

Choice and Quality in Action Research Practice

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This article explores the nature of quality in action research practice. The origins and purposes of action research and its relation to social science methodology are reviewed. Action research is described in terms of four characteristic dimensions—worthwhile practical purposes, democracy and participation, many ways of knowing, and emergent developmental form—that present a broad range of criteria beyond those of the empirical research paradigm against which quality research might be judged. Recent debates concerning validity and quality in qualitative research are explored. It is argued that action research is characteristically full of choices, and the argument is made that quality in inquiry comes from awareness of and transparency about the choices available at each stage of the inquiry.

Keywords: *action research; participation; validity; quality*

This article explores the nature of quality in action research practice. To locate the arguments, the article starts with a brief review of the origins and purposes of action research and its relation to social science methodology. Action research is described in terms of four characteristic dimensions, which present an enormous range of criteria beyond those of the empirical research paradigm against which quality research can be judged. Following a review of recent debates concerning validity and quality in qualitative research, the quality issues for each of the characteristics

of action research are explored. It is argued that none of these criteria are in any sense absolute but rather represent choices that action researchers must make in the conduct of their work: Action research is characteristically full of choices. So the primary rule in approaching quality is to be aware of the choices that are made and their consequences. Significant choice points in the conduct of action research are then explored.

The origins of action research are broad—they lie in the work of Lewin and other social science researchers around at the end of World War II; in the

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article was developed from a keynote address to the World Congress of Action Research, Pretoria, September 2003, which was in turn developed from my collaboration with Hilary Bradbury in writing the introduction and conclusion to the Handbook of Action Research (2001). I am profoundly grateful for this long term collaboration and the many creative exchanges we have had. The way these ideas are developed and articulated here is of course my own responsibility. I am also grateful for the constructive comments on drafts of this article from Richard Boyatzis, Donna Ladkin, Judi Marshall, Rupesh Shah, Jack Whitehead, Alfred Keiser, and two anonymous *JMI* reviewers.

liberationist perspective that can be exemplified in Paulo Freire (1970); philosophically in liberal humanism, pragmatism, phenomenology and critical theory; and practically in the work of scholar-practitioners in many professions, notably in organization development, teaching, health promotion and nursing, and community development both in Western countries and in the majority world. None of these origins is well linked to the mainstream of academic research in either North America or Europe: Quantitative hypothetico-deductive research retains a dominance, and although this has been strongly challenged by qualitative and interpretive approaches to research, the emphasis of the latter has been on representation of the world rather than action within it (Greenwood & Levin, 2001). So the family of practices called action research has inhabited the margins of academia for many years. As Argyris (2003) points out, the pursuit of knowledge in the service of justice and effectiveness has often been held in disrepute by management scholars.

However, social science is in a period of paradigm contestation. In the context of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to the "critical, interpretive, linguistic, feminist, and rhetorical turns in social theory" that lead to the triple crisis of "representation, legitimation, and praxis" (p. 17). But Denzin and Lincoln pay less explicit heed to questions of praxis than action researchers would wish. For although the linguistic turn is hugely important in showing us how to deconstruct, and transgress beyond our taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies, and habits and although more generally, constructionist approaches (Gadamer, 1981; Gergen, 1999; Morgan, 1983; Schwandt, 1994; Shotter, 1993) emphasize the important principle that all ways of seeing and interpreting the world are human constructions framed by language, still another transformation, this time toward the action turn (Bohman, 2004), is necessary to reach a transformation of social sciences necessary for our times. As has long been pointed out, the findings of traditional social science are of little or no use to members of organizations or practitioners (Susman & Evered, 1978; Torbert, 1981); there is a division between academic research and the everyday practice that action research seeks to address.

To make the action turn is to revision our view of the nature and purpose of social science. Because all human persons are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not primarily to describe or interpret our world, to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct taken-for-granted

realities, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities, and the ecosystems of which they are part (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a; Reason & Torbert, 2001a).

If we start from the idea that creating knowledge is a practical affair, we will start not, as in traditional academic research, from an interesting theoretical question, but from what concerns us in practice, from the presenting issues in our lives. As Richard Rorty and Paulo Freire, from their very different perspectives, put it so clearly,

We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999, p. xxv)

The starting point . . . must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people . . . [We] must pose this . . . to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at an intellectual level, but at a level of action. (Freire, 1970, p. 75)

The focus on practical purposes draws attention to the moral dimension of action research—that it is inquiry in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes, for the flourishing of persons, communities, and the ecology of which we are all a part. In this, action research walks hand in hand with the Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) seventh moment in qualitative research.

The seventh moment asks that the social science and the humanities become sites for critical conversation about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community. . . . We struggle to connect qualitative research to the hopes, needs, and goals of a free democratic society. (p. 3)

A first characteristic of action research, then, is that it is concerned with addressing worthwhile practical purposes, with the "primacy of the practical" (Heron, 1996b, p. 41).

But does this mean that action research is simply about what works? I think not; we should resist a purely outcomes-based view of action research. Argyris puts it nicely: "Learning occurs when understanding, insight

and explanation are connected with action" (Argyris, 2003, p. 1179); and Pettigrew (2001) argues that management research must address the "double hurdles" of relevance and scholarship, reminding us of the Lewinian maxim that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory." So action research draws on an extended epistemology that integrates theory and practice. It is grounded in the phenomenology of everyday experience (Ladkin, 2004). It draws on the images we develop and the stories we tell (Bruner, 2002). It is concerned with how we make sense of experience and accounts, and how we link these with a wider field of scholarship. It is concerned with the congruence of our theories and our practice (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1974) and the testing of our claims to knowledge against evidence derived from practice (Whitehead, 2000). Thus, a second characteristic of action research is that it encompasses many ways of knowing.

Practice in the world necessarily involves other people, and for many, action research is necessarily a democratic, participative process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis, 2001). At a methodological level participation is important because self-evidently one cannot study and improve practice without deep involvement of those engaged in that practice, for the necessary perspective and information is simply not available; and as Heron (1996a) argues, one can only study persons if one approaches them as persons, as intentional actors and meaning makers. But participation is also an ethical and political process: People have a right and ability to contribute to decisions that affect them and to knowledge that is about them, and action research has an important place in the empowerment of people (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Rahman, 2003; Selener, 1997). Thus, action research is a participative and democratic process that seeks to do research with, for, and by people; to redress the balance of power in knowledge creation; and to do this in an educative manner that increases participants' capacity to engage in inquiring lives.

Because action research is so intimately bound up in peoples' lives and work, a fourth characteristic is that it is necessarily an emergent process (Reason & Goodwin, 1999). Good action research does not arrive fully fledged in a clear research design separate from the stream of life but evolves over time as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice. This means that the inquiry process begins at the initial moment of inception—however tacit and inchoate that may be—and continues well after any formal research is complete; and it means

that in the early days of an action research endeavor, choices about quality maybe quite different from those in a more established process.

This articulates action research as an emergent process of engagement with worthwhile practice purposes, through many ways of knowing, in participative and democratic relationships. These four dimensions are reflected in a recent definition of action research as

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. . . . 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, p. 1)

In the spirit of transparency to which this article is devoted, I should clarify my choice of these four dimensions. They emerge from a professional lifetime engaged in action research, innumerable debates with students and colleagues, and my study of the wide-ranging literature on action research. They also arise from my personal and professional commitment to participation as a grounding metaphor for our times: Humans are not disembodied minds but embodied, acting beings who participate with each other and with a wider ecology of beings in life on earth. We act for certain purposes that we deem to be worthwhile lest we lapse into meaninglessness. Our actions and our purposes are not discrete experiments but part of the emergent process of life (Reason, 1997, 1998b, 2002; Reason & Bradbury, 2001a; Reason & Torbert, 2001b; Torbert & Reason, 2001). Others may and will choose different characteristics through which to articulate action research that will better suit their perspectives and choices.

What, then, is good action research? What are the dimensions of quality?¹ One traditional answer is that action research addresses social issues in a practical fashion and also makes a contribution to theory. But this is inadequate and unsatisfactory, not least because it continues the separation of theory from practice and is a justification for action research from a primarily academic perspective. The argument of this article is that these characteristics of action research open up a wide range of choices for the conduct of inquiry. Thus in the practice of quality inquiry, researchers need to be aware of the choices open to them; to make these choices clear and transparent to themselves and to

their inquiry partners; and, in writing and presenting, to articulate them to a wider audience.

This strong emphasis on choice and transparency is congruent with broadly constructionist, nonfoundational epistemologies and with political pluralism, aspects of the paradigmatic turn that Denzin and Lincoln articulate. It is part of a move away from a view of inquiry as a search for one valid truth. Because in this view all understanding is constructed from a standpoint (Denzin, 1997) and all action is in the pursuit of particular valued purposes, we are no longer pursuing a validity that is about getting it right. There are parallels here with Rorty's (1989) notion of the ironist as being one who continually faces up to the contingency of their language, identity and community, and combines strong commitment "with a sense of contingency of their own commitment" (p. 61; Reason, 2003).

Quality in action research will rest internally on our ability to see the choices we are making and understand their consequences; and externally on whether we articulate our standpoint and the choices we have made transparently to a wider public. The argument for choice and transparency is also congruent with the position that the whole scientific enterprise is based fundamentally on free and open discourse in an open society (this is well argued, for example, in Feyerabend, 1978; Popper, 1945).

Part of making our choices available for public scrutiny is that we engage in a creative discourse on quality in action research—an essential move if this approach to inquiry is to establish itself both academically and in practice. Thus, it is also important that action researchers explicitly connect their own judgments to discussions in current literature (to which the present article is intended as a contribution). So before turning to explore these dimensions of action research in more detail and to suggest some of the important choices for action researchers, I turn to make a brief comparison of the issues raised in the discourse on validity in qualitative and interpretive research, which will help to locate the present argument in a wider context.

THE DISCOURSE ON VALIDITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Concern for questions of validity in qualitative research has been well focused by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their influential volume *Naturalistic Inquiry* and in later writings (e.g., Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln &

Guba, 1986). They first developed four criteria that paralleled the four that guided conventional inquiry. As they came to "understand the foundational nature of the original four criteria" that they rested in assumptions borrowed from an empiricist philosophy of research, Lincoln and Guba proposed five new criteria "which took as their basis the claims, concerns and issues of the new paradigm" (Lincoln, 1995, p. 277): They called these "fairness" and "ontological, educative, catalytic and tactical authenticity" (p. 277). These new criteria reflected

concern for the learning of respondents as much as the learning of the researcher, to open and democratic sharing of knowledge . . . and to the fostering, stimulation and enabling of social action. (p. 277)

In action research, a similar stream of work exploring the notion of validity and quality in action research started with criteria derived from orthodox inquiry (Reason & Rowan, 1981) and moved on to develop criteria more appropriate to the emerging field (e.g., Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Heron, 1988; Holland & Blackburn, 1998; McTaggart, 1997; Reason & Marshall, 1987; Reason & Rowan, 1981; Torbert, 1991).

In 1995, Lincoln collaborated with the present author to draw together a group of scholar-practitioners concerned with validity issues in qualitative and action research in a seminar at the University of Bath that resulted in the special journal issue *Quality in Human Inquiry* (Reason & Lincoln, 1996). This work clarified the significance of social relevance, participation, and practical outcome as dimensions of quality in a non-foundational epistemology. Lincoln continued this exploration (Lincoln, 1995, 2001) clarifying the notion of varieties of validity in her wide-ranging 2001 review paper. She argues that

validity—at least in its narrower, earlier, and conventional sense—is literally deconstructed. The discursive "site" has been cleared, and new and more powerful structures are being built to serve needs not imagined a score of years ago. Nothing less than a complete rethinking of validity is imaginable. (Lincoln, 2001, p. 62)

This deconstruction of validity in the conventional sense is reflected in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005) that is framed by the editors in a question-posing fashion in terms of seven moments, each of which throws up different

challenges and choices and which culminate in the triple crisis of the seventh moment referred to earlier, with all its challenges. This stream of thinking about validity argues that we must move beyond concern for validity criteria as a form of policing research and move toward “validity as incitement to discourse” (Lather, 1993, p. 675) as Patti Lather so energetically puts it (see also Lather, 2001). Kvale makes a similar point when he resists “validity as an expression of a modern legitimation mania” (Kvale, 1995, p. 36) and seeks a validity in the craftsmanship of inquiry.

Thus, the movement in qualitative research has been away from validity criteria that mimic or parallel those of empiricist research toward a greater variety of validity considerations that include the practical, the political, and the moral; and away from validity as policing and legitimation toward a concern for validity as asking questions, stimulating dialogue, making us think about just what our research practices are grounded in, and thus what are the significant claims concerning quality we wish to make. In the next sections, I explore the four characteristics of action research identified earlier and consider the nature of the choices they offer action research practitioners.

PURSUING WORTHWHILE PURPOSES

The essential purpose of action research is to address issues of concern to individuals and communities in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose is to contribute to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of humanity and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a).

This emphasis on the practical is in many ways based in the philosophy of pragmatism. Richard Rorty (1999) argues that among the things that get in the way of creating a just and open society are the dualisms that dominate our thinking, including that between reality and appearance. This misleads us into an attempt to find the truth corresponding with an intrinsic nature of reality, when the task of inquiry should be that of human problem-solving:

Pragmatists hope to break with the picture that, in Wittgenstein’s words, “holds us captive”—the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with

a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment—doing their best to develop tools that will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools that these clever animals have developed. (Rorty, 1999, p. xxii-xxiii)

Rorty’s (1999) view is that “no organism, human or nonhuman, is ever more or less in touch with reality” (p. 33); it is a Cartesian error to think of the mind as somehow swinging free of the causal forces exerted on the body. So we should give up seeing inquiry as a means of representing reality and rather see it as a means of using reality. The relationship between truth claims and the world becomes “causal rather than representational” and the issue becomes whether our beliefs “provide reliable guides to getting what we want” (Rorty, 1999, p. 33).

Thus, one question we can ask about action research is whether it does “provide reliable guides to what we want?” The practical issues addressed in action research projects reported in recent editions of three journals devoted to action research—*Action Research, Concepts and Transformation*, and *Systemic Practice and Action Research*—include:

- The quality of working life (Fricke, 2001)
- Leadership in community development (Ospina et al., 2003);
- How Black women can thrive rather than simply survive in U.K. organizations (Douglas, 2002)
- Leadership in the police (Mead, 2002)
- Citizen’s juries exploring agricultural development with Indian farmers (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2003; Wakeford & Pimbert, 2004)
- Integrating universities, corporations, and government institutions in knowledge generating systems (Levin, 2004)

The kinds of practice concerns at the heart of action research are expressed by Mead (2002) as he starts his inquiry into leadership in the police service:

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. (p. 191)

It must be clear, then, that the practice of action research is not a value-free process; it raises questions

of values, morals, and ethics and is intended to contribute to the flourishing of human persons, communities, and the ecosystems of which we are part. Here there can be no absolutes. As Rorty (1999) points out, moral choice is "always a matter of compromise between competing goods rather than a choice between absolutely right and wrong" (p. xxvii-xxix). So in the practice of action research, we must continually ask what worthwhile purposes we are pursuing and whether they continue to be appropriate and relevant. But there can never be a clear and ultimate answer.

When the question "useful for what?" is pressed, [pragmatists] have nothing to say except "useful to create a better future". When they are asked "Better by what criterion?" they have no detailed answer. . . . [They] can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked "And what exactly do you consider good?" pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, "variety and freedom" or, with Dewey, "growth".

They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology . . . but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate. (Rorty, 1999, pp. 27-28)

How should we inquire into purposes? David Loy suggests in his discussion of Buddhist ethics that "meaning, like pleasure, must be pursued obliquely" (Loy, 2000, p. 127); and Rorty (as cited in Reason, 2003) in conversation asserted that "All discussion between human beings, one way and another, is about what's worthwhile" (p. 114). On the other hand, some action researchers are very explicit about the values they hold and try to put into practice. To take just one example, Robert Chambers (1997), in articulating a fully participative approach to poverty alleviation, wants us to continually ask "Whose reality counts?" He argues that we should always prioritize the voices of the underprivileged, whose needs and view of reality are usually overlooked, thus putting the first last.

I am not here arguing that action research must adopt one clear ethical and moral position, rather that quality action research will show appropriate attention to interrogation of purposes and be as transparent as possible about the moral choices that are made.

But I need here to raise an additional caveat: the question of providing reliable guides to what we want is actually rather complex because it immediately raises issues such as who it is that defines what we want, whether we know what we want, and whether what we want is actually good for us. In particular, the human animal is well capable of focusing on issues of immediate concerns and ignoring the ways in which these are embedded in a wider interconnected system.

In exploring this issue, my colleague Judi Marshall (1984) has drawn on Bakan's (1966) distinction between agency (the expression of independence through self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion) and communion (which seeks union and cooperation as a way of coming to terms with uncertainty). As Richard Tarnas (1991) argues so well, the dominant thrust of Western thought and practice has been agentic: the project to create an "autonomous rational human self," an "autonomous human will and intellect" (pp. 441-442). This has been an essentially masculine project "founded on the repression of the feminine" (pp. 441-442), on the repression of communion in Marshall (1984) and Bakan's (1966) terms. Gregory Bateson (1972), in "Conscious Purpose Versus Nature" and other essays, similarly argues that actions driven by conscious purpose can cut through the information circuits that maintain the stability of ecological (including human) systems (see also Reason, in press). The consequences of this one-sided, agentic consciousness has been—to borrow Skolimowski's (1985) phrase—"ecological devastations, human and social fragmentation, spiritual impoverishment" (p. 22).

What I am cautioning against here is view of quality in action research simply on the basis of "Does it work?" Yes, action research addresses practical issues, but if the action in action research tempts us to become hegemonically agentic—and there will always be a temptation for this to be so, particularly when we are bidding for funding and attempting to respond to the urgently experienced problems of managers and politicians—our vision will be narrowed and the effect will be suboptimal or dysfunctional.

A participatory action research study exploring the management of incontinence among people with mental illness residing in privately owned residential facilities shows some of the complexity of practical outcomes. Incontinence was common amongst this group, resulted in continual bedwetting, clearly caused significant social and practical problems, yet

had never been directly addressed. A significant practical outcome for the owners of the residential facilities would be the containing of the incontinence through medical intervention and the provision of incontinence pads; much health education work would similarly be aimed at prescriptive solutions to incontinence. However, participative inquiry with residents revealed the stigma attached to incontinence, their strategies for concealment and denial, and also that the residents wished to discover their own ways to understand better and self-manage their incontinence. The political pressure by the owners to stop bedwetting led to residents feeling that incontinence was their fault, to concealment of evidence and the inability to discuss the issue—effectively making the problem worse. Participative exploration allowed more intimate conversation, led to a greater empowerment of residents, to greater openness and the ability to think through and practice their own self-determined strategies of self-management, and to new practical solutions to incontinence that were not originally apparent (see Koch, Kralik, & Kelly, 2002).

The practical outcome of an inquiry such as this goes beyond an outcomes based measure of the original presenting problem. All the dimensions of action research can be seen in work such as this as forms of knowledge in action. So although concrete practical concerns may well be the starting point, our sense of quality must reach wider than simply “does it work?” It must include whether we have helped the development of an effective community of inquiry among participants, whether questions of power have been addressed, whether the inquiry has been emancipatory and deepened the experiential basis of understanding, and so on. In this way, we can avoid being trapped in a heroic, agentic vision of action research: It is not just about solving the immediate problem but of articulating the subtle ways in which the inquiry is affecting our world.

DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION

Building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to the work of action research; action research is only possible with, for, and by persons and communities for political, moral, and epistemological reasons. This point is argued throughout the action research literature

(see Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron, 1996a; Kemmis, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001b).

As Anisur Rahman (2003) has pointed out, in a very worrying world,

One positive force has also advanced, which is the awareness of democracy, human rights and social and ecological justice. Totalitarianism, where it still reigns or raises its head today, does so without any pretence of righteousness, and the “voice of the people” when it expresses itself anywhere claims an intrinsic legitimacy. Human rights—including women’s rights—movements as well as movements for environment care are being more assertive than ever before. (p. 13)

Rahman (2003) suggested that a “deeper meaning of democracy is being sought” and that an important task for action research is

to help promote the empowerment of people—the subaltern, underprivileged, oppressed people—toward their democratic participation and voice in society for realizing their human urges as well as to enhance their contribution to and involvement in the search for deeper articulation of an ideological vision of a more humane world. (p. 16)

These concerns about a deeper meaning of democracy are closely linked with action research. Stephen Kemmis (2001) puts it very clearly in saying that

the first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space . . . and to do so in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do, in the knowledge that the legitimacy of any conclusions and decisions reached by participants will be proportional to the degree of authentic engagement of those concerned. (p. 100)

The “formation of communicative space” (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100) is in itself a form of action. It may well be that the most important thing we can choose to do in certain situations is to help open, develop, maintain, and encourage new and better forums for communication and dialogue. This may be judged a far more significant outcome than the solution of immediate practical problems. Maybe the most dramatic expression of this in recent times was the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which opened and held space for the

expression of grief, anger, and responsibility for the atrocities of the apartheid era (Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, 1998).

Action research as the enactment of democracy requires particular skills and capabilities amongst its practitioners. The following interconnected issues are particularly salient.

Power and politics. The development of participatory democracy often acts directly against the interests of those who hold power in social systems—both legitimate and illegitimate. I know of people who have been ridiculed, silenced, sacked, firebombed, imprisoned, and killed for engaging in participative action research. Research participants may be harassed and otherwise prevented from engaging in discussions (e.g., Busza, 2004).

Taking time. Creating democratic spaces takes enormous amounts of time and care. It is easy to bandy about words such as *participation*, and these days some funding bodies like them (e.g., The World Bank, 1994). But the process of drawing people together and creating a framework for collaborative work always takes longer than one imagines. At times, building collaboration will seem to get in the way of directly addressing practical problems.

Working against denial. Where the issues are significant and profoundly difficult to address, there will be quite active processes of denial that make it very difficult to sustain conversations. Elizabeth Capewell, working with communities that have experienced significant disaster (such as random shootings, major train or aircraft crashes, or terrorist acts) finds that there is a strong tendency for people to deny the extent of the trauma and try to get back to normal as soon as possible; they often claim that their community is strong, that the children are resilient and will recover naturally. This acts against any moves to open up spaces for dialogue and represses discussion of the impact of the disaster (Capewell, 2005).

Errors of consensus collusion. Participation can have a shadow side in that human persons in primary association can band together in defense of their version of reality and refuse to countenance alternatives.

Tensions in facilitation. There is a constant and fascinating tension between the organizing ability and

facilitation skills of an outsider—a professional action researcher, a community organizer, an animator—and the community they are working with. The outside facilitator is always in danger of helping in a way that is not helpful because it is controlling or patronizing or suffocating, or just doesn't understand. The community is always in danger of irrationally rejecting the outsider or of becoming overdependent. The language used by professional researchers to talk with each other—as exemplified in the present article—must be radically adjusted to make it relevant to the concerns of people in the everyday conduct of their lives while avoiding both confluence and patronizing. For these reasons, action research facilitators must follow disciplines of reflective practice and carefully monitor their practice (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). An excellent exploration of the issues involved can be found in the research work of the Leadership for a Changing World project at New York University (Ospina et al., 2003).

The limitations of first-order democracy. Ken Gergen (2003) makes a useful distinction between first- and second-order democracy. First-order democracy brings together groups of people who share a sense of identity in effective coordination about issues of common significance. Although it is of vital importance, first-order democracy has degenerative as well as generative qualities, so that every step that creates a sense of us can also create a sense of them and the potential for alienation and hostility. Development of second-order processes that cross boundaries are required to counter this.

The question of scale. Bjørn Gustavsen and his colleagues (Gustavsen, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Philips, 2004; Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996) have developed and sustained an argument that action research will be of limited influence if we think only in terms of intensive work in particular cases and that we need to think of creating social movements, which he sees as many events of low intensity interconnected in a broader stream. The challenge is to find ways in which the reflective practice of first-person inquiry and the first-order democracy of the face-to-face group are integrated with wider political processes (Reason, 2004).

Reflections on quality in action research must therefore include careful exploration of the qualities of dialogue and participation that are needed in a

particular situation along with careful and in-depth exploration of how such dialogue can be established and developed. Any one of the issues touched on earlier—and many more—might be the salient issue for quality in a particular inquiry. The issue of choice faces the practitioner both tactically, moment to moment as he or she facilitates inquiry, and strategically as he or she chooses how to position his or her inquiry practice. We need many more detailed and careful descriptions of the choices action research practitioners make (McArdle, 2004).

MANY WAYS OF KNOWING

One of the traditional claims of action research is that it addresses practical issues while also making a contribution to knowledge. *Knowledge* in this sense can be taken to mean the propositional, abstract theorizing of academia. But many action researchers argue that their work is based on ways of knowing that go beyond the orthodox empirical and rational Western epistemology and that start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition (see for example Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Heron, 1996a; Park, 2001; Torbert, 1991). These many ways of knowing

assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 9)

One helpful formulation is that of John Heron (Heron, 1971, 1981, 1996a; Heron & Reason, 2001), who articulates a fourfold “extended epistemology” of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing.

Experiential knowing brings attention to bear on what the phenomenologists called the *lifeworld* of everyday lived experience. Heron (1996) describes it as knowing through direct face-to-face encounter, empathy, and resonance with a person, place, or thing. Experiential knowing can also be linked with Polanyi’s (1962) tacit knowledge, it is in some senses inaccessible to direct conscious awareness.

Carlis Douglas (1999, 2002) posed the question of how Black British women such as herself could not just survive, but thrive—with passion, humor, and

style—in the racist context of U.K. organizations. Her argument was that oppressed groups develop a sophisticated level of skill at detecting discrimination in its more subtle forms that is not translated into conscious awareness. One task of inquiry, therefore, is to explore and articulate this tacit knowledge. But the exploration of this experiential knowing was deeply challenging. Without in any way minimizing the racist quality of U.K. culture, both personal and collaborative inquiry uncovered ways in which survival strategies colluded in maintaining oppression rather than in negotiating liberation. Douglas’s work is a particularly clear example of the significance of in-depth encounter with experience in inquiry process, exploring experience in depth even when this is painful and disturbs well-established survival strategies.

The danger here is that coresearchers create a defensive inquiry that guards against the discovery of the new. Quality inquiry will courageously seek ways of challenging preconceptions and deepening contact with experience.

Presentational knowing grows out of experiential knowing and provides the first form of expression through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, and dance, drawing on aesthetic imagery. As Bruner (2002) puts it, “We come to experience the ‘real world’ in a manner that fits the stories we tell about it” (p. 103).

Richard Rorty (1989) takes a similar view, pointing to the contingency of the language that we use. It is not possible to arrive at objective criteria for one choice of vocabulary to describe events over another: The difference between what is taken as literal and what is taken as metaphorical is the distinction between the familiar and the unfamiliar vocabularies and theories. So when we want to argue persuasively for a new view of phenomena, we are caught in a “contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things” (Rorty, 1989, p. 9; see also Reason, 2003).

This leads to the key notion of redescription—“a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change” (Rorty, 1989, p. 7):

The . . . “method” of philosophy is the same as the “method” of utopian politics or revolutionary science. . . . The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern

of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it. . . . It says things such as "try thinking of it this way." (Rorty, 1989, p. 9)

In a cooperative inquiry with young women in management in a multinational company, group members reflected on their experience of being snubbed, criticised, and ignored when making presentations. At first, they saw what was happening to them in terms of their own inadequacies but, through the inquiry process, learned to redescribe this as bullying. And when they further placed this within a wider context of the culture of the organization as based on values of winning rather than values of inquiry, they are beginning to create a new vocabulary (redescribing lots and lots of things) that has implications for cultural change. It is not a question, following Rorty, of whether bullying corresponds to the way things really are; rather, it is a question of whether it is useful because it invites us to stop feeling and doing some things and start feeling and doing others. As they learned to tell new stories of their experience, they were able to stop feeling frustrated and powerless. They were able to tell themselves different stories about their managers' behavior—narratives that were not offered by the organizational culture—and by responding differently, they were able to shift how they were treated in the future (McArdle, 2002, 2004).

The danger here is that coresearchers will stay with the same old stories and thus re-create existing realities and confirm existing beliefs. Quality inquiry will actively experiment with redescription and draw on a range of presentational forms to turn stories and accounts upside down and express them in new ways.

Propositional knowing draws on concepts and ideas and, in this sense, is the link between action research and scholarship. Styhre, Kohn, and Sundgren (2002) suggest that theoretical practices must be seen as part of action research. After reviewing the critical, postcolonial, feminist, and management theorists, they write,

Theory is a means for breaking with the common sense thinking that prevails in everyday life in terms of gender, sex, race and ethnicity. For feminist and post-colonial theorists, one cannot argue against common-sense thinking through its own means. . . . As a consequence, theory becomes a liberating force, a medium that can formulate alternative perspectives, ideas, worldviews, and beliefs. . . . Not only a

matter of verified hypotheses and scientific statements about the worlds. . . . It . . . can transfer the world into something new . . . uproot old taken for granted beliefs and establish new topics on the agenda. (p. 101)

The ability to develop alternative theories critical of everyday common sense grows out of in-depth examination of experience and new narratives. One of the most significant social movements in our times has been feminism (although currently somewhat out of fashion). The work of feminism was grounded in reexamining experience and telling new stories in consciousness raising groups, but out of this new theories were fashioned by writers such as Carol Gilligan (1987), Patti Lather (1991), Silvia Gherardi (1995), Sandra Harding (1986), Judi Marshall (1984, 1995), Joyce Fletcher (1998), and many others—new theories of gender, of power, of individual and social development, and of inquiry—which have had a huge impact on the lives of both women and men.

Working in the other direction, major theoretical perspectives can be brought to bear on the practice of action research. Thus, Stephen Kemmis (2001) has devoted time to exploring the relevance of Jurgen Habermas for his action research practice; Judi Marshall (2004) draws on the systemic thinking of Gregory Bateson to illuminate her reflective practice; Bjørn Gustavsen has collaborated with Stephen Toulmin to bring insights from the philosophy and history of science to bear on Scandinavian practice (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996); and to give one example from PhD research, Rupesh Shah (2001) drew on double-bind theory (Bateson, 1972; Laing, 1971) to illuminate the problematic aspects of relationships between business corporations and non-governmental organizations. These practices generate a dialogue between theory and practice that illuminates both.

Quality inquiry will refuse to be held within the hegemonic paradigm and uncritical acceptance of taken for granted theories (and its identical opposite, the uncritical acceptance of the currently fashionable oppositional position!) but will engage accepted theory critically and forge new theoretical perspectives.

Practical knowing, knowing-in-action, is of a quite different nature to knowing-about-action; action research is not the same as applied research. I can tell you how to ride a bicycle and can describe bicycle riding in terms of its dynamic mechanics, but this is

not the same as riding a bicycle, as any child and parent knows. I can describe the stages of development of a working group, for example as forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965), but this is not the same as the practical knowledge held collectively by an effective work group that has struggled together. As Macmurray (1957) argues, "I do" rather than "I think" should be the starting point of our philosophy, and practical knowing has a quality of its own, "useful to an actor at the moment of action rather than to a disembodied thinker at the moment of reflection" (Torbert, 1976, p. 167). At the heart of practical knowing is an awareness of the excellence of the skill in doing it, which is "beyond language and conceptual formulation"; we can, however, ask whether the practice is executed "with appropriate economy of means and elegance of form" and whether the action "does in fact have the effects claimed for it" (Heron, 1996b, pp. 43-44).

Practical issues in action research are typically addressed through cycles of action and reflection, in which the outcomes of each cycle are checked against plans and intentions—this is the empirical or evidential dimension of inquiry. Among the fundamental choices for the researchers is how many cycles to engage in and on what timescale; the appropriate balance between action and reflection; whether to converge on an increasingly focused question or converge to explore issues in a wider context. These cycles are always more messy than the neat diagrams drawn in action research texts would suggest, and Heron highlights the important choice between Apollonian or Dionysian inquiry: Apollonian inquiry takes a more rational, linear, systematic, controlling, and explicit approach; Dionysian inquiry is more imaginal, expressive, spiralling, diffuse, impromptu, and tacit. Both have their place, and no inquiry is likely to follow a purely Dionysian or Apollonian approach (Heron, 1996a; Heron & Reason, 2001). Whatever the approach to research cycling, the key quality question is whether through these cycles of action and reflection sufficient good evidence is produced to support the claims that are made.

These many ways of knowing present choices to action researchers: It may, for example, be judged more important to open to new experiential knowing than to carefully engage in cycles of inquiry; but, on the other hand and in other circumstances, to do so might be judged indulgent when the more significant question is whether we can provide systematic

evidence for the claims we make. The appropriate balance is always one of judgment.

EMERGENT DEVELOPMENTAL FORM

There is always a pressure in institutional contexts to *end-gaming*,² a term used in the inner-game teachings of Tim Gallwey (1986) to draw attention to the ways in which, by attending to outcomes, one fails to pay attention to the present moment that creates the opportunities for successful outcomes: in tennis, by being so preoccupied by winning the point that one stops actually watching the ball. So, for example, participation becomes something to achieve in a particular way, rather than an organic process of human association.

Because action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living, situational knowledge, in many ways, the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals learn skills of inquiry, as communities of inquiry develop, as understanding of the issues deepens, and as practice grows and shifts changes over time. Emergence means that the questions may change, the relationships may change, the purposes may change, and what is important may change. This means action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods.

Carlis Douglas's research demonstrates this emergent quality. She began by asking why organizations paid lip service to equal opportunities but actually did nothing in practice; as she attended to this question, she realized that the more lively question was about how Black people such as her can thrive rather than simply survive. As she studied this question in her own life and with others, she explored how survival strategies learned through socialization often stood in the way of survival and paid more attention to the pain and resistance that this brought about. As these questions were understood in greater depth, she was able to bring these insights to her practice as a race relations consultant, both testing her understanding and using the new understanding to develop her practice. None of this could be foreseen but unfolded through the inquiry process.

Just as the "order of a complex system is not predictable from the characteristics of the interconnected

components nor from any design blueprint, but can be discovered only by operating the iterative cycle" (Reason & Goodwin, 1999, p. 288), so quality inquiry will be characterized by a naturally evolving form. There is something here of the spirit of Lyotard's description of the postmodern artist.

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and principles are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and writer, then, are working without rules to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard, 1979, p. 81)

The danger to be guarded against is that emergence degenerates into a random shuffling between competing options—hence, the argument of this article that quality inquiry will strive to actively seek out and articulate the choices made.

But I would argue that not only does an individual action research project emerge, but the whole practice of action research is emergent. One might say that there are two faces to action research: the practical question of how we engage with a group of people in the service of doing things they care about better, and the utopian project of helping bring forth a very different kind of world, one characterized by inquiring intelligence in participation with others. In this sense, as I once found myself saying, "Action research is an aspiration, not a possibility!"

Action research is partly a family of practical methodologies for engaging people in dealing with key issues in their lives. So the quality issues attended to in this article (How do we enter participative relationships? What is the relationship with theory? How do you judge the effectiveness of practice?) and the practical issues (such as how do you initiate a cooperative inquiry, conduct a search conference? and so on) are all important and interesting questions to engage with.

But action research is also asking more fundamental questions: Suppose we had a different kind of world? And how could we create a different kind of world? Action research is not something you can do because each project is continually evolving and changing and because one could only fully engage in action research in an open, inquiring, democratic society—one which action research practitioners are continually aspiring to create. By opening new

communicative spaces we create micro versions of the society we wish to see, but a wider shift of perspective in society is also needed to fully embed the practices and values of action research. So not only is each project a developmental process, but so too is the whole movement of action research. It is a kind of utopian adventure.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

My purpose, in articulating these four broad dimensions of action research and indicating some of their complexity, is to demonstrate the very broad range of considerations that go into an action research project. I want to show above all that action research is full of choices: It is not possible, either theoretically or practically, to engage in an inquiry that addresses all dimensions fully and completely; rather, there will always be choices about what is important to attend to at any particular moment. My argument then is that quality in inquiry comes from awareness of and transparency about the choices open to you and that you make at each stage of the inquiry; and as Lyotard might suggest, creatively making and articulating quality rules as you go along. Quality comes from asking, with others, what is important in this situation? How well are we doing? How can we show others how well we have done? I would also suggest that it is not necessarily a question of whether you have done well but of how well you have done and whether you have done well enough for the claims you may wish to make. It is through understanding the choices that have been made that judgements can be made about the nature of the knowledge and practice that has been generated.

- Sometimes, immediate practical outcome is what is most important. Sometimes what is most pressing is to learn how to do something better.
- But sometimes in action research what is most important is how we can help articulate voices that are not being heard. How we can draw people together in a conversation that is not taking place? How we can create space for people to articulate their world in the face of power structures that silence them?
- Sometimes, action research will be about finding ways to open ourselves to different sorts of realities, or finding different ways of telling stories. The Western mind, it is often said, is hugely individualistic, and

that individualism drives the frenzied consumerism that is Western capitalism, with terrible consequences for the majority human world and the more-than-human world. Maybe action research could explore how the Western mind can open itself to a more relational, participatory experience.

- Sometimes action research will be an in-depth exploration into values, into what purposes are worthwhile pursuing, and into what issues most deserve our attention.
- And sometimes action research will be about creating tentative beginnings of inquiry under very difficult circumstances, planting seeds that may emerge into large fruits.

How do we know our choices are quality based? There are in the end no clear foundational grounds. The best we can do is to offer our choices to our own scrutiny, to the mutual scrutiny of our coresearchers, to the wider community of inquirers, and to the interested public at large. Quality rests not so much on getting it right but on stimulating open discussion.

I think it is a question of seeing these choices, seeing through the choices, and being clear in a first-person sense, being collaborative in a second-person sense, and raising the wider debate in a third-person sense: What are the choices we are making, and are they the best choices? Can we be transparent about these choices in our reporting of our work? That is what I think quality in action research is about.

A FINAL COMMENT

My own choice in writing this article has been to articulate a multidimensional view of the quality of knowing-in-practice as the outcome of action research, which will make sense to the academic readers of this journal. I believe that implied within this, as a kind of subtext, is a more radical view that action research in its fullest articulation is not solely or even primarily an academic pursuit but is a way of living. For in the end, I would argue that there is no difference between good action research and living a good life, individually, and communally. As Marja-Liisa Swantz, one of the originators of participatory action research, puts it,

I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and

to create what I call living knowledge—knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself. (Reason, 1996, p. 7)

I have applied this to my own life as educator (and written about some of this, Maughan & Reason, 2001; Reason, 1993, 1998a, 2000, 2001; Reason & Marshall, 2001). Similarly, my colleague Judi Marshall (1992, 1999, 2001, 2004) has written of researching women in management as a way of life and coined the phrase “living life as inquiry” to account for her integration of action and reflection in the everyday. Bill Torbert (1991) describes action research as a “kind of scientific inquiry conducted in everyday life” (pp. 220-221). I love this quote from the great American playwright, Arthur Miller (2000):

There is hardly a week that passes when I don't ask the unanswerable question: what am I now convinced of that will turn out to be ridiculous? And yet one can't forever stand on the shore; at some point, filled with indecision, skepticism, reservation and doubt, you either jump in or concede that life is forever elsewhere. (p. 1)

The division between academic life and the everyday was forged at the time of the European Enlightenment, for very good reasons at that time but which in many ways no longer hold (Toulmin, 1990). My choice is to see action research as one way to break down this barrier between living an inquiring life and research in a formal sense, to see inquiry as part of a well-lived life, and of a healthy organization and society.

NOTES

1. I avoid the term *validity*, which for me at least has strong references back to positivist research and which suggests that there is one validity.
2. I am indebted to Suzie Morel for this phrase.

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