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Utopia made practical

Dick, Bob (2001, October). Utopia Made Practical? Action Research Comes of Age. Review Essay: Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice* [32 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 3(1). Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-02/1-02review-dick-e.htm>

Invited book review.

Abstract

This large and important work gathers together an enormous variety of action research processes, applications and skills in its 45 chapters. Following a useful section of chapter outlines and an introduction by the editors, a section on “Groundings” offers a number of value and epistemological positions. This is followed in turn by three other sections and a Conclusion. “Practices” provides descriptions of many of the varieties of action research. “Exemplars” contains case studies. “Skills” offers readers a glimpse of some of the competencies action researchers draw on in their work. The quality of the individual chapters is high. In the

Introduction and Conclusions the editors describe their purpose, identify some themes, and offer a commentary which points towards a way forward for action research. The result is a rich collation of current thinking about a family of action oriented research approaches which is growing in popularity.

Keywords: action research, collaborative research, emergent research, theory, practice, praxis, emancipation, participation, relationships, rigour, anti-reductionism, quality of research

1. Introduction

As I write this, Western aircraft are raining destruction on Afghanistan in retaliation for the tragedy of the World Trade Centre. Against this backdrop it is not difficult to understand the idealism and hints of utopianism which colour some of the chapters of this valuable collection. At the same time it might easily be thought that action research has promised much but has not yet delivered enough to forestall such tragedies. It is perhaps understandable that a defensive posture against modernist science can occasionally be discerned. [1]

But this is too narrow a view. What follows is a broader appreciation of the handbook. I begin with a description of this large piece of work. Then, in turn, I discuss some of the more prominent themes, some personal reactions, and a possible future for action research. I haven't attempted to report all of what this book has to offer. Instead I gather most of my comments around the themes, referring occasionally to chapters which illustrate those themes. [2]

2. Description

The 450 or so pages of the book contain 45 chapters in addition to the editors' Introduction. A small font and a 2-column format allow the editors to squeeze almost 1000 words into each page. This both tested my eyesight and placed this large and diverse work beyond what I could reasonably summarize here. [3]

Peter REASON and Hilary BRADBURY have organized the chapters into four sections: *Groundings* (conceptual and value frameworks); *Practices* (varieties of action research); *Exemplars* (specific examples); and *Skills* (those skills needed by action researchers). In addition the editors provide an overall *Introduction* and *Conclusion*. As the editors state (and as some colleagues and I found in a more modest action research collection we edited) action research, engaging as it does with the "real world", does not lend itself easily to any categorization. Almost all of the authors quite clearly value theory, practice, skills, and their mutual integration, whatever their particular focus. [4]

That said, the structure of the handbook worked well for me. *Groundings*, while clearly action oriented, gathered in one place many of the knowledge and value frameworks action researchers (and often other researchers) draw upon. Many chapters in the *Practices* section include case studies by way of illustration. At the same time, the section provided a collection in one place of many of the varieties of action research. The *Exemplars* are built upon *Groundings* and *Practices*, further illuminating them. The *Skills* chapters made more explicit what was already evident throughout much of the handbook: action research is among other things a performing art drawing upon a range of expert competencies. [5]

Interposed between the *Preface* and the *Introduction* is a useful section of chapter outlines, each a paragraph in length. Between them these chapter outlines provide the reader with an appreciation of the enormous diversity which characterizes action research. [6]

The breadth and complexity of action research is displayed in all four sections of the book and perhaps most obviously in the section on *Practices*. There, among other varieties of action research, you will find action science, participatory research, co-operative inquiry, appreciative inquiry, action learning, action inquiry, systems approaches such as soft systems methodology, and more.

Accompanying the established varieties are some less well known processes such as “ethnodrama” (MIENCZAKOWSKI & MORGAN). It was developed in Brisbane, where I live. Why have I not heard of it before? In addition the action researchers who have written chapters for the handbook have worked in many nations, with many people, for many purposes. [7]

If anything, the diversity gives more salience to the themes which recur across all sections and many of the chapters. [8]

3. Major themes

Given the dual pursuit by action research of improvement (the action) and understanding (the research), some themes can be expected to recur. Included here is the relationship between, or the integration of, research and practice. Related to this is a focus on the purpose of critical reflection by individual and groups. In this context an emphasis on participation is also not surprising. Nor is the strong commitment by most authors towards some ideal of a better world or a better way of doing things. [9]

Theory and practice

A commitment to informed action, shared by all authors, is one of the defining characteristics of action research. Although almost two-thirds of the authors have academic appointments their intent to bring about action is very clear. Those chapters which are more theoretical have as their aim a contribution to action. For instance, many of the papers in the *Practices* section include a case study as illustration. Almost all of the case studies in the *Exemplars* section

acknowledge the contribution of the values and epistemologies in *Groundings* and the methodological frameworks in *Practices*. Some papers use the hybrid term “research/practice” rather than separate research and practice from one another. [10]

For GUSTAVSEN (Chapter 1), following HABERMAS (1984/1987), theory and practice *are* separate worlds. They require the third world of “mediating discourse” to integrate them. For many others such as HERON & REASON (Chapter 16) and MARSHALL (Chapter 44) the action research cycle alternates between action and reflection to provide the integration. [11]

Participation and relationships

Action research is research with people, involving the participants of the study as equal partners in the research exercise. This is another of action research’s defining features. In some action research literature there are exceptions (such as CLARK, 1972), though not in this collection. None of this is new. Action research has sought to use egalitarian and involving research processes since its beginnings. What is more evident than usual in this collection is a strong realization that participation is not enough. Quality of relationship is central to effective change work. This emphasis can be found in other action research literature — for example in OJA & SMULYAN (1989) — but seldom as prominently. [12]

This strong valuing of egalitarian relationships can be seen in most chapters. While present throughout it is perhaps most obvious in the chapters informed by feminist or liberatory approaches. These include those by BARRETT (Chapter 27) and SWANTZ, NDEDYA & MASAIGANA (Chapter 39), and in most of the *Skills* chapters, among others. The relationships which are valued are those of authentic engagement between people, described for example by ROWAN (Chapter 10) as he discusses a humanistic approach to action research. [13]

A better world

The more theoretical papers talk about “emancipation” and “liberation” — see, for instance, KEMMIS (Chapter 8) . The more practical papers, such as that by HILLS (Chapter 33) on changing the evaluation of nursing practice, model it in their descriptions of what was done. It is not trivial change which the authors in the handbook favour. Their wish in most cases is to involve the marginalized, give power to the disempowered, and create the social structures which will allow a voice to all. I sense here an impatience with current governance. There is also sometimes an unfortunate undercurrent of criticism of other ways of doing research and practice. [14]

4. Themes for the future

There are other themes, less evident in the chapters, which REASON and BRADBURY choose to emphasize. Included are some which are more implicit than explicit in the chapters, but which I expect will make this a handbook for shaping the future as well as reporting the present. These themes include the broad relevance of action research, its emergent nature, and the ways in which rigour can be increased. [15]

Broad relevance

My own experience of action research is that it provides personal and professional development for its practitioners and participants while it builds better relationships and enhances the situations which it studies. Using TORBERT'S (1998) categorization of 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-person research, REASON & BRADBURY identify the relevance of action research for self, others, and wider system. Action researchers improve themselves as they help others to enhance teamwork and to improve systems. TORBERT (Chapter 23) himself addresses this in his chapter on action inquiry. Both of the editors, REASON (Chapter 16)

with John HERON on co-operative inquiry and BRADBURY (Chapter 29) on “The Natural Step” process, also make use of it. [16]

An emergent process

Action research and a few other approaches such as grounded theory (especially in the hands of Glaser, 1992) are above all emergent processes. They are not pre-designed but continuously negotiated and crafted as the research and practice proceeds. This is a theme implicit in many of the chapters and made explicit in the editors’ Introduction and Conclusion. [17]

It is also acknowledged in their decision to use “action research” in the title of the book — with misgivings, as they say, because it has such different meanings for different people. But in my view action research practitioners have been too ready to give separate labels to the particular processes they use. It is good to see the many varieties and traditions brought together once again under a single label. As a label, “action research” serves that purpose well. [18]

The purpose of an emergent process is to be flexible enough to be tailored to the requirements of the particular situation and the particular people. If action research studies are to be thus flexible and responsive, each study is unique. I imagine that most action researchers subscribe to the principle that the situation, the goals, and the people drive the choice of process. This being so, it is strange that there has been a sort of diaspora of action research, fragmenting into different varieties which from time to time display sectarian jealousy. Does this handbook represent a homecoming? [19]

Rigour

The editors and some of the authors also address rigour with a care which I think much of the action research literature lacks. In doing this they avoid adopting the extreme relativism which in some qualitative literature makes rigour a topic not easily discussed. The editors’ *Conclusions* chapter takes rigour and quality as

central motifs. I had feared that action research might be swallowed up in postmodernism, but am now more optimistic. [20]

5. Minor themes

Minor themes are also to be found. A systems approach, essentially anti-reductionist, is addressed directly in papers by PASMORE (Chapter 3) and FLOOD (Chapter 12), among others, and implicitly in most papers. A dissatisfaction with higher education is evident in the Introduction and in papers such as those by LEVIN and GREENWOOD (Chapter 9) and BRULIN (Chapter 45). Throughout the handbook there are hints that action researchers feel marginalized in academia. [21]

6. Some personal reactions

My own quarter-century of experience with action research has been divided across organization development, community change and higher education. While that time has been spent at universities, I have continued to think of myself primarily as a practitioner. This is the background I bring to this review. My own reactions therefore are governed by what I am used to. There were some surprises for me (though that may say more about the nature of my own exposure to action research than about anything else), some disappointments, and some other reactions. [22]

Breadth of application

I am pleased to see action research reclaiming the breadth of applications for which it is useful. However, I was surprised at the relative scarcity of material on educational action research. Although the origins of action research were in social and community settings, it was the field of education which kept action research alive in much of the West during the years that quantitative research was most dominant. Educational action research predominates in the English-

language literature. A web search on "action research" yields more educationally-relevant hits than for any other application. ZEICHNER (Chapter 25) provides an overview of action research in education. Elsewhere in the handbook, mentions of it are sparse. [23]

Philosophy and ideology

Another surprise, mostly pleasant, is the relative lack of philosophy. Postmodern approaches seem paramount in the qualitative literature. I had feared that action research was forgetting its pragmatic and liberatory roots and adopting postmodern approaches unthinkingly. I need not have worried. Having said that, however, I have a wish list for the second edition. I'd like someone to do something practical about an application of Bhaskar's "critical realism" to action research (see COLLIER, 1994.) It seems to me to suit action research well. While acknowledging that theory is a social construction it does retrieve concepts of quality and validity from the backwater to which some commentators have consigned them. [24]

There is also less ideology than I had expected, though more than I had hoped for. It is most evident in the unquestioned commitment to participation. Why not capitalise on the emergent and flexible nature of action research and let the appropriate amount and style of participation emerge from the situation and the people? The action research cycle equips a researcher with a way of learning from experience that is potentially enormously flexible. One might therefore adopt action research as a meta-methodology — a methodology you can use until you know enough about the situation to choose the most appropriate methodology. That's a second item on my wish list: to see the "first person research" concept extended to action research as emergent meta-methodology. [25]

There are hints of this point of view. For instance, on page xxv of the preface we find

“We eschew thinking about action research as a methodology, as it is a world-view which manifests as a specific set of practices which emerge in the inter-play between action researchers, context and ideas.”

The view also sits well with the editors’ emphasis on action research as involving choices, each with consequences. It seems to me that this acknowledges the nature of action research as “performing art”, requiring the action researcher to engage continuously with the situation and the other players. WADSWORTH (Chapter 43), in a chapter I found exciting, provides a compelling example of this characteristic of action research facilitation. [26]

Disappointments

A disappointment for me was the “them and us” orientation in some chapters towards traditional research methods, though I confess I had expected even more. It seems that many action researchers still think of themselves as a beleaguered and discriminated-against minority who dare not accept that other ways may also have their place. I wonder if this explains some of the ideological commitment to participation. To this complaint might be added the occasional sniping between users of different varieties of action research. Fortunately, the editors and most of the authors have avoided both the demonising of other research methods and the internecine jealousies. [27]

Some minor grumbles ... I have already mentioned the small font (though I can appreciate the reasons for it). In addition I found the index disappointing. It wasn’t much help when I tried to use it to retrace something I recalled having read. If a handbook is to be a handbook, I would have thought a good index was almost obligatory. Add this to my wish list for the next edition. [28]

7. Conclusions

I predict this will be a well-read book. The breadth of its coverage, the authors who have contributed, the gathering within one set of book covers a spectrum of

approaches and applications ... these can be expected to appeal to many academics and practitioners. [29]

Every single chapter was of value for me. It might be said that with the publication of this handbook action research has come officially of age, though not yet fully mature. There are hints of a greater maturity to come: signs of a greater acceptance of methodological diversity both within action research and of other approaches. [30]

I intend to revisit this collection often. It has already opened new avenues of thought for me. Those avenues of thought will interact with my practice. This in turn will further enhance the insights I draw from returning to the book. The richness of it has also occasioned some temporary indigestion; I will digest it in smaller pieces when I re-read it. [31]

In addition, whatever happens to the items on my wish list, I look forward to the later editions. I anticipate that they will track the further development of the family of action research approaches. [32]

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Author

Bob Dick has a lecturing appointment at Griffith University in Brisbane and adjunct appointments at Southern Cross University and the University of South Australia. His interests include community and organizational change and action research.

Bob Dick

Southern Cross Institute of Action Research

Southern Cross University.

(Mail is best sent to 37 Burbong Street, Chapel Hill, Qld 4069, Australia)

eMail: bdick@scu.edu.au
