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Introduction

Action Research, Diversity, and Democracy

Action research (AR) can help us build a better, freer, fairer society through collaborative problem analysis and problem solving in context. In this book, we offer a general overview of AR, including a comprehensive philosophical justification for it, a review of some commonly used methods, case examples to contextualize it, and a review of a variety of different approaches to AR praxis. Throughout, we advocate AR and its social change agenda vis-à-vis other forms of social research that do not contribute as actively and directly to processes of democratic social change and the simultaneous creation of valid social knowledge.

Our advocacy rests on two distinct but related bases: democratic inclusion and social research quality. AR democratizes research processes through the inclusion of the local stakeholders as coresearchers. AR also produces better quality social research than that arising from professional expert social research strategies. Thus, AR is central to the enactment of a commitment to democratic social transformation through research, analysis, and action design.

Action Research Defined

Action research is social research carried out by a team that encompasses a professional action researcher and the members of an organization, community, or network ("stakeholders") who are seeking to improve the participants' situation. AR promotes broad participation in the research process and supports action leading to a more just, sustainable, or satisfying situation for the stakeholders.

Together, the professional researcher and the stakeholders define the problems to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions,[1] and interpret the results of actions based on what they have learned. AR rests on the belief and experience

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that all people—professional action researchers included—accumulate, organize, and use complex knowledge continuously in everyday life. This belief is visible in any AR project because the first step professional action researchers and members of a community, organization, or network take is to define a problem that they seek to resolve. They begin by pooling their knowledge. AR democratizes the relationship between the professional researcher and the local interested parties.

Because it is a research practice with a social change agenda, AR involves a critique of conventional academic practices and organizations that assert either the necessity or desirability of studying social problems without trying to resolve them. Although AR views academic and professional knowledge systems that do not engage practice direction as wrongheaded, action researchers neither reject formal research methods nor ignore the epistemological issues that necessarily undergird the development of valid social knowledge. To the contrary, action researchers, precisely because the results will affect the lives of the stakeholders, have a profound interest in the validity of the generated knowledge. These issues are dealt with in greater detail throughout Part 2 of this book, particularly in Chapters 4, "An Epistemological Foundation for Action Research," and Chapter 5, "Scientific Method and Action Research."

Why General Overviews of Action Research Are Hard to Find

We decided to write a general overview of AR because of our experience with university students and practitioners encountering the subject for the first time. In our experience, students and novice practitioners generally lack access to a sufficiently comprehensive and balanced way to learn about the diverse origins, theories, methods, motives, and problems associated with this complex field. Although there is an extensive bibliography of works on AR, including a number of introductory works and a handbook that provide overviews of various approaches (we cite these throughout), we felt that another kind of general book is also needed. Existing works are compendia, focus on a particular variety of AR to the exclusion of others, or do not link the history, philosophy, and practice of AR to a sufficiently broad set of philosophical, scientific, and political issues. The present book tries to overcome some of these limitations.

Gaining such an overview of AR is difficult, in part because of the organization of AR praxis. Action researchers are found in social service agencies, nongovernmental organizations, international development agencies, planning departments, and industry and are spread around the disciplines in academic institutions (for example, education, planning, communications, social services, program evaluation, sociology, anthropology, organizational

behavior). Almost nowhere in academia is there a "department" of action research. Rather, networks of colleagues from diverse disciplines share an interest in AR. One result is that AR practitioners have very little common knowledge, read different journals and books, and often write in ignorance of relevant contributions of others in AR from other fields.

We do not believe that creating a university department of AR is the answer to this dilemma. Indeed, we view the departmentalization of the social sciences as one of the ways in which the social reform agenda of the fields emerging from political economy in the 19th century was eliminated. However, we do not let academic institutions off the hook, and the final part of this book (Part 4) deals with these issues.

We want the reader to understand that what follows is not an overview of a discipline in the making. It is a presentation of a diverse and often divergent set of practices centered on putting social research to use for democratic social change. To that end, we try to include representation of many different approaches to AR and offer some references to allow readers to follow their own interests. What we include is limited by our own experience, our judgments of the different approaches we know about, and our own epistemological, methodological, and political agendas. Still, our goal is to give an honest and broad-minded presentation of the field of AR from our point of view. We are fully aware that the map is not the territory, and we know that knowledgeable AR practitioners will find gaps and idiosyncrasies in our choices.[2]

Action Research, Applied Research, and Qualitative Versus Quantitative Research

Action research refers to the conjunction of three elements: action, research, and participation. Unless all three elements are present, the process may be useful but it is not AR. Put another way, AR is a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change. The social change we refer to is not just any kind of change. AR aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so within a more sustainable and just environment.

AR is not applied research, and AR explicitly rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure/applied distinction that has characterized social research for a number of generations. This theoretical/applied pseudo-split, in our view, has been a key mechanism by which the social sciences have become deformed. It creates a useless dance between disengaged theorists and engaged actors, a dance that liberates both sides from the

need to generate valid understandings of the social world and its change processes and to hold themselves accountable to both meaningful social consequences and solid methodological and theoretical groundings.

We believe that valid social knowledge can only be derived from practical reasoning engaged in through action. As action researchers, we believe that action is the only sensible way to generate and test new knowledge. The widespread belief that being a "true" social scientist means not being engaged in social action is, to us, so peculiar and counterintuitive that we devote a considerable amount of space to explaining this phenomenon in Part 2 of this book.

We reject a widespread tendency for people to believe that AR must be qualitative research rather than quantitative research. This unjustifiable assumption probably arises from the belief that action-oriented work cannot be scientific (precisely because it involves action) and the additional assumption (erroneous in our view) that quantitative research must be more scientific than qualitative research. Because we see no merit in these assumptions and because we use both quantitative and qualitative methods ourselves, we reject the notion that AR is qualitative research only and argue that action researchers are obligated to be competent in all major forms of social research.

Action researchers can accept no a priori limits on the kinds of social research techniques they use. Surveys, statistical analyses, interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, and life histories are all acceptable, if the reason for deploying them has been agreed upon by the AR collaborators and if they are used in a way that does not oppress the participants. Knowing exactly how much heavy metal is in the groundwater somewhere may be as much a part of an AR project as knowing how people make sense of the future. Formal quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods all are appropriate to differing situations.

Action, Research, and Participation

Despite the significant differences among AR practitioners and their life situations, we believe that several important commitments link most of us. AR is composed of a balance of three elements. If any one of the three is absent, then the process is not AR. This is not to say that all non-AR processes are meaningless but to distinguish AR from other kinds of research and application activities.

1. *Action.* AR is participatory because AR aims to alter the initial situation of the group, organization, or community in the direction of a more self-managing, liberated, and sustainable state. What is defined as a liberated state varies from one practitioner to another. Some use AR to create a kind of liberation through greater self-realization. Others emphasize more political meanings of liberation, and these vary among themselves regarding how strong a political

liberation agenda they advocate. Still others believe that AR occurs in any kind of research activity in which there is participation by some members of the organization being studied. Although a few practitioners try to link AR and revolutionary praxis, by and large, AR practitioners are democratic reformers rather than revolutionaries.

2. *Research.* We believe in research, in the power and value of knowledge, theories, models, methods, and analysis. We believe that AR is one of the most powerful ways to generate new research knowledge.

3. *Participation.* We believe in participation, placing a strong value on democracy and control over one's own life situations. These values permeate our arguments and create a strong general commitment to democratizing the knowledge generation process. AR involves trained social researchers who serve as facilitators and teachers of members of local communities or organizations. Because these people together establish the AR agenda, generate the knowledge necessary to transform the situation, and put the results to work, AR is a participatory process in which everyone involved takes some responsibility.

All these different approaches are further subdivided by the kinds of topics they deal with: community development, change in educational systems, economic development and liberation in the Third World, participatory change in core institutions of society (companies, administrative bureaucracies, and so on). Many of these different approaches to AR are incompatible. Some rest on Marxist notions of political economy and social transformation; others are rooted in pragmatic philosophy; still others build on a particular brand of social psychology; and a few simply advocate that, whatever the question, participation is the answer. We take seriously the obligation to make the reader aware of these differences, but we harbor no illusions about reconciling them.

Action Research, the Disciplines, and Coverage

As noted earlier, AR is not a discipline. It involves practitioners from anthropology, development studies, education, engineering, gender studies, human services, psychology, human services, social work, sociology, planning, civil engineering, and many other fields, including many forms of nonacademic practice. Consequently, students will not find AR presented in introductory disciplinary courses in most departments. Academic disciplines use introductory courses to recruit neophyte disciplinarians and to enhance enrollments to satisfy the demands of university administrations in return for which the departments get additional resources. These courses generally do not aim to attract scholars and practitioners who share particular views about democracy, participation, and the creation of useful knowledge. This is the case despite the fantasies of U.S. neoconservatives who imagine the social sciences and

humanities in U.S. universities to be hotbeds for the promotion of left-wing ideologies.

In a higher education environment, AR is not an easy way to work, because disciplinary enrollments and boundaries are the tools used in academic competition and administrative command and control. Yet, we encounter increasing numbers of students from diverse fields who come to us to learn about AR. Some come in reaction to their unsatisfying experiences of the abstractions and social passivity of their home fields, others because of their rejection of the instrumentalism of many so-called applied fields, and still others because of their experiences with other approaches that are critical of "canonical" disciplinary systems (for example, feminism, neo-Marxism, critical theory). The teaching challenge with such heterogeneous groups is how to present an introduction to people who are searching for something, to provide them with enough background to permit them to continue learning about AR independently, and, at the same time, to build as directly as possible on the experiences that moved them to explore AR in the first place.

After thinking through this problem and teaching AR courses over the past 20 years, we decided that the best approach is for us to develop a consistent historical, philosophical, and ethical argument for AR, provide some cases of AR practice, and then introduce a variety of AR approaches. To fulfill the conditions of this design, we develop a philosophical argument for AR as scientific activity and a view of the links of AR to many different kinds of reform movements in the sciences, engineering, and social sciences. We couple this with a political economic argument that accounts for the suppression of praxis-oriented social research in academia. Because we intend to bridge theory and praxis, we also develop discussions of methodologies and tools useful in AR. Then, to evoke some of the diverse visions among AR practitioners, we provide a general overview of some of the main AR positions (including our own), knowing well that many of these positions ignore one another in practice.

This general overview will most likely be criticized by other AR practitioners because it is not truly comprehensive and because we express our own views about each approach we review. AR has many proponents, and several different groups would like to claim they know the "right" way to do AR, whereas others reject the name entirely, preferring (often for sensible reasons) another term (such as *participatory research, human inquiry,* or *action science*). Occasionally, some practitioners are ignorant or intolerant of each other's work. Although we are well aware that our review is not likely to win us friends in all groups, we persist in presenting our own view of the field as our intellectual and political right and invite others to present alternative views and critiques of ours. The first edition of the book did provoke some reactions, but, as yet, no comprehensive alternative view of the field of AR has been proposed.

Our Take on AR: Pragmatic Action Research

Our experience is predominantly, though not exclusively, in industrial, community, and higher education settings in Europe and the United States. Davydd Greenwood is an anthropologist and Morten Levin is a sociologist with a background in engineering. Greenwood, a professor at Cornell University, a large combined state and private institution, has served as an academic administrator of large multidisciplinary centers for more than 20 years while continuing to teach anthropology. His main research has taken place in Spain, in upstate New York, and recently in the international, comparative study of universities. He has been active in a number of AR programs in Norway and Sweden, including an AR Ph.D. program led by Morten Levin. Levin is a professor at the Norwegian University for Science and Technology (NTNU) at Trondheim and has been the leader in the creation of combined engineering and AR programs there, as well as the leader of a number of national work-life development programs. He has also conducted AR in the United States and Canada and is the founder and leader of a Ph.D. program in AR sponsored by the Norwegian social partners and anchored at his university.

We have made a good-faith effort to become knowledgeable about many different approaches, but we are aware that there are many gaps in our backgrounds. We do not intentionally slight other approaches by writing from our own knowledge base. The longer-term solution to problems of balance found here is for others to write their views of these subjects and be critical of what we have offered. We will respond, and hope thereby to open up a dialogue that broadens our collective sense of the scope of AR and enhances discourse on the democratization of knowledge creation and action. Our hope is that this book can encourage a long-needed critical discourse on the foundations and praxis of AR.[3] Our aim is to present one consistent strand of thought, integrating a philosophical, methodological, and political economic position with a consistent praxis supported by suitable methods and tools, while keeping the different kinds of AR practice and visions in sight.

As we mentioned previously, we are both mostly experienced in the use of AR in industrial and community development in Western industrialized countries. We share a strong commitment to the democratization of knowledge, learning, and self-managed social change. We are reformers, not revolutionaries, however, and we are social scientists, not psychoanalysts. We do not believe that we have the wisdom or the right to "lead" others to the "correct" social arrangements "for their own good," as some of the more liberationist practitioners do or as some of the more "therapeutic" approaches to AR advocate. Rather we believe in trying to offer, as skillfully as possible, the space and tools for democratic social change.

We refuse to guide such change unilaterally from our positions as action researchers. We consider ourselves participants in change processes in which democratic rules guide decision making. We bring to the table certain skills and knowledge, and other actors do the same, bringing their own capacities and experiences to bear on the problems. This is why we call our own particular variety of AR practice "pragmatic action research."

Our views on democracy and liberating situations are relevant, and we want to clarify them. Democracy is a concept with such a multiplicity of meanings that attempts to be clear about it are extremely controverted (see Dahl, 1989, for an excellent review). To some, especially many North Americans, the term often evokes egalitarianism. For others, it involves participation, whereas for others it conjures decision making by consensus, and for still others, decisions by majority rule. For some, democracy implies a homogeneous community and for others, arenas for lively debate. All these meanings have their associated genealogies, theories, politics, and ethics.

Our own view of these matters equates democracy with the creation of arenas for lively debate and for decision making that respects and enhances the diversity of groups. We explicitly reject both the distributive justice and the consensus models of democratic processes. We take the diversity of skills, experiences, ethnicities, gender, and politics as the most valuable source of potential positive changes in groups. Consequently, we reject the dominant political view of democracy as majority rule, accepting Iris Young's (1990) critique of this view of democracy as one that rests on the oppressive actions of welfare state capitalism to reduce social justice to a limited redistribution of goods to those defined as disadvantaged. That view of democracy neither respects diversity nor seeks to enhance the capacity of the disenfranchised to act on their own behalf. For us, AR aims to enable communities and organizations to mobilize their diverse and complex internal resources as fully as possible.

Consequently, we are suspicious of approaches to AR that seem to privilege the homogeneity of communities or consensus-based decision making, believing that such approaches open up great potentials for co-optation and coercion. One does not have to look far for documentation of these problems. At various points in recent history, such as 1968, the democratic critique of capitalist business as usual was embodied in attempts to create so-called alternative social forms. Many of these took the form of intentional communities, cooperatives, and open schools, and many tried to abolish social and cultural differences and to substitute consensus decision making for majority rule. A wonderful ethnographic portrait of such an organization is given in Jane Mansbridge's (1983) *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. To obliterate oppression of minorities by the majority, these architects of social change tried to substitute absolute consensus for majority rule. The effect, as Tocqueville (2001/1835,

1840) saw generations ago, often was to create a tyrannical demand for consensus that eventually undermined the belief in democracy through the experience of group pressure and self-censorship.

We believe that diversity is one of the most important features of human societies. Diversity is a biological fact, continually reproduced in each generation, regardless of anyone's intentions. Diversity is also a cultural product. Anyone who takes the trouble to look closely discovers that, even in the most homogeneous-appearing groups, there are wide differences in knowledge, interests, experience, and capabilities. We view these differences as a rich social resource that, when effectively mobilized, gives a group or an organization a much greater capacity to transform itself. We view democracy as an open system that should be able to welcome and make humane use of these differences. From our perspective, the aim of democracy is to give rise to societies and organizations capable of emphasizing, mobilizing, and energizing the differences within them.

We view liberating situations as those in which social change is possible and can be influenced by the participants. Further, we see a group or organization as being on a liberating trajectory when it is increasingly able to tolerate, use, and reward the diversity of viewpoints, capacities, and experiences within and if it is increasingly possible for a greater and greater proportion of members to affect the future directions of the collectivity. Finally, in a liberating situation, a group increasingly welcomes change as an opportunity for group enhancement and growth.

The Plan of the Book

Part 1 of the book continues with Chapter 2, a history of AR, and three cases presented in Chapter 3. Following this, in Part 2 ("Science, Epistemology, and Practice in Action Research"), Chapters 4–8 present the philosophical and methodological arguments for AR as a form of scientific inquiry that better meets scientific standards than what is currently called "social science" in academia. We provide an explanation of the marginalization of AR activities in academia through a brief historical political economy of academic institutions in advanced capitalist societies. In Part 3 ("Varieties of Action Research Praxis"), we move on to Chapters 9–15, on different approaches to AR, beginning with our own approach. We close, in Part 4, with Chapter 16, on the education of action researchers, and Chapter 17, a broader look at AR, participation, and democracy. Throughout, we advocate our views strongly, but with the intention of encouraging the reader to consider them, not to accept them without debate.

Our Assumptions About the Readers of This Book

We assume that our main audience has some previous experience either in formal social research or in social change-oriented action. We aim to present AR to readers who are seeking what they hope will be more appropriate and productive ways of conducting social research. We do not ask you to ignore your prior experience; we encourage you to use it as a point of reference as you learn about AR approaches. As in our classrooms and AR projects, we see the relationship between the reader-participant and the author-researcher as a collaborative one.

Notes

1. Sometimes the professional action researcher is engaged in the actions deriving from the AR process and sometimes not. This depends on the situation and the needs of the stakeholders.

2. The existence of the *Handbook of Action Research,* edited by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2001a), helps remedy this problem, and that work can be turned to with profit for an enormous array of perspectives and extensive bibliographies. A second edition is in the works and due out in 2007.

3. A useful exchange of this sort recently was published in the *International Journal of Action Research* (then named *Concepts and Transformation;* Greenwood, 2002, 2004a).