Getting with the Act of Action Research

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Review Essay:

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Abstract: Action research (AR) prides itself on being a field of both theoretical and practical inquiry. Its scholarly identity rests heavily on framing participants as engaged, subjective, and participatory beings who learn and change through research processes. Yet, action research struggles to be considered a rigorous methodological field of inquiry and certainly there have been those who have raised questions about its validity as a research method. Where action research is used, qualifications and justifications abound as people struggle to have their research heard over other disciplines and techniques that claim more validity or appropriateness of methods. As a community development practitioner, I have employed AR approaches in the design and application of projects. As an academic, I have had the opportunity to design and facilitate meetings using participatory action research methods for data collection and to develop ground-up interventions with primary health care professionals. Therefore, I was eager to read about AR theoretical developments and to examine this text for its core purpose: as a "handbook" to guide research and practice. The handbook boasts 32 chapters covering theory, practices, exemplars, and skills which I reviewed with particular attention to where, how, and why I would use the content and whether it offered what a research handbook should—practical assistance in design, application, analysis, and synthesis for AR. Overall, the handbook does provide extensive examples about research projects and process. In future editions though, I would like to see more attention to complementary methods that can be employed in AR and attention to methods for the analysis of data generated via action research approaches.

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1. Act 1—Scene Setting: Some Theory

Peter REASON and Hilary BRADBURY's editorial work for this *Handbook of Action Research* can be called nothing else but impressive! The second edition of the handbook boasts 43 international contributors who discuss action research (AR) over four parts. These move from theoretical grounding (Part I) and practices in the action research fields (Part II), to exemplars (Part III), to a conclusion on the skills required for doing AR projects (Part IV). In total there are 32 chapters available for reading that provide a range of perspectives on AR and examples of AR projects. Many contributors enter into the key debates around the nature of knowledge, knowing and what is science, including the issue of subjugation of certain kinds of knowledge in favour of more positivistic, reductionist standpoints. The text makes an attempt to be practically oriented for researchers in the field but certainly does not leave theory aside. [1]

However, on the topic of theory the editors have an obvious desire to position AR as an informed and highly theoretical field, so much so though that one finds that there is a tendency for some contributors to position AR as being outside of, separate from, or unique to "ivory tower" scholarship. This is done in a manner that risks falling into the trap of re-igniting the same disciplinary divisions and academic rivalry that AR claims to move beyond, and it should be approached with caution in future editions. Seeing any method or field of inquiry as unique for its approach or the perspective it offers is always fraught with challenges. Certainly, in the present age of cross-disciplinary research and inter-disciplinary efforts, there is an inherent need for all scholarship and academia to move beyond the "us and them" divide a little more. This would be one area to explore in any third edition of the handbook; in particular, more about cross-disciplinary efforts and the challenges and benefits of using AR with different methods would be informative. That being said, the impetus for making this case about AR's difference is understandable given the monopoly that some forms of knowledge have held in academia. [2]

This is a handbook and as such a good place to begin a review of it is to examine how much it meets the criteria of one. Is it a concise book that contains specific information about a topic or field of study? Are the essays written by authorities in the field? Does it organise information in a user-friendly manner? Is the handbook compact, giving the essential information in the field? Does it form a useful manual and comprehensive guide for both the novice and experienced researcher? I used these questions as a guide to reviewing the chapters and parts of the handbook combined with my practical and academic experience in the application of AR in research and community-development projects. Each of these questions thus informs the sub-sections presented herein. [3]

In their preface, REASON and BRADBURY are quick to offer that AR need not be regarded as so much of a methodology but "an orientation toward inquiry" (p.xxi). By this, I take the editors to mean that AR offers a particular way of "seeing" research problems and thus engaging in research in a process-oriented manner that can facilitate beneficial solutions and not simply generate objective

findings devoid of contextual meaning. We are told that AR is a field that has originated from a desire to foster participation in research as a democratic pursuit while attempting to create practical solutions to societal concerns (PASMORE, p.39). Theorists within the field are actively informed by educators like Paulo FREIRE (1972) who put forward the notion of *conscientisation* (critical consciousness) as a method of social and personal transformation. [4]

In this respect there is a transformative dimension to AR which obviously corresponds with the "action" component of the field. AR developed as part of the social-change agenda of the 1960s and as an alternative research pursuit to dominant positivist driven inquiry. This has seen AR research studies often deal with questions of social justice or transformation. Though this ground-breaking work in some areas should be recognised, acknowledged, and valued, it is important to note that AR is not as different as one might expect when compared with recent developments in sociology and developments in qualitative methods and modes of inquiry. For example, narrative approaches, or more traditional fields of hermeneutic, phenomenological, and feminist theorising all contest abstracted research. REASON and BRADBURY (p.xxviii) make note of this themselves in the preface, suggesting that action researchers "will draw on a range of methodologies, both those described [in the handbook] and, where appropriate, from recent innovations in qualitative and sometimes quantitative research". The various theoretical influences on AR and the methodological approaches that can be employed make the field difficult to pin-down; and as such, it is a challenge to find a comprehensive assessment of all of these theories and methods. For this reason, AR is not viewed as a method for research but rather it is seen as a process of doing and inquiring. [5]

2. Act 2—Epistemological Challenges in AR

"Unless people participate in the construction of knowledge, the knowledge has no meaning for them".
(BALDWIN in REASON & BRADBURY, p.223)

The AR handbook is a reflection of the challenges that all process-oriented research has in terms of being seen as high quality and robust, and as a valid method of inquiry, two factors that REASON and BRADBURY revisit in their concluding chapter. The focus of this review is not to make a case for or against quality and validity as I am trained in qualitative methods of inquiry, so perhaps I will be biased. Moreover, given that my discipline is applied ethics, my orientation will naturally be toward the moral and ethical questions AR raises and the transformative pursuits in research studies. However, one does ask, what makes AR so special when we consider that there are many a non-positivist, process-driven theory to apply in research design and analysis? [6]

My assessment of the handbook is in terms of whether it does the work of being a practical and theoretically informed book. Can both the novice and experienced researcher utilise and benefit from this handbook? Does it generate understanding of AR that enables design and application to research? To begin,

ten chapters are provided within Part I that each take up the challenge of introducing the theoretical origins of AR processes and practice. The perspectives that are offered are designed to provide a handbook that meets the needs of a wide readership (REASON & BRADBURY, p.1) and certainly a range of theoretical and philosophical influences are discussed. [7]

Various terms of reference are called upon including participatory action research (PAR) and participatory inquiry (PI). When practices are explored in Part II, additional terms are introduced such as cooperative inquiry (CI), action science (AS), appreciative inquiry (AI), community-action research (CAR), and action inquiry (AI). One is compelled to ask if these are simply different versions of the same thing, but the authors do all identify variations amongst these terms and the theoretical groundings that have influenced them. The notion that all AR is the same is probably a commonly held misconception that indicates that the message about the subtleties of inquiry has not yet filtered out to the broader research community. [8]

REASON and BRADBURY's (p.2) Introduction provides five widely shared features of AR: its purpose is to produce practical knowledge useful in the everyday conduct of people's lives and for the greater good of humanity; it seeks practical outcomes and new forms of understanding; the research develops over time in an evolutionary process; the research is participatory; and, the process of inquiry is as important as the specific outcomes. In Part I various authors suggest that AR is based on a different way of understanding the creation and purposes of knowledge, that it is as a philosophy of life, and way of becoming a thinking, feeling person (FALS BORDA, p.31). AR draws on theoretical influences of thinkers like HABERMAS, MARX, and LEWIN. In particular, it is influenced, as REASON and BRADBURY (p.3) note, by the Marxist (MARX & ENGELS, 1969/1845) dictum that *the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point is to change it.* [9]

This notion of generating knowledge based on seeing humans as subjective, thinking and feeling beings is indeed one of the greatest challenges AR raises for other objective fields of inquiry. This includes the way in which AR combines research efforts with the moral pursuit for change. Such moral pursuit is, however, shared with other disciplines such as philosophy and ethics—a point that is acknowledged by REASON and BRADBURY in their overview of the evolution of Western thought and the more recent shifts away from modernism in their Introduction. However, a first comment would be that the section on "groundings" in the handbook could have benefited from the inclusion of a chapter on the ethics of AR given its moral pursuit and disruptive potential. This would assist to bring the ethical and moral agenda of AR to the foreground instead of it remaining implicit. [10]

Nonetheless, the reader is taken by the expansive theoretical influences of the social-change agenda of the late 1960s and early 1970s on this field. Additional summaries are provided by the editors on the historical paradigms that have influenced the developments of AR: the push away from the humanist values of

the Renaissance period to the Enlightenment view of objective science premised on DESCARTES' (1912) notion that "*I think, therefore I am*". Part of the editors' view is that there is an "emerging participatory worldview" on which AR is premised; "objective knowledge is impossible, since the researcher is always a part of the world he or she studies" (REASON & BRADBURY, pp. 4, 6). Again, it is important to recognise that the phenomenological philosophy of thinkers like MERLEAU-PONTY (1945) have presented being-in-the-world in this way too. The difference from the AR perspective is that researchers are treated as subjective beings, as are those engaged in the research. [11]

Somewhat confusing, though, is REASON and BRADBURY's position that AR represents a post-modern shift, particularly given the emphasis that is placed on modernist theoretical influences and the social change agenda. Later, the editors do acknowledge that postmodern/poststructuralist perspectives have assisted researchers to see through the myths of the modernist world, but do not "help to move beyond the problems it has produced" (REASON & BRADBURY, p.6). Their solution to this is to develop a participatory paradigm, or a worldview, premised on AR which emphasises the co-construction, subjective and embodied nature of knowledge. In this worldview, researcher and researched exist in a continuous relationship which results in giving the term Participatory Action Research (PAR) new meaning. [12]

In the groundings part of the text, FALS BORDA explores social theory developments. Taking readers through its origins and challenges and the influences of this on PAR; his chapter notes the beginnings of PAR as rooted in the turning points during the 1907s. Thus, the development of PAR approaches and theories are situated for FALS BORDA within social movements to create alternative institutions, by those who wanted to see radical change and so had left institutionalised academies to seek this. For many, this is the most commonly understood and applied explanation. PAR is commonly seen as a community-development technique where projects are undertaken to foster skills within communities and develop the capacities of individuals to respond to social problems. In the practical community-development setting, AR has received much less criticism than within academic circles, and it fits with the empowerment agenda of the field. [13]

Citing some key periods of PAR developments, largely in developing countries, FALS BORDA illustrates the strong relationship between this field of inquiry with activist movements and the 1970s agenda for emancipation and liberation of the oppressed (p.28). In this respect we are reminded of AR and PAR links with FREIRE's emancipation agenda and the influential role of the feminist creed, "the personal is political". FALS BORDA suggests that PAR processes are as much about educating the participants of research throughout the process as they are about doing the research; for him, this cognitive process underpinning PAR "ha[s] an ethical strain" (p.29). This fits with REASON and BRADBURY's proposal that there can be a participatory worldview. Yet, a challenge is maintaining a commitment to these alternative worldviews when dominant institutions start to

take up such approaches. Will we ultimately arrive where we began with the emancipation agenda of AR captured by dominant institutions? [14]

MAGUIRE's chapter advocates that feminist challenges—particularly those around epistemology—show an unacknowledged force at the heart of PAR (p.60). Given the focus on power relations and challenges that feminist theory has raised around the nature of knowing and knowledge production, some, MAGUIRE argues, find the limited reference to feminist theory in AR quite surprising. In her conclusion, MAGUIRE argues that any AR which does not acknowledge feminist thought and its goals is inadequate for "its supposed liberatory project" (MAGUIRE, p.67). Certainly this orientation toward change and a transformative agenda is shared across many other chapters in the handbook including GAVENTA and CORNWALL's proposal that participatory research provided a means to close gaps in power inequities through knowledge production, in turn, strengthening voice, organisation, and action (MAGUIRE, p.71). This is the core theme of the handbook: Knowledge and power are interconnected and, used correctly, the process of research can be transformative. For EDMONSON BELL, however, the issue of race, like feminism and ethics, has also been treated implicitly within the AR genre. Writing on her experiences as a Black women seeking ways to liberate Black people from social injustice and White racism, she suggests that "public dramas being played out in our communities and society must become out learning laboratories" (EDMONSON BELL, p.57). Yet, there is some debate still about just where the boundaries lie in these public dramas. Particularly where participants may not see themselves as being engaged within a laboratory that is for the purposes of research even though they are obviously committed to social change. Some boundaries do appear necessary for research to remain ethical. [15]

GUSTAVSEN's chapter, "Mediating Discourses", is helpful here to introduce the complicated relationship between knowledge and theory generation and action research. GUSTAVSEN re-visits HABMERAS' critique that "the relationship between theory and practice can be seen as a relationship between three different but interdependent discourses—a discourse on theory, a discourse on practice, and a mediating discourse on how to link them" (GUSTAVSEN, p.18). HABMERAS' (1973) view was that if a researcher is locked into the practical side of the equation, then they lose the ability to participate in theoretical discourse—for HABERMAS, liberation begins with theory not practice. GUSTAVSEN's piece highlights the boundary problems created by "social sciences' [desire] to help construct the future and not only [interpret] the past" (GUSTAVSEN, p.25). He notes that it is unavoidable to embark on a course that will differ from the descriptive-analytical traditions when "change" is added to the research equation. These tensions may well be the result of early action-research studies being focussed on the implementation of new work and technologies within social organisations. To implement new forms of work, it was necessary to have a mediating discourse, or, a space in between theory and practice that links them. More than this though, these issues raise some deeper questions for REASON and BRADBURY about the nature of research and human inquiry. [16]

3. Act 3—Ontological Calls of AR

An area for advancement in the AR handbook is on this relationship between AR and ontology; that is, what it means to be human. A clear case is made for AR to be about knowledge generation that is beyond knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In fact there is a deeper question raised by the AR field around "what is the nature and purpose of research?" This is a fundamentally ontologically question related to what it means to be human and how individual and collective pursuits ought to be shaped by a moral purpose for those engaged in AR. [17]

PASMORE's chapter, for example, heralds the early work of education theorist DEWEY who argued that "practical problems demanded practical solutions", but he returns also to the earlier work of COLLIER and LEWIN to illustrate these key theorists contributions to AR foundations (PASMORE, p.38). LEWIN's (1951) work in field theory posited that "behaviour is influenced by its environment, the context within which it works" (PASMORE, p.38). This was a shift away from dominant Freudian thinking that saw behaviour as a result of deep seated personality. PASMORE also shares another fundamentally important development in AR by introducing Wilfred BION's attempts to foster behaviour change in large groups of men. It is critical to recognise that BION's efforts to bring together between 100 to 200 men to discuss management of a hospital wing (all based on the theory that if they controlled their surroundings, they would regain a sense of control over their lives and responsibility for their own well-being) was one of the earliest large-group interventions on record (PASMORE, p.40). The interventions, in spite of their success, were suspended by the Department of Army Psychiatry. Early AR work was also taken up by the Tavistock Institute within their socio-technical system thinking and developed by Eric TRIST using ethnographic methods of research which included interviews with coal miners in their social settings of pubs and at their homes. An important finding from TRIST and his colleagues' research, as PASMORE shows, is the insight into how technological advances are taken up by groups: "no matter how advanced the technology, it would fail if not mated within a social system designed to operate the technology effectively" (PASMORE, p.42). This reinforces that pre-existing social conditions within organisations, the contextual dynamics, and the capacity of professionals within this are central to the introduction of new practices and change. AR can provide fundamental insights into these areas. [18]

By the end of the Part I a good case has been made that AR is a theoretically grounded field of inquiry that has been highly influenced by the social change agenda of the 1960s and 1970s. What is surprising is that for all the efforts to highlight the importance of change and transformation within the AR agenda, theorising about change processes and transformation in Part I remains fairly implicit. The reader is given the message that the organisational conditions are important, but some of the project descriptions that have employed AR lack analysis of the resultant changes. There is limited evidence provided on the outcomes that AR does achieve. MARTIN's chapter examines large group processes in AR. She employs a definition from GREENWOOD and LEVIN to

illustrate that the action/social change that is the goal of action research is not just any kind of change. GREENWOOD and LEVIN say that, "AR aims to increase the ability of the involved community or organisation members to control their own destinies more effectively and to keep improving their capacity to do so" (1998, p.6, quoted in REASON & BRADBURY, p.168). But, how much does this tell us about the actual change initiated by AR beyond continuous learning being an explicit component? AR is premised on a particular way of appreciating what it means to human—it is an ontological pursuit that in one sense sees humans with the potential to be and become powerful change agents. The groundings of AR would do well to consider the ontological dimensions of its pursuit particularly in the context of the AR agenda for transformative action. This would also enable the assumptions and values of the field to be clearly outlined. [19]

4. Act 4—Practices (or Research?) that Facilitate Change

Thus, there is a deeper ethical tension in AR which is raised within some of the chapters of the handbook but overall not fully addressed in as much detail as one might have liked: this is the tension of where exactly the boundaries lie between applied research and facilitating change. On one level the boundary need not be developed if we accept fully REASON and BRADBURY's case for a participatory worldview where no line is drawn between research for knowledge generation and action research. Instead, under this worldview, research is driven by a universally shared position where everyone has a moral responsibility to change humanity for the better. However, I was interested to see if this boundary issue re-emerged in any of the eight chapters of Part II illustrating AR practices. [20]

To me, boundaries seem an important issue to address given that change is such a critical part of AR, yet there is the complicating tension that research requires data to be generated for analysis. FRIEDMAN's overview of the three fundamental points within the common action science (AS) approaches highlights boundary issues further. He says: (1) that inquiry into social practices produces knowledge; (2) the situations that action science is concerned with are unique, uncertain and unstable and thus they do not lend themselves to theories and techniques of rational science–often, practitioners may construct theories of their own; and (3) inquiry is a collaborative endeavour wherein subjects are co-researchers rather than objects (FRIEDMAN, pp.131-132). Yet, FRIEDMAN also notes that AS application within the literature is limited because there has been a "tendency to view action science primarily as a method of intervention rather than research" (p.141). Again, this highlights the challenges of distinguishing between AR as a process of doing research or as a methodology. [21]

FRIEDMAN's chapter illustrates that the boundaries between intervention and research have emerged as a barrier to the application of the practice of AS. LUDEMA, COOPERRIDER and BARRETT's chapter argues, however, that inquiry itself *is* intervention (2006, p.165). So, by engaging in research one is by nature intervening. Their view is that all research generates findings that inspire action but the key is that our capacity to create innovations is reduced by the problem-oriented view of the world (LUDEMA, COOPERRIDER and BARRETT).

The solution for these authors is to ask unconditional positive questions to facilitate appreciative inquiry (AI) because, as they point out, language is central to the construction of our reality. In this case, "inquiry and change are simultaneous rather than separate moments" which can be facilitated by taking the approach of AI. This does not, however, adequately address some of the distinctions that are necessarily required around inquiry as intervention and intervention as inquiry. Surely it is also important to be able to identify the elements of inquiry that facilitated change and the change that influenced the inquiry. [22]

Cooperative inquiry (CI), though, does not have the same problem as AS. HERON and REASON present CI as research *with* rather than *on* people which is premised on four ways of knowing: experiential knowing, presentational knowing, propositional knowing, and practical knowing (HERON & REASON, p.149). The best use of CI appears to be with a group of people who share an interest in exploring a particular idea; thus it is well suited to professional groups who want to examine a concern or process. Once the group is initiated, by following some set-out processes, the person who takes on the facilitation role enables change to occur through the CI process. SCHEIN's description of the place of clinical research and inquiry and the various ways it can evolve is very beneficial for researchers engaged in the clinical setting, too. CI is different from SCHEIN's overview of clinical inquiry/research (CI/R) which introduces how "useful data can be gathered in situations that are not created by the researcher" (SCHEIN, p.185). SCHEIN's CI/R approach raises particularly relevant points to the case of primary medical care and other medical research in clinical settings where there is a great deal of data available and generated naturally, but not initially for the purposes of research. His chapter also reinforces LUDEMA, COOPERRIDER, and BARRETT's position that "the research process in any form is an intervention" (SCHEIN, p.194). Certainly MIENCZAKOWSKI and MORGAN would agree with this position given their use of ethnodrama to negotiate and construct understandings and meanings with participants and audiences (MIENCZAKOWSKI & MORGAN, p.176). Their discussion of the implications of ethnodrama for participants in plays and audiences provides a compelling example of how inquiry and intervention need to be distinguished. To illustrate this, the authors recount how a mature-age student (possessing firm but unstated and unrecognised fundamentalist religious beliefs) came face to face with a patient in a full-blown psychosis performing a work on schizophrenia in a psychiatric institution. The result of which was for the student to flee, because of her unrecognised religious beliefs she thought that the patient was possessed by the devil (MIENCZAKOWSKI & MORGAN, pp.181-182). [23]

Part II concludes with SENGE and OTTO SCHARMER's contribution on community-action research (CAR) as a method for fostering greater cooperation between organisations, and TORBERT's discussion of the practice of action inquiry (AI) which attempts to entwine action inquiry into a philosophy of living inquiry. CAR builds on many of the other approaches presented already in the handbook on AR by "continuing the cycle of linking research, capacity-building and practice" (SENGE & OTTO SCHARMER, p.205). The handbook has

presented to this point a clear message about AR as a mode of inquiry for doing research, but I am not sure that there has been an equally strong message about how to analyse AR research findings as yet. I turn to Part III exemplars to see if this issue is raised and incorporated within the examples. [24]

5. Act 5—Exemplars and Skills of AR

At the outset of this review essay I indicated that my particular interest in this handbook was twofold. First, I have been a community-development worker and have applied PAR methods and approaches to community projects and reviews of services. Second, I am an academic, and during 2007 and 2008 was responsible for facilitating 30 group meetings held with primary health care professionals around the organisation of depression care using PAR processes and principles.[1] The exemplars were thus read keenly for conciseness and demonstration of how to apply action-research methods in practical projects and research within the university setting. [25]

The first of another ten chapters in this Part builds on the cooperative-inquiry material presented by REASON and HERON. In this respect, chapters are well cross-referenced to each other and writers are aware of what previous contributors have said about different approaches; this is a definite strength of the handbook. BALDWIN shares his experience of working together and learning together in social work; his chapter provides an overview of the group processes of cooperative inquiry applied to the issue of continuing implementation of a community-care policy. This idea of professional groups coming together to learn and facilitate small, personal change is expressed in the early mothering project by BARRETT also. The group setting offered a medium by which to exchange stories and challenge what the mothers viewed as a prevailing medico-patriarchal institutional structure. [26]

In BRADBURY's chapter on action research in sustainable development, she grounds her work to facilitate change around sustainable development within an environmental organisation. This is followed by an example of action inquiry by BRAVETTE GORDON which discusses bicultural competence and using this as a method to get in touch with the reality of her experiences as a woman of African-Caribbean descent. Inter-organisational networking using AR is presented by CHISHOLM, education for social change by MATTHEWS LEWIS, creative arts and photography in Guatemala by LYKES in collaboration with MAYA IXIL WOMEN, clinical inquiry in information technology-related change by MCDONAGH and COGHLAN, using PAR in Southern Tanzania by SWANTZ and colleagues, and young people and AR by WHITMORE and MCKEE. The exemplars have a clearly community-based flavour and my challenge to

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1   The *re-order* study: re-organising care for depression and related disorders in the Australian Primary Health Care Setting was led by Professor Jane GUNN and an international team of investigators. This project received funding from the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI), which is supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The information and opinions presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of the Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute or the Department of Health and Ageing, or the investigating research team.

REASON and BRADBURY for the third edition is to showcase some of the exemplars of AR that are based within university research centres. This would provide some examples of those research studies that are truly disrupting the dominant research approaches and the notion of academia as ivory tower. I wanted to see greater representation of some AR undertaken in medicine, for example, and other fields equally as problematic for their typically objective and detached approach to research. [27]

As a final conclusion, looking at any given handbook one naturally expects to see a section on the skills required for the practice, method, or approach in question. In this final Part, readers are introduced to collaborative off-line reflection as a way to develop skill in action science and action inquiry (RUDOLPH, TAYLOR, & FOLDY), working with graduate research students through looking at the first-person aspects of inquiry and developing a process-oriented approach to research supervision (REASON & MARSHALL) and a chapter by WADSWORTH about facilitating participatory action research. WADSWORTH's chapter provides some good outlining of processes used to facilitate participatory action research. This is followed on by MARSHALL's piece on self-reflective inquiry practices which incorporates part of the AI pursuit for inquiry as life process within it. Unfortunately, I found many of the skills chapters, while covering important topics, reading as largely descriptive accounts of processes people had used rather than being critical analyses of reflection that illuminated how these were distinctively AR skills. This is similarly the case with the absence of critical reflection on different methods that are complimentary or otherwise to AR for data collection. Again it reinforced the need to examine the distinction further between process and method in this field of inquiry. [28]

The finale of this penultimate edition is BRADBURY and REASON's conclusion about validity, issues, and choice-points for improving the quality of action research, re-visited from the introduction. The chapter provides a neat summary of the key questions raised across the four parts by different contributors and devotes some attention to the idea that "systems are not totalising, and that conscious, action-oriented people, especially those working and reasoning together, can indeed achieve systematic and systemic change through time" (BRADBURY & REASON, p.345). BRADBURY and REASON re-visit the questions for validity and quality raised in their introduction and present five questions that are beneficial for consideration of AR research: is the research explicit in developing a praxis of relational participation; is it guided by reflexive concern for practice outcome; does it include plurality of knowing (ensuring conceptual-theoretical integrity—embracing ways of knowing beyond intellect and selecting the appropriate research method); is it worthy of the term significant; and does it emerge toward a new and enduring infrastructure? These five questions are perhaps applicable to all research and form the basis of developing a more clearly articulated framework of doing and approaching research ethically. It is refreshing in an economically dominated world to have such a tome dedicated to humanistic inquiry and the view that change is possible. [29]

6. Closing Scene—Additional Considerations

"Why is it that good ideas don't always catch on?"
(PASMORE in REASON & BRADBURY, p.39)

At the beginning of his chapter in Part 1, PASMORE raises the issue about why it is that universities have yet to foster ideal learning that facilitates critical inquiry and collaboration on ideas. PASMORE says, "at some point, it would be worth someone's time to examine why it is that good ideas don't always catch on" (p.39). Yes it would, and this remains a pertinent question not only in the AR field of inquiry, but for all scholarship and research undertaken by universities. However, this must be said with an acknowledgement that there are exemplars of where ideal learning is fostered within universities as much as there are many and varied academic research projects which adopt the AR approach. Certainly the push for greater collaboration between industry and academic research suggests that AR processes could have mutual benefits in terms of engaging and developing relationships between participants on the basis of being co-researchers. The issue of research fatigue in professional groups and for lay participants in studies also means that greater sensitivity to people as thinking, feeling and subjective beings is important—people should not merely be treated and seen as laboratories for examination. These principles of equality and a sense of shared power are important. However, what remains unanswered is just how far research inquiry should go. Should there be parameters and boundaries around how much change can be expected from research inquiry processes? Many research projects can be undertaken by seeing our participants as co-subjects, with important knowledge to share and generate and in relation with the researcher—does active, intentional change always need to result? [30]

One of the major strengths of action research and all its counterparts that the handbook introduces to its readers is obviously the focus on democratic dialogue as a core feature of research. Undertaking research using AR processes, principles, and theories means valuing the contributions of those who may be considered as "lay personnel" or non-academics and placing their views and ideas centrally. That said, from personal experience I know that it is often extremely difficult to achieve participation from professionals in time-limited settings where practitioners have other competing demands and research funding is limited to a certain period of time. AR processes might be ideal, but where outcomes must be achieved and measures produced for reporting back to funding bodies they are often compromised. Additionally, research funding bodies can overlook how much time and resources are required for the relationship-building efforts of these approaches. Moreover, the pre-existing power differentials within organisations are often difficult to challenge particularly if one is an outside researcher coming in to facilitate the research process. A greater challenge in all of this is to be able to maintain commitment to a participatory worldview if large institutions like the World Bank, for example, take up the AR approach within community-development projects. Where there are real value conflicts, these might be difficult to transform. [31]

Importantly, all research that is undertaken should be framed by the question "what will be the most suitable method that I can employ to answer or provide insights into the problem I seek to address"? This question should be accompanied by critical appraisal of the ethical suitability of the methods and the ethical processes that will be utilised to ensure participants are respected and valued. BALDWIN, for example, suggests that he chose AR because it was suitable to the questions that he needed to answer and, in his critical reflection, he noted he had almost "fallen" into one research method because of the research environment he was engaged in. A key message that is beneficial to all of us engaged in research is to work with research students and collaborators to explore the right fit between method and the research in question, rather than to push a particular preferred agenda because we think it is right or because science tells us this is so. [32]

All research ought to be designed using the appropriate methods for the questions that require answers. In this respect, if one is exploring epidemiological questions, then it is suitable and rigorous to think that quantitative methods may be more appropriate. What is important to recognise and bring forward in this debate is that some research methods have been given more value than others by powerful research and funding bodies, yet research processes might be transferrable across the quantitative and qualitative divide. The AR handbook is a good avenue for sharing in a participatory worldview. An area for development, though, is in the examination of the development of skills that are required for these areas of action research and action science. Developing skills "not only means developing skills, but also internalising and enacting new values" (FRIEDMAN, p.141). Values are critical to the action-research process and remain implicit rather than stated explicitly. In particular, it is important to examine how those who value social justice are attracted to AR and to the desire to change and transform through the research process. [33]

AR has resonance for people who have commitments to emancipation, liberation, and social-justice principles but that ought not to be the sole reason why it is employed in research; a key message in any handbook should be: is this the method that can generate the right data to answer your research question? But more than this, can it assist you to answer your research question in a way in which you remain ethical, committed to your participants as subjects and not solely objects? Given that biomedical and clinical researchers are being encouraged to have more process evaluation and pilot work undertaken prior to the implementation of interventions and trials (MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, 2000), this will become all the more important. As a parting comment, then, I leave to be debated and questioned how it is that AR as a method for data generation can find ways to link with methods for data analysis. To date this important element of the research process is absent, and in my view this is central to evaluating whether change or action resulted from these approaches. [34]

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