. What might begin as some gentle observational notes should, over time, become an in-depth exploration of ‘what is really going on?’

So what does this look like in practice?

Marianne Kristiansen and Jørgen Bloch-Poulsen are Danish OD consultants who see their work as training members of organizations to enter into dialogue on topics in which they are deeply engaged, so they can arrive at practical solutions that will receive general support. They describe (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, in press 2004) how through reflective practice they saw that in spite of their espoused values of practising democracy and dialogue with participants, their theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1996) revealed how they behaved in such a way as to maintain unilateral power. They develop the concept of 'self-referentiality': interpreting others' behaviour through one's own frames of reference:

Self-referentiality means that you take your own actions and reactions for granted. You do not question your observations, bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, intuition, and communication. They pass unattended and are not submitted to the scrutiny... (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004:372).

They arrived at these insights first through watching videotapes of conversations. They had already seen how rare dialogue was between managers, who regularly interpreted the perspective of their colleagues and employees within their own perspective without checking this. However, they also realized that this was often true of themselves:

A closer look at video clips of our own inquiry practice in feedback conversations revealed that we, too, acted self-referentially in spite of our espoused value of practising dialogic research... (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004:377)

They saw in these videotapes how they interpreted non-verbal cues through their own framing rather than exploring with the managers how they themselves experienced them; they saw how their ostensibly 'open' questions were actually biased, often in quite subtle ways; and how this established themselves in superior position, as 'uppers' devaluing others' experience as 'lowers' (Chambers, 1997). They experienced this self-questioning as a vulnerable process.

Transcending self-referentiality is not only a question of changing one's own behaviour, it is also about questioning a tendency to impose one's own regime of truth on others (Foucault, 2000) rather than treating others as co-participants in a learning process. As a result of these insights they continued to explore and challenge this tendency among themselves through continued off-line review, collegial feedback and education in psychodynamic psychotherapy provides an understanding of transference and counter-transference when working with participants.

Second-person research practice

Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern – for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately. Second person inquiry starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry and learning organizations. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:xxvi)

Second-person research/practice starts when we engage with others in a face-to-face group. One of the most clearly articulated approaches to second-person research/practice is co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2003a) which we have outlined above: a typical inquiry group will consist of between six and fifteen people who work together as co-researchers and as co-subjects.

While co-operative inquiry is a clearly set out methodology, second-person research/practice is always present, albeit underdeveloped, in everyday life. In organizations, activities to develop effective teamwork, mentoring, and other forms of person to person and small group engagement are at their best forms of second-person inquiry, albeit tacitly. Indeed, most forms of professional practice are at their best forms of mutual inquiry. For example the appraisal interview, which can be experienced as an exercise of power and defence, can be reframed as an inquiry to which both manager and managed bring their own different knowledge, skills, and perspective to the improvement of performance. Thus a significant form of second

person research/practice may be to make explicit and systematic these everyday, tacit forms.

The shift from first- into second-person space involves a sense of 'going public' with one's inquiry, of joining with others who have similar concerns/questions and engaging with them in exploration of these. It is important to reiterate here that the 'shift into' second-person inquiry is not a 'shift away' from first-person inquiry. As discussed earlier, each generates and is sustained by the other and working to figure out a balance of attention between the two is one of the many challenges for the action researcher. Indeed, as in Geoff Mead's (2002) example that we use here, the inquiry opens a second-person space which allows participants to attend to first-person practices.

Geoff Mead was at the time of inquiry a senior police officer in Hertfordshire Constabulary in the UK. Among his concerns was leadership in the police force at a time when police services through the country were being accused of insensitivity, machismo, and 'institutional racism'. He started from the premise that "Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning about theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders." (Mead, 2002:191). To explore this issue he initiated and ran an eighteen month long co-operative inquiry entitled 'Developing Ourselves as Leaders', which was included in his doctoral research (Mead, 2001).

Initiating a co-operative inquiry is itself a delicate process (McArdle, 2002). After exploring the idea with senior colleagues and getting the formal endorsement of the Chief Constable, Geoff initiated a series of briefing meetings:

... designed to help people make a positive decision to opt in to the action inquiry or to decide, without any stigma, that it was not for them. The underlying principle was that of voluntary, informed self-selection... I talked about the possibility of transformative learning and asked people to decide if they wanted to take part using their head (Do you have enough information? Does it make sense for you to do it?), heart (Are you

intrigued, curious, drawn? Does it feel right for you to do it?), and will (Are you able and willing to meet the commitment? Do you really want to do it?). (Mead, 2002:196)

From these meetings an inquiry group was established which engaged in cycles of action and reflection over several months. Sometimes all members focus on the same issue, but often the inquiry is conducted as variations on a common theme:

...each member of the [group] formulated his or her own individual inquiry question under the umbrella: "How can I improve the way I exercise leadership in the Hertfordshire Constabulary?" The focus on our own practice informed each subsequent cycle of action and reflection...

We found that the simple act of sharing our stories, telling each other how we had been getting on with our inquiries, was enormously powerful – both to deepen the relationships between us and as a way of holding ourselves and each other to account... We learned to trust the process of... inquiry and that, in an organisational setting at least, it needs to be sustained by careful cultivation and lots of energy. (Mead, 2002:200)

The outcomes of the inquiry were varied. The following might be taken as typical

A colleague in the group was exploring his style as a leader and a manager espousing a clear position of valuing other people and wanting to empower his staff. He was confronted quite suddenly one day by feedback from his boss: rather than opening up and giving his staff space in which to work as he wished, they were concerned about the controlling influence he was retaining inappropriately.

When he talked about this in the group I could see that the work we had done together enabled him to hold the challenge and work with it. Instead of being either resistant to it or panicked by it, he took this as an

opportunity to really reflect, and with the group form an action plan as to how he would actually begin to try to shift his behaviour, so that it was in accordance with his values. He began to learn how 'let go the reins' and arranged to get systematic feedback from this person about how he was doing.

Geoff also reflects on the difficulty of accounting for these kinds of changes:

Sometimes these stories which have such enormous import to us in our lives, as reported feel quite small. And I am also conscious that in the telling and the retelling of the story so much of the richness of that encounter, that learning, is inevitably dissipated. But part of the huge pleasure and privilege of working in an inquiry group in this way is that we do come together and share these problems and issues, these moments together. And then we move out again. We constantly converge and diverge, and at these points of convergence we can take sustenance and then take that energy out into the wider world.

(transcribed and adapted from Mead, in Marshall & Reason, 2003)

The role of co-operative inquiry in organization development has enormous potential which has been applied with medical practitioners (Reason, 1999), to explore ecologically sustainable practice in a construction company (Ballard, in press 2005); inter-organizational collaboration (Mullett, Jung, & Hills, 2004); organizational culture (Marshall & McLean, 1988); gender and race in organizations (Aymer, in preparation 2005; Bryan, 2000; Douglas, 1999, 2002); and leadership in communities (Ospina et al., 2003).

Third-person research practice

How can we move beyond the relatively contained and small scale practices of first- and second-person action research to stimulate inquiry in whole organizations and in the wider society? The current debate in action research circles (Fricke, 2003; Greenwood, 2002; Gustavsen, 2003) suggests that while we

have learned a lot about how to create inquiry at a personal, small group and to some extent at an organizational level, we have been less successful in addressing large scale issues of institutional change, and scarcely touched the global issues of poverty, violence, and environmental degradation which are arguably the most pressing.

It is suggested by some that there is therefore an urgent need to develop strategies for developing larger scale in action research. To do this we may start from two perspectives: first considering ways to 'scale up' small scale inquiry at an organizational level; and then to ask whether action research can contribute at the level of social movement to address major issues of our time.

How, then might we 'scale up' first- and second-person research practices? How can we build from the relative intensity of the co-operative inquiry group to engage large groups and whole systems in inquiry? Often, the move from an intimate inquiry group to larger participation is difficult. However, Kate McArdle's inquiry with young woman was more successful in stimulating wider debate by inviting others into an inquiring space.

Kate initiated a co-operative inquiry within a multi-national organisation in the UK as part of her PhD Research (McArdle, 2002, 2004), and as part of the organization development toward more effective management of diversity. The inquiry call invited young women from the organisation to form a co-operative inquiry group through which they would deepen their understanding of their experience of the organisation and enable themselves to act in more effective ways. The eventual inquiry group 'YoWiM' (Young Women in Management) consisted of 7 women who worked together in month-long cycles for 15 months. The group met together every four weeks on-site at the host organisation, sharing their stories and ideas from the action phase. In doing so, they opened space for new conversations about their experience - conversations which ranged from concerns about self-presentation, how they were addressed, the absence of female role models, and bullying - all of this being underpinned with issues around voice and voicing.

From the very earliest days of the inquiry group, participants discussed their desire to include, in some way, a wider group of women in the process. There was a strong sense that this would validate their involvement in the inquiry group in the eyes of a larger membership of the organisation – rather than just key sponsors – and that the involvement of more women from a more diverse ‘slice’ of the organisation (older, younger, more senior, more junior) would enable the inquiry group members to ‘check out’ their own experiences in the light of new stories these women would bring. Furthermore, working the (by this stage familiar) co-operative inquiry method with a new group of people who had not encountered it before offered the group the possibility of trying out new ways of being with ‘others’ – a further validity check on their developing facilitative skills.

The YoWiM group conceived, designed and conducted the half-day event, with Kate, who had initiated and actively facilitated the YoWiM co-operative inquiry, almost entirely as an observer. The preceding ten months of developing first- and second-person inquiry skills together in the intimate YoWiM inquiry group ultimately enabled the YoWiM women to facilitate and hold an inquiring space for over 50 women from their organisation with confidence. Translating their own processes of inquiry into the larger third-person space – a (much bigger) circle of chairs, structures to enable work in smaller, safer sub-groups, setting expectations that participants would really listen to each other and would endeavour to hear each other as equals, stating that experience is real and that stories told from it are therefore ‘true’, encouragement to offer opening comments and challenges, rather than judgemental closing ones – shifted the pattern of interactions and the types of stories that were possible to tell. The YoWiM women facilitated the deepening of engagement with the themes that emerged throughout the session – with Kate carefully intervening at times when they became drawn into non-inquiring behaviours, or hooked into other normative agendas.

The key point with this inquiry is how the development of first- and second-person inquiry skills over the preceding year enabled the YoWiM women to create and hold an inquiring space for others in which normative patterns of behaviour can be

named, inquired into and resisted – alongside the emergence of behaviours that enable flourishing and an inquiring stance to become a reality.

An entirely different model of third-person inquiry comes from the Scandinavian experience under the leadership of Bjørn Gustavsen. Gustavsen suggests we need to extend beyond the relatively small scale of individual action research ‘cases’ so that “rather than being defined exclusively as ‘scientific happenings’ they (are) also defined as ‘political events’” (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996b:11). More recently he deepens this argument, stating that action research will be of limited influence if we think only in terms of single cases, and that we need to think of creating social movements by adopting a ‘distributive’ approach - generating efforts of some substantial size and focussing research effort into developing and sustaining the network rather than on individual interventions. (Gustavsen, 2003).

If we use action research in a distributive way to create social movements it becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a “case”. Instead of using much resources in a single spot to pursue things into a continuously higher degree of detail in this spot, resources are spread over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible. (Gustavsen, 2003:96-7)

Gustavsen employs the ‘dialogue conference’ (Gustavsen, 2001) which, akin to the range of large scale and ‘whole system’ conference designs – future search, the appreciative inquiry summit, open space, whole systems events, and so on (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Pratt et al., 1999; Weisbord & Janoff, 1995) – broadens the ‘community of inquiry’ definition - creating a forum for debate based on principles of participatory democracy, but without the intensity, intimacy and duration of second person inquiry designs.

Using the dialogue conference approach (Gustavsen, 2001), Marianne Ekman Philips (2004) reports such a ‘distributive’ intervention in the Swedish Health Service, focussing on dialogue generation between as many actors as possible. Participants represented the main professional groups, including nurses, doctors, assistant

nurses, occupational therapists and home-service assistants. The main purpose was to expose the participants to each other, across professional as well as organisational boundaries to explore the potential for learning from one another.

As an action research strategy, the health care programme can be seen as an effort to promote organisation development in as wide a range of workplaces as possible through the organisation of an external support structure. This support structure relied, furthermore, mainly on actors from the health services themselves and on activities unfolding between them. The main task of research was to help develop the support structure, not to intervene deeply in processes at the level of specific organisations. The main reason for this kind of strategy is the need to reach broadly out into working life to be able to give changes a critical mass and sustainability. (Philips, 2004:362)

Summary

After taking a look at some illustrated accounts of first-, second- and third-person research practice, what are the themes that we can see and how might they be useful for the OD practitioner?

The accounts emphasise that action research is not a methodology, but an approach that shapes methodological practices. As such it is full of choices: rather than thinking in terms of 'getting it right or wrong', action researchers must endeavour to make appropriate choices in different situations. We would argue that a key dimension of quality is to be aware of the choices, consider them well, and to make those choices clear, transparent, articulate, to your selves, to your inquiry partners, and, when you start writing and presenting, to the wider world (Reason, 2003b).

Action Research and organization development are close cousins. We argue that in remembering the way OD is in many ways born of action research we can emphasize OD not only as a process of organizational improvement but also as a process of mutual and liberating inquiry.

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