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The social ecology of action research

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a reflexive commentary on the nature and validity of actionable knowledge from the authors' experience with action research in New Mexico and beyond.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors have situated their localized experience in the history and theory of the broader field of action research by posing the question of whether the validity of action research depends more upon the observer's worldview than upon the quality of change in the lives of those involved in the intervention.

Findings – Three fundamental tenets of action research are identified. A pragmatic perspective underlies the need for locality grounded criticality in reflection, instrumental participation leading to trust and genuine understanding of behavior, and a shared desire to actualize untapped human potential to solve a problem.

Research limitations/implications – The paper offer's reflection on the validity of actionable knowledge from the authors' experience, supported by a brief case example to illustrate the dialogical convergence of theory and practice. Thus, this perspective may not be relevant and useful to all readers.

Practical implications – Reflection, regardless of when or how long it takes, is an essential catalyst in the transition of actionable knowledge into change.

Originality/value – The article attempts to separate a few essential elements of action research from the accumulated bits of technique, personal beliefs, ideology, and collected experiences that practitioners and theorists have attached to the question of validity and utility of knowledge produced by action research.

Keywords Action research, Pragmatism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A friend and colleague from the UK recently visited Las Cruces and, on being asked if he had enjoyed his dinner at a local restaurant, he replied, "Well, it seems to be poor people's food". Usually, we would expect a question about the food that someone has just eaten to be answered in terms of the taste of various ingredients, the aroma, or the presentation of the meal instead of a commentary on class structure. The parallel to action research is perhaps a bit too striking "when you think about how doctrinaire so much action research has been, and the evangelism of people who regard themselves as a dispossessed minority" (Swepson *et al.*, 2003, p. 249). Can a single research participant's ideology deny the taste that everyone else enjoys?

Another colleague flying into El Paso for the first time from Beijing was so struck by the relative desolation of both desert and city that she wondered aloud, "What have I gotten myself into?" Her view from the plane would not fit into any frame of reference she had ever known, but she still could not allow herself to abandon the old perspective. Perception is so strongly influenced by what a person expects to see that we tend to unconsciously hammer new experiences into prefabricated typologies (Bruner and Postman, 1949). Similarly, action researchers impose a set of unrelated



constraints on every environment that they encounter, theories of action which “significantly influence how individuals and groups solve problems and make choices” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68).

Lifelong identification with a familiar landscape shapes our expectations and obscures the possibilities in our current realities as we travel. Visitors see bleakness instead of beauty, or find poverty in a banquet. The perceptive frames through which we see and judge the world travel freely with us and the appearance of objectivity in any paradigm, worldview, or ideology is simply a transient consensus on the nature of a shared subjective reality. The workers of New Mexico do not really need to own the means of production to enjoy eating refried beans, red enchiladas, and green chile rellenos. Nor do they need densely packed skyscrapers in a colorful riparian garden. They like the landscape and foods, not because the taste of oppression is sweet, but because the desert imbues life with its own distinctive flavors.

Is action research any more or less valid in the desert of southern New Mexico than anywhere else in the world? The editors of this special issue asked us for a reflexive discussion of our epistemological views – essentially, a thoughtful commentary on the nature and validity of actionable knowledge – in conjunction with the perceptions toward action research of people in our part of the world. The question of geographic influence was probably meant to merely provide some comparative experience to interest journal readers, but we cannot resist the deeper reflection embedded in the question: does the validity of action research depend more upon the observer’s worldview, ideology, or past experience than upon some other sort of measure to indicate the quality of change in the lives of those involved in the intervention? Our article commences with reflection on the general field of action research and concludes with an application from our local desert of inquiry.

Divergence into continuity

The term *action research* suffers from the same type of vagueness that characterizes the label qualitative research. Agar (2006) believes that no one knows whether the term refers to epistemology, ontology, paradigms, methods, data, validity, theory, or some other consideration. However, the confusion does not stop researchers from trying to work together, often by stubbornly clinging to semantic differences among many subtle variations of the same basic approach. Swepson *et al.* (2003, p. 247) found that:

... one of the things that was noticeable about action research during the 80s and particularly the 90s was that everybody wanted to brand their own variety of action research with a different name...there was this sudden explosion of different labels. They were distinguished more by their similarities than their differences. For example, collaborative inquiry, cooperative inquiry, action evaluation, appreciative inquiry, participatory action research, emancipatory action research. And that hasn’t exhausted the field by any means! If you read the preface to the *Handbook of Action Research*, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury say that eventually they decided that action research was the only umbrella term under which they could gather all these siblings and cousins.

Action research unnecessarily spans the false dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods. The field of inquiry meets the dilemma of Pepper’s (1942) study of world hypotheses across this methodological divide. Action researchers must ultimately address the simple pragmatic question of “What works?” Thus, we cannot take the positivist’s easy path to arbitrarily restrict the field of objective inquiry, nor can we drift to the subjective extremes of constructivist–interpretist approaches. Pepper used these opposing perspectives to show that both routes diverged from the

pursuit of valid knowledge as they sought to capture human experience with frames of skeptical doubt or dogmatic belief. Although some have asserted that the paradigm underlying action research must be pragmatism (Hanson *et al.*, 2005), it may be sufficient to simply use an abductive lens by which to focus theory – any useful theory – into a method to gather actionable knowledge and to achieve practical results. Coser (1975) echoes and expands this argument into a method vs substance debate. When “the methodological tail wags the substantive dog”, social scientists resort to questioning the validity of knowledge researched via competing methods in the belief “that one can compensate for theoretical weakness by methodological strength” (Coser, 1975, p. 692). In management research, the dog’s tail has grown as methodological purists have fabricated trivial concerns to study about the methods themselves.

Unfortunately, as we move beyond these false dichotomies, we eventually encounter one that is historically very real and present. Hoffer (1952) observed a conscious and intentional separation, throughout history and in all civil societies, of intellectuals from practical endeavor. For current evidence of this division we need look no further than the Academy of Management’s bylaws, which explicitly restrict the member class of management consultants and practicing managers to no more than 25 per cent of the total membership (AOM, 2006). Thus, action research attempts to reunite theory and practice by breaching a wall historically built to reinforce social hierarchy. Reason (1998) channels this tacit theme as he discusses varieties of action research, all in the context of what he labels a “participative worldview”. This idealized abstraction seems to unnecessarily confuse the simple requirement of collaboration in action research with the broader aggregate consequences of action inquiry that may eventually lead to more equitable participation in society. However, it is not necessary for the researcher to script each project into a grand narrative of global transformation.

Hoffer (1952) reminds us that although they share common roots, scribes, writers, and rebels all differ in their motives and in their views of means vs ends. The scribe seeks an uneasy allegiance with management to rise up from the masses, the writer incites a self-serving revolution by chronicling a selective history, while for the rebel “theorizing, philosophizing, and writing are a means for hurdling or exploding the obstacles on the road to action” (Hoffer, 1952, p. 108). Action researchers must contend with all three of these personalities. However, to escape from the theory vs action dialectic prison into a dialogical and pragmatically purposeful relationship of theory and practice, we must frustrate the noble rebel behind the epistemology of action research. Reason (1998, p. 279) implies that valid knowledge results in a:

...change in the lived experience of those involved in the inquiry. Participants are empowered to define their world in the service of what they see as worthwhile interests, and as a consequence they change their world in significant ways, through action.

The rebel desires to enact a new grand narrative in the image of his own worthwhile interests, thereby subjugating genuine participation under his view of the greater social good (Hoffer, 1952). This situation parallels the thought in our opening vignette in which our friend’s ideological frame relegated the primary function and benefit of eating in New Mexico to an inconsequential afterthought.

If we think of the collaborative or participative aspect of action research only in terms of pragmatic methodological necessity, then we can return from Pepper’s (1942) extreme skeptic and dogmatic diversions back toward the pursuit of valid and actionable knowledge. The thought that microstoria analysis is “not quite Marxist” (Boje, 2001, p. 48) mischievously implies that something could perhaps be just a little

bit Marxist. Thus, if an absolutist ideology could be so substantially downgraded to a mere influence, then perhaps we as action researchers might find a way to mitigate the influence of our own motives and perspectives on the measures of validity in our interventions. Coser (1975) might also be appeased at the resituation of substantive theory to inform practice.

Valid and actionable knowledge

Our opening vignette may seem a bit facetious, but, to situate a plate of refried beans within a slightly broader network of social and economic relationships is essentially what action researchers must do in order to understand the problems they hope to solve. Whether action researchers are predisposed to personally identify with the oppression they find in their projects is debatable, but the excessive emphasis on critical theory may overshadow the immediate purpose of a project.

Carson and Fisher (2006) provide a key insight in their distinction of the role of critical reflection from the broader tradition of critical theory. They note that critical theory demands a grander scale for thoughtful action, that consideration of a problem in its social and historical context must lead to transformation on a societal or global scale. However, the relevant context for an action research question tends necessarily to the small group and personal reflection level, such that a situation can be transformed “when one reviews and changes misconstrued meanings arising from uncritical acceptance of the status quo” (Carson and Fisher, 2006, p. 703).

Rather than focus on the subtle methodological differences noted in Swepson *et al.* (2003), it may be more useful to attempt to define action research of all forms in terms of irreducible and essential elements. Carson and Fisher (2006) have alluded to one of these fundamental tenets: locally grounded criticality in reflection. For another, Wax (1971, p. 372) notes that a researcher “idealizes the people he is about to study and he also idealizes either himself or the nature and value of his fieldwork. Learning better is an essential part of his development”. Such ideals show up in other forms, as Dehler (2006, p. 636) asserts that “action research is grounded in democratic principles”. Underneath this ideological abstraction, we see the simple practical truth that “causal inferences about human behavior are more likely to be valid and enactable when the human beings in question participate in building and testing them” (Argyris, 1999, p. 433). In fieldwork, Wax (1971) cautioned against the extremes of participation – the detached approach of the survey/modeler vs the gone-native anthropologist – and suggested that shared socially constructed meaning, a genuine understanding of human behavior, was always to be found somewhere between. Participation may be a means to an end, to developing trust, as “one cannot live with human beings in the field or out of it without trusting them. The great feat in most field expeditions, as in life, is to find the areas in which a mutual or reciprocal trust may be developed” (Wax, 1971, p. 372). Microstoria analysis depends upon trust among participants and co-researchers (Boje, 2001), without which it is nearly impossible to resolve discrepancies in observations of the same phenomena (Harré and Secord, 1973). For a third and perhaps final tenet of action research, participants must share a common desire to actualize the untapped human potential within their midst to create viable solutions to their problems (Savall *et al.*, 2000).

Action research in New Mexico

Although most of our work in New Mexico has involved small business consulting, our approach is essentially a form of action research with the pedagogical emphasis of

creating a learning environment for students to explore the wondrous dysfunctions of real world organizational behavior. Our student consulting program was established as a free service to help local businesses that generally do not have the resources to hire professionals to diagnose and correct their problems. Clients gain actionable knowledge researched through a semester-long project which is theirs to use as they please. Although full solutions often cannot be implemented in one semester, most clients seem to find the beginnings of change in the mirrored reflection from outside perspectives.

Reactions and perceptions of action research from our institutional powerbrokers have changed somewhat over the years as business school deans have come and gone. A previous dean left the micromanagement of such programs to the associate dean, who effectively discouraged expansion of action research beyond the classroom. However, his conservatism had more to do with legal liability and institutional control issues than with any ideological predisposition concerning the validity of action research. The current dean has emphasized a new need for generating revenue and other quantifiable benefits from research projects. It remains to be seen whether or not that focus will have a material impact on the action research which has become a crucial element in the educational development of our business students.

Our student consulting practice has ebbed and flowed with the influx and assimilation of new research methods, knowledge, and people into our program. Our first attempts to get students involved in small business consulting utilized an internal-external or SWOT model of business analysis. However, the need to gather information primarily through interviews with owners, managers, employees, and other relevant sources soon produced a hybrid qualitative model that sorted interview quotes into internal-external categories. The flood of rich field data soon overflowed the SWOT frame of analysis into the more comprehensive field of socio-economic management. This fortuitous transition corresponded with our first visit to ISEOR in Lyon, France. At the time, there was only one manual in English on the socio-economic management variety of action research (i.e. Savall *et al.*, 2000). However, the methodology offered such potential for our practice that we sought assistance from the much more detailed resources available in French (e.g. Savall and Zardet, 2003).

In the most recent program addition, an entrepreneur/consultant/doctoral student has focused on action over theory, with greater emphasis on goal setting, rating scales, and graphical indicators for all involved in the action research process. In retrospect, the series of changes in our approach seems to reveal an oscillation in emphasis between theory and practice, with methodological waters flowing and receding. The strong desire for relevance and practical application in academic research finds inspiration in the convergence of academic standards, social utility, and the action researcher's creativity (Savall and Zardet, 2004). Perhaps like other action researchers, we have struggled to overcome the dialectic of theory and practice, and have succeeded at times in turning our research intervention into a dialogical convergence of theory and practice.

A small business consulting engagement is itself an extended process of analysis and reflection. The first student consulting group to work with a business might succeed in diagnosing the root causes of serious problems, with numerous quotes from employees and managers to describe the interrelations among dysfunctional behaviors, organizational structures, and impacts on performance. The mirror effect of evidence in their own quoted words can be psychologically overpowering enough to start a process of genuine reflection. However, in our experience, we have found that small

business owners often react to the mirror effect with a period of denial before corrective action begins in earnest. Voicing the unspoken problems breathes life and gives them power, and they demand action.

The team-based approach and frequent feedback sessions built into the action research process (Emery, 1978/1993) tend to limit the likelihood of genuine methodological issues. However, the indisputable organizational dysfunctions reflected in the members' own words leave no option for doubters but to question the validity of the research process. Our student researchers have had the opportunity to work with some of the same local businesses over the course of several years and we have found the socio-economic approach to be reliable in diagnosing persistent problems that defy evidence-based action. The following example from our experience illustrates the point.

New Mexico restaurant example

Barriers to entry into the restaurant industry are minimal, but competition is usually fierce enough to eliminate the weakest performers from the field. However, a constantly growing town can easily mask congenital dysfunctions in management, as we have observed in our action research practice. Joseph, the owner of Sunset Café has hosted student consulting teams twice thus far. Although the research interventions were two years apart, he has only recently begun to acknowledge the root cause of performance problems in his business.

Joseph bought out his partner's share of the business two months before the start of the second intervention and reported that sales had nearly doubled in that short period. The two partners had mismanaged their way through three different local restaurants before finally splitting up. However, a comparison of reports from both interventions shows that the root cause has not changed. The consistent failing of Joseph's career in the local restaurant industry has been his inability to manage effectively, including the crucial skills of hiring and training his staff in the day-to-day operations of the restaurant. Although Joseph's partner was a bigger drain on the business because he lacked knowledge of food preparation, as well as desire and ability to manage, the same problems persist. The inventory mismanagement of crisis proportions that was reported two years ago has improved, not by intentional action, but instead because Joseph and his former partner were forced to close their other restaurant and catering business that constantly "borrowed" food from Sunset Café.

Oddly enough, at the beginning of the first intervention, the owners seemed to recognize that there were problems in training and inventory management. Yet, clients sometimes deny the validity of our findings because of the challenge to their current perceptions of reality. It was psychologically uncomfortable for Joseph and his former partner to admit that owners dedicated enough to work 80 hours per week could also be the greatest barriers to releasing untapped potential. The tip of the iceberg identified by both interventions, two years apart, was the inability to delegate. They micromanaged when they were there and left no one in charge while they were away attending to their other restaurant and catering business. In practice, they could not delegate because they could not train their employees. They could not train because they had no standard operating procedures to define everything from inventory control to food preparation and customer service. They could not formulate standard operating procedures because that would make their inefficient workaholic micromanagement unnecessary.

The difficulty in getting past themselves was compounded by Lewin's (1936) cogent observation that, in action research, no absolute reality exists to serve as a benchmark for the collection of realities within an organization. For instance, when asked about training, the owners' stated perception was that they followed a special Disney program. According to employees, "I was thrown right in without knowing what to do" (cook) and "I was trained for three shifts, but I never had to take a menu test" (server). Two years later and on his own, Joseph still has not trained his staff to handle basic functions without his close supervision. History has a way of repeating itself, as Joseph plans to open a second restaurant. Yet, change is inherently a cognitive process that requires reflection (Lewin, 1948).

The Sunset Café reports from two student groups working two years apart brought out the question of whether action research validity requires action to be taken after potentially actionable knowledge has been produced. The same root cause in both reports shows that it can take quite a long time after the mirror effect to overcome the denial of dysfunctional findings. Perhaps critical personal reflection needs to be much more prominent in action research. At the end of our second intervention, Joseph observed that "the overall message was a good one for me. It involved not micromanaging in order to get a better view . . . freeing myself up and managing my time more effectively". Perhaps the reflection of actionable knowledge for change will finally be accepted as valid.

Conclusion

We have had numerous opportunities to teach, study, and conduct action research well beyond the limits of New Mexico. Even with careful reflection, it is surprisingly easy to attach extraneous bits of technique, personal beliefs, ideology, and collected experiences to the question of validity and utility of knowledge produced by action research. Ward-Schofield (1993, p. 202) captures this dilemma:

... at the heart of the qualitative approach is the assumption that a piece of qualitative research is very much influenced by the researcher's individual attributes and perspectives. The goal is not to produce a standardised set of results that any other careful researcher in the same situation or studying the same issues would have produced. Rather it is to produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of the situation.

The conundrum of validity in any type of actionable research is that one must necessarily interpret and re-contextualize the knowledge gathered from participants into a network of social and economic relationships of which the participants may not be fully aware. Thus, the action researcher must not succumb to the temptation to simply extrapolate the participants' localized oppression into some sort of epic struggle of the downtrodden masses of all humanity. Wainwright (1997) questions whether social science can be both critical and valid, yet concludes that it must be both because its validity is interwoven with the active and conscious process of change. We call this hybrid conceptual perspective antenarrative criticality – a fragmented and dynamic unscripted complement to narrative, unburdened in form by the influence of ideology, world view, or past experience. The guiding reflexive pragmatism of Peirce and Serres anchors both data collection and reflection to the purpose of the research. It is present in the physical person of co-inquirers, psychologically, and in the polyglossia of participative trust. "Social scientists are faced with a fundamental *choice* which hinges on a dilemma of rigor or relevance . . . From the action researcher's perspective,

the challenge is to define and meet standards of *appropriate* rigor without sacrificing relevance” (Argyris, 1999, p. 432). We hope that our commentary has contributed insight into the fundamental tenets and challenges of action research encountered in all the world’s beautiful deserts of inquiry.

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