

Images of changing practice through reflective action research
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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review action research approaches to changing practice through reflection, identifying themes, issues and questions relevant to a broader community of research practitioners. It invites additional layering in concept, enactment and account.

Design/methodology/approach – A framework for considering interwoven dimensions of action research as first-, second- and third-person inquiry is presented. The paper then works through stories to explore the complementarities of action research with other genres of research, addressing developments of practice through reflection. Questions of general relevance are identified.

Findings – Action research is a richly diverse range of approaches having much in common with a broader community who seek to develop embodied practice and practical knowing, work in collaboration, respect multiple ways of knowing, and influence change in social systems. Frames, approaches, practices and questions from action research can be applied more generally. The paper articulates a profusion of questions. These include inviting attention to researchers' reflective practices, to different ways of exploring issues of power, and to questioning (organizational) contexts in which interventions are set.

Practical implications – Practices of inquiry and intervention for social and organizational change are explored. Attention is drawn to issues of power and how they might affect action with a participatory intent. Ways of developing understandings and enactments are offered.

Originality/value – This paper offers a companion language and set of practices from which to view other genres of research/intervention interested in developing practice through reflection.

Keywords Action research, Reflection, Management power

Paper type Research paper

1. Offering an account from action research

As an action researcher, I share many interests with those who, working from diverse traditions, are interested in changing practice through reflection. This article elaborates notions of reflective action research, identifying themes and questions relevant to a broader community who seek to develop embodied practice and practical knowing, work in collaboration, respect multiple ways of knowing, and influence change in social systems. It is thus a contribution to conversation, offering action research as a companion language from which to articulate and develop notions of practice in relation to reflection. I seek to contribute both mirroring and some interference, which Watts (2008) contrasts as a form of knowing to reflection (depicted as potentially stabilizing and fostering replication). "Interference occurs when light waves meet in a place, when they superpose and add together [. . .] It creates a pattern of light and dark, partial and fragmentary points of knowledge" (Watts, 2008, p. 189). Such patterning is specific to a location, topographically and epistemologically. This paper is located in the opportunity this issue affords to articulate

questions of quality from action research in relation to changing practice through reflection. I first outline a framework for mapping notions of action research, sketching a broad canvas within which to explore. By working with examples that show some of action research's key dimensions, I then generate both potential resonances, and a range of critical questions and quality issues relevant to researchers in different genres interested in relationships between reflection and practice. This paper is thus offered as inquiry, asking a profusion of questions. Its form mirrors its intentions, offering multiple reference points of potential interest. Some threads are thus necessarily left open, perhaps partial, fragmentary.

2. Mapping action research

Action research is a term applied to a richly diverse range of approaches, as recent attempts to collect members of this potential "family" together and categorize them in handbooks (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, 2008b; Cooke and Wolfram Cox, 2005) and an article (Cassell and Johnson, 2006) show. It includes Kurt Lewin, cited as one originating source in the USA of the 1940s, and his associates John Collier and Ronald Lippit (Cooke and Wolfram Cox, 2005). It includes the participatory action research approaches of the south, shown in the work of Freire (1970) and Fals Borda (2001), and emancipatory movements, such as feminisms, with their radical objectives and concerns to give voice to the silenced. It includes organizational development as an approach to intervention and change; and action science and action learning, with their different histories, languages and procedures. It includes the Scandinavian workplace democracy heritage. Concerns with discerning qualities of practical knowing can be traced back to Aristotle in the "hidden curriculum of the western tradition" (Eikeland, 2001, p. 145).

This, incomplete, listing shows that there is no one "it", but a plethora of movements concerned with practice, reflection and potential for change, which are in more or less connection with each other. I shall nonetheless use the rubric "action research" here, for convenience, and for the politics of standing for inquiry that challenges separations of theory and practice. One question that arises in critically reflective practice is whether choosing necessarily means creating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Nicolini et al., 2004). In this case, that is not my intention, and I hope that terms can be "held lightly" and permeably. Nonetheless, I have serious intents. Issues of paradigm, knowing, action and power matter, I think vitally, in a world of climate change, climate change debate, poverty and hyper-affluence.

One attempt to map the diversity of action research is a framework considering approaches as contributing to different territories of action – as being first-, second- or third-person action research, or, more commonly, some combination of these (Reason and Bradbury, 2008a; Reason and Torbert, 2001; Chandler and Torbert, 2003). I use this framework here for its flexibility and scope. These threads in researching are not, however, discrete. They represent multiple simultaneous attentions, potentially fleeting, scanned and glimpsed in action, challenging to reflect in writing. Developing the crafts of such practice is a significant aspect of learning as an inquirer, and intervener, about which we seldom hear.

First-person action research involves the researcher adopting an inquiring approach to their own assumptions, perspectives and action, seeking to behave awarely and

choicefully in a given context, and to develop their practice in some way. It might be relatively focused, such as a teacher adopting self-study to improve their practice (Whitehead, 1989), or a more pervading approach of “living life as inquiry” (Marshall, 1999), problematizing different issues as they become learning edges of some kind.

The reflexive qualitative researcher engages in first-person inquiry as they pay attention to themselves in action and interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). First-person action research is an aspirational notion. Espousing self-awareness is a bold, futile, claim. “Of course, the whole of mind could not be reported in a part of the mind” (Bateson, 1973, p. 408). Analytic intelligence cannot know everything. We must accept living with incompleteness. And we are social, contexted, not bounded, beings. But recognising that there are limits to any account we can give does not absolve us from seeking to give some account. As an action researcher, I thus pay attention to how I bring myself to inquiry, to my apparent intentions, and reflect on my choices, adopting quality processes such as opening myself to challenging questioning (Torbert, 1991; Marshall, 2001).

I see some form of first-person inquiry as foundational to all forms of research that go beyond positivist assumptions of objectivity (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Marshall and Reason (2007) outline dimensions of “taking an attitude of inquiry” as a learning orientation and quality process that is potentially widely applicable. This core strand in action research has been strongly influenced by action science (Friedman, 2001). Self-reflective knowing was a key element in Aristotle’s richly discriminating map of ways of knowing (Eikeland, 2001), alongside other forms related to practice of different kinds.

Second-person action research involves people coming together to inquire into issues of mutual interest. There is often an initiating researcher, but their intention is to help create a community of inquiry in which all participate in decisions about the process as well as the content of the research. Co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2008) is an especially clearly articulated form of second-person action research. It advocates moving through cycles of action and reflection in disciplined ways. Formats do, however, need to be tailored to context, issues and purposes. Often, collaborative forms of inquiring are nested into other activity patterns within an organizational or social setting.

Third-person action research seeks to stimulate engaged, sustained inquiry in a wider community such as an organization or a geographic region (Gustavsen, 2001) over time. Again, the form of inquiry is tailored to context and purposes. A corporate responsibility manager might, for example, seek to encourage formal and informal organization-wide discussions about sustainability issues and company action. Writing is third-person inquiry if it seeks to generate debate. Often, third-person action research’s core aim is stimulating a broader sensibility of inquiry amongst participants, and this “capacity-building” may take precedence over other objectives in initial phases.

The Scandinavian workplace democracy movement has a long history of social and organizational change through third-person action research (Gustavsen, 2001; Paolshaugen, 2001). It has developed especially through working with participative processes in companies in Norway and Sweden since the 1970s to enhance workplace productivity, equality and satisfaction, acting from a sense of “common good”. It is

supported by legislation which encourages wide-spread participation and human rights, and is set within a societal tri-partite agreement between work organizations, trade unions and public bodies to collaborate on improving the quality of working life and organizations' economic viability. The patterns of light and shade in some of this Issue's papers are similar to those in the Scandinavian tradition.

How to achieve scale of involvement and impact is a current preoccupation in some action research circles, partly prompted by Gustavsen's (2003) challenge that effects have often been local and small scale. I am cautious about the potential seduction of scale for its own sake, and question appropriateness to issues and contexts. But, we are globally facing environmental sustainability and social justice crises that are urgent and systemic (IPCC, 2007), and therefore require wide-spread reflection, questioning, discussion and action. Action research of different scales could enable these activities.

Having mapped a range of inquiry approaches, I now move into identifying resonances and some questions from action research to share with other scholars interested in developing practice.

3. Articulating choices

In any action research, choices are made about how first-, second- and third-person inquiry processes are interwoven (Chandler and Torbert, 2003). For example, second-person research can provide a generative setting through which people conduct first-person inquiries (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005). Second-person inquiries, with first-person research nested within them, can raise awareness and potential for action affecting a wider organization (McArdle, 2002).

In articles considering developments of practice, researchers and facilitators affect first-, second- and third-person spaces, if we use this nomenclature. I would welcome more reflection on their choices of how inquiring to be in each of these spaces, and at their boundaries, and what strategies to adopt. What, if anything, does inquiry or research mean to the actors at different levels of the systemic patternings engaged? What resources are participants offered to develop their capacities for reflective sense-making and action? Is the nature of organizing open to critical review or considered the benign backdrop to workplace interventions?

4. Characteristics of action research

Whilst acknowledging action research as a "family" of approaches with great variety, at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, we worked from some key characteristics (published by colleagues as Reason and Bradbury, 2008a), seeing action research as:

- (1) producing practical knowledge relevant to everyday life;
- (2) contributing to human flourishing, in an embedded relationship with the wider ecology of the planet;
- (3) promoting participation and democracy, in the service of epistemological quality and social justice;
- (4) being concerned with reflective knowledge in action; and

(5) taking emergent, developmental forms.

These offer a schema of criteria against which to develop and debate (action) research practices. They explicitly invite attention to values (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), for example requiring reflection on criteria for judging “worthwhile purposes”.

I would add two further characteristics as definitional in action research practice. These are:

- (1) Operating systemically with contextual sensitivity, including attention to timing; and
- (1) Paying attention to issues of power, as an important companion to aspirations of participation.

Systemic thinking can contribute significantly to inquiry (Bateson, 1973), offering ways to attend to contexting as a dynamic process, with ever-provisional senses of what is figure and ground (Marshall, 2004). Whilst tentative boundaries may be created in this process, they can also be subject to reflection and review. Action research as emergent process can be seen as a form of recursive inquiry, seeking to connect sensitively with “context” in a dialogue of relationship, rather than habitually favouring either conformity or challenge. This raises questions for the researcher of how to attend to systemic patternings, and enact inquiring engagement.

Notions of power are potentially relevant in action research in a myriad of ways (Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Lukes, 2005; Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). We may attend to micro enactments of powers in interplays between, and amongst, research initiators and participants. We may focus on interpersonal conflicts or those between stakeholder positions; navigating the implications for whose voices count, noticing any propensity to align, and seeking forms of action with integrity in context. We may be especially alert to the operation of symbolic dimensions of power, for example as language use creates what is “good and true”, even in our own attempts to open spaces for dialogue. We may be aware of potentially subtle structural dimensions of power, for example as they affect the perceived legitimacy of certain forms of knowing, or the creation of boundaries. Power equalisation in participatory research is not, then, easily achieved (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008).

Reflexivity about issues of power requires attending to ourselves as actors and sense-makers. Given these plural approaches to issues of power, researchers are faced with interesting and challenging questions of awareness and practice. They can ask “In what ways might dynamics of power be operating here?” “What perspectives are appropriate to adopt in relation to power, here?” “How are my practices enactments of power?” Gaventa and Cornwall (2008, p. 179) argue that participatory research needs to attend to the three inter-related dimensions of knowledge, action and consciousness simultaneously if it wishes to reconfigure power relations, noting that much literature emphasizes only one dimension. Their reminder is valuable. And the enactment of radical participation is still also a challenge – in practice, but also conceptually – as diversities of power of different sorts are inherent in any research situation.

Power in relation to knowing, and valuing is often highlighted in action research. The primacy of practical knowing and that knowing is in the service of action are key themes

in literature. This has strong connections with the “practice turn” in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Action research in its different traditions explores issues of knowing, and the politics of how different forms are depicted and valued in relation to each other (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). Proponents call, for example, for propositional knowing to take its place alongside experiential, presentational and practical knowing, rather than being privileged (Heron and Reason, 2008), and for local knowledge, developed by and for local people in action, to be respected (Fals Borda, 2001). These approaches are not, of course, unique to action research, being central, for example, to feminist theory and practice. In research accounts, I am, then, eager to hear explicit comment on the politics of demarcating valued and devalued knowing.

Whatever can be said generically, action research is enacted practice in context. In the next sections of this paper, I therefore illustrate action research through stories that depict key features and tensions, identifying edges of practice and questions of quality with potential relevance to a wider community of scholars involved in changing practice through reflection in varied ways.

I take first-, second- and third-person inquiry as headings below for convenience, recognizing that they are not clearly demarcated and often interweave.

5. Working through stories: starting from first-person action research

Here, I offer an account showing emergent form in action research and how initial questioning is followed through into action and threads back again iteratively to reflection. This interweaving of reflection and practice gives action research its form, with congruent patterns but tailored to each initiative. Underlying the account are practices of “taking an attitude of inquiry” (Marshall and Reason, 2007).

First-person accounts in critically reflective action research can seem self-indulgent, an issue autoethnography also addresses (Sparkes, 2002). The question “to what purpose?” is key (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The internally reflective account, making no pretence at objectivity, can locate the sense-maker and actor (Eikeland, 2001), show the inquiry disciplines and quality processes they adopted (Marshall, 2001), open their framings, assumptions, understandings of power and choices to potential scrutiny (Torbert, 1991). The following story seeks to show this style of account and the reflective work of the inquirer, informing practice.

First-person action research sometimes arises for me from noticing an edge of learning that I am not yet paying full attention to. It is like a loose thread waiting to be pulled. It involves working with intention(s), not all of which may be initially explicit, even to the researcher (Marshall, 2001), and treating all action as inquiry in some way.

Some years ago, I was working with two postgraduate research peer supervision groups. These were small because some previous members had completed their PhDs. I planned to bring the remaining students (all mature, part-time), together and introduce new people, forming a group of nine. I would be their sole PhD supervisor. I noticed both my excitement at this move and a slight sense of concern. When I turned to look directly at the latter, I wondered about the quality of my supervision practice, and whether, despite its apparent strengths (on which I received feedback) it had “shadow sides” of

which I should be more aware. The supervisor can be highly influential in the UK PhD system, and I wanted to offer students my best potential practice. (Working in a peer community is already highly generative, so I was not the only influence.) Being busy, I ignored this potential inquiry “project” for some time. But the slight concern and enticement of learning kept recurring. I therefore decided to address them. It helped that I could see an elegant form in which to be inquiring and collaborative.

I wrote asking the two groups to give feedback on my practice. Each did so through a tape-recorded discussion, which I only partly attended (to give space for them to gather their views without me present). Both groups challenged my intention to seek out “the shadow” and gave more rounded feedback. I had the tapes transcribed, arranged comments in a thematic analysis with copious quotations, and offered this to the newly formed group for discussion. I learnt how my practice was viewed. Some themes related to generic issues in the PhD process, and to symbolic and structural interpretations of power (Hardy and Clegg, 1996). For example, to achieve a PhD, students need to heed stated quality criteria. But they will only meet these if they also take authority for their own work and so do not slavishly follow external rules. Experiencing and resolving this tension is a key developmental aspect of the PhD journey. As supervisor, I sit at this threshold. I can advocate the apparent rules, or I can seek a more paradoxical position, encouraging students’ creativity and also raising with them the nature of the quality standards they are seeking to meet (on their own terms). The main issue students raised that I needed to explore in my practice related to this tension. It was how I commented on people’s work. Sometimes, I could be seen as unclear, as unwilling to give a view, as I reflected back choices or issues. (I was seeking not to provide a language that they might feel obliged in some ways to copy, eschewing power as meaning-making. And yet, of course, languages of inquiry, “holding things lightly” and other reflections of my approach would be “on view”.) It was often when someone most wanted to find clear, external, reference points, that I appeared reluctant to providing them. (I was resisting potential structural positioning of me as the “expert”.) At other times, when people were more “self-referenced” (in one person’s term), I was considered to be more direct, offering views that the recipient could work with, or not, as they saw fit.

Discussing these issues in the newly formed group over two early meetings informed our practice together. For example, members considered how they could take ownership of requesting different forms of feedback and of commenting on process when I was giving feedback on their or other people’s work. In terms of theories of power, decision making became more inclusive, and aspects of symbolic and structural power become potentially open to review. Also, the inquiry offered me prompts to experiment with my behaviour, for example more overtly framing what I was doing and why, and inviting more feedback during my interventions.

This example shows that inquiry can, perhaps should, be demanding. Taking an attitude of inquiry (Marshall and Reason, 2007), with its associated disciplines, helps us travel uncharted territory. It also illustrates how first and second-person action research can become interwoven, how “my” questions became, partly at least, reflected into “our” questions. The example integrates contextual sensitivity and attention to issues of power as key dimensions of inquiry. Finding an elegant approach that fitted the contours of the setting felt fitting, touching issues that mattered to me, as initiating researcher, and to others. At each stage of the action, inquiry was explicitly stated and tested. The students influenced the form it took and could at any point have declined

further involvement, or shaped processes differently. This account explores some potential issues of power, but space does not allow consideration of the multiple patterns of powers we lived reflectively in our practice together.

Given my approach to inquiry, as I read research accounts, I want to hear the researchers' critically reflective voices, individually and in teams, as inquirers into their own developing practice. In relation to applications of the Change Laboratory intervention method (Virkkunen and Ahonen, 2010), for example, I have a range of curiosities. I would like the research team to report on their experiences as a significant influencing strand in the action. The model sets out clearly the approaches they will take, the kinds of spaces into which they will invite participants whose reflections are enabled. To what extent do they follow these, tried and tested, processes? How do they adjust their approaches and behaviours as interventions unfold? What cues are they paying attention to? How novel will outcomes be in each situation? What forms do first-, second and third-person inquiry take for the initiators? Where are their learning edges and challenges? Does their apparent stance of neutrality appear so in practice to other participants? How would they depict their goals? Are all outcomes equally acceptable to them? An orientation that gives social engagement primacy over people as individual and team actors is both appealing and intriguing. The local, contextualized, politicized processes of inquiry in action might become de-focused, hiding first and second-person dimensions of researching from view, in an undisclosed "backstage".

Another feature of practice-based work, about which I welcome reflective commentary, is the explicit use of tools introduced by outside facilitators. These tools produce artefacts enabling processes of reflection. For example, Iedema and Carroll's (2010) "clinalyst" uses videos, maps and schema, in "video-reflexive ethnography", as projective devices, making dynamics of practice visible and available to reflection, dialogue and diffraction. How does an outside facilitator navigate issues of symbolic and structural power in the impactful interventions they make? How can the prescribed tools be contextually sensitive? What implications about valued, and less valued, ways of knowing might they carry, and are such issues open to debate with participants? In some forms of action research, such as participatory rural appraisal (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008), tools for data generation are usually similarly prescribed, incorporating processes intending to allow all involved their voice. In other action, research approaches choices of method and representation are negotiated with co-researchers. But apparent flexibility might mask the facilitator's potential, tacit, power as they draw on experience to offer ways of working.

6. Working through stories: starting from second-person action research

Stories in this section demonstrate a range of action research approaches with relevance to developing practice through reflection, and lead to questions about power and boundary setting in inquiry.

The nesting of first- and second-person action research is shown in McArdle's (2002) co-operative inquiry with youngwomenmanagers. Members explored issues of identity, gendered images that affected available organizational roles, and effective action. They later took their learning into an organizational intervention, inviting senior women to hear their findings and the issues raised.

Members of the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2005) have engaged in a long-term project exploring White supremacist consciousness and associated issues of practice. Their individual development has been radically informed by a collective co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008). They argue that second-person action research of some kind is vital to support first-person inquiry, especially if self-concept is at risk. They identify the need to live on the edge of knowing and not-knowing, characteristic of action research, as the practice of “critical humility”, a general “habit of being” that contributes to quality in research (p. 250).

Any research is set within a wider context. Paying attention to boundary setting and issues of power is therefore an aspect of framing and enacting inquiry.

Pimbert and Wakeford (2003) worked with citizens’ juries in Andhra Pradesh, consulting various stakeholder groups with knowledge relevant to agricultural development, to shape a vision for the future. This project, combining second- and third-person action research, is placed here because whatever boundaries become drawn, there is always a wider context in which powers of different sorts operate (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). Pimbert and Wakeford especially wanted to equalize power and affirm local farmers’ knowledge in relation to that of scientific “experts”. Their publications show the systemic unfolding of this research. At a late stage, two major donor organizations who had chosen not to participate in the initial project challenged its collaboratively achieved outcomes (Wakeford and Pimbert, 2004). Resulting tensions had to be worked through in further cycles of inquiry.

Congruent insights come from Nicolini et al.’s (2004) three-year project in a UK health authority. This employed whole community change conferences and Reflective Action Learning Sets to generate spaces to reflect and to act, seeking a “structure that reflects”. Learning set members reported significant development, but inclusion (in the set) limited connections across boundaries. Attempts to link to “key decision makers” in the wider organization thus had limited success, partly mirroring back characteristics of managing within the loosely coupled institution. Challenging as it was, the reflection was therefore of value as an indication of “what is”.

Participatory research emphasises sharing sense-making, power and action with participants, who thus become co-inquirers. There are links between such research forms and those reported by Iedema and Carroll (2010), Kostulski (2010) and Virkkunen and Ahonen (2010), as inquiry happens in a contained space and time, and according to disciplined procedures or tools for connecting knowing and acting. There also seem to be nuanced differences. In each approach, there are strong underpinning philosophies. Co-operative inquiry is grounded in a participative paradigm, overtly emphasising participation in framing as well as research action as both an epistemological and a social justice imperative (Reason and Heron, 2008a, b). It then offers practices for working with these challenging, often conflicting and paradoxical, aspects of research. (Of course, issues of power raised above also apply here.) In other research accounts intentions for participation are more or less explicit, and can seem somewhat curtailed. I welcome insights into how this aspect of the contract is framed, negotiated and enacted in practice with participants, and with institutions involved.

7. Working through stories: starting from third-person action research

This section explores and questions some of the conundrums of power involved in seeking to promote inquiry, reflection and developments of practice at organizational and social levels.

Third-person action research approaches include the Scandinavian workplace democracy movement and participatory action research (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). Some action researchers depict their practice as seeking to open up communicative spaces, recognising the complex challenges of this simply worded aspiration. Power is at issue in any scale of research, and is figural when considering organizational interventions.

As an action researcher, I have a heightened awareness of the paradoxes of participatory research. Any offered format also has the potential to socialise participants into the forms of thinking and practice that it offers (Lukes, 2005), especially if it is advocated charismatically and persuasively, and if materials, tools and processes are congruently aligned, proving challenging in relation to the micro practices of power (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2008). There is no clear line between offering transformative learning environments and coercion, despite researchers' intentions. I therefore welcome overt attention to issues of power and how they are addressed, both in initiating formats and in ongoing action. How can we offer strong facilitation and not significantly shape outcomes, not oppress participants with inappropriate uses of authority? These questions are Freire's (1970) when he asks whether the silenced can be liberated by others, and Fenwick's (2005) when she critiques the aspirations of critical management education. They are shared in action research.

Often, projects in action research have an intentionally paradoxical quality. Living through this with participants is part of the action. This type of approach seeks to make issues of power available to be worked with. For example, the notion of liberating structure (Torbert, 1991, p. 98) with its defining, paradoxical qualities intends to "cultivate empowerment through development". Creators of liberating structures seek to establish conditions that will enable, encourage and perhaps even demand that participants go beyond formal requirements to think and develop for themselves. Engaging with potentially liberating structures involves consent in the service of possible surprise or challenge.

Interventions seeking to prompt reflective developments of practice have similar intentions. In Virkkunen and Ahonen's (2010) work, for example, people encounter and then transcend offered processes through their enactments of new forms of collectively orchestrated practice. Torbert (1991) argues that creating such communities of inquiry requires the initiator to open their purposes, strategies and behaviours to challenge. Can this be achieved in workplace interventions? Will there be limits to questioning? Can the initiators of such interventions display the necessary attention, strength, vulnerability and integrity to open the space for inquiry, giving up control (Torbert, 1991)? These are demanding intentions in interventions sanctioned by senior management. I wonder how such initiatives are negotiated and funded. Who protects the researchers' abilities to stay in the research site? Are there limits to their potential for disruption? If so, how are limits known and enacted?

I would welcome more discussion of these paradoxical issues in practice-oriented, interventionist research accounts in which symbolic and structural power are at issue. What notions of power are the researchers working with, and how do these affect their practice? The prescribed processes of activity theory in the Engeström Change Laboratory, for example, could be interpreted as encoding structural notions of power (Hardy and Clegg, 1996;). Is power patterned into these ways of working? Are issues of power open to view and review? Are participants trained in a language that then shapes their sense making through ways Lukes (2005) and others might call symbolic uses of power? How open to question are these frames of sense making? As the processes are employed in the service of organizational development, is critical questioning, especially of the activity itself, allowed? Can the participants change the very structures through which they are invited to reflect? Will “dissenters” accounts be omitted from research outcomes? I also wonder about relationships amongst the research team. Do differences of any kind make a difference? How is power in diverse forms enacted?

8. In reflection

Working through stories, I wanted to populate this paper with images of action research practice alongside general principles of what it might entail. The stories have shown the complementarities of action research with other genres addressing developments of practice through reflection. And they suggest some potential differences in what is accounted for and treated as worthy of inquiry and representation.

Research addressing practice development has similarities to action research, but often does not use this language, identifying instead other traditions within which it is working. It seems valuable also to be making connections, appreciating practices and theorizing in different epistemological locations. And difference is welcome. It is encouraging that interest in developing practical action is widespread and receiving more attention.

Exploring these intersections, I have appreciated the patterns of light and shade created by viewing from other frames or perspectives. This happens within the diverse family of action research as well as between “it” and other practice-oriented approaches. Exploring “interference patterns”, I have sought to draw attention to similarities and potential differences. I have explored a range of potentially interesting threads, allowing them to remain here “partial and fragmentary” (Watts, 2008, p. 189) as an inquiry into connection and critical questioning, rather than ordered too neatly in one frame. I note the themes in my questioning. I especially want: to be told more of the “backstage” processes of researching, to hear reflections on multiple notions of power, to be told how inquirers interweave first-, second- and third-person attentions; and to hear how they adapt their practice in different settings. These wishes do not intend to dismiss the research stories others tell, or to confront their framing, but rather to invite additional layering.

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Further reading

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