

Action Research and the Single Case: a response to Bjørn Gustavsenⁱ

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For Concepts and Transformations

Bjørn Gustavsen has done the action research community a great service with his exploration over several years of the issue of scale and wider influence in action research. He has argued that we need to extend 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, 1996:11); in his recent CAT paper in response to Davydd Greenwood he develops the argument, suggesting 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, which he sees as events interconnected in a broader stream (Gustavsen, 2003). Gustavsen writes that his core concern is for the movement for democracy and participation; other social movements in a ‘search for a world worthy of human aspiration’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) embrace justice and sustainability (Reason, 2002a): feminism, anti-racism, peace, responsible business, and so on. In a subsequent paper (Gustavsen, in press 2003) he suggests that we might see action research as a process of building social capital.

I find these arguments persuasive, and have joined Torbert in referring to this kind of large scale inquiryⁱⁱ which aims to build political networks as ‘third-person’ inquiry practice, to distinguish it from the personal engagement, ‘first-person’ inquiry, of the reflective practitioner; and the face-to-face interpersonal and group interaction of ‘second person’ inquiry (Chandler & Torbert, in press 2003; Reason & Torbert, 2001; Torbert, 1999, 2001).

But Gustavsen also suggests that to build action research as a social movement we have ‘to use action research in a distributive way’ and that this means it

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

It is here that I am less sure of his arguments and whether I want to follow them. For it seems to me and my colleagues at Bath that in order to influence changes in society toward justice and democracy, and in order to engage people in an exploration of those issues of ‘global significance’ to which both Gustavsen and Greenwood refer, we need not only to build large scale networks of inquiry but also to engage in transformations of consciousness and behaviour at personal and interpersonal levels. While it is true that we cannot make large scale change on the basis of small cases, neither can we build truly effective and liberating political networks of inquiry without developing significant capacities for critical inquiry in the individuals and small communities which constitute them. Rather than argue that distributive networks are more important than the ‘single case’, we must seek means of integrating the personal with the political, linking first-, second- and third person inquiry practices. As Willis Harman noted

Throughout history, the really fundamental changes in societies have come about not from dictates of governments and the results of battles but through vast numbers of people changing their minds—sometimes only a little bit (Harman, 1988:155);

And as Margaret Mead is famously quoted, ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world’.

Members of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at Bath certainly do attempt to engage with issues beyond the single case. For example

- Sue Porter was involved in an action research project in a town in the English West Country which engaged many citizens in different ways, from street theatre to future search conferences to small action groups, in exploring and influencing the development of the town.
- David Ballard attempted to work at government level to develop sustainability reporting protocols that would incorporate inquiring and learning processes.
- Elizabeth Capewell has been associated with every major civil disaster in the UK over the past twenty years—including indiscriminate shootings, terrorist bombs, and major train crashes—working (with inadequate resources) to bring processes of inquiry to each of these difficult situations, and also to national and local policies that influence the way these events are understood, prepared for and managed.
- Geoff Mead has used principles of action research, and his co-operative inquiry into leadership in the police service (Mead, 2001a, 2001b), to inform a national programme of public leadership training, informed by action research and funded by the Cabinet Office. The programme includes 15 (soon to be 21) active action inquiry groups involving 200-250 participants over 2-3 years (www.publicserviceleadersscheme.gov.uk).

At the same time, we hold strongly to the importance of high quality personal inquiring practice moment-to-moment-to-moment, both for professional action researchers and their associates, which we call first-person inquiry. Thus Judi Marshall has articulated her ways of ‘living life as inquiry’ (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002) in which the processes of action research are applied not to ‘cases’ or to ‘programmes’ but to the self-study of practice in everyday life. As Torbert has it, ‘all our actions, including those we are most certain about and are most committed to, are in fact also inquiries’ (Torbert, 2001:250). From this perspective, the purpose of action research is

... to bring scholarship to life... to bring inquiry into more and more of our moments of action—not just as scientists if that happens to be our profession, but as organizational and family members, and in our spiritual, artistic, craft, exercise, conversational, sexual, and other activities. [This] is a turn toward a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings. (Reason & Torbert, 2001:7)

Drawing on these ideas, we work hard with graduate students on our programmes (see www.bath.ac.uk/carpp) to bring inquiry into their everyday practices as managers, consultants, activists, community members, seeing action research approaches as informing their work as tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) and self-appointed change agentsⁱⁱⁱ seeking to help create a more just and sustainable society.

We also champion ‘second person’ inquiry practices, drawing in particular on the family of approaches called co-operative inquiry (John Heron, 1996; John Heron & Reason, 2001) in which a face-to-face group of co-researchers engage together in cycles of action and reflection. In co-operative inquiry the aim is to work together to better understand aspects of our world, and also to find ways to act more effectively within that world, by cycling through experiential, presentational, propositional and practical forms of knowledge. The co-

operative inquiry process can produce an intense, intimate inquiry space in which participants can examine their practice closely and carefully, and change what they do as a result (for examples of co-operative inquiry practice, see Reason, 2002b). This can be seen as a powerful new ‘communicative space’ (Kemmis, 2001), or in Gergen’s terms (2003) a first order democracy. Opening such inquiry spaces can be highly challenging, even subversive, to the established order, so long as they do not degenerate to become closed, inward looking, self-satisfied, even hostile to other perspectives as Gergen warns.

We see that these processes of first- and second-person inquiry need to be tied into wider ‘movements’ in the sense that Gustavsen describes them. Often this happens quite naturally as part of the field of practice. For example, Carlis Douglas explored, in her own life and in co-operative inquiry with others, how Black women like her could not only survive but thrive in British organizations (Douglas, 1999, 2002). To do this well, she found she had seriously to confront her own socialization as a Black woman and invite her peers in the inquiry group to do the same. The group experience was not the supportive ‘sisterly’ affair one might imagine, but was intensely difficult. As one member said, ‘if we hadn’t had this inquiry group *we wouldn’t even have known what questions to ask*’, which points to the effectiveness of such intimate inquiry spaces in raising new questions and *redescribing* the territory, to use Rorty’s evocative word (Rorty, 1989; see also Reason, 2003;). She used this research to develop her own practice in race relations training and organizational change. Her work was followed by further doctoral studies by Black women using action research in different professional settings (those available in the public domain include Bravette, 1997, 2001; Bryan, 2000). This kind of work, based in close, intimate inquiry, contributes to the wider movement of people working toward a non-racist society, and supports the activist-practitioners working in this movement to draw on action research in their work.

A clear example of the interweaving of the personal, the interpersonal and the wider political can be seen in the stream of activities exploring the theory and practice of holistic medicine in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK. We can pick this up with the co-operative inquiry John Heron and I initiated with general medical practitioners (Heron & Reason, 1985; Reason, 1988), which responded to a groundswell of interest in holistic practice in the British medical profession at that time. We judged it an appropriate moment to initiate a more systematic inquiry as part of this professional movement. The co-operative inquiry process included an intense and sometimes very personal face-to-face dialogue amongst the doctors as they explored fully the implications of holistic practice. We built and tested a model which articulated the practice of holistic medicine, and explored the reductive assumptions built into allopathic medicine, the social power carried by the medical profession, and the privilege and distress that doctors experience, occupying as they do the role of healer in our society. This meant that we were touching on fundamental issues of personal, professional and social identity, and how the pathologies built into the doctors’ role affected both their own well-being and that of their patients. And at the same time the doctors were experimenting with how to put these ideas into practice in their day-to-day encounters with patients.

The ideas and practices we explored together were influential in establishing the British Holistic Medical Association, whose founders included members of the inquiry group, and whose aim was to provide a focus for holistic thinking in medicine as a counter the establishment British Medical Association. When the latter published a report highly critical of ‘alternative’ medicine (British Medical Association, 1986) members of the inquiry wrote a considered reply and contributed to the public debate in the press (British Holistic Medical Association, 1986). It is significant to the sense of a developing movement that a later BMA review was far more constructive and less critical.

One of the members of the inquiry group established Marylebone Health Centre, an innovative medical practice in central London with a philosophy informed in part by that established by the original inquiry. Several years later he invited me to facilitate a further co-

operative inquiry into collaboration between general and complementary medical practitioners. This returned a strand of inquiry from the institutional third-person back to the first- and second-person processes of clinical practice and relations with colleagues and patients (Reason, 1991, 1999; Reason et al., 1992).

It would be overstating the case to say that this stream of action research work, which stretched over some ten years, created a ‘movement’ in medicine that has significantly changed the relationship between allopathic and complementary medicine. I think it is fair to claim that it made a worthwhile contribution to a movement that was already underway, and that the interplay between the intensely personal and interpersonal and the wider social and professional was a significant aspect of this contribution.

A third example of practice that relates a small scale action research endeavour to a wider field can be seen in the recent work of Kate McArdle. As part of her PhD research, McArdle initiated a co-operative inquiry group of young women in management (YoWiM) in a large multinational company (McArdle, 2002, in preparation). Through cycles of action and reflection, group members reflected on their position in the organization and experimented with new behaviours. For example, they sought ways of speaking out more effectively in the face of patronising and bullying behaviour of male managers, and finding new value in more relational forms of behaviour. McArdle argues that one of the most important outcomes of this inquiry group was the development among these young women of a reflective, critical inquiring competence:

... one of the most valuable inquiry practices... was ‘really listening’ to each other (as something different from ‘waiting to speak’), thus opening a space for new conversations about the experience of being young women in management. This helped them become aware of how their voices were largely absent in the organization. Group members brought their observations and concerns to the group, told stories of their experiences, and reported back the outcomes of action experiments which they undertook away from the group, and were encouraged and helped to develop new ways of responding to their experiences. Most important was the creation of a critical perspective, so that problems experienced by group members were no longer always ‘their fault’ but could be seen as part of the culture of a masculine-oriented organization requiring a creative response. (Reason & McArdle, in press 2003)

Toward the end of the inquiry, the members initiated a wider inquiry with both other young women and senior women in the company. They initiated and facilitated a large group dialogue to enable themselves and others to gain further understanding of issues of interest to women in the company. While this was not a large-scale ‘movement’ in the sense that Gustavsen writes, it does reach the inquiry beyond the single case to build a wider network of inquiry and potential action. McArdle suggests that the success of this venture is largely due to the inquiry skills the young women developed from their own experience in the intimacy of the co-operative inquiry, which enable them to develop the capacity to open a wider inquiring space within the organization:

... because they had developed a second-person community of inquiry over a ten-month period, YoWiM group members were able to create and hold a wider *inquiring space*. They were careful not to re-create the hierarchy that existed ‘in normal workshops’ in the company, in which people were rewarded for ‘knowing the right answers’, but through quite simple means, such as arranging chairs in a circle without tables, sharing some of their own experience of inquiry, inviting other young women to tell their stories and really listen to each other, helping them to explore their experience, they countered the prevailing

organizational culture and created a quite unusual experience for their peers.
(Reason & McArdle, in press 2003)

The point is not that the ‘results’ of the detailed inquiry of the young women, the ‘single case’ in Gustavsen’s terms, is exported into the organization—that doesn’t work in our experience (see, for example, Mead, 2001a, 2001b). Rather, the creative inquiry space of the small group was opened to a wider community, and in part this opening was dependent on the inquiry skills developed face-to-face, through cycles of action and reflection, in the original inquiry group members.

So I entirely agree with Gustavsen that action research must seek a way to create a wider influence, and that one way to do this is to ‘create and support social movements’; I can see that it is important for individual action research activities to become ‘part of a broader stream’. But I don’t think this means that we must avoid the intimate, in depth, sometimes life-changing work of the personal and small group inquiry; these may be crucial to the development of social movements which bring about real differences. As Loy points out from the perspective of engaged Buddhist practice:

... the obvious need is to work on ourselves as well as the social system. If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill will and delusion, our efforts at addressing institutionalised forms are likely to be useless, or worse. We may have some success in challenging the socio-political order, but that will not lead to a transformed society (Loy, 2003:35)

Maybe the best example of this is the feminist movement, which (although currently out of fashion) probably brought about more changes in attitude and behaviour in Western countries than any other movement in the late C20. Feminism was at least in part based on many different forms of consciousness raising group in which women explored the impact of gender roles on their lives deeply and personally—coining the phrase ‘the personal is political’. So rather than imagine that we can create and sustain social movements directly, we must realize that such movements are interdependent with the reflective and critical inquiry skills of those who are active within them.

Gustavsen also suggests that individual inquiry projects will have ‘diffuse boundaries’, and I accept, with Gergen (2003) that in creating first order democracies we must beware of creating impermeable boundaries that separate them from wider second order democratic processes. But the first- and second-person inquiry practices we champion at Bath may need strong and clear boundaries in the early stages to create the safety required for critical exploration. Our experience at Bath suggests significant transformation of experience and practice in many fields demands an intense and focussed experience. In exploring patterns of thriving rather than surviving, Douglas and her sisters had seriously to confront their own patterns of relation with each other and with White society. Members of the holistic medicine group had to explore in some difficult depth their own socialization as doctors before they could engage as influential change agents in the wider debate. In order to confront gendered patterns in their organization, YoWiM group members had to explore their own assumptions of identity and patterns of interaction.

So as well as seeking to create large scale inquiry movements in the manner Gustavsen describes, we must explore how to expand the emancipatory inquiry space created by face to face action research groups to encompass and create larger networks. Maybe it is necessary to establish a critical mass of second-person inquiry which can then engage in dialogue with a wider community of stakeholders: this, for example, is a possible direction for the Public Service Leaders Scheme.

This points to emancipatory education as another way of contributing to a 'social movement'. Our Postgraduate Programme in Action Research and our MSc in Responsibility and Business practice include at any one time 80-90 graduate students who are engaged in some form of action research practice in their professional lives, making 'small wins' (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) which may have quite significant influences. Participants on these programmes often re-create their careers on the basis of action research practices, bringing inquiry skills into both large and small enterprises. We are extending our reach by inviting all our associates to join a 'vital network' of action research practitioners, which we intend to both support the use of action research in members' professional practices, and provide the resources to staff a series of collaborative inquiry projects. We regard the integration of the personal with the political as absolutely central to our work together.

We must also remember that action research practice is not limited to those like Gustavsen, who have significant power and access to resources within their field and indeed within their society (which is not to say Gustavsen would not like to have more!). To say that 'real' action research means creating social movements implies a practice on a scale and with a degree of leverage that not all initiating researchers can command. This can generate a sense of exclusion, and even disempowerment, among those who wish to bring action research into their practice, particularly those who are drawing on action research practices within their own organizations (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001), and young students entering the field of action research who are in a completely different life space from those of us who are well established in the field (Gayá & Reason, 2002).

Davydd Greenwood asks the question 'Why has action research not taken over the social sciences?' (Greenwood, 2002:128), and Gustavsen's paper is at least in part a response, arguing as he does for a more significant influence on policy. I find myself wondering if we really want to become the mainstream of social science! In one sense at least, of course we do: we want much more work to be done that engages theory with practice, we want to see an end to some of the nonsenses that purport to be inquiry in the major academic journals, and to young people's hopes and aspirations being wrecked on the nastier aspects of the dominant paradigm; we want the resources to do the good work we know we can do to address significant issues. But is there also more than a suggestion that action research will only be successful if it gains recognition in the context of social research in late capitalist society, if it 'joins the party', as it were? I wonder if it also fruitful to see action research as fundamentally countercultural, an articulation of that dimension of Western culture that is necessarily muted and thus potentially subversive. The passion of the Western mind through the ages has been for control and domination (Tarnas, 1991), but Gregory Bateson identified an undercurrent of thought concerned with form, pattern and process rather than substance, which goes back at least to the Pythagoreans and comes to us through the Gnostics, alchemists and Romantics (Bateson, 1972:449; see also Skrbina, 2003). Today this is voiced through feminisms, the civil rights movement, deep ecology and Gaia theory, creation spirituality and the voices of the underprivileged South (Fals Borda & Mora-Osejo, in press 2003). This is the stream of thought that reminds us to listen to what is silenced, to honour the margins of our society (hooks, 1991), to always wonder, as 'ironists', how we come to see the world the way we do and use the language we do (Rorty, 1989).

Both Gustavsen and Greenwood want action research to have a bigger influence and to do this by taking on the established social sciences and funding bodies. I don't want to disagree with them so much as to articulate another perspective: maybe we should be thinking homeopathically^{iv}. Homeopathy is the science and art of healing through small doses that stimulate the self-healing capacities of the organism. Action research as homeopathy would mean that rather than large-scale funded projects changing policy we imagine lots and lots of individuals and small groups, acting inquiringly in their personal lives as mothers, lovers, neighbours and in their working lives as doctors, managers, and bricklayers. Their inquiring practice would stimulate questions: what is important at the moment? what assumptions are

we carrying that may be inappropriate? does our behaviour match our intentions? might there be more fruitful ways of doing this? how might we engage with others on this? and so on. We would see action research not primarily as a form of social science producing cases or influencing policies, but as a form of day-to-day collaborative inquiry at the moment of action for individuals, small groups, organizations, and society as a whole, an enormous groundswell for change.

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ⁱⁱ I use the term ‘inquiry’ throughout as always including both action and reflection

ⁱⁱⁱ This phrase is borrowed from Judi Marshall

^{iv} I am indebted to Nick Mayhew for this metaphor; he uses it more rigorously than I manage here.