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Introductory comments

We welcome you to the first of many issues of the peer reviewed, interdisciplinary and international *Action Research* journal. We take it as an auspicious sign that this first issue has come together quickly, easily and with so much to offer. We’ve been thrilled by the number and caliber of articles coming into the review process from the action research community around the world. We are particularly grateful to the reviewers whose high standards, developmental approach and professionalism bode very well for the years to come. We urge you to keep the manuscript offers coming in. The first issue plants a number of seeds we would like to see grow in future action research projects and articles. You will find submission guidelines at the Sage website [available at http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/Details/j0478.html].

Editorial

We have organized this issue (and we imagine future issues) under a number of headings: *Editorial comments*, which will introduce each issue; *Shaping the future*, which addresses issues we as a community need to attend to in the development of our practice and theory as action researchers; *Articles*, which recount action research projects and help reshape old practices and/or define new practices are the heart of the journal; and *Influential Ideas*, which is devoted to presenting ideas that we believe are significant for action research but perhaps not broadly known, or which deserve a renewed appreciative and critical appraisal.

*Why Action Research? by Mary Brydon Miller, Davydd Greenwood and Patricia Maguire*

We start with a collaborative article that introduces action research and many of the board members of the journal, as well as illustrating a commitment to collaboration that is at the heart of much action research. The authors posed the question ‘why do you do action research?’ and used the replies from the board of the journal to illustrate what it means to aspire to do useful research in partner-
ship mode. We see that what we have called choice points for quality (or validity concerns) in the Handbook of Action Research (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) are broadened to include: practical contribution; developing capacity for partnership; grounding theory development in the reality and complexity of life; dealing with questions of real significance; and seeking to promote infrastructure to help develop critical mass over time.

**Shaping the Future**

**Context and diffusion of knowledge: a critique of Eurocentrism, by Orlando Fals-Borda and Luis E. Mora-Osejo**

The Colombian authors, a sociologist and a biologist, invite fellow scholars to develop theory and practice beyond the dominant Eurocentric paradigm. They argue that action research should be faithful to its local origins and context, different from those Eurocentric theories developed without regard for the whole systems in which they are expected to operate and which are maladapted in the countries of the South. They urge that social and biological contexts should be part of shaping context relevant scholarship. Their call is as relevant to compatriots as to many of us in the North who want to live and work outside the unsustainable but domineering logic of techno-economic rationality. Certainly practices developed outside the Euroamerican world, such as participatory action research (PAR), have already deeply informed the action research paradigm. With the authors we welcome ‘an alliance between peers that could everywhere face up to the structural injustices and global defects of the modern world’.

**Action research and orders of democracy, by Kenneth Gergen**

The author links action research to the work of bringing democracy alive in our lives. He envisions a world of dialogue, based on recognition that relationships matter. For it is in and through relationships that we are grounded and can co-establish one another’s identity. Action research practices (the author mentions in particular the work of David Cooperrider and Bjorn Gustavsen) are offered as examples of the kinds of action required to: 1) bring people into a state that facilitates effective coordination; what the author refers to as ‘first order democracy’; and 2) recognizing the naturally occurring exclusionary momentum behind first order democracy, so that differences might be experienced as variations around a common cause. The author refers to this work as ‘second order democracy’ which he encourages action researchers to work toward.
**Articles**

**Feminist discourses of (dis)empowerment in an action research project involving rural women and communication technologies, by June Lennie, Caroline Hatcher and Wendy Morgan**

The authors offer a report of a feminist action research project. They focus on the slippage between our discourse as action researchers and actual practice, especially as it relates to the equality of all involved and their capacity for dialogue. Action research has always advocated a concern with egalitarian and democratic values but we are often curiously silent about what that actually means when in a group some are highly educated (with what Pierre Bourdieu calls lots of linguistic capital) and some are literally rendered speechless, feeling like fish out of water. The authors bring our attention to this issue and offer some tentative ways for engendering better action strategies.

**Framing Practice-Research Engagement for Democratizing Knowledge, by L. David Brown, Gabriele Bammer, Srilatha Batliwala and Frances Kunreuther**

Brown and colleagues tell us about practice-research engagement (PRE). PRE offers an example of the type of action research undertaking that has policy as well as local implications. At its heart, PRE illustrates the action research concern for integrating action and reflection. The article refers to a number of case studies used to illustrate PRE in the ‘field’. PRE tenets can inform other action researchers’ work whose capacity does not yet span continents or the capacity for institute development referred to here. PRE work shows how choice points in action research differ from those in traditional social science endeavors.

**Influential Ideas**

**Pragmatist philosophy and action research: readings and conversation with Richard Rorty, by Peter Reason**

As we formulated our editorial policy for *Action Research*, we decided to feature regular editorial and invited articles which would explore the contribution of different schools of thought and bodies of ideas for the theory and practice of action research. We start with an exploration of the relevance of Richard Rorty’s distinctive brand of pragmatism for action research.
On a more personal note we want to share our excitement at co-instigating a journal to support what we hope will become the alternative to quiescent modes of research. Living as we do in a time of great collective anxiety it seems more important than ever to acknowledge those who catalyze new partnerships, dialogue and inquiry, in the service of a world worthy of our collective aspirations. Social science can move to embrace responsibility for making a positive difference. We want this journal to be a flag bearer and a respected contributor in this ‘great turning’. We continue to enjoy working together, and appreciate, in somewhat grateful amazement, the amount of work we seem to accomplish. We have been ably assisted in this by Patricia Gayá, who has forged the new role as Editorial Assistant. It’s always a pleasure.

Hilary Bradbury
Peter Reason
Why action research?

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and members of the editorial board of Action Research

ABSTRACT

Members of the editorial board of Action Research responded to the question, 'Why action research?' Based on their responses and the authors' own experiences as action researchers, this article examines common themes and commitments among action researchers as well as exploring areas of disagreement and important avenues for future exploration. We also use this opportunity to welcome readers of this new journal and to introduce them to members of the editorial board.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- biography
- commitment
- ethics/morality
- social change
Welcome! The launch of this new journal marks an important achievement for all of us who identify ourselves as action researchers. We hope that this journal will serve, not only as a forum for the presentation of important innovations in the theory and practice of action research, but as an open invitation to new scholars and activists. For the inaugural issue, we have prepared this article to serve two purposes. The first is to present some of the major issues and tensions currently under discussion by those of us committed to the practice of action research. You will see these questions repeatedly discussed, debated, and disagreed about in the pages of this journal. Our intention here is to begin to identify some of these issues and to acknowledge both areas of commonality and of controversy among action researchers.

Our second purpose is to introduce readers of Action Research to members of the editorial board. Action research is not an impersonal practice and we want you to know who we are, how we came to the practice of action research, and what we stand for, both individually, and as a community. This article is built on responses from members of the editorial board to the following query:

We'd like your thoughts on the ‘Why?’ question. Why do you choose to do action research? What brought you to this practice? What keeps you involved? Do you have particular stories that illustrate why you practice action research? What issues, values, experiences, personal characteristics or other factors underlie your commitment to action research and shape your practice?

We (Mary, Davydd and Pat) have taken the responses to that query, including our own, and have identified some of the themes and concerns expressed by our colleagues, as well as some of the unspoken issues we feel need to be addressed if the practice of action research is to fulfill our hope for it to become a force for social change both within and beyond academic settings. We are grateful to all of those who were able to respond. We wish to acknowledge that, in attempting to create this brief overview, we have not done justice to the diversity of experience and the depth of insight reflected in the comments submitted to us by our colleagues. For this we apologize in advance and we hope that you, our readers, will be inspired, intrigued or irritated enough by what you find here to seek out additional works by these scholars.

Defining action research

Action research, as defined by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, is:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit
of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (2001, p. 1)

Action research has a complex history because it is not a single academic discipline but an approach to research that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields. There are strong elements of action research in the work of John Dewey, both in his philosophical work and in his studies and experiments in education. Action research perspectives can be found in the early labor-organizing traditions both in the US and Europe, in the Catholic Action movement and in liberation theology. Kurt Lewin brought an action research perspective to the US in the 1940s and succeeded for a time in making the notion of collaborative research with stakeholders with a liberating intent a central interest of a broad range of social scientists. The anthropologist, Sol Tax, founded what he called ‘action anthropology’ to promote both collaboration with local stakeholders and democratization processes. The Tavistock Institute for Human Relations supported action research efforts combining the work of British, Norwegians, and Australians on work in both the UK and Scandinavia. This work has spread to Sweden, Denmark and Germany. Myles Horton and his collaborators founded Highlander in Tennessee to promote social justice, civil rights, and democracy. Paulo Freire, Budd Hall, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Orlando Fals-Borda and others developed and promoted an action research approach to oppression and institutional change. Chris Argyris, Donald Schön, Reg Revans, William Torbert, Peter Reason and John Heron promoted this kind of work in a wide variety of organizations, ranging from private sector companies to public authorities.

As disparate as these traditions are, what links them is the key question of how we go about generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the well-being of individuals, communities, and for the promotion of larger-scale democratic social change. Action research challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge which holds that in order to be credible, research must remain objective and value-free. Instead, we embrace the notion of knowledge as socially constructed and, recognizing that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction, we commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices.

Action research is a work in progress. As readers of this journal will discover, there are still many unanswered questions and many unresolved debates. We invite you to join us and the many action research practitioners throughout the world in shaping our practice, in defining our goals, in articulating the theoretical frameworks to support our work and in discovering ways in which our shared commitment to social justice can be realized.
The journey to action research

The members of the editorial board reflect the diverse fields in which action research has begun to have an influence, among them organization development, anthropology, education, economics, psychology, sociology, and management. From the descriptions of the journey to action research we received from editorial board members, it appears that many of us have one thing in common—our profound dissatisfaction with where we were. As Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt observed, I was alone, but deep inside I could not accept that majority views must be right, accepted or adhered to simply because of their majority status. I recognized that we should not leave a paradigm unchallenged simply because it is dominant. (Zuber-Skerritt and Farquhar, 2002, p. 103)

Acting from this sense of dissatisfaction, we began our search for a new research practice. But the road to action research was not clearly marked, especially for those of us who have pioneered the re-emergence of this approach. Reflecting on her entry into participatory action research over 35 years ago, Marja-Liisa Swantz recalls, 'I had no knowledge or training in action research and the participatory method I knew about was the anthropological participant observation. I found it untenable. I mingled in the affairs of the community in many and varied ways.' Similarly, Werner Fricke notes, 'I had been studying economics and sociology at several German universities. There was never a word about action research at the university; it was unknown in German academia in the late sixties and seventies even more than it is today.' Bob Dick's experience, or a variation on the theme, is also familiar to many of us, 'my early training was as an experimental psychologist. I wasn't given even a hint of the existence of action research.'

Fortunately, tenacity is also something of a commonality. Bob goes on to recall that, 'some colleagues mentioned something called action research. Others tried to dissuade me from even looking at it. “Not much action, and not much research”, was how one of them characterized it. That was reason enough to examine it for myself.' Shankar Sankaran describes a similar experience and acknowledges that following his first encounter with action research he ‘came away very puzzled. Most of us were positivists brought up with a scientific background.’ But further reading of action research brought him back to his childhood heroes, ‘Gandhi and Nehru, whose democratic principles I admired a lot.’ Shankar recalls how, ‘reading Lewin’s papers and hearing about some of the AR stories kindled the free spirit that I had when I was younger although I was much poorer. I started feeling more comfortable about action research.’

The struggle for congruency between our theories and practices is another commonality among action researchers. Bill Torbert says it clearly—our practice ‘aims toward greater congruity between the values one espouses and the values one enacts’. Pat Maguire recalls how that very struggle in the early 1980s brought
her and others at the Center for International Education to participatory action research. ‘We realized that our approaches to research and evaluation were incongruent with the values of the empowering, non-formal education we espoused in our work outside the academy.’ After changing from being a laboratory-based experimental psychologist to an educator, Bob Dick also felt the tension of incongruity, ‘The research methods I knew well didn’t fit my new situation. Either I found something else or I abandoned research altogether.’

In describing their journeys to action research members of the editorial board cite a variety of influences, including Kurt Lewin, Paulo Freire, Thomas Pettigrew, Chris Argyris, Gregory Bateson and John Dewey. But as important as these fellow scholars have been, it is also clear that for many of us early political activity, community development efforts and the inspiration of the people we’ve met through these experiences have been the real impetus behind our dedication to this work. Werner Fricke, for example, describes taking part in an investigation of Nazi-era judges in post-war West Germany; Victor Friedman recalls his work as a young scholar in the Jewish community on an island off the coast of Tunisia; Olav Eikeland relates his experience in a progressive high school; and L. David Brown writes of his time as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. These experiences were pivotal in their development as action researchers. Through such experiences many of us reached the same conclusion as Robin McTaggart. ‘What really is the purpose of social research? The answer to this question to me now is quite straightforward: the improvement of social practice.’

L. David Brown’s description of the journey captures what many of us seem to feel.

I believe that many events in my work and life have been a matter of luck or accident. But I am also aware of several occasions on which I explicitly made choices to step off the obvious path, and do something that others thought odd or worse. . . . I have come to think of these events as ‘detours’ from the obvious career paths stretching before me. Frequently these detours have become the main road for me. There are obvious costs to such detours. Other choices might have made me richer, more influential, more famous, more productive, and so on. But I like what I am doing, even though the path has involved a lot of wandering through uncharted territory.

**A shared commitment to democratic social change**

Action research rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation in favor of an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice. John Shotter states it quite succinctly, ‘research into our ways of life cannot be conducted in the same, value-free way as in the natural sciences.’

David Coghlan, describing the impact of Kurt Lewin’s work on his practice, describes a basic tenet of action research, ‘the powerful notion that human sys-
tems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself.

A key value shared by action researchers, then, is this abiding respect for people’s knowledge and for their ability to understand and address the issues confronting them and their communities. Ernie Stringer reflects this position when he suggests that our task should be to:

provide people with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles. The people, we knew, not the experts, should be the ones to determine the nature and operation of the things that affected their lives.

As Elizabeth Kasl suggests in writing with Lyle Yorks, it is by working in collaboration with others that we are able to achieve the most. They describe how in their own community-based work, the participants ‘grew to appreciate how their interrelatedness created a power greater than a sum of individual powers’ (2002, p. 16).

Working collaboratively with others leads not only to community and organizational changes, but also to personal changes in the action researcher. As action researchers reflect on their experiences, they acknowledge being profoundly changed by those experiences. Marja-Liisa Swantz recalls a project with 50 students at the University of Dar Es Salaam that engaged student-researchers directly with village youth and women cleaners.

In each case the researchers became involved in the problems of the people concerned over a period of time. The research changed the attitudes of the students radically and made the research mode a thorough educational process for the villagers, students, and myself as a scholar.

Similarly, Elizabeth Kasl wrote, ‘From my experience as a participatory research methods teacher and dissertation chair, I have second hand experience of witnessing the transformative power of participatory processes as launched by students in course practicum projects and dissertation work.’

Action research, according to Werner Fricke, is:

empathy and listening while meeting the other, it is a commitment to basic values like human creativity and democratic participation, it is based on the perception of social reality as a continuing process with individuals being subjects of their history and the social contexts they are dependent on.

He goes on to insist, we ‘cannot (and must not) avoid values and personal commitment’.

These values require action. Knowledge comes from doing. Action researchers feel compelled to act collectively on and with that knowledge. Hilary Bradbury urges, ‘Action research must draw power from the premises of pragmatism, that belief that we can know through doing.’ She continues, ‘I realize I
am particularly comfortable with knowing through doing, as much, if not more so, than knowing through conceptualization.’ Robin McTaggart reflects this commitment to action in describing the difference between action research and other forms of inquiry, ‘the crucial difference lies in the commitment of action researchers to bring about change as part of the research act. Fundamental to action research is the idea that the social world can only be understood by trying to change it.’ Pat Maguire wrote, ‘I stay involved with action research because all the theorizing in the world, feminist or otherwise, is of little use without the doing. And action researchers are doers.’

A respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action, these are the basic values which underlie our common practice as action researchers. Ian Hughes sums up how many of us seem to feel:

I choose action research because I have a long standing commitment to developing more effective strategies and methods to promote social justice. . . . I choose action research because I believe in old fashioned virtues like compassion and truth. I know this sounds corny, but it is real.

The integration of theory and practice

Many of us cite Kurt Lewin, who once observed, ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (1951, p. 169), as a major influence on our work. But action research goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice, and, as the earlier discussion of values would suggest, that theory is really only useful insofar as it is put in the service of a practice focused on achieving positive social change.

Werner Fricke recalls that his ‘entrance was research praxis, not theory’. We think many action researchers would have to admit that they came to theory largely as a way of justifying what they knew was correct to begin with; to legitimize a politically informed and effective form of knowledge generated through experience. We were able to justify our work as academics through reference to theoretical frameworks challenging the dominant positivistic worldview of the social sciences. Critical theory in particular made much of our work possible and we draw upon many of the more recent theoretical frameworks to provide new perspectives on our work. As Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt notes, theory provided the insights needed for ‘effective intellectual argument’.

But having embraced critical theory, or feminism, or pragmatism, we began to discover the ability of theory to frame issues of power and identity; to suggest strategies for action and explanations for outcomes which had earlier left us puzzled; to provide structures within which our work could be better understood
and our practice improved. Theory provided a grounding for our attempts to take
the next step. L. David Brown describes his experience of trying to bring together
community activists and business leaders. After his first efforts ended in a weary
stalemate, Brown reconceptualized the process in terms of intergroup tensions
and power differences. The success of this second project ‘confirmed that both
practice and theory could benefit from combining action and research’.

Wrestling with this connection between theory and practice can provide an
intellectual challenge as well. Ernie Stringer notes that action research,

provides the impetus for me to continue to explore the academic and intellectual
roots of this tradition, enabling me to seek affirmation for my work in the post-
modern, feminist and critical theories that are, for me, the most significant discourse
in the academic world I inhabit.

In some cases, theory has led not only to a critique of conventional research prac-
tices, but to a much needed re-examination of our own practice. As Pat Maguire
recalls:

the juxtaposition of everyday activism in the women’s movement with theorizing
action research led me to feminist critiques of traditional social science research as
well as feminist critiques of international development assistance. It didn’t take long
to superimpose feminist critiques on participatory action research.

There is much work left to be done in adequately articulating strong theoretical
foundations for our work as action researchers. Olav Eikeland notes, ‘I think
most action research doesn’t understand itself in adequate ways, which often, but
not always, means that action researchers have better practices than theoretical
self-understandings.’

There is also work to be done in articulating inclusive theoretical foundations
that build more extensively on indigenous knowledge systems (see for exam-
ple Hermes, 1999; Smith, 1999), feminist theories (Brydon-Miller, Maguire &
McIntyre, in press; Morawski, 2001), postcolonial (Bhabha, 1994; McClintock,
Mufti & Shohat, 1997) or critical race theories (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller &
Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Parker, Deyhe & Villenas, 1999). It
is our hope that this journal may provide a forum for such conversations regard-
ing theory, and in doing so, might help to advance both the theory and practice
of action research.

**Relationships for learning and action**

Some contributors indicated that during their professional training at university,
y they never heard of action research. Or, as Bob Dick’s earlier comment demon-
strates, if they did hear of action research, they were discouraged from exploring
it. Others note that they were discouraged as scholars-in-training from combining
research and action. Mary Brydon-Miller wrote, ‘There are those who say that direct action is not, nor should be, the responsibility of social scientists.’ She continues, ‘one graduate school advisor told me, “You can’t mix your politics and your psychology.”’ To which she responded, ‘If I have to choose one, I’ll choose my politics.’ Fortunately, action research provided a way to preserve both while losing the advisor.

Still others note that their university-based doctoral training proved inadequate for the questions they grappled with and the challenges they faced in the field. Through his PhD studies, Ernie Stringer ‘sought to understand how teachers and school systems could provide appropriate and successful educational experiences for Aboriginal children’. He continues, ‘By the early eighties, I came to realize that all my expertise, the now diverse array of quantitative and qualitative research tools I now had at my disposal, would fail to provide what I was seeking.’

Despite the absence of action research from university curricula or faculty discouragement, many of the editorial board contributors did indeed learn about action research through other university faculty or students, as well as through readings, and classes. It was during McTaggart’s move from a teachers college to a university setting, Deakin, that he was introduced to action through work with Stephen Kemmis. In graduate school, Hilary Bradbury was introduced to action research concepts by Bill Torbert, while Mary Brydon-Miller was ‘rescued from a life of positivism’ by Peter Park. Despite Shankar Sankaran’s ‘puzzlement’ after his initial introduction to action research in his PhD program, he went on to complete an action research doctorate supervised by Bob Dick and Alan Davies. Shankar recalls, ‘My emancipatory spirit had been awakened and I started feeling restless after I finished my doctorate. My world had been changed and I was looking at it from different eyes.’

Indeed one of the themes that emerged from these contributions is how critical it is for us to create and sustain spaces in universities and training institutes through which we support, nurture, and challenge action researchers. Through collegial persistence over the years, many of the members of the editorial board have contributed energetically to the development of university-based action research programs or networks. These include such action research programs or networks as: Deakin University School of Education; University of Bath Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice; the Cornell Participatory Action Research Network; Participatory Research in Asia; Southern Cross Institute of Action Research; Case Western Reserve Department of Organizational Behavior; the Leadership for Change executive program at Boston College (which brings together faculty from the Lynch School of Education, the Carroll School of Management, and the Sociology Department); Boston University School of Management; Griffith University; the University of Sydney; and research groups such as Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM); the UK-based Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN); the New
Zealand Action Research Network (NZARN); and the newly formed US-based Community-based Research Network.

Our stories indicate that the mentoring and collegial sharing that many of us have enjoyed with others has been crucial to our development as action researchers and as human beings passionately concerned with injustices and inequities. To paraphrase Elizabeth Kasl and Lyle York, we have developed and learned ‘in relationship’. Many of us came to action research through our work with indigenous people – Australian Aboriginals, American Indians, African villagers – or those marginalized in more industrialized nations, such as the elderly, people with disabilities and factory workers. Yet our voices as editorial board members are disproportionately white, male and from industrialized nations. In her response to the query which launched this article, Mary Brydon-Miller quoted Wildman and Davis, ‘. . . to end subordination, one must first recognize privilege’ (1996, p. 20).

Essentially, we editorial board members are a privileged group, functioning in a gate-keeping capacity both as editors and in our university and institutional affiliations. But our commitment to action research requires us, collectively and individually, to reach and push beyond our comfort zones to truly diversify the editorial board, in each volume of this journal, in our institutions, and in our networks, formal and informal. We hope to turn the conventional gate-keeping function into a door-opening function and to do so in a collaborative spirit with those who are disseminating action research through other journals and book series. While we started out this article with an invitation and hope that new action researchers would ‘join us’, it can certainly be intimidating to try to join an ongoing network of academics and practitioners who have enjoyed various relationships with each other over the years. Our challenge is to reach out.

Similarly, our challenge is to diversify the knowledge base of the field that gets shared with newcomers. Editorial board member Yoland Wadsworth, current President of ALARPM, recently came across an article that gave an overview of action research. Skipping down to the reference list, which serves to codify the legitimate knowledge of action research, she was appalled to find the work of so few women action researchers. Yoland noted, ‘the life work of feminist and women action researchers is being disappeared before our eyes’ (personal communication). While many contributors to this article noted the influence of pioneering ‘fellow’ action researchers, we have a collective responsibility to introduce the next generation of action researchers, indeed ourselves, to the work of the action researchers such as Alice McInytre, Ella Bell, M. Brinton Lykes, Yoland Wadsworth, Judi Marshall, Michele Fine, Patti Lather, Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit, Jean King, Penny Barnett, Jan Barnsley and Diana Ellis, Francesca Cancian, Irene Gijt and Meera Kaul Shah, Korrie De Koning and Marion Martin, Renu Khanna, Susan Noffke and Marie Brennan, Britt-Marie Berge and Hildur Ve, Sandra Hollingsworth, Patricia Hill Collins, Colleen Reid, Marie
Mies, and Marja-Liisa Swantz, who is credited with coining the term ‘participatory research’. There are so many others.

**Action researchers as educators**

In our roles as academics or facilitators, many of us have found that the road to action research also required changes in our teaching practices. Ernie Stringer notes,

> Enacting participatory approaches requires me to take quite a different stance to my work. I now realize the necessity to thoughtfully engage in practices that involve changes in relationship, positioning, authority, and knowledge production practices.

As a teacher, researcher or professional practitioner, I am a changed person.

Many contributors wrote of the various ways that they incorporate democratic, participatory, and experiential methods into their university action research classes, cognizant of the need for congruency in teaching about action research through active, reflective, and relational practices (David Coghlan, Elizabeth Kasl and Lyle Yorks, Bill Torbert and Dawn Chandler, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Davydd Greenwood). Bob Dick writes about the dialectical relationship between teaching about action research and engaging in action research on our teaching practices.

> ‘When I began to build regular monitoring and reflection into my university classes, they began to improve noticeably. . . . As my educational skills improved, so did my action research. As my action research was refined, so were my educational skills.’

It’s a good thing that tenacity seems to be a shared trait among action researchers. While action research is enjoying a period of expanded legitimacy, we have to be tenacious in advancing the practices. Although Marja-Liisa Swantz wrote about a Tanzanian project which took place many years ago, the dynamics are similar to those faced in using participatory processes in development contexts today. ‘Ministries and the district offices were not ready to make use of the benefits of the study. It became clear to me that there must be institutional preparedness to act on the basis of the results gained at the community level.’ She continues, ‘I am perplexed that after all the work done with PAR and the evident successes in using it, the main-line social scientists still largely ignore it.’

Werner Fricke, in writing of the isolation experienced trying to advance action research in the German trade unions observes,

> We all know the great difficulties action researchers face to bridge the two worlds of theory and praxis, but if they try to avoid these difficulties, they will be reduced to either consultants or academic scientists. In both roles they are missing the social function of action research: to enhance democratic participation and to create public spaces in [the] economy.
The world of heretics

We all can, and must, do our part to contribute to the goal of achieving greater social justice and each of us brings a unique set of experiences and talents to the task. But even given the diversity of disciplines, locations, and perspectives, there do seem to be certain characteristics common to many of us currently engaged in this practice. For one thing, we’re basically a hybrid of scholar/activist in which neither role takes precedence. Our academic work takes place within and is made possible by our political commitments and we draw on our experience as community activists and organizers to inform our scholarship.

In general, we don’t do well with boundaries, witness the interdisciplinary nature of our editorial board and the broad range of influences cited by contributors. In addition, as the story of our journeys to action research suggests, on the whole those of us who define ourselves as action researchers are not the world’s greatest rule-followers. As Robin McTaggart puts it, ‘Welcome to the world of the heretics!’

On the other hand, we do tend to be practical and concerned with achieving real outcomes with real people. Hilary Bradbury speaks for many of us when she notes, ‘it’s more satisfying for me to help create desired change, rather than merely observe life go by.’ L. David Brown suggests how we bridge these two inclinations, ‘I learned to be a maverick early, but I like to be a maverick with influence.’

It helps to be patient. Building trust in communities that have every reason to be wary of outsiders and especially of academic outsiders doing research is a long-term project. Jim Kelly describes the 10 years he and his students dedicated to working with African-American community leaders in Chicago on the Developing Communities Project (Kelly, Azelton, Lardon, Mock & Tandon, in press), but the impact of the project on the community and the richness of the insights generated in their work together are testament to the value of such patience.

We also tend to be optimistic. We believe in the possibility of change, ‘surprising changes ... changes that happen unexpectedly, changes that strike us with amazement and wonder’, as John Shotter describes it. And we continue to believe in the potential for change, often despite years of fighting battles within our institutions and communities that might deter a less determined soul. We take joy in what we do (mostly) and we even tend to like one another! Ian Hughes observed, ‘action researchers are a friendly and supportive community,’ and Hilary Bradbury concurs, noting, ‘all of my best friends are action researchers.’
The beauty of chaos

It also helps to be able to handle a certain degree of chaos, uncertainty and messiness. As Victor Friedman put it, it helps to have ‘a preference for learning from experience and especially from engaging uncertainty/complexity’. You have to be willing to be wrong, to trust that other people know their own lives and their own interests better than you do. This comes hard to those of us who have been trained to believe that we are smarter than everyone else.

Russell Ackoff’s (1999) term ‘messes’ sums up one of the ways a great many action researchers differ from their conventional social science colleagues. Messes are complex, multi-dimensional, intractable, dynamic problems that can only be partially addressed and partially resolved. Yet most action researchers have disciplined themselves to believe that messes can be attractive and even exciting. We try not to avoid messy situations despite knowing that we do not have the ‘magic bullet’ because we believe that, together with legitimate community stakeholders, we can do something to improve the situation.

Just how action researchers come to have this way of living in the world is not at all clear. Nearly all of us have conventional disciplinary training built on a Fordist division of intellectual labor, hermetic professional hierarchies and disciplinary peer control systems of ranking and reward. No way of organizing intellectual life could be more antithetical to engagement with messes because messes require the recognition of the limitations and weaknesses of single discipline knowledge systems and methods and engage us in collaboration, not only with other disciplines, but with non-academic partners.

Some of this emerges directly from ethical and political commitments. As convenient as Fordism is, it makes it impossible to address any significant social issue. Those action researchers committed to social change necessarily have to deal with messes; we are forced to follow the problems wherever they take us, and the best among us learn the theories, methods, and processes we need along the way. Whatever our uncertainties, we seem to tolerate them because we are committed to changing the world in some positive way.

Another element of this is a kind of fundamental sociability that shines through in all the contributions from the editorial board members. Many action researchers find joy in being with others, in working passionately in groups, in brainstorming, in struggling together. Through experience, we have learned that it is not reasonable to try to be alone in our work. Again, the contrast with the isolated disciplinary scholastic hero with 20 books, hundreds of articles and a solitary life is sharp.

There is a clear legacy of pragmatism and feminism that helps explain our penchant for messes. As a group, we seem unable to resist ‘embodied’ intellectual practice. We never leave our corporeality; we are engaged in ongoing cycles of reflection and action in which our bodies and ourselves and those of our collabo-
rators are not only present to us but essential to the very process of understanding messes. Pain, joy, fear, bravery, love, rage—all are present in our action research lives.

There may also be a kind of 'aesthetic' at work in action research that welcomes complexity, uncertainty, and struggle as energizing and filled with possibility. We seem to tolerate paradoxes and puzzles and to survive them through a sense of their beauty and some kind of sense of humor as well. When non-action research colleagues greet us with fear and hostility, we probably should attribute some of this defensive reaction to their sense that we have a worldview that is too dynamic, too unstable, and too chaotic to be acceptable.

Of course, our community has its share of less dynamic participants. Personal uncertainties, weaknesses in research training, poor writing skills and other defects are also with us and we need to work hard as networks to improve both the quality of action research and the ongoing training of those with a will to improve their own practices.

**Facing the challenges of change**

Robin McTaggart’s answer to his question, ‘What really is the purpose of social research?’ was ‘the improvement of a social practice’. As action researchers, what are some of the challenges we face in improving our action research practices, individually and collectively?

Perhaps one of the first challenges is tackling and changing or improving the places within which many of us practice. Many action researchers do not have university affiliations. Indeed a few would actively reject them. But on the whole, most editorial board members are affiliated with universities and research institutes. There can be no question that universities are a key institution for teaching about, conducting, and publishing action research. The editorial board’s personal stories are almost always of personal transformation into action researchers after a long period of unsatisfying university training or work. This path does not recommend itself as a way of promoting action research. We cannot be content to permit universities to continue to train most social scientists out of their values and social engagements and then try to convert them later into action researchers. To paraphrase Jill Morawski’s challenge to feminist scientists, our task is to continue to ‘modify the near environment’ (2001, p. 68) in which we conduct our action research, learn, teach, and evaluate our efforts.

We cannot do this from a position of arrogance and, unfortunately, in response to the arrogance of the disengaged positivists, against whom we routinely rail, we often place ourselves on a moral high ground that blocks genuine and direct dialogue with the very colleagues we should be challenging.
Given this, our collective near silence on universities as institutions and why action research has a hard time prospering in them is concerning. We should take up the challenge to develop and articulate an analysis of the dynamics that make universities as institutions behave as they do. Only then can we develop practical strategies and mechanisms for transforming universities into real learning institutions at the service of the communities in which they are situated.

This means adopting conscious pedagogies of action research and furthering the crisis into which the conventional social sciences have fallen. At present, abstract economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology are largely socially disengaged and self-referential. While they are being supplanted by management studies, organizational behavior, human resource management, program evaluation, and so on – all fields with more regular extra-university social contacts – this is not leading to the re-emergence of action research. Rather, the ‘new’ social sciences are being looked at by university administrations as entrepreneurial centers of research revenue generation and the ‘old’ social sciences are losing ground to them. At the end of the day, the corporate entrepreneurial university of the 21st century will certainly be more socially connected but its connection is likely to be mainly through competition in the neo-liberal global market. Action research, with its multi-college, multi-disciplinary, critical view, may be the last source of resistance to this process and the source of a renewed university–society relationship. But this will only happen if we take on the universities as they are. It is one thing to be a ‘heretic’ and another thing to accept this as a desirable status for action research.

Davydd vividly remembers our late friend and colleague, Donald Schön, at the end of a wonderful workshop day in which all had outdone themselves being smart and collaborative, saying, ‘If we are so smart, why did action research die in universities?’ He went on to say that he did not want to be right and defeated again.

To live up to Don’s challenge, however, requires an effort that most action researchers in a position to do so are not yet making – beyond the paradigm clarifications, the critiques of positivism, the ethical exhortations – an effort to understand and change the conditions that continue to produce undemocratic and disengaged social research and increasingly neo-liberal universities and institutions.

It is not enough to be right and comfortably better than others; if we really believe what we say about action research, then we have to bend our efforts to the comprehensive reform of universities because they are institutions with so much power and so many resources that ignoring them means that we are likely to live out Don’s fear of being right and defeated again.

While action researchers situated within university settings may be having a rough time getting our message about action research heard in university forums, we do seem to have had a modicum of success impacting international develop-
ment assistance or donor agencies and NGOs (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Wilson & Whitmore, 2000). Many editorial board members have been working for years bringing participatory action research, evaluation, and learning approaches to international development work. Indeed, there are close relationships between our work through universities and development agencies and NGOs at the international, national, and local levels. University faculty and personnel have provided leadership and expertise in project partnerships with international and community development agencies to address capacity-building for sustainable development and poverty reduction. From the World Bank to United Nations agencies to a range of NGOs, increasingly, ‘participation’ has become a required component of evaluation, assessment, appraisals, training, and research projects. This causes us both celebration and serious caution. On the one hand, action research is being legitimized as a useful strategic tool to include community people in addressing the critical issues of their lives. Participatory approaches to research, evaluation, appraisal, and training are being promoted as part of a complex counter to the ‘dismal failure of the past several decades of world “development” efforts in improving the conditions of the poor’ (Wilson & Whitmore, 2000, p.104). On the other hand, as these participatory processes have been scaled up and integrated into development policy initiatives at many levels, action researchers are called to resist co-option and reinforcement of existing power relations (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Just as the corporate university’s social connection is mainly through competition in the neo-liberal global market, development practitioners who promote action research must continue to promote dialogue on how best to mount a meaningful challenge to the neo-liberal global development enterprise. Who actually participates and for whose purposes? Whose practices are targeted for improvement? How are inequitable power relations actually unsettled and rearranged?

While promoting participatory and action-oriented processes in the field, many development agencies remain hierarchical, rigid institutions with little sense of how to operate democratically and inclusively. Hence the challenges of ‘scaling up’ participatory, action-oriented processes for social justice and meaningful change are similar whether we work in and through universities or development agencies. Although we seem to have had more success promoting participatory processes and action research in development assistance agencies, there is still extensive work to do to help create attitudes, skills, and processes that truly challenge and unsettle deeply entrenched power relationships and interests that resist meaningful democratization. The need to intervene and ‘modify the near environment’ of development agencies and NGOs is surely as acute as in the universities. To paraphrase Geoff Mead (2002), these institutions have been good at ‘activating their immune responses’ to the values and practices of action research. The potential contributions of action research to social change are limited if we are a marginal force within universities, yet the challenges of scaling up, a
measure of the acceptance of action research in the development arena, are equally daunting.

One of the weaknesses of action research is its localism and the difficulty we find in intervening in large-scale social change efforts. The bulk of action research takes place on a case by case basis, often doing great good in a local situation but then failing to extend beyond that local context. For quite some time, practitioners like Björn Gustavsen, Werner Fricke, and Morten Levin have been struggling with the construction of broader, societal-level action research initiatives where the local interventions are part of larger-scale networks and social change strategies. Absent such broader social change strategies and commitments, action research is likely to win local skirmishes but not the bigger social battles that face us all. How should action research address problems such as war and peace, environmental degradation, and a world increasingly hostile to the poor and powerless?

But action research is not merely about ‘doing good’, it is also about doing things well. One of the tenets of action research is that research that is conducted without a collaborative relationship with the relevant stakeholders is likely to be incompetent. The respect action researchers have for the complexity of local situations and for the knowledge people gain in the processes of everyday life makes it impossible for us to ignore what the ‘people’ think and want.

From this initial respect, based on both democratic and empirical principles, action research moves on to the affirmation that action research is much more able to produce ‘valid’ results than ordinary or conventional social science. This is because expert research knowledge and local knowledges are combined and because the interpretation of the results and the design of actions based on those results involve those best positioned to understand the processes: the local stakeholders. Further, action research meets criteria of validity testing more effectively than do most other forms of social research. Action research projects test knowledge in action and those who do the testing are the interested parties for whom a base result is a personal problem. Action research meets the test of action, something generally not true of other forms of social research.

Conventional researchers worry about objectivity, distance, and controls. Action researchers worry about relevance, social change, and validity tested in action by the most at-risk stakeholders.

Many of the editorial board members appear confident that action research has somehow survived and is more prominent now than it has been for a generation or two. The inaugural issue of this journal supports that contention. We must however initiate more inquiry to explain why this new prominence has happened and what can be done to sustain and expand it with integrity. With increased legitimacy comes the challenge to maintain connections to our radical roots. Our hope is that as readers and contributors to this journal, you will keep our feet to that fire.
Notes

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2 We wish to thank Mary’s colleague Lanthan Camblin for this insight. As he observed, ‘Wherever they are isn’t giving them what they want.’ Quite right!

3 Among the action research publication and dissemination networks with which we hope to collaborate are the journals Concepts and Transformation, Systemic Practice and Action Research, Convergence, Action Research International, Human Relations and the book series, Dialogues on Work and Innovation. We expect our efforts to be collaborative in the worldwide promotion of action research.

4 A recent volume that addresses this issue very directly is Francine Sherman and William Torbert’s Transforming social inquiry, transforming social action: New paradigms for crossing the theory/practice divide in universities and communities (2000).

5 Davydd has written a very critical review of the failings of action research recently, which is published in Concepts and Transformation (Greenwood, 2002).

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Context and diffusion of knowledge

A critique of Eurocentrism

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ABSTRACT

On January 4, 2001, in Bogota, Colombia, the authors issued a self-described ‘manifesto’ to Colombian scholars inviting them to rescue local values of self-esteem and creativity and to resist intellectual colonialism by European and North American colleagues. After months of discussion, they decided to revise the document and publish an expanded text. Eyebrows were raised not only because this is an interdisciplinary document (signed by a biologist and by a sociologist without any visible signs of disagreement on such sensible matters) but also because both are known to have been trained and given doctorates during the 1950s at the University of Florida and Mainz Johannes-Gutenberg University respectively.

KEY WORDS
- context
- endogenesis
- paradigms
- participation
- tropics
Toward a contextual hypothesis

We both have admitted and still believe that we received the best possible training from our professors, who were world-recognized authorities. We assimilated their teachings eagerly and transferred their frames of reference, methodological and theoretical orientations into Colombia. Without being fully conscious of it, we also transmitted their thematic preferences, naturally derived from the actual circumstances of their background, their times and their institutions. This somewhat spontaneous transfer of knowledge did serve a good purpose in helping to awaken to Colombian conditions.

In Colombia in the 1950s universities had been ignored by governments and left without sufficient resources. Moreover, traditional elites were inclined to imitate and adopt foreign traits and cultures. We both were given good opportunities to serve our society, and we were left mostly to ourselves in regard to the nature and content of the subjects we taught. Our positive educational direction became strained after about a decade, when we noticed that some central concepts, principles and theories learned abroad did not find commensurable replication or confirmation in the conditions in which we were living and working. Social, economic and political factors were so resistant that they virtually obliterated much of the respected academic rule of the knowledge accumulated abroad.

In the social sciences, we were challenged by structural and open violence, an intractable monster still at large; in the natural sciences, especially biology, the challenge came from observing and dealing with the unique characteristics of the tropical milieu in the Amazonian and Andean regions, all of which contradicted well-known frames of reference. These discrepancies and negativities were of such nature and scope that we felt we had to re-learn much of our disciplines. We discovered the obvious fact that contexts mattered for meaningful observation and abstraction, and to deal in a satisfactory way with natural and social phenomena.

After much deliberation we concluded that we had to fly alone. At the time of our Manifesto in 2001, we agreed to frame our concern for contextualization in the following manner:

As human products, scientific frames of reference receive inspiration and concreteness from cultural, historical, and geographical contexts. This is a universal process with different modalities, which are justified by the search for a fullness of life and spiritual as well as material satisfaction for those who intervene and share in the creativity/inquiry process and in its diffusion. (2001, p. 7)

This is nothing new, of course, and during our university training there had been a nebulous understanding of what was meant with 'context'. We tried to combine the contextual hypothesis with the more contemporary concept of endogenesis, as expressed in our Manifesto, where endogenesis is a biological term referring to 'growth from within'.
With the advantage of hindsight, after 50 years of experience and study in tropical and violent areas in Colombia, we realize that we could have done better had we re-read some of our Euroamerican university textbooks and manuals more critically. As a belated exercise, we did so with unsatisfactory results. We understood context better through contact with, or by reading from, local respected elders and sages in our base or ethnic communities, or by reflecting on our own socialization at home.

As a theoretical construct, contextualization could be seen as a widespread principle of life, almost common sense. Although it had not been a clear-cut heritage from our university training in Europe and the US, it could be useful nevertheless for our scientific and disciplinary purposes in Colombia. From the standpoint of sociology, one could find passing references to ‘context’ in the revered essays by W. F. Ogburn (1912–1956) (1957), and we could relate it to the well-known principle of ‘definition of the situation’ by W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki (1958, p. 43), which included recognition of the role of church and family. But the same idea is of course older, if we remember Blaise Pascal’s dictum that ‘what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other.’

Somewhat clearer in the broader sense of the term ‘context’ that we use in the Manifesto, where the idea is considered as ‘perspective/vision’ or ‘Weltanschauung’ as in the sociology of knowledge when examining different paradigms. Karl Mannheim (1936, p. 89) stated that ‘no human thought is immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context,’ including common sense knowledge. A similar approach is found in Berger and Luckmann when they state that ‘specific agglomerations of reality and knowledge pertain to specific social contexts, and these relationships will have to be included in an adequate sociological analysis of these contexts’ (1966, p. 13). Yet context is still limited to the social, and seen mostly as a latent or constant factor.

From the standpoint of the natural sciences, we discovered considerable assistance in the work of philosophers of biology like Ernst Mayr (1988) who had been fighting mechanistic and deterministic interpretations. Mayr appealed to the concept of ‘living systems’ as ‘complex open systems’ and defined them as follows: ‘The complexity of living systems exists at every hierarchical level from the nucleus to the cell, to any organ system, to the individual, the species, the ecosystem, the society’ (p. 14). This definition broadened the scope of the life sciences and social sciences. It was flexible enough to include our idea of contextualization as a dynamic, open phenomenon that implies a respect for, and concern with, meanings, symbols, discourses, values and norms connected with a complex time-and-space dimension that is ecological, social and cultural.
Lags and paradigms

Once we adopted an open and systemic contextual hypothesis as an instrument to determine an ethos or collective vision of a ‘mother society’ with living beings, observers, and creators, we could move on to criticize Eurocentric paradigms and Eurocentric teachings by locating them where they belong: within their own time/space realities and milieux. This observation can induce independence among intellectuals in poorer nations, as inside observers and actors who are more fully in charge of their own ways and means, including the mysterious patterns of our unique tropical world. It would have been expected that the idea of Eurocentrism, as a formal concept, would not be in the curricula of European and/or American universities, and this was not the case when we were students there. Yet there have been some self-critical attitudes among radical intellectuals, like Sartre and Rolland. References can be found in the works of Edward Said, Immanuel Wallerstein, André Gunder Frank.

The first systematic treatise on the subject of Eurocentrism comes from the Egyptian economist Samir Amin (1985). For Amin, Eurocentrism is a culturalist expression of ongoing capitalist world expansion. Like its better known political cousin, Development, Eurocentrism proposes the western mode of life, economy and culture as a model to be adopted by the rest of the world, as the only solution to the challenges of our times. It fits well with the ideologies of globalization. However, as European and North American scientific paradigms have been conceived in the contexts of temperate zones and their historical, cultural and material development, they are similarly conditioned by those contexts in the determination of collective thinking and action. These paradigms have spread to the rest of the world creating a breach between their societies and ours in the South. Advanced countries have been able to develop a strong knowledge-building capacity, in part with inputs from resources and riches of our southern nations. Some of those paradigms became dominant in many societies but the resulting imbalance has produced not only a powerful economic base in the North supported by sophisticated technologies but also a one-sided worldwide political and economic system posed to favor the richer countries where southern realities and facts may be unknown, disregarded, or unilaterally exploited.

At least on the basis of the contextual hypothesis, it appears to us that those ex novo facts do not make Euroamerican scientific paradigms – notably Cartesian positivism, Newtonian mechanism, Marxian determinism, and Parsonian functionalism – any better, superior or more pertinent for local purposes, than those generated in other parts of the world. They are conditioned by history, culture and environment. Descartes’ thinking was molded by the insecurities of the Thirty Years War and his secular dualism and belief in control of nature were understandable rebellions and alternative quests. Today what may best be recovered from him may be his revolt against the status quo including traditional
universities. Newton, like Talcott Parsons, was overtaken by the relativity theory and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, although some of Newton’s camouflaged insights taken from medieval magicians could still be worthy of attention today. And Marx and his European followers should be understandably forgiven for their lack of knowledge of Latin American history and culture.

Paradigms derived from the reflections of those great men are now like still pictures on a movie camera, often just parroted and being presented as dominant patterns of thinking for contemporary problems in the so-called Third World and elsewhere. We forget that they are all social constructs and are subject to revision and interpretation. It is therefore understandable that if a scientific frame of reference is not well rooted in its milieu, theoretical and practical lags would occur with consequent dysfunctional implications for sociopolitical and other systems. We also state in our Manifesto that such situations are worsened when frames of reference are copied or badly adapted from extraneous paradigmatic sources, like those implied by Eurocentrism and Development. Their imitations often become a source of local disorganization and anomie. For example, the Cartesian rationality of the ‘Green Revolution’ of the 1950s was bent against those it purported to serve, the poor peasants; advanced machinery created difficult lag problems when imported to retarded economies; and functional American institutions found strong cultural resistance when tried elsewhere. Such has been the fate of much of Development in all these years since it was invented in 1949 by the American Government.

More endogenous paradigms rooted in our own realities and circumstances would likely have contributed more effectively to our progress. Our experience has shown that such alternative paradigms, more open than those imported from advanced countries, could offer constructive ways out of our problems, as suggested below.

**Complexity in the tropics**

Life conditions in the Andean and Amazonian tropical regions are unique and diverse. They need to have adequate and proper explanations, management techniques, and governmental institutions according to local exigencies. We detail these processes in our Manifesto. From the scientist’s point of view, the knowledge of local realities turns out to be as rich and useful as made possible by his/her personal involvement, that is, through life experience or ‘vivencia’. Scientific insight and authority come from this involvement with real life. We have learned that endogenesis of this kind opens the way for useful discoveries and initiatives apt to alleviate social problems within the local world. We as insiders to the tropics are in a privileged position to produce, analyze and systematize this knowledge with the help and contribution of autochthonous peoples.
Fortunately awareness of these abilities is increasing, as witnessed by local inventions by Andean farmers (improved seeds and plants, potato sorters and the like) and city dwellers (in community improvement programs, dance and music) and in civic movements like peace programs, land takeovers from *latifundists*² and water distribution systems.

We know that environmental factors in the tropics are complex and clearly distinct from those of other world zones, notably the temperate ones. Yet we have received from the North, often with good intentions, economic, social, cultural paradigmatic and developmental advice that many of us have considered final and sufficient. This limiting procedure has had the additional effect of nullifying or undervaluing the intellectual production of our people, which may be more pertinent to our needs. Intellectual colonialism on our part is one negative result, as shown in many published works. Such extraneous and/or incompatible formulæ are precisely the ones that in our zones have had negative environmental impact. For example, our forests utilize subtle ways to gain mineral nutrients from poor soils, as is the case with leaf decomposition induced by rain, then captured by mychorrhizal fungi, which then return the nutrients to the trees. This is a continuous growth cycle that our aboriginal and peasant communities understand well. In fact they have created or discovered for centuries many varieties of plants useful for mankind, and they have developed basic behaviors and social organs congruent with those processes. Yet dominant paradigms constructed in temperate zones usually cannot accommodate such indigenous, ancient wisdoms. They are closed to them and lead to tragic mistakes like those caused by transferring neat, homogeneous planting systems from North America to Amazon pluvial bushes. It is known that the highest indices of organic diversity are found in our territories, as for instance in savannah lands, coral reefs, and deep-sea waters, besides humid forests. As suggested in the Manifesto, we need to enrich traditional knowledge about these systems with academic knowledge about their potential, and also to develop effective procedures for their sustainable use.

Steps are being taken in this direction. Similar challenges are met in customs, values and patterns of social organization that we have given ourselves. This is important because it is also among us where there is the greatest loss in biodiversity, and where there are the biggest threats for the survival of life not only here but also for the entire world.

**Need for endogenesis**

Explanatory and reproductive endogenesis is necessary. It is required by the infinite contextual reality of our milieu, a task that is not adequately anticipated by Eurocentric paradigms, techniques and institutions. We are more fully aware of the marked differences of our local world, especially in fragility and complexity...
in regard to climate, soil and ecosystems as compared with those of other zones. This in turn conditions human behavior and enriches cultural patterns. The harmonious reconstruction of the relationship of people and nature in our country implies a rediscovery of the peculiarities of our daily living and our socialization processes. Independent scientific research focused on the intricacies of our medium and on our specific social, cultural and historical development is proving to be useful for our needs, as described above. Let us remember that the tropical climate is characterized by the Circadian seasonal rhythm – summer in daytime, winter at night. This condition is accentuated as one goes higher into the mountains. It is also characterized by intermittent oscillations of radiation, relative humidity and temperature during the daily light cycle, notwithstanding the stability shown by monthly averages. Moreover, even in reduced tropical forests there are hundreds of trees, but each species has just a small number of individuals in place. The megafauna is also found in small numbers. The habitat appears then to be structured like a fine mesh of specific niches. Such is the way in which the immense biodiversity of the tropical ecosystems is formed, in the lowlands as well as on the mountains. This process also gives rise to ecological patterns of thought, feeling and action in our cultural and ethnic groups.

It may be seen that with these dynamic contextual flows effective solutions can be gained which cannot be transposed from foreign, authoritative or closed constructs. It is increasingly important for academics and practical leaders to exercise our investigative self-discipline in observing realities and making inferences accordingly.

**Creativity and knowledge accumulation**

Our Manifesto ends with an invitation. Although it is possible, logical and convenient to develop scientific paradigms and technical frames of reference with our own intellectual and practical means, we cannot do this ignoring what is foreign. However, intellectual colonialism and development cannot continue as we form reference groups of our own. This task is best done when it is interdisciplinary and open, and when it anticipates possible universal interest. To this end the capacity of our local human element has been amply confirmed for centuries. We have been able to accede readily to the imbedded factors of our human and natural environments, to be socially and culturally creative with universal recognition and to produce and invent in material fields with traditional and modern know-how. We have done this up to the present, albeit hampered by poverty; ignorance and disease; political discrimination and rigid seigniorial structures; economic dependence and exploitation; violent upheavals; and mental and spiritual captivity. Of course we have tried not to become xenophobic nor isolated from the intellectual world. But we have tried to comply with the need to accumulate
diverse patterns of thought and action congruent with our specific modalities of
growth and progress – a process defined as ‘knowledge summation’ or ‘conver-
gence’ in the Participatory Action Research (PAR) school that we developed in
the so-called Third World.

We cannot overlook the type of intellectual accumulation that has occurred
in the North with its technical superiority. Yet such northern vision and know-
how can be more useful and pertinent to the South if they become horizontal and
symmetric with enough respect for what we in the South have learned and dis-
covered on our own with PAR and other schools, and with the concourse of the
common peoples.

The 21st century has opened with a battery of new critical tools inspired in
diverse consolidated systems of thought, yet they can converge. Such may be the
course with PAR. This may be fortunate, as such convergent systems can help
all of us – in the North as well as in the South – to understand those complex,
irregular, multimodal and fractal dimensions of our tropical social and natural
structures. In this manner we can work together more constructively. For
example, European complexity and open systems theories like those by P. B.
Checkland, Robert Flood or Ernst Mayr can be enriched with the findings of
Chile’s Humberto Maturana or of the Colombian Desana Indians’ ‘circuit of the
biosphere’; the theory of chaos (Mandelbrot, Prigogine) can be refreshed with
daily-living studies like those of Venezuela’s Jeanette Abuabara; Peter Reason’s
‘participatory worldview’ can be contextualized with Father Camilo Torres’ ‘par-
ticipant utopia’; and holism (cf., Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra) can find support
in aboriginal and oriental thinkers.

An alliance of North and South colleagues sympathetic to these intellectual,
social and political developments may be formed by all of us who are interested
in similar problems and motivated by convergent interests – an alliance between
peers that could everywhere face up to the structural injustices and global defects
of the modern world (cf. Fals-Borda, 1996). With such objectives in mind, we
can stimulate combined research-and-teaching attitudes and practices within and
outside educational institutions which are able to overcome discriminatory
distinctions, such as those between the academic and the popular, between the
scientific and the political, and to stimulate self-esteem among our peoples and
in our academic communities. This is indispensable for satisfactory living in
countries as privileged as Colombia.

Note

1 The full text of the original manifesto can be seen in Globalisation, Education
   and Society, 1(1), (March 2003).
2 A latifundista is the owner of a large estate.
References


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Action research and orders of democracy

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ABSTRACT

In this article I lay out several premises of a constructionist orientation to action research, as such inquiry contributes to the unfilled hopes for sustaining value and creating new futures. To facilitate these developments a relational orientation to the creation of meaning is outlined, along with implications for revising the very idea of democracy. In this context we consider the contribution of action research to two orders of democracy, the first bringing people together into concerted action and the second necessitated by the fragmenting effects of first order democracy. In each case the contributions of action inquiry to a vocabulary of practice are earmarked. Such a vocabulary is now in but a chrysalis stage, but the long-term potentials are substantial.

KEY WORDS
- action research
- democracy
- qualitative methods
- social construction
The spirited dialogues on the nature of knowledge, truth, objectivity and the individual mind – sweeping across the academy for several decades now – have left us in an uneasy state. At least within the social sciences, we find an enormously active minority of establishment critics, on the one hand, and on the other a broad group of traditionalists who either actively resist the critics or who simply go on with business as usual. In certain respects it is this latter group who supply us here with food for reflection. For, as one colleague of mine reported, ‘I am impressed by the criticism of our traditional research practices. But, I am good at experimental research, and I don’t see that you offer me anything better to do.’

This is an important remark, because it responds to the general tendency over the past several decades to remain fixed within the ritual dance of attack and counter-attack. Why as critics should we presume that we live in an ultimately rational world in which the superior arguments will inevitably win out? But most importantly, there is an important need for new practices of inquiry, demonstrated accomplishments and a compelling rationale for these activities. It is to just such ends that I see action research contributing.

Although very much absorbed in the critical genre for a number of years, I have since become far more optimistic about the possibilities of action alternatives. In this vein much of my recent work has attempted to draw together certain lines of reasoning inherent in existing critiques to form what might be called an ungrounded grounds for creative futures (Gergen, 1994, 1999). In brief, many forms of ideological critique, literary and rhetorical critique, and social critique of empiricist foundationalism, come together in their assumptions of a socially constructed world. In the critical realm, Foucault’s work is exemplary in its focus on identity construction through discursive practices (Foucault, 1978). Similarly, almost all literary critique of rational foundations relies on a view of discourse as world making (see, for example, Derrida, 1976). Rhetorical critique again presumes that knowledge, rationality and the sense of the real are social achievements (Myerson, 1994). Most centrally, virtually all history of science, sociology of knowledge and social studies of science critique, are lodged in a view of knowledge as a communal achievement (see, for example, Latour, 1987). Yet, the constructionist view of knowledge favored by these various lines of critique cannot itself be viewed as foundational grounds for subsequent action. This view falls subject to its own logics – social construction as socially constructed. Social construction is not, then, a new foundation but a dialogue to be judged in terms of that which it stimulates or inspires within the world.

Herein we locate, then, a groundless grounds for proceeding – a set of logics that can inspire but not require, sensitize without sanitizing, unify without universalizing. In what follows I wish to link the emerging logics of social construction with the action research movement. To secure the connection I will focus on their joint investment in democratic process. In both cases there is an abiding concern with moving beyond the individual to processes of relationship,
and working with relational processes to achieve social ends. To set the stage for this inquiry, I will first set out in briefest form a vision of a social science informed by a constructionist sensitivity. Within this context we may take up the issue of democracy. Here we shall find that the traditional conception of democracy proves problematic, and a new view is required. We shall find it useful to distinguish between a first and second order democracy. It is within the space that we can appreciate the powerful potentials of action research – as they have been realized and as further development is required.

**Movements in constructionist social science**

Action research is gaining steady momentum within the social sciences, offering a welcome and significant alternative to the typical fare of rarefied assessments of the status quo. Reason and Bradbury’s (2001) *Handbook of action research* stands as a signal achievement. However, as these authors also reason, it is important that action researchers do not embrace a new methodism, viewing the practice of a specialized set of methods as an end in itself. Ideally such endeavors should be linked with a broader vision of human functioning, one that can act as a source of continuous reflection and enrichment. In my view, linking action research to the constructionist dialogues can serve just this purpose. In this context it is useful to consider the forms of professional activity that seem especially favored by the constructionist dialogues. Four domains of inquiry are especially salient. In two of these domains action research makes a unique and significant contribution.

**Liberation from ‘the natural’**

Social constructionist writings first call into question all taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of the real, the rational and the good. They demonstrate to us that such commonplaces as ‘the world is round’, ‘4×4=16’ or ‘thou shalt not kill’ are culturally and historically embedded forms of intelligibility. Such declarations serve particular functions within the enclaves in which they were brought to life. It is this denaturalization of the ordinary that has absorbed the attention of myriad scholars – all attempting to illuminate the constructed character of the commonplace. The goal here is largely emancipatory; that is, the implicit hope is that by recognizing the historically and culturally ‘thrown condition’ of what we otherwise take to be ‘just natural’, we are liberated to consider alternatives. It is in this liberatory spirit that scholars have variously explored the social construction of emotion, rationality, mental illness, the sense of smell, pain,
gender, sexuality, identity, the family, culture, natural science truths and much more.

Critical reflection

If the real, the rational and the good are the achievements of culturally and historically located groups, then we confront such questions as ‘whose account of the world’, ‘whose good reasons’ or ‘whose justice’ dominates the contemporary landscape. Further, we ask, what social groups are not represented in the construction of the natural order; what peoples are not heard; what traditions are suppressed? Here we enter the critical moment. We move from a recognition of the ultimately arbitrary nature of our understandings, to critical inquiry into the potentially inimical effects of these understandings. Again, we find an enormous literature fired by the sense of injustice and suppression. It is a literature to which virtually all minority or marginalized groups in the West have contributed – women, peoples of color, gays and lesbians, the infirm, the old, the colonized, the poor, and more. We have, then, a robust literature exploring the potential evils of the ordinary.

Nurturing practices

Emancipation and critique are mainstays in the constructionist vocabulary of inquiry. They are also useful preliminaries to a third form of constructionist activity. In particular we are invited at this juncture into appreciative reflection on our existing traditions and into forms of action that may sustain them. It is one thing to criticize the world of the taken-for-granted, but another to ask ‘what is it that gives sustenance to our lives?’, ‘what is worth valuing?’ or ‘what do we cherish?’ As we gain cognizance of these springs of value, constructionist dialogues call our attention to the importance of collective interpretations and their integration with forms of practice. The means of bringing people into collaborative relations are required, from which mutual understandings and appreciations may emerge, along with patterns of action that are both buttressed by these discourses and simultaneously bring them to life. While constructionist challenges and critiques of the natural have given rise to an enormous scholarship, the challenge of sustaining life-giving traditions has been sadly neglected. In part this is because the challenge moves us beyond the scholarly realm and into the arena of cultural action. It is here that action research plays a vital role.
Creating integrative worlds

As we gain cognizance of the traditions bringing purpose, joy and meaning to life, we also confront the challenge of contingency. That is, we begin to realize that all traditions exist in a tenuous state, typically born and raised in circumstances that no longer exist. The social context is undergoing continuous change; we are in continuous danger of hapless nostalgia. We increasingly confront a panoply of difference – multiple traditions that are set apart and sometimes antagonistic to that which we cherish. With increasing frequency we also realize that we ourselves are polyphonic in our pleasures. We ourselves simultaneously value multiple traditions that are not only disparate but disagreeable. It is here that the fourth constructionist challenge occurs, for at this point we are invited to construct new futures. We are launched into the stratosphere of reconstruction, exploring new frontiers from which new and more integrative amalgams can emerge. We envision possible means of bringing otherwise conflicting traditions into new and more viable forms of relationship. We are only now beginning to understand and appreciate the possibility of creating new and more integrative worlds in the social sciences. However, action research should surely be in the vanguard of this movement. While one may see these as mutually exclusive movements in social constructionist inquiry, it is also useful to realize their intimate connection. Indeed, for both pragmatic and aesthetic purposes, it is enriching to imagine a pattern of eternal reiteration. Liberation from the natural gives rise to questions of possession and power: whose constructions dominate, whose are suppressed, whose are obliterated . . . which invites critical reflection, and the importance of challenging dominant discourses, locating the prejudices, and enabling the articulation of the unheard . . . which invites attention to nurturing practices, practices that give life to the perishable, that sustain traditions of value, but simultaneously raise questions of how to go on in the face of multiple and conflicting traditions . . . which thus invites the creation of new and more inclusive or viable worlds, which worlds, once realized in new discourses and practices, will give rise to . . . liberation from the natural. At this moment, Hegel’s image of Absolute Spirit (full cultural consciousness) is surely inviting. However, resistance is counseled. We are scarcely speaking here of an inevitable trajectory of time’s arrow but a vision of social science vibrantly engaged with the unfolding of global life. With this broad-brush vision of a constructionist science in place, it is useful to consider one theoretical departure of special relevance to action research and its general concern with enhancing democratic process.
Relational being and revisioning democracy

Although constructionist dialogues invite consideration of values and visions in the conduct of inquiry they do not themselves demand any particular commitment. Nothing is required. In this sense one might say that the constructionist dialogues give a place to all at the table, but do not provide a menu. With this said, however, constructionist deliberations do open what I find to be an enormously important vista of inquiry – the potentials of relational being. For over three centuries western culture has been engulfed in a romance with individual being. Where in the 15th century there were relatively few terms referring to individual psychological states, we now have over three thousand terms in English alone. We understand ourselves and others primarily as psychological beings, our actions directed by internal resources of reason, emotion, desire, motivation, conscience and so on. We owe much to this tradition, including our institutions of democracy, public education and religion. However, the constructionist dialogues have not only given rise to a phalanx of critique of the individualist tradition, they have also planted seeds for developing theory and practices for realizing relational being. That is, they point to the possibility of augmenting the individualist tradition – in which the individual self serves as the fundamental atom of society – with an appreciation of relational process as the fulcrum of societal stability and change. As they suggest, we may replace the view of the individual mind as the center of meaning and action with a reality of relationship.

There is much to be said about relational realities, but simultaneously an impoverishment of language in which to say it. Where we have an enormously rich vocabulary to objectify states of the individual mind, we have relatively few terms that bring into reality the relationship among persons. Moreover, many of the terms we do employ in moving beyond the individual (e.g. family, community, group, organization, nation) simply recirculate many of the problems of individualism at a broader level. Rather than a world of independent, alienated, mistrustful and narcissistic individuals, we create a world in which these same attributes now apply to the larger units. How, then, can we understand human action in ways that do not depend on bounded units as the argot of understanding?

There is no single response to such a challenge, nor should there be. Let us imagine the flourishing of many metaphors – or better still, the emergence of myriad metaphors working their way toward the literal. We have, for example, the early departures of symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and Vygotskian developmental theory, and more recently, cultural psychology, discursive psychology, distribution theories and Bakhtinian dialogism. Closely related to these latter ventures my own concerns have centered on the relational genesis of meaning, and the implications of this orientation to the relational redrawing of psychological processes. This is scarcely the context for a full recounting of these
ventures, but at least one of the central ideas informing this work will prove useful in considering the achievement of democracy through participatory inquiry.

Specifically, my attentions have focused on the incapacity of the free standing signifier to bear meaning (see, for example, Gergen, 1994, chap. 11) That is, a single word standing alone, thrown from nowhere into our midst – would signify nothing. We overhear a conversation . . . the word ‘spinach’ is spoken, and a moment later we make out, ‘rocket’ and then ‘sad’. What on earth are they talking about? The free standing words breed only puzzlement. It is only within the context of supplementary signifiers that meaning is given birth. ‘Little Emil hates the taste of spinach.’ In the confluence we begin to find meaning.

Now let us apply this principle to individual action. Let me propose that the utterances of a single individual themselves possess no meaning. They stand barren until another affirms, or in effect, supplements these actions in such a way that they are granted meaning. The simple question, ‘How are you today?’ will stand as an empty gesture until an interlocutor provides what we take to be an answer, such as ‘Fine, I suppose’. The supplement to the act functions retroactively in such a way that the initial utterance is granted meaning as a question. Yet, the act of questioning simultaneously functions proactively to grant meaning to the supplement as ‘an answer’. Meaning is found neither in the act or the supplement but in the conjoining.

On this account, we also see that the supplement – ‘the response to the question’ – itself constitutes an act which stands open to further supplementation. It retroactively brings meaning into being, but proactively stands open to further creation. ‘You don’t sound fine to me . . .’ supplements the response in such a way that it is rendered meaningful. Further, it is evident that the capacity of any act/supplement conjunction to function as a meaning generating unit will typically depend on a preceding context of relational juxtapositions. Although we/herenow can – through our coordinated movements in language – generate a local meaning, the wheels of our efforts are greased by decades (if not centuries) of preceding coordinations. I could elaborate further, but this may be sufficient to appreciate the general proposal that meaning issues from coordinated actions among people, with any present meaning typically depending on its placement within a tradition (or genre), and yet, continuously open to redrawing as relational exchange proceeds. Or, more globally, we may say that all articulations of the real, the rational and the good find their origins within the relational matrix. The origin of the source of meaning does not lie within the individual mind, but in Martin Buber’s words, ‘In the beginning is the relationship.’

There are many directions in which this relational view of meaning may be taken, but I wish to focus here on the concept of democracy. The institution of democracy is essentially a child of Enlightenment individualism. Within this tradition the individual is constructed as a rational and bounded agent – the fundamental atom of the society. Each of us, on this view, should observe astute-
ly, think carefully, examine our values and vote accordingly. ‘Avoid social influence; think for yourself,’ we are reminded. The State will flourish, it is supposed, by tallying and integrating the sum of the independently derived opinions. In lieu of direct democracy – typically viewed as unwieldy and impractical – democratic governance is based on the free expression of individual opinion as carried by elected representatives.

As should be clear, from a relational perspective the presumption of individual, rational agents is thrown into question. An individual comes into rationality only within a relational process. The capacity to achieve rationality depends on one’s bearing the traces of a discursive history, along with the supplemental activities of his or her interlocutors. I am scarcely advocating an abandonment of democratic institutions, however flawed in terms of their underlying assumptions. However, our conception of democratic process may be revitalized and enriched through relational reconstruction. Consider: If all meaning finds its origins within relationship, then it is not the individual voice that is important to a viable society but the process of conjoint meaning making. The more unobstructed and extended the participation in the dialogues relevant to the future of a society, the more likely its policies will serve its participants, and the more likely the society will remain viable in its surrounding context.

This relational view renders support to traditional values of freedom of speech and assembly; it also favors dialogue over monologue in all political spheres, and would endorse public support for the extension of internet availability to all. Most important in the present context, it provides strong support to efforts that enhance or extend the dialogic process. The success of democracies throughout the world does not depend on the structure of free elections – as we are repetitively reminded by the deadly upheavals accompanying the voting process in all corners of the world. Rather, the strength of democracy lies in the process of relationship – the unencumbered capacity of people to sustain the meaning making process.

Orders of democracy and vocabularies of practice

Now let us turn more directly to the contribution of action research to the achievement of democracy. In my view such research practices harbor enormous potential for social change, and particularly in the expansion of the democratic processes on which the social good depends. My special hope is that in the flowering of action inquiry we can develop what I would call ‘vocabularies of practice’. Here I wish to move away from the traditional view of bounded practices or methodologies, in which, for example, we might contrast experiments (as a particular form of practice), with survey research, ethnography or participatory research. Rather, our potentials are far richer if we view all practices as com-
posites – containing many voices, functions or illocutionary moments. For example, a typical action research project might include moments of invitation, exchanges of information, moments of critique, points of planning, moments in which the group considers itself a single unit, and so on. A laboratory experiment will typically involve moments in which the researcher provides information, asks questions, introduces stimulus materials, and so on. Rather than comparing these methods as a whole, we can extricate from them specific actions, ‘phrasings’, ‘words’ or ‘dialogic forms’ that may be reassembled within new composites.

My argument here is not only against the fixing, ritualizing or canonizing of any specific method or change practice – as if a cookbook to success. Rather, it is to say that our position as scholars or practitioners is more like that of a poet laboring in a continuously evolving context of meaning. The poet cannot simply repeat past arrangements of words to press the envelope of meaning outward. Rather, the continuous challenge is to reassemble the existing vocabularies, thereby speaking into the present to create the future anew.

With this said, it will prove useful here to consider several forms of existing practice – falling under the broad rubric of ‘action research’ – and ask ourselves, what particular features of these practices contribute to the democratic process of achieving meaning together. What may we take away from existing research that we might place into practice in other contexts?

**Action research and first order democracy**

Earlier I proposed that from a constructionist perspective it is useful to understand democracy not in terms of individual expression, but rather, as emerging from the relational process of generating meaning. If we understand action research as a process of relational coordination, it is immediately clear that certain forms of participatory action may be central to building democracy while others may be quite peripheral (or even contraindicated). In mining current participatory forms for their contribution to a more general vocabulary of action, it is useful to consider first what we may call ‘first order democracy’. Here we focus on practices that bring groups of people into a state of effective coordination. People may live in close proximity but seldom communicate, even about issues of common significance. They may share a common plight, but have no means of voicing their discontent to others. There is little consciousness of meaningful relationship. Establishing effective coordination is essential to first order democracy.

In this respect, we may identify numerous practices of action research that have contributed to first order democracy. By way of illustration we might include:
Early PAR efforts to establish a civil-disobedience group in India, to organize Brazilian peasants to realize their rights, and to form a Brazilian civil resistance group.

Attempts by feminist and black researchers to enlist members of their communities to participate in generating research that speaks their lives and opposes existing oppression.

The generation of local, participatory groups for monitoring and evaluating government policies in India, the Philippines and Bolivia.

Organizing a mid-wife action initiative in an Australian hospital.

Organizing citizens in India around issues in resource management.

These and many other illustrations are described in Coghlan and Brannick (2001), Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991), Greenwood and Levin (1998), Heron (1996) and Reason and Bradbury (2001). This is scarcely the context for a full assessment of the specific practices making up these various initiatives. However, with a constructionist theoretic at hand, we can begin to locate several specific practices of special significance in bringing about first order democracy. In effect, we might consider the following moves in dialogue to form a rudimentary beginning to a vocabulary of democratic practice.

**Acts of affirmation**

Virtually all the above practices bring people together under conditions in which they are positively disposed to each other. By dint of history or the conditions of communication, they are encouraged to listen affirmatively to the voices of others. Acts of affirmation may constitute the critical fulcrum for creating democracy. To affirm is essentially to ratify the significance of another’s utterance as a meaningful act. It is to locate something within an expression that is valuable, to which one can agree, or render support. To affirm another’s utterances is also to grant worth, honor and validity to the other’s subjectivity; failure to affirm places the identity of the speaker in question. Finally, in affirming an utterance one also generates the primitive bond from which further coordination may ensue.

**Productive difference**

While affirmation is of critical significance in effecting collaboration, it is important to draw a distinction between affirmation and duplication. At the most rudimentary level affirmation ratifies the reality and value of a preceding utterance. However, it functions in this way primarily against the backdrop of that which it negates. If another agrees with you, this agreement serves as an affirmation primarily when the other is apprised of what is not being affirmed or valued. When one shows signs of deliberating the issues, and then agrees, affirmation is
achieved. If one is prepared to agree no matter what is proposed, we have duplication as opposed to affirmation. The distinction is important in virtue of a more general theoretical point: The conjoint creation of meaning depends on the generation of difference. In the same sense that the meaning of a single word depends on its differing from other words (e.g. bit, bat, but), so does the meaning of any utterance in a dialogue acquire its meaning from its difference from other utterances. To echo each utterance spoken by the other is to destroy the meaning of these expressions. Thus, in a more general sense, democratic dialogue depends on the continuous generation of differences. The meaning making process is rendered robust by virtue of distinctive voices. All of the above practices excel in their setting the stage for the expression of difference.

In addition to the critical ingredients of affirmation and difference, attention should also be drawn to specific practices that contain the following elements.

**Common cause**

Although differences among people are required, ultimately these must represent variations around what might be called a ‘common cause’. Virtually all the practices described above are characterized by an attempt to generate a shared vocabulary (an interpretive stance), and most particularly a vocabulary that establishes a common set of values or goals. A shared account of ‘existing conditions’, and an evaluative stance toward these conditions (‘unjust’, ‘intolerable’, ‘oppressive’) is essential for bringing participants into full coordination.

**Achievable goals**

Another hallmark of these collaborative endeavors is to build dialogue around achievable goals. Democratic organizing is not simply a matter of establishing shared *topoi*, but requires a search for goals that are within reach of the participants. More specifically, the attainment of these goals must be tied to the collaborative process itself. Without continued collaboration, the goals will not be achieved.

**Concrete action**

Closely related to establishing achievable goals, sustaining the vitality of collaboration requires the possibility of concrete action. Discursive collaboration is itself limited in potential; it is only when it is linked to concrete actions that the fruits of democratic process are realized. Within all the above initiatives, dialogue ultimately turned toward concrete actions to realize the implications of shared vocabularies of value and vision.
These various elements only begin to form the basis for a full vocabulary of first order democracy. Elsewhere my colleagues and I have also treated the contribution to collaborative organization of dialogic moves that create coherence (an internally consistent rationale for understanding self and society), generate temporal integration (a sense of history and one’s current placement), contribute to repetitive sequencing of actions, punctuate conversations to reduce ambiguity, and that generate the reality of the ‘we’ (Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, in press). These moves in dialogue all contribute to establishing first order democracy.

Democracy as self-destructive

While action research facilitating first order democracy is of vital importance to the future functioning of society, further reflection is required.

Specifically, it is vital to distinguish between two moments in the meaning making process, one generative and the other degenerative. On the one hand, consider forms of coordination among people in which their discourse and action move in synchrony and a recognizable ‘form of life’ comes into being. Participants create a world of being along with contours of good and evil. This generative process may characterize the development of meaning between mother and infant, a conversation among neighbors that yields a neighborhood security system, or a political platform meeting of the gay liberation movement. Contrast this movement into an organized world with instances in which people’s actions function as mutual inhibitors, in which the actions of one group rob the other of significance or destroy their capacities to mean. The hostile argument (e.g. ‘that is pure rubbish’) serves as a good example here, but so do imprisonment and war. All function to destroy the conjoint process of making meaning.

While this distinction between generative and degenerative moments seems clear enough, the case becomes more complex when we consider that every movement in the generative direction creates the grounds for degeneration. To explore, consider that when two or more people come into a state of positive coordination, they may create together a locally agreeable ontology, ethic and rationale for acceptable as opposed to unacceptable action. At the same time, such agreements will also create an exterior, a range of contrasts (that which does not exist, is not true, not good), or essentially a domain of the ‘not we’. This will be so by virtue of the principle of co-constitution described earlier: all ‘being’ requires the creation of a ‘not being’.

Thus, for example, if we were to continue our negotiations here until the point we could agree on ‘the future of social inquiry’, we should simultaneously create the imaginary of ‘the opposition’. Further, because of the highly agreeable views of proper social inquiry we would come to share, we would also create the opposition as less than agreeable. They would be positioned as ‘less than know-
The degenerative moment is at hand. As we came to write our celebratory books, and to create our own journal and society, so would connection with the exterior cease to compel. Nor would we wish their alien empiricist/universalist/bio centered views to appear in our midst. If new positions developed in our academic departments, we might avoid hiring ‘that kind of scholar’. Effectively we move toward the annihilation of alterior meanings. To put it more bluntly, for every first order movement in democracy, there is potentially an anti-democratic outcome.

It is at this point that we begin to see the relationship between action research and the literature on civil society. On the one hand there are the arguments ranging from de Tocqueville in the 1800s to the more recent writings of Fukuyama and Putnam, to the effect that civil movements are vital to the democratic process. Similarly, the present analysis suggests that during the generative phase of development, civil movements may indeed function in just this way – enhancing the democratic process. This has certainly been the case in the US with the emergence of identity politics – the creation of myriad groups of the otherwise marginalized whose voices now vitally enrich democratic dialogue. It is also precisely the kind of ends that are served by the forms of action research described above.

Yet, this optimistic vision suppresses the degenerative moment in meaning development. Identity politics in the US is also responsible for what we locally call ‘the culture wars’. It is in this same vein that in Algeria, where a popular movement of Muslim fundamentalists succeeded in gaining the democratic majority, democracy was simply suspended. In this latter respect, my arguments resonate with Foucault’s concern with the potentials for subtle domination inherent in any organized vision of the real and the good. Yet, Foucault’s analysis is ultimately suspicious of all civil movements, as all are potentially hegemonic in their thrust. In terms of our present analysis, however, such suspicion fails to take account of the generative processes inherent in such movements.

In this context, consider the challenge of religious fundamentalism, or what outsiders often characterize as religious fanaticism. In many respects fundamentalist movements may be considered manifestations of civil society par excellence. They are frequently counter-posed to existing governments and economic institutions, and they are inspired by grass roots inclinations to protect and sustain that which is most valuable in life. They carry the banner of social justice. In this sense, they bear a distinct resemblance, for example, to environmentalist, civil rights, pro-life and gay liberation movements. (One might be tempted to say that the latter movements differ from fundamentalism in their ultimate investment in the democratic process. However, I suspect there are few environmentalists, pro-choice or gay liberation enthusiasts who would give their lives to protect the voice of their opposition.) The major difference between the fundamentalist and the kinds of grass-roots movements that many of us endorse in the name of
democracy may simply be in terms of the extremes to which they have been pressed in protecting their vision.

**Transformative practices: second order democracy**

At this point we confront the possibility that all movements toward a more fully voiced democracy carry within them what might be called ‘uncivil potentials’ (Keane, 1998). Required is yet another phase of inquiry, now into second order democracy, that is, into theoretical and practical means of restoring the generative process undermined or destroyed by first order democracy. To confront this challenge I am again drawn to the potentials of the relational stance developed earlier. First order democracy is essentially achieved by those processes of meaning making that bring into being the disparate voices of the culture. However, such first order processes do not seem adequate to the challenge of confronting the second order problem of conflicting traditions of meaning. The discourses of the real and the good that sustain any particular tradition, seem ill suited to the task of hammering out a rationale for mutual viability. The discourse of creating identity boundaries is not adequate to the challenge of crossing boundaries. Alternative forms of discourse are required, second order intelligibilities and actions that enable us to soften the edges of otherwise embittered and embattled traditions. On the level of global democracy, such discourses seem particularly required as 20th-century technology brings the varying cultures of the globe into increasingly jarring proximity.

At this juncture the present analysis conjoins with scholarly debate on discourse ethics, and specifically the question of whether we can establish an ethics governing interchange among otherwise hostile parties? As Habermas (1993) has proposed, we might usefully articulate and justify *ideal speech conditions*, conditions that would enable otherwise conflicting parties to achieve consensus. However, the debate stimulated by Habermas’ important proposal has not left us sanguine about the outcome. As scholars variously argue, in a world of multiple realities and values, consensus is not an ideal goal of dialogue. A vital democracy depends on sustaining differences. Further, these ideal conditions may continue to favor those possessing the most commanding rhetoric – typically the result of training at our elite institutions. Any appeal to logical or moral foundations of dialogue will inevitably be tied to the ideology of the founding culture. Also, any foundational arguments will themselves demand legitimation, thus thrusting us into an infinite regress of legitimation.

More recently, Anthony Giddens has entered this same territory. As he proposes the division between the power blocks of political Left and Right are no longer adequate for political deliberation. He proposes instead a concept of *dialogic democracy*, where relationships are ‘ordered through dialogue rather
than through embedded power’ (1994, p. 113). He aspires through such dialogue to develop ‘personal relationships in which active trust is mobilized and sustained through discussion and the interchange of views, rather than by arbitrary power of one sort or another’ (p. 118). Dialogic democracy is unlike liberal democracy, in which participants are committed to achieve self-interested gains, or represent their own rights. Rather, we assume a complex array of opinions and values, and the unlikely outcome of ‘the one right answer’ (p. 115).

In a similar vein, with Sheila McNamee I have tried to develop a concept of relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). The proposal in this case is that we bracket the tradition of individual autonomy, out of which the presumption of individual responsibility, blame, alienation, and guilt arise. Rather, we may justifiably foreground our responsibility to ongoing processes of relating. If all meaning derives from relational process – as proposed earlier – then the destruction of this process brings to an end all that we would consider valuable, ethical or worthy of pursuit. When we are responsible to the process of relating in which meaning is indeed given birth, we essentially support the possibility of a good life, society or world. The specific form of relational process that is valorized in this argument is the generative, as outlined earlier. In degenerative relational process we essentially slouch toward the end of meaning. The ethic of relational responsibility is itself non-foundational; all of its constituent assumptions are themselves open to continued dialogue. But if we move in this case, as in any other, to annihilate the premises we also diminish the domain of difference and thus the possibilities of continuing the very process from which meaning derives.

In my view the kind of relational responsibility essential to second order democracy constitutes a major challenge for the future of action research.

The same enthusiasm, ingenuity and commitment to the social good sparking action inquiry at the first order is vitally needed in the achievement of second order democracy. I do think there are promising beginnings. For me, exemplary instances include:

- The work of David Cooperrider and a host of colleagues throughout the world engaged in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000; Watkins & Mohr, 2001), a form of practice designed to create democratically based, visionary change in organizations. The practice is especially useful in promoting coordinated action between groups which are otherwise antagonistic. The practice is being used at present, for example, to create a United Religions – roughly equivalent to the United Nations – enabling warring religious groups to unite in productive dialogue (see also www.taosinstitute.net).
- The work of the Public Conversations Project in the US, designed by family therapists for purposes of reducing the mutually annihilative tendencies found in many ideologically opposed groups (Chasin & Herzig, 1992).
The work of Bjørn Gustavsen and his colleagues (see, for example, Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996), attempting to bring together various groups – labor and management, different parts of large organizations or active organizations within entire regions of Sweden – into productive dialogue. Particularly important is the shift from dialogues intended to generate a single product (plan, vision) to dialogues that build relationships. Second order democracy is facilitated especially in the attempt of these discussions to create overlapping networks of actors, with the capacity to make a number of different plans simultaneously.

It is premature to draw more than a handful of tentative conclusions from this work concerning vocabularies of practice. However, such work does suggest the importance of several dialogic moves.

**Domains of agreement**

Although there are numerous differences and antagonisms that separate various groups in society, second order democracy thrives on locating common domains of agreement. A focus on shared investments helps to reduce perceived distance, highlight possible interdependencies, and to generate a landscape of potential collaborations.

**Personal narration**

Differences between groups are often lodged in principles or abstract credos. Where there is often little hope in crossing boundaries at this level, personal stories can be enormously effective. While eschewing the abstract arguments of their ‘opponents’, adversaries are typically susceptible to personal stories of grief, pain or loss, or to accounts of what gives personal meaning to the lives of others.

**Self-reflexivity**

In cases of extreme animosity, such as those confronted by the Public Conversations Project, it has proved enormously helpful to have participants discuss their ‘grey areas’. Does one harbour doubts in one’s own position? To hear one’s adversaries reveal doubts in the positions they espouse, is essentially to hear one’s own voice within the other. The mutual sharing of misgivings thus has a salutary effect in bridging distances between groups.

**Positive visions**

The practice of appreciative inquiry, in particular, demonstrates the catalytic effects of enabling disparate groups to generate a shared vision of a positive
future. In this case participants move beyond ‘tolerance’ to the creation of new social forms.

It should finally be noted that when second order democratic work is successful, the results may be similar to the effects of first order collaboration. That is, a new order of communality will be established, and as it begins to flourish so will the potential for ‘an exterior’, or derogated class to emerge. This is once again to call attention to the phasics of constructed worlds, from naturalization to deconstruction and reconstruction. Democracy in this sense is not a final achievement of an organization or society; it is an ideal that must be diligently and unceasingly pursued.

References

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Feminist discourses of (dis)empowerment in an action research project involving rural women and communication technologies

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ABSTRACT

Women’s empowerment is a central aim of feminist action research. However, due to the many contradictory discourses of empowerment, it has become a contested concept. Drawing on poststructuralist theories of power-knowledge, discourse and subjectivity, this article critically analyses the discourses identified in an Australian feminist action research project involving rural women, academics and industry partners. This project aimed to empower women to discuss and use interactive communication technologies (ICTs). This analysis highlights the contradictory effects of the egalitarian and expert discourses that were identified, and the multiple, often conflicting, subject positions that were taken up by the researchers and participants. Our analysis suggests that discourses of empowerment and disempowerment intersect and interpenetrate one another, and highlights some of the dangers and contradictions associated with feminist participatory action research. We argue that a poststructuralist approach to analysis and critical reflexivity can lessen the ‘impossible burden’ on academic feminists engaged in emancipatory research.

KEY WORDS
• contradictory effects
• discourses
• disempowerment
• empowerment
• feminist participatory action research
• poststructural analysis
Introduction: power relations in the action research context

Women’s empowerment is a central aim of feminist action research. However, many contradictory discourses of empowerment circulate in the contexts within which feminist action research is conducted, such as educational or community development programs or women’s organizations. Empowerment has become a contested concept, provoking widespread debate among those engaged in participatory, collaborative and emancipatory forms of research (Bhavnani, 1988; Humphries, 1996; Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000; Truman, Mertens & Humphries, 2000). In recent times, critiques of empowerment have been underpinned by poststructuralist theories of power, knowledge and subjectivity.

Some feminists have found that, due to the close relationships developed with participants, certain feminist research methodologies can have unintended outcomes, including exploitation, disempowerment and exclusion (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Martin, 1996). As Acker et al. (1991) suggest, ‘an emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome’ (p. 145). The gap between theory and practice in participatory forms of feminist research clearly requires greater acknowledgment and understanding (Martin, 1994). Many feminists therefore argue that, in using such methodologies, the power–knowledge relations in the research context need more critical attention (Gore, 1992; Humphries, 2000; Martin, 1996; Opie, 1992). Consequently, these feminists assert that poststructuralist theories and methods can produce and heighten awareness of how their work can reinscribe existing power relations, perpetuate dichotomies and produce unintended effects, including silencing, exclusion and other forms of disempowerment.

These issues are particularly significant in feminist action research projects when women from disadvantaged rural areas are involved in research with relatively privileged urban feminist academics, with different needs, agendas, and ideologies, and different levels of knowledge and expertise. This article uses feminist poststructuralist forms of discourse analysis and deconstruction to critically analyse the assumptions that were made about processes that would be empowering for rural women in the action research project ‘Enhancing Rural Women’s Access to Interactive Communication Technologies’ (The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).¹

Feminists from various fields have raised important concerns about the potentially ‘paralyzing consequences’ of poststructuralism and postmodernism for feminism (Hoff, 1994, p. 443). These concerns include poststructuralism and postmodernism’s lack of attention to questions of action (Lather, 1991); their tendency towards cultural relativism (Mies & Shiva, 1993); and the way gender has become ‘depoliticised’ (Hoff, 1994). Despite these issues, the value of postmodernism and poststructuralism for feminist theorizing and research cannot be ignored or lightly dismissed. Feminists are increasingly drawing on the influential

¹ This article uses feminist poststructuralist forms of discourse analysis and deconstruction to critically analyse the assumptions that were made about processes that would be empowering for rural women in the action research project ‘Enhancing Rural Women’s Access to Interactive Communication Technologies’ (The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).
work of Foucault and Derrida to understand the operation of gendered power relations in particular discourses, and to critique concepts such as empowerment.

We regard the concept of empowerment as problematic. However, given an awareness of the potential contradictions in certain discourses of empowerment, the concept has a continuing usefulness in the context of feminist action research and community development projects (Parpart & Marchand, 1995). Therefore, the position adopted in this article is that researchers should use the term empowerment with ‘a sense both of its problematical nature and of the political rhetoric it might serve’ (Peters & Marshall, 1991, p. 127).

Poststructuralist theories of power, empowerment, discourse and subjectivity are used in this article to analyse the contradictory effects of feminist discourses of empowerment, and the subject positions taken up by the feminist researchers involved in the Rural Women and ICTs project. We demonstrate the complex and shifting nature of (dis)empowerment and the multiple, contradictory discourses and subject positions that the feminist researchers took up in the context of this project. Our analysis suggests that there are no stable positions from which to do feminist action research, and that we can never be certain whether our research activities have been empowering or disempowering for any group. However, we argue that a feminist poststructuralist approach can reduce the ‘impossible burden’ of responsibility (Walkerdine, 1986) on feminist researchers that can be experienced in action research involving diverse stakeholders. Like Treleaven, we believe that discourse analysis is a useful method of ‘foregrounding for examination of the taken-for-granted factors (historical, political, social, cultural, educational) that shape the language people use’ (2001, p. 265).

The rural women and ICTs research project

This project aimed to explore the current and potential impacts of ICTs for women in rural Queensland, in terms of personal, business and community development. At the time it was conducted (1996–1997), it was the only project of its kind in Australia. The project was undertaken by an interdisciplinary team of six researchers (four women and two men) and a research assistant based at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, in collaboration with eight government and industry partners. The team included three researchers who had collaborated with rural women on an earlier related research project (see Grace, Lundin & Daws, 1996).

One of this article’s authors (June Lennie) was a researcher with the project. She undertook a detailed evaluation and critique of the methodology and methods used in this project for her doctoral study, which was supervised, in its later stages, by the other two authors (Caroline Hatcher and Wendy Morgan).
This research used two methodologies: participatory feminist evaluation and ‘feminist deconstructive ethnography’ (Lennie, 2001). The evaluation involved the use of multiple methods, including interviews with participants, the research team and the industry partners, workshop feedback questionnaires and participant observations.

As well as workshops held in ten Queensland communities, project activities included online conversation groups, regular audioconferences, a virtual conference, and a major one-day seminar. The online conversation groups established and managed by the project were called wechat (women’s electronic chat), a small informal group, and welink (women’s electronic link), a larger mailing list that linked rural and urban women, including government policymakers, around Australia. The four female researchers took part in most of the workshops, while the two male researchers and some of the industry partners participated in a few workshops. In addition, all but one of the research team and representatives of five industry partners took part in the online groups to varying degrees.

The majority of participants had a white Anglo-Celtic background, a professional occupation, or were farmers or graziers (or both professionals and farmers), a relatively high level of education, and belonged to community or industry organizations (Lennie, 2001). Participants included women living in rural towns and on isolated farming properties, and women from different age groups. A small number of indigenous and migrant women participated.

The researchers aimed to facilitate rural women’s empowerment through methods such as ‘listening to and validating women’s experiences, giving voice to women and creating more equal relations between researchers and participants’ (RWICTs Team, 1999, p. 13). A feminist participatory action research (PAR) methodology was used which sought ‘to develop and implement a participatory process which was inclusive and empowering for participants, takes the differences between rural women into account, and encourages women to take action leading to desirable change’ (p. 12). The evaluation indicated that the project was empowering not only for many of the rural participants, but also for many of the researchers and some of the female industry partners who developed a better understanding of the lives and issues of rural women, and gained a voice for their feminism (Lennie, 2001).

However, a significant dilemma for research that attempts to be empowering is that the wider, often hierarchical institutional structures, ‘beset with power/knowledge questions of what counts as research’ (Peters & Marshall, 1991, p. 128) often militate against the aims and methodology of this form of research. Therefore, a key challenge for the project was that ‘non-hierarchical’ relations with participants had to be established in the context of a university-based project that included senior academics and representatives of several collaborating organizations, some of whom held quite senior positions. The project’s diverse stakeholders and participants had different levels of knowledge about...
issues related to rural women and communication technologies, and different political perspectives, agendas, needs and expectations. These differences created certain difficulties in meeting the project’s inclusive and egalitarian aims.

‘Empowering’ rural women

Strategies for empowerment, inclusion and ‘capacity building’ are assuming growing importance in Australia and elsewhere, as community members, governments and specialists seek new community-based solutions to ensure the long-term sustainability of rural communities. With its strong emphasis on social justice, recent literature on community participation and community development advocates processes for participation that are more inclusive and empowering than have traditionally occurred (see, for example, Cohen, 1996; Sarkissian, Cook & Walsh, 1997; Sheil, 2000). Involving and empowering disadvantaged groups is usually advocated in this literature. The groups that are typically targeted include women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds or with low incomes and rural people.

Rural women are practising significant leadership in community development, and have been described as ‘new pioneers’ in the adoption of new ICTs (Grace et al., 1996; RWICTs Team, 1999). However, given the patriarchal nature of Australian rural communities and rural women’s often undervalued and ‘invisible’ status, rural women themselves have signalled their lack of an effective voice for their issues (Alston, 1995; Rural Women’s Unit, 1996). In addition, until recently, gender differences in access to communication technologies have usually been neglected in Australian research and community consultations. The Rural Women and ICTs research project sought to address this neglect and to empower rural women to talk about their ‘burning issues’, to develop confidence in using technologies such as email and the Internet, and to take action to change their inequitable access to ICTs (RWICTs Team, 1999, p. 13).

Feminist theories of power and empowerment

Feminist theories have tended to construct power as negative, repressive and related to the domination and control of women by men (Hayes, 1994). However, some feminist activists have also emphasized positive ‘power to’ and ‘power with’ models (Deutchman, 1991; Maguire, 2001). In praxis feminist research, power is often constructed as social and cooperative, and linked to feminist practices that aim to be empowering, such as supporting women, giving voice to women’s silences, developing less hierarchical research relationships and working collectively to change women’s unequal status (Gatenby & Humphries, 1996,
2000; Reinharz, 1992). Such practices underpinned the methodology and activities of the Rural Women and ICTs project.

With these imperatives in mind, Lather proposes that an emancipatory, critical social science ‘must be premised upon the development of research approaches which empower those involved to change as well as understand the world’ (1991, p. 3). By ‘empowerment’ Lather means:

- analysing ideas about the causes of powerlessness . . . and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives . . . empowerment is a process one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone. (1991, p. 4)

Lather argues that ‘the heart of the idea of empowerment involves people coming to a sense of their own power, a new relationship with their own contexts’ (p. 4). This perspective is important because it recognizes the interconnections between individuals, groups, and systemic factors, the role of analysis, communication, and consciousness raising, and the need for both individual and collective action to facilitate empowerment.

### Power–knowledge relations in empowerment practice

In her valuable critique of critical, collaborative and activist research, LeCompte argues that ‘many of these projects defined the research participants as in need of empowerment, whether or not they understood the concept or wanted to be empowered’, and all of the projects assume that ‘the act of doing research, by itself, is empowering’ (1995, p. 104). Similarly, Gillman suggests that:

- Professionals’ claims to empowerment as a knowledge base places them at the centre of empowering activity, where they assume the right to determine the needs of those to be empowered . . . and to apply the technologies of practice to bring about empowerment (1996, p. 108).

Gillman further comments that ‘it is possible to view empowerment as a more subtle refinement of domination, cloaked in the respectability of liberatory discourse’ (p. 113).

Taking another perspective, Gore proposes that empowerment needs to be context-specific and related to educational practices. Gore defines empowerment as ‘the exercise of power in an attempt to help others exercise power’ (1992, p. 62) and argues that empowerment ‘must be pedagogical – a process of knowledge production’ (p. 68). This definition is useful in that it allows researchers to confront ‘the unforeseeable and contradictory effects of the exercise of power’ and to therefore ‘be more humble and reflexive in our claims’ (p. 62). It also suggests the
potentially important position of action researchers as experts in facilitating the exercise of power, and their implication in the production of knowledge.

However, Gore believes that academics should still continue to be involved in political struggles ‘while constantly questioning the “truth” of their/our own thought and selves’ (p. 69). This is one of the major ways that Foucault’s (1976, 1980) model of discourse and power–knowledge is of value to feminist action researchers. From the tension between feminism and Foucault’s scepticism about emancipatory politics, Diamond and Quinby suggest a potential ‘ethics of activism’ which ‘fosters a mode of empowerment that is at the same time infused with an awareness of the limits to human agency’ (1988, pp. xvi–xvii). Given the emphasis on freedom, control and choice in dominant liberal humanist discourses of empowerment, an awareness of the limits to human agency is necessary.

**A feminist poststructuralist framework of analysis**

Analysis of the complex power relations enacted in participatory action research projects requires a framework that enables researchers to focus on both the micro and macro context, and the multiple subjectivities of those involved. It also requires the use of methods that can enable the critical, reflexive analysis of taken-for-granted assumptions about important feminist and action research concepts such as ‘empowerment’.

A feminist poststructuralist framework of analysis that draws on Foucault’s conceptions of discourse and power, and uses the techniques of discourse analysis, deconstruction and critical reflexivity effectively meets these requirements. Researchers, such as Jennings and Graham (1996), Opie (1992) and Treleaven (2001), advocate the use of discourse analysis and deconstruction in the critical reflection stage of action research and feminist research projects. We were ever mindful that an absence of reflexivity results in an omission of contradictions, and that it is tempting to tidy the ‘messiness’ of data in order to make research reports ‘hygienic and clean’, ‘thus limiting any analysis of power between researched and researcher’ (Humphries, 1994, p. 201).

From a poststructuralist perspective, discourses are ways of constituting knowledge that offer a preferred form of subjectivity. As Jennings and Graham explain, ‘not only is discourse determined by community [for example churches, business people or families of a certain sort], it is also embedded in the larger framework of social relationships and social institutions’ (1996, p. 172).

Foucault argues that the ways in which discourse constitutes individuals (or ‘subjects’) are always part of a wider network of power relations that often have institutional bases (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). Foucault states that
it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. . . . Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (1976, pp. 100–101).

Thus, while a discourse offers a preferred form of subjectivity or reading, ‘its very organisation will imply other subject positions and the possibility of reversal . . . [and this] . . . enables the subjected subject of a discourse to speak in her own right’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 109). This process of reversal is the first stage in challenging conventional meanings, thus enabling alternative discourses to be produced which contest dominant discourses.

The use of Foucault’s analytic of power (1976, 1980) enables a more complex analysis of feminist discourses and practices of empowerment. From this perspective, power is something that exists in action, in a network of interconnected relations. It is enacted in everyday social practices, rather than wielded by powerful groups. Foucault’s work shows ‘how objects of knowledge are not natural, but are ordered or constructed by discourses which determine what is “seeable and sayable”’ (Jennings & Graham, 1996, p. 171). This power–knowledge nexus highlights the power relations that are enacted in all interactions, whether those involved have an emancipatory intent or otherwise.

The Foucauldian concept ‘regime of truth’ is also useful here, since it can highlight the dangers of certain emancipatory discourses, including those of feminist action research (Gore, 1992, 1993). Gore suggests that this concept allows us to posit that feminism may have its own power–knowledge nexus, which in particular contexts and in particular historical moments, will operate in ways that are oppressive and repressive to people within and/or outside of the constituency of feminism. (1993, p. 61)

This can be seen, for example, in the rejection of feminism by many women in rural Australia (Alston, 1995).

In contrast to the humanist concept of subjectivity that presupposes ‘an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent’, subjectivity is seen as ‘precarious, contradictory and in process, [it is] constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). The multiple subject positions available to feminist action researchers (such as ‘supportive friend’ or ‘advocate for women’) have implications for the power relations between researchers and participants that are likely to have contradictory effects in terms of women’s empowerment. In support of this line of argument, Walkerdine demonstrates the way in which female teachers and girls ‘are produced as a nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power which are constantly shifting, rendering them at one moment powerful and at another powerless’ (1990, p. 3). This suggests that discourses can be powerful or powerless, depending on the contexts in which they are produced. The mapping of this
shifting discursive terrain, with its shifting, shadowy production of power, is the focus of this article.

**Discourse analysis and deconstruction method**

The discourse analysis and deconstruction method that was used drew on the work of Fairclough (1992), McWilliam, Lather and Morgan (1997) and Potter and Wetherell (1987). Following the initial coding and analysis of the interview transcripts from the evaluation, textual material was selected for the discourse analysis, using the selection criteria. This material included transcripts of interviews and workshops, feedback questionnaire responses, workshop invitations, case studies of individual participants, messages sent to the project’s online groups, and project reports and publications.

The discourse analysis process included identifying: the dominant and oppositional or alternative discourses; the significant binary oppositions in the discourses and their gendered nature; and the preferred forms of subjectivity offered by the discourses. The analysis also identified examples of the exercise of power and resistances to these enactments of power. The context of the talk was taken into account, as well as the wider social, organizational and cultural context within which the discourses were used. The process of deconstruction included: asking what values and assumptions were enframed in the text; reversing binary oppositions to challenge the dominant discourses and generate alternative interpretations; and demonstrating ways in which the positively and negatively valued concepts interpenetrate each other. The process also involved identifying and naming the multiple subject positions adopted by speakers, and pointing out inconsistencies and contradictions.

**Mapping the discourses of feminist participatory action research**

One of the significant discursive fields within which the Rural Women and ICTs project operated is that of feminist participatory action research (Gatenby & Humphries, 1996, 2000). As Figure 1 illustrates, four discourses within this discursive field were identified and named: *egalitarian feminist, care and connection, academic expert,* and *technology expert*. The *egalitarian feminist* and the *care and connection* discourses are closely interrelated, as are the *academic expert* and *technology expert* discourses. However, as our analysis will suggest, the researchers often shifted between these different discourses in the various research contexts.
The egalitarian feminist discourse

One of the significant features of feminist PAR is the attempt to create a non-hierarchical or more equal relationship between the researcher(s) and the participants (Gatenby & Humphries, 1996; Reinhart, 1992). Reinhart explains that in order to achieve this egalitarian relationship, ‘the researcher abandons control and adopts an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk. Differences in social status and background give way as shared decision-making and self-disclosure develop’ (1992, p. 181). The researchers took up an egalitarian feminist discourse when they sought to use inclusive language and strategies that created a sense of commonality, and when they positioned themselves as ‘non-experts’ with technologies. This discourse was used in a range of project contexts, particularly the workshops held in rural communities and the online conversation groups.

The care and connection discourse

The praxis feminist framework that was used in the project was underpinned by an ethic of care and connection and research methods that sought to foster friendship, trust, mutual care and support. The discourse of care and connection has been associated with the feminine (Gilligan, 1982), and was taken up in much of the talk by both the feminist researchers and the participants, particularly in
messages sent to the project’s online groups. It is closely connected with the humanist, social justice perspective of many of the women involved in the project. This discourse is associated with feminist practices that aim to meet women’s needs and create research contexts that are ‘safe, friendly and comfortable’.

The academic expert discourse

The academic expert discourse that was also used, at times, by the feminist researchers reflects, in part, the requirement to be accountable to project partners, and to their university bureaucracy. Parpart points out that the ‘expert’ is ‘embedded in Enlightenment thought’ and in the use of scientific knowledge and methods (1995, pp. 222–223). This discourse therefore tends to emphasize differences in power, knowledge and expertise. It was mostly found in reports and papers on the project that used academic or specialized social science terminology, but was also evident in the occasional use of academic and occupational titles. The academic expert discourse seeks to demonstrate that the research was conducted using rigorous methodologies, that the results are ‘valid’, and that the researchers are well qualified, and have expert knowledge of the specialized concepts, theories and issues in their field.

The technology expert discourse

As well as ‘feminist activists’ and ‘academic researchers’, the researchers were also positioned as ‘communication technology experts’ by the participants. Feminist critiques of technology and technical expertise have highlighted the gendered power relations embedded in the discourses and practices associated with technology and expertise. Wajcman suggests that this feminist analysis ‘reveals the extent to which expertise is monopolised by men’ (1991, p. 165). The subject position ‘technology expert’ can therefore often be a problematic one for women. The technology expert discourse was particularly evident in the workshops, in which members of the research team provided information on telecommunications policies and issues, and technologies such as computers and the internet. As Figure 1 illustrates, this discourse intersects with the academic expert discourse in this context.

Analysis and deconstruction of the discourses

This section analyses four of the discourses that were taken up in the project and undertakes a deconstruction of selected themes and metaphors identified in the analysis. The aim of this analysis is to identify and critically analyse the underly-
ing assumptions about empowerment and disempowerment that are embedded in the discourses taken up by those involved in the project. However, using a both/and logic that underpins the concept of *differance* (Derrida, 1978), this analysis suggests ways in which the concepts ‘empowerment’ and ‘disempowerment’ interpenetrate each other and are not separate and distinct from one another. It also recognizes the ‘soft’ edges of any discourse, where a word, explanation, or tone of voice can transform a discourse of *care and connection* into an ‘expert’ discourse and can move quickly back again to position the speaker as carer.

Due to their high level of involvement in the design and conduct of the project, and in ongoing communication and interaction with the participants, the main focus of this analysis is the subject positions and discourses taken up by the feminist researchers. However, given the relational model of power being used, and our aim to identify effects of the discourses that were taken up, our analysis also inevitably draws on the various discourses available to the rural participants.

**Attempting to create more equal power relations**

An *egalitarian feminist* discourse was identified in various texts and in the practices that attempted to produce a more ‘equal’ relationship between the feminist researchers and rural women participants. For example, the brochure about the project states:

> We aim to make this project as participative as possible: women taking part will be co-researchers actively working together with us on this project.

Use of this discourse of ‘participation as ideal’ by the researchers produced subject positions that included ‘non-expert’, ‘advocate for rural women’, ‘supportive friend’, and ‘nurturing mother’. The *egalitarian feminist* discourse was often used by the researchers in an attempt to avoid positioning themselves as ‘urban academic experts’ with the attendant connotations of ‘privileged’ status, ‘expert’ knowledge and hierarchical power relations, in the context of a project that aimed to be empowering for ‘disadvantaged’ rural women.

The *egalitarian feminist* discourse was also produced through the use of the inclusive terms ‘we’ and ‘our’, in ways that suggest common concerns and an equality of status between researchers and participants. These terms are used in opposition to the more exclusive terms ‘your’ and ‘their’, that can signify differences in concerns and an inequality of status in the context of a feminist research project. Examples of this are:

> What information about technology and policy development can we share? What are our concerns for the future? How can we work together to get technology working for women? (invitation to 1996 workshops)
then about 1.15 we want to move onto looking ahead, and there are two aspects that we've planned: one is to do a bit of brainstorming and visioning about what the future might be that we might like to work towards . . . understanding that we’re all at different stages with understanding the new technologies . . . (research team member, 1996 workshop)

This discourse suggests that the feminist researchers sought to work in collaboration with, and advocate on behalf of, rural women in an activist way. However, a shift towards the use of less inclusive the terms such as ‘you’ and ‘your’ was also indicated in the workshop invitations in phrases such as ‘What are your burning issues?’ and ‘What have been your experiences with technology since the last workshop?’. These phrases suggested that the researchers would also be collecting information in a more one-way fashion.

Equally, the use of the terms ‘sharing information’ and ‘sharing issues and experiences’, rather than ‘giving information’ and ‘hearing issues and experiences’ implies that the research involves a two-way communication process in which some mutual disclosure will occur. Such acts of mutual disclosure were occasionally made during various project activities, particularly the online groups. Both the rural participants and the researchers sent messages about their personal lives and experiences. Some of these messages were about the researchers’ connections with rural areas. The rural background of two researchers was also mentioned in the project brochure and web site. In addition, the information provided to welink subscribers stated:

Although we are all city dwellers at the moment, most members of the Research Team have some experience of living in rural communities.

This discourse is part of the ‘politics of inclusion’ that underpinned the project methodology, which, as Ang suggests, is ‘always ultimately based on a notion of commonality and community’ (1995, p. 57). Like the rural women, the researchers also received messages of support in response to their stories of stressful or difficult times at work or in their personal lives. These texts position the researchers as ‘former rural dwellers’ and ‘women in need of support’, thus establishing some commonality between them and the rural participants.

Another strategy used by the feminist researchers in an attempt to create more equal power relations with the workshop participants was to position themselves as wives or mothers, as well as researchers or academics. Positioning themselves as mothers, and talking about their children and grandchildren and their use of email to keep in touch with family members, was another means by which the urban researchers could create a sense of commonality with the rural participants. Use of the metaphor ‘mother’ is analysed in more detail in the next section.

Drawing on an egalitarian feminist discourse, which emphasized taking women’s needs into account, the processes used in the workshops were framed as ‘flexible’, ‘non-threatening’, ‘relaxed’, ‘informal’ and ‘inclusive’. The workshop
invitations suggested that any woman could take part in the discussions, no matter what their level of knowledge or experience with communication technologies. Along with the attempt to use a ‘clear, women-friendly’ language style, these framings of the workshop process enabled the context to be read as ‘safe’ and ‘comfortable’ by most participants. In this friendly context, participants who positioned themselves as ‘inexperienced internet users’ could freely interrupt an information-giving session with questions and comments, while those who positioned themselves as ‘competent, experienced internet users’ could display their knowledge and experience of new ICTs.

However, the evaluation showed that the workshop processes and the diversity of women who participated also had disempowering effects on some participants. These included feelings of exclusion for some, not having a voice for their issues, ‘embarrassment’ because of a lack of knowledge about new ICTs, and greater fear and concern about the impacts of new technologies. In addition, some of the researchers themselves (including the first author) reported experiencing frustration, intimidation and a sense of exclusion and powerlessness at times during the project. Reasons identified for these disempowering effects include the lack of collaboration among the research team at times, the ‘hierarchical’ practices of some researchers, and the contradictions between the egalitarian feminist ideals of the researchers and the reality of the project’s competitive, male-dominated academic context.

Nevertheless, some of the women who experienced these forms of disempowerment also experienced a significant increase in empowerment from taking part in the same activity that had disempowering effects. For example, while Ingrid, a professional woman living in a rural town, developed greater confidence in using email and the internet from participating in the online groups, she also reported feeling ‘quite excluded at times’ from the WeChat group. She provided several reasons for this, including feeling that she lacked sufficient knowledge to contribute to the predominantly farm-based issues that were discussed. Numerous examples of this kind were evident in the analysis. This suggests that an activity that is experienced as empowering can sometimes also be experienced as disempowering and vice versa, depending on the context, the perspective of those involved, and other factors such as the type of power–knowledge relations that become established.

**Positioning the researchers as ‘friends’ and ‘nurturing mothers’**

Jones points out that feminist discourse is ‘often . . . permeated by a language that speaks in familial and intimate tones’ (1990, p. 787). A care and connection discourse that used familial language was very evident in much of the talk by both the researchers and the participants. For example, the researchers labelled the methodology used in the project ‘the friendship model’ and the online group
welink was often referred to as a ‘family’ by its members. As well as the friendships that developed between the participants, the relations among the research team and between the researchers and the participants were characterized as ‘friendship’ by research team members and some of the rural women. Participants and researchers were positioned as ‘friends’:

[name of rural participant] felt that we all knew who was on wechat, we knew them all, they all participated, it was like being at a meeting with friends. (interview with rural online group member)

I’ve appreciated the opportunity to get to know so many of these women and I think some of them have become more than just people I’ve worked with on a project, they’ve become friends and people I want to associate with beyond work. (interview with research team member)

Two rural participants used the metaphor ‘mother’ to describe the female researchers. However, while the use of this metaphor in this context signifies the supportive, nurturing role of the female researchers, it also has hierarchical connotations.

Marilyn, a farmer who was an active participant, referred to the female researchers as ‘mother figures’ and positioned herself in a relationship of ‘child-like dependency’ with them (the latter is our term). In the following exchange, the interviewer resisted her implication that the researchers had a hierarchical relationship with the project participants:

Marilyn: Yes, and I also appreciate the mediating influence of you and Liz and Eve up the top there.
Interviewer: Yeah?
Marilyn: We do see you as . . .
Interviewer: Up the top. No hierarchies here. [both laugh]
Marilyn: No, but as somebody said, mother figures the other day. It is like that. [both laugh] Like if you all abandoned us, we’d feel a bit bereft.

Her use of the term ‘mother figures’ referred to a comment in a message from a welink member, who described the researchers as ‘the mothers of welink’ and the welink members as ‘the children you spawned’. These metaphors convey a caring, maternal image of the research team in a very direct way. However, as Kenway and Modra (1992) argue, such a connection with mothering is problematic because of its essentialist associations with the traditional nurturing role of women. In the context of a feminist action research project, this type of representation clearly works to maintain existing gender roles that are seen by many feminists as oppressive. In the dominant Australian culture, the subject position ‘mother’ is also one that is often devalued.

In addition, in the context of a classroom or a feminist action research project, a nurturing subject position produces a ‘problem of authority’ which is related to women’s perceived lack of capacity to exercise authority and the desire
to ‘foster “horizontal” power relations’ (Kenway & Modra, 1992, p. 153). The analysis of the egalitarian feminist discourse showed the ways in which this ‘problem of authority’ operated in the workshop context, in which an attempt was made to avoid the ‘expert’ role. For example, during some workshops, the researchers sometimes found it difficult to assert their authority as facilitators. As a result, the older, ‘high profile’ activist rural women often dominated the talk at the expense of others with less confidence and status.

Displaying power, knowledge and academic expertise

An academic expert discourse was taken up in various texts associated with the project, sometimes in conjunction with the egalitarian feminist discourse. This discourse signified a hierarchical relationship between the ‘privileged’ urban academic ‘experts’ and the more ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘disempowered’ women in rural communities who participated in the project. For example, oral and written communication that used titles such as ‘Senior Lecturer’ or ‘Doctor’ positioned the researchers as having a higher occupational and educational status, and greater power, knowledge and expertise compared with most of the workshop participants.

Several participants provided details of their academic qualifications in their welink introductions, or talked about their postgraduate studies in their welink messages. This academic expert discourse positioned some women as ‘uneducated’ and lacking knowledge of certain topics, such as feminism or community development, which were occasionally discussed on welink. The evaluation data suggests that the effects of this discourse, for some participants, included feeling ‘intimidated’ and, at times, silenced, due to their lower educational level or lack of knowledge of some issues. However, the dominance of talk about farming matters on wechat also had disempowering effects on some of the professional women who lacked knowledge of farming life and practices.

The project’s feminist PAR methodology and methods made certain assumptions about rural women’s needs. These assumptions indicate that an ‘expert needs’ discourse (Fraser, 1989, p. 171) was used in some of the texts produced by the researchers. This discourse is signified, for example, in the lists of strategies which were assumed to be empowering for women. These lists were included in some project publications. This ‘expert needs’ discourse is closely associated with the academic expert discourse.

An academic expert discourse was also evident in the specialist social science terminology used in various publications, particularly the final report on the project (see RWICTs Team, 1999). In such documents, the ‘shared experiences and issues’ voiced in various activities became ‘data’ to be ‘coded’, ‘interpreted’ and ‘analysed’. In addition, each workshop participant was asked to complete forms and questionnaires that enabled ‘demographic data’ to be ‘collected’ and
'categorised', and statistics produced. While this analysis implies that the method-
ological practices and the data analysis processes were somewhat dehumanizing
and disempowering, the final project report (RWICTs Team, 1999) also includes
extensive quotation from participants, thus giving them a voice, to some extent.
The project reports also gave veracity to the rural women’s claims of being dis-
advantaged in their access to various ICTs. In addition, the occupational and
organizational information and statistics presented about the participants high-
lighted their diverse, multiple roles, thus positioning them as valuable and com-
mitted members of rural communities. However, we concur with Bhavnani
(1988) and others who suggest that the connection between ‘giving voice’ to
women and empowerment is a problematic one.

While the academic expert discourse clearly had some disempowering
effects, it can also be seen as empowering in the sense that it gave the project, and
therefore rural women’s needs and issues, greater credibility and validity. The
presentation of the participants as ‘data to be managed’ was therefore likely to
have had more influence on those involved, than if a more ‘subjective’, ‘caring’
feminist discourse had been maintained. In this way, the academic expert disc-
ourse made a significant contribution to the usefulness of the project while
simultaneously being implicated in power–knowledge relationships of benefit to
the careers of the researchers involved.

Avoiding the technology expert discourse

The feminist researchers used various strategies in an attempt to avoid taking
up the position of ‘expert’, particularly in the workshops. These workshops
included providing information about new ICTs and, where possible, hands on
experience with the internet and email. The researchers indicated that they asso-
ciated this subject position with the disempowering, hierarchical, ‘power over’
relationships identified with men and masculinity. Some researchers positioned
themselves as ‘non-experts’ very directly at times. For example, one of the femi-
nist researchers who had less technical knowledge than some of the others on the
team made the following comment during a workshop:

\[\ldots\text{it’s not about that you need to be an expert in any kind of way. And that’s the situation with us as a research team too.}\]

When Kate, the researcher who provided the technical information at most of the
project workshops, was asked, in an interview, how successful the research team
was in creating a ‘more equal footing’ between the researchers and the partici-
pants, she responded:

\[\text{Oh, I think we were very much cast as experts. I particularly always felt like that and it was because of the role I was playing in the workshops about providing the information about the technology and, as much as I tried to make that in lay persons}\]
Despite Kate’s attempts to create a non-hierarchical relationship between herself and the participants by using ‘lay person’s terms’ and adopting a friendly, informal, inclusive style, her dominant subject position was ‘the expert’. Kate implies that she was ‘cast’ in this role by others and therefore had no choice. However, many of the participants clearly wanted and expected Kate to adopt the position of ‘the expert’ who could satisfy their ‘hunger’ for information in a ‘professional’ way and ‘open their eyes’ to the benefits and problems of new ICTs such as the internet. This example of the way in which we are positioned by others demonstrates the limits to empowerment practices in feminist action research.

Some participants also positioned the researchers as ‘friends’ and ‘mothers’ who would provide care, support and guidance, as well as relatively powerful academics who could advocate persuasively on their behalf to policy-makers. This suggests that if Kate had considered this complex range of subjectivities, she may have viewed her positioning as ‘the expert’ as much less problematic than she did.

While the research team attempted to take up a ‘non-expert’ subject position, they were unavoidably positioned as having a moderate to very high level of knowledge and expertise with ICTs. At a workshop that included a large proportion of older retired women, two researchers and another woman were introduced to the group in ways that emphasized their experience with computers. Following this, Mary, an older participant, described herself and some of the other participants as ‘ordinary people’ who were ‘not doing any of these things’. Mary was introduced as someone who ‘does home duties, she’s a pensioner’. The woman introducing her explained: ‘we’ve got no computer skills’. In addition, in her feedback on another workshop, a farming woman with no experience with using email or the internet commented:

> We felt a little bit out of place. We were just ordinary women and most of the others were professional people.

These discourses of powerlessness emphasize the difference in status between the ‘ordinary’ women with little computer knowledge or education and the other participants with good computer knowledge and tertiary education. This suggests that one of the effects of bringing these women together was that some women with less formal education, or those with much less knowledge of new ICTs, experienced a certain degree of exclusion and disempowerment. This was clearly indicated by one of the farming women without tertiary education qualifications, who reported often feeling ‘a little bit intimidated by the academia’ who were members of welink.

Although the feminist researchers appeared to find the subject position...
'expert' highly problematic, their policy-related, technical and research knowledge was clearly valuable to the participants in many ways, and often greatly appreciated. The knowledge and information that the women shared and obtained through project activities, such as workshops and online groups, resulted in various empowering effects such as increased confidence in using and talking about new communication technologies. While a few participants were critical of the ‘computerese’ used in the workshops, most reported that they appreciated the ‘professional’, ‘non-patronising’, ‘easy to understand’ presentations about technology, and many clearly found it empowering that these presentations were made by a woman.

Reducing the ‘impossible burden’ on feminist action researchers

Our analysis has highlighted the contradictory effects of feminist discourses of empowerment in a feminist action research project and ways in which the project’s methodology operated as a regime of truth that regulated and constrained the discourses and practices of this form of research. Empowerment and disempowerment are clearly not separate and distinct, but can be viewed as intersecting discourses. This suggests that action research processes that attempt to empower will inevitably produce disempowerment at certain moments. Claims that action research has had empowering effects therefore need to be examined more critically and reflexively.

In her insightful analysis, Walkerdine shows how female teachers experienced an ‘incredible and impossible burden . . . to be “teacher” and “mother”, to be nurturant and caring’, due to their responsibility for maintaining the ‘moral order’ and the possibility of ‘freedom’ in a democratic society (1986, p. 70). These responsibilities, which involved ‘the management of an idealist dream, an impossible fiction’, often induced ‘guilt at not being good enough’ (p. 71). Our deconstructive readings suggest that a similarly ‘impossible burden’ was placed on the feminist action researchers involved in the Rural Women and ICTs project who used an idealist egalitarian feminist discourse that produced expectations of ‘equal relations’ between the researchers and the participants. However, the researchers’ attempts to establish these ‘non-hierarchical’ relations were made in the context of a project involving knowledgeable academics and industry partners in senior positions. Thus, the egalitarian feminist discourse was constantly undercut by the academic expert and technology expert discourses that were also taken up.

The analysis of the four discourses available to the researchers suggests that they each had empowering and disempowering effects. For example, the egalitarian feminist discourse produced a context in which many participants were
able to give voice to their ‘burning issues’, but resulted in some women (including the researchers) experiencing reduced status and authority and other forms of powerlessness. This suggests that the discourses associated with feminist PAR can be powerful or powerless, depending on the contexts in which they are produced. The analysis also indicated ways in which both the academic expert and egalitarian feminist discourses operated as a regime of truth. This was evident, for instance, in the assumptions that were made about participatory processes that would be empowering for rural women, and the various strategies that were used to create a sense of equality between the researchers and the participants.

The analysis also highlighted the problematic nature of some of the subject positions that were taken up by the researchers. In particular, the position of ‘expert’, which was rejected by the researchers (but not by the rural women), due to its associations with patriarchal science and masculinity, became unavoidably imposed onto the researchers in contexts such as workshops. The researchers were also constructed, by some, as ‘friends’ and ‘mother figures’, suggesting intimacy and closeness. However, these subject positions also created some dependency.

The researchers were often much more critical of the project’s methodology, methods and outcomes, compared with the rural participants. This appeared to be due to various factors, including the ‘impossible’ aims (our term) and ‘unmanageable’ number of activities that were undertaken, the tensions that developed among some members of the research team, and the multiple subject positions taken up by the researchers. Our analysis indicates that feminists working on PAR projects would benefit from a greater awareness of their often conflicting subjectivities, the potentially disempowering effects of some of these subjectivities, and the complex power relations enacted in these projects. However, as Walkerdine argues, while the ‘multiple positionings’ accorded to women are often in contradiction, they can provide ‘sites for struggle and resistance’ (1986, p. 74). For example, rather than rejecting the ‘expert’ subject position, the feminist researchers could have regarded the various discourses as offering new ‘possibilities’ for the formation of new subjectivities which produce ‘a range of tensions, a potentially constructive ambivalence, from which to understand social experience’ (Jacques, 1992, p. 593; see also Treleaven, 2001). Such new subjectivities would include the feminist researchers accepting being positioned as experts, and thus authoritative knowers.

The idealistic and evangelical discourses taken up by the feminists involved in the Rural Women and ICTs project clearly produced an ‘impossible burden’. However, we argue that the more realistic perspective offered by feminist poststructuralism is likely to lessen this burden that results when feminist action researchers seek women’s empowerment in the context of collaborative academic research projects. Some feminists argue that poststructuralist approaches can be paralysing (Hoff, 1994). In contrast, we propose that this framework can enable
feminists to liberate a multitude of possible subjectivities, to practice what we call a ‘knowing humility’, and to become courageous enough to openly acknowledge the limitations and dangers of our research practices.

Notes
1 From henceforth these authors will be referred to as ‘RWICTs Team’.
2 The term ‘rural women’ is used in this article in relation to the Rural Women and ICTs project as an abbreviation for the phrase ‘women living in rural, regional and remote Queensland and elsewhere in Australia’.
3 For example, an analysis of the welink group, which was established by the Rural Women and ICTs project, found that the care and connection discourse, which was often produced by this group, is a particularly powerful discourse that can sometimes silence or stifle other more critical discourses in the context of this online group for women (Lennie, 2000).
4 All names have been changed.

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Framing practice-research engagement for democratizing knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Practice research engagement (PRE) is increasingly important for producing knowledge and innovations in practice for complex social problem-solving. We pose several questions: Why do PRE? What is required to organize effective PRE? And what is needed for PRE to contribute to democratizing knowledge? We present a framework to encourage researchers to think systematically about organizing PRE that focuses on: 1) frameworks, goals and interests, 2) relationships and organization, 3) strategies and methods, and 4) contextual forces and institutions. We describe challenges to effective engagement posed by these elements and identify a few approaches to dealing with them. We illustrate the concept and the challenges with four case studies – Gender Relations in India; Heroin Prescriptions in Australia; Inter-sectoral Cooperation in Africa and Asia; and Building Grassroots Movements in the US. We argue that PRE that contributes to the democratization of knowledge must pay special attention to social change theories, power relations, long-term domain development strategies and building friendly institutional bases.

KEY WORDS

• knowledge and social change
• knowledge democracy
• knowledge economy
• knowledge production
• participatory action research
• power and knowledge
The role of women is an important issue in social and economic development in India. In the mid-1990s, the Women’s Policy Research and Advocacy Unit at the National Institute of Advanced Studies launched a study of rural women in cooperation with five local non-governmental organization (NGO) partners (Batliwala, Gurumurthy, Anitha & Wali, 1999). With inputs from NGO partners and local women the team produced an innovative survey focused on gender relations rather than women in isolation, and explored issues raised by local participants – such as women’s ownership of land. One local NGO was shocked to learn that less than 10 percent of women in some areas owned or shared ownership of land, in spite of the NGO’s previous work with them. The NGO launched a movement for joint ownership, and a survey five years later showed that more than 50 percent of land-owning households had created joint titles. The project has become a widely imitated benchmark in gender studies, recognized for both conceptual and methodological innovation.

In a five-year project examining the feasibility of treating dependent heroin users with prescription heroin, Australian university-based researchers interacted widely with heroin users and ex-users, police, treatment and other service providers, policy makers, opinion leaders and the general community through workshops, joint projects, and formal and informal discussions. Although the research remained firmly in academic hands, care was taken not to promulgate inaccurate stereotypes, to find ways to formally recognize inputs, and to provide reciprocal benefits to the stakeholders (Bammer, 1997a; 1997b). At its conclusion in 1995, the comprehensiveness of the research was widely lauded and a broad constituency had been built to advocate the project results. While the idea of heroin prescription was opposed at the outset by many stakeholders, the research concluded that a trial should be conducted and many early opponents supported that decision. The engagement led to a continuing long-term relationship among many of the stakeholders and further collaboration, sometimes initiated by the researchers and sometimes by the practitioners.

Civil society actors and government agencies in the developing world are often very suspicious of one another, but experiments with joint action began in many countries in the 1980s. An international coalition of civil society practitioners and researchers documented cases of cooperation among grassroots groups, NGOs and government agencies in 12 countries in Asia and Africa. Regional members identified cases and case writers credible to all the parties, especially marginalized groups. The case writers drafted cases using a common protocol, shared the drafts with case actors to check accuracy and catalyze further reflections, and then brought case actors to regional conferences in Asia and Africa with coalition researchers and practitioners to extract lessons from analysis across cases. Those lessons were used by donors like the UN Development Programme and US Agency for International Development to foster more cross-sectoral cooperation (e.g. USAID’s New Partnerships Initiative) and by
researchers to build knowledge about sustainable intersectoral problem-solving (Brown & Ashman, 1996) as well as by coalition participants in their development work.

In the fall of 1999, a practitioner fellow (a senior practitioner with a long-term appointment) at Harvard University convened a meeting of practitioners working for grassroots social change in the US to talk about the problems they faced. That meeting gave birth to the Building Movement project, one component of which was a qualitative study of generational differences in leadership in social change groups, an issue identified as important and unstudied (Kunreuther, 2000). For two years, a faculty researcher worked closely with the study as consultant and advisor, helping with study design, supporting its progress through the University review process, training interviewers and commenting on draft reports. The Building Movement project retained control of the project, but after submitting the study report the practitioner fellow asked if the data could be useful to the researcher. They agreed to jointly reanalyze the data, and they are currently co-authoring a book on the results as well as producing more ideas for the practice field.

Introduction

These are all cases of practice-research engagement (PRE). Such engagements offer opportunities to combine the insights of practice with the analytic tools of research to produce new knowledge and innovations in practice. We will use these cases to illustrate issues that confront researchers and practitioners as they draw on each other’s special resources to understand and affect complex problems.

Practice research engagement

Practitioners span a wide range of social actors, and include policy makers, business people, service providers and social activists. They are concerned with effective practice in a variety of arenas. Researchers are a narrower group, often located in universities, businesses, government agencies and think tanks. They are particularly concerned with producing or elaborating knowledge. Practice-research engagements include a wide range of interactions that involve reciprocity and space for learning, as the examples in the opening paragraphs illustrate.

The term ‘practice-research engagement’ emerged from discussions among civil society researchers and practitioners from around the world who use such engagements to foster social transformation and development (Brown, 2001). We use the term to characterize a wide range of possible interactions. PRE can involve from two to many parties, and can include researchers from a variety of...
disciplines and practitioners from an array of sectors. The problems addressed can be local, national, transnational or global; they may vary greatly in complexity. Engagements can challenge elites or be controlled by them; they can empower marginalized groups or make them dependent. Relationships between practitioners and researchers can be largely instrumental or can require deeper partnership. Engagements may be fleeting events or long-lasting collaborations. PRE enables practitioners and researchers to learn together about problems of mutual interest, combining their perspectives to build concepts, insights and practical innovations that neither could produce alone.

This conception is broader than many early definitions of ‘action research’ as evaluating interventions (e.g. Lewin, 1948), ‘participatory research’ as conscientizing the oppressed (e.g. Hall, 1975), ‘action learning’ as individual development (e.g. Revans, 1982), and other approaches that combine practice and research. It resembles more the recent expanded definitions of ‘action research’ (e.g. Reason & Bradbury, 2001) designed to cover the emerging range of possibilities. But even the broader definitions of action research suggest commitment to some form of systematic inquiry, and we are also interested in very brief engagements that affect practice and research. So the PRE concept is intended to erect a very large conceptual tent.

We believe that PRE has particular value in applied fields and disciplines, where the implicit and explicit knowledge of practitioners can be a vital resource to researchers. Fields like medicine and engineering have long histories of systematically combining the insights of research and practice to deal with complex problems. Indeed, analyses of patterns of knowledge production suggest that discipline-based research driven by the priorities of academic fields in universities is increasingly complemented by application-centered research driven by problems in various domains of practice (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow, 1994; Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons, 2002). There are many forces at work in modern societies to press for a wider variety and increased frequency of engagements between research and practice.

**Democratizing knowledge**

Much of the application of PRE in the developing world has focused on enhancing the ability of the marginalized groups to gain access to others’ knowledge or give voice to their own. The links between knowledge and power have been well established (Foucault, 1979; Freire, 1970), and the framing of critical questions has often excluded some voices and views from public decision-making (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Post-modern thinkers have highlighted the links between the construction of knowledge and the construction of power (Foucault, 1977), and challenged the idea that research produces a body of objective, universally applicable and unassailable truths (Fals-Borda, 2001). Movements for popular
education and participatory research have built on these roots to conceive of knowledge generation as a process of transforming power relations.

If knowledge generation is closely linked to power, the work of researchers is not neutral to many constituents—their work may serve or extend existing hierarchies, or it may help to transform existing arrangements. Researcher choices assume great significance today, when inquiry increasingly serves a vast ‘knowledge economy’ in which new ideas and the capacity to produce them are critical commodities to be owned, invested in, patented and protected (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). In ‘knowledge democracies’, in contrast, knowledge is ‘a resource that affects decisions’ (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p. 74) that can be widely shared, jointly generated and utilized to help marginalized groups to gain voice, re-frame issues and debates, and expand their visibility and power. We are particularly interested in PRE that helps to democratize knowledge by enabling marginalized groups to join in the social construction of knowledge, awareness and action.

This article

Our aims in this article are three-fold. First, we argue that PRE can produce value that is not available to other forms of inquiry. We emphasize here the value for researchers, though we believe that practitioners can also gain a great deal from such engagements. Second, we argue that gaining that value requires meeting a set of challenges in organizing and implementing PRE, and we present a framework for thinking systematically about those challenges. Finally, we focus on the special challenges of PRE for democratizing knowledge. We believe that many of the challenges for PRE are common across many problems—but readers should recognize that we are particularly sensitized to the issues involved in democratizing knowledge.

Why do PRE?

It is clear that PRE is not easy. In general, PRE makes demands and has pay offs that are outside conventional academic work and reward structures, and so presents particular challenges to researchers. On the other hand, some knowledge is impossible to produce without engaging with practitioners. We will briefly consider four such research results as illustrations—not as an exhaustive list—of the possibilities:

1) early identification of emerging issues,
2) access to sensitive information,
3) new concepts and hypotheses, and
4) credibility with constituencies needed for future impact.
Practitioners are steeped in the day-to-day realities of practice worlds and can help researchers identify important emerging issues that would otherwise remain invisible. In the Building Movement project, for example, initial consultations with practitioners – once their initial distrust of the academics and the academic setting had been allayed – revealed great concern about the state of grassroots social change organizations in the US. They saw generational differences among leaders as an important factor – an idea that appeared nowhere in the existing literature on the sector. So engagement with practitioners enabled the identification of an area of work largely unrecognized by the existing research community.

Alliance with practitioners may also enable researchers to gain access to sensitive information that would not otherwise be available. In the Indian Gender Relations project, the researchers’ alliance with local NGOs to develop the research framework, create the survey and collect the data made it possible for respondents to be interviewed by NGO staff they already knew and trusted. Many of these women live at the very bottom of powerful social and economic hierarchies, and they survive only by being careful about what they say. Outside investigators would be viewed with suspicion and get cautious or inaccurate answers, while the NGO interviewers had the relationships needed to get frank responses.

Working with sophisticated practitioners can also help researchers create new concepts and hypotheses that would be difficult to develop otherwise. In the Asian conference on Intersectoral Cooperation cases, an NGO leader pointed out the critical role of personal relationships in cooperation across sector boundaries: His partnership with a state agency to build rural biogas plants grew from a relationship with the agency director, who had years before been an intern at the NGO. When another official replaced the director, the partnership disintegrated. That discussion contributed substantially to the development of a framework focused on social capital as both a base for and a product of intersectoral cooperation.

Engagement with practitioners can also build credibility for the research with key constituencies. In the Australian Heroin Prescription study, the engagement with police and drug users as well as doctors and policy makers created substantial credibility for the study and its results. Engagement led some constituents, opponents of the concept at the outset, to support a systematic trial to test the impacts of providing heroin by prescription. Where research seeks to influence public policy, support from key constituents such as police unions and commissioners can be extremely valuable.

In short, PRE can produce valuable results for researchers. But those results require commitment and attention to solving a variety of challenges. We turn now to a framework for understanding some of the critical issues involved in effective PRE.
Organizing practice research engagement

We argue that PRE initiatives must explicitly address how they organize their joint work, because otherwise the assumptions of some parties may be accepted by default – and those default assumptions can introduce unintended biases which in turn undermine joint inquiry. Organizing engagements across research and practice differences requires attention to at least four elements:

1) *frameworks, goals and interests* that parties bring and their agreements about priorities for the engagement as a whole,
2) *relationships and organization*, informal and formal, that shape their behavior,
3) *strategies and methods* that the parties adopt to carry out the engagement, and
4) *contextual forces and institutions* that influence engagement activities and outcomes.

Figure 1 presents these elements in graphic form. The central oval represents the PRE initiative. It includes practitioners and researchers (represented by small circles) from four different institutional bases (represented by small ovals). Interactions among practitioners and researchers (arrows within the central oval) develop shared frameworks, goals and interests, build relationships and organization for engagement, and implement strategies and methods for their joint work. Their work is affected by pressures from the institutions they represent (arrows within small ovals) as well as other contextual forces (ovals outside the PRE oval). These factors combine to shape the interaction of the parties and to produce results of the engagement. Many of these factors are also linked by iterative feedback loops that we have left out for simplicity’s sake.

This graphic is a vastly simplified version of the realities of some engagements. The Intersectoral Cooperation study, for example, involved researchers and practitioners from Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America in the original coalition, and expanded to included case practitioners and writers from 13 cases during the conferences. Negotiations over frameworks and goals continued through much of the project: The protocol of questions to guide case writers went through eight drafts prior to discussions with the actual case writers, and was then revised again to fit regional concerns. Although many members of the coalition had good prior relationships, the differences between researchers and practitioners and between industrialized and developing country perspectives required continuing discussion throughout the project. Many years of experience with research projects that ‘extracted’ data without adequate return, for example, led the African regional organizers to propose an inquiry process focused first on an African analysis of the cases followed by an international discussion. The rest of the coalition agreed – albeit reluctantly – to this approach, accepting that the
historical context and institutional pressures on the African participants would undercut their participation otherwise. In short, organizing the Intersectoral Cooperation study involved a great deal of give and take among participants – research and practice, Northern and Southern – to develop mutually acceptable goals and frameworks, relationships and organization, and strategies and methods for joint inquiry.

In the sections that follow we examine some challenges associated with organizing PRE. We identify issues associated with the four elements, and illustrate them from our case examples. Where feasible we also briefly refer to approaches to dealing with them.

Frameworks, goals and interests

The coordination of differing – and sometimes clashing – frameworks, goals and interests is often a central challenge for effective PRE. We will focus here on three kinds of differences:

1) contrasting intellectual and ideological frameworks,
2) disagreements about engagement goals and interests, and
3) differing expectations about ethical practice and accountability.

Figure 1  Organizing practice research engagement
PRE often brings together participants whose perspectives are rooted in fundamentally different intellectual and ideological frameworks. Researchers are typically trained in university-based disciplines that provide well-developed values, concepts and methodologies to guide the production and validation of knowledge. Practitioners bring frameworks from their own constituencies and institutional contexts, with their own definitions of excellence and effectiveness. These differences easily lead to misunderstanding and impatience with each other’s priorities. Practitioners are often irritated by researchers’ obsession with details and the snail-like progress of ‘academic time’, while researchers are often irritated by practitioners’ indifference to important conceptual distinctions and their insistence on emphasizing practical rather than theoretical significance. For many practitioners in the Building Movements project, for example, ‘truth’ is grounded in their identity, experience, affiliation with their constituents and value commitments to justice and democracy, not in the detachment, value neutrality, or commitments to research rigor and independence that is associated with ‘truth’ for many researchers. Framework differences can become polarized when the issues evoke strongly held social as well as professional values.

Researchers and practitioners may also disagree about specific goals and interests with respect to their engagement. The parties need to negotiate agreement about the goals of their joint work and how their various interests will be served. Both the Indian Gender Relations study and the Intersectoral Cooperation study involved ongoing discussions about how their engagement would serve their diverse interests or contribute to shared concerns. The debate over how to handle the African case conference, for example, was resolved to support the African concerns rather than the interests of parties from other regions who wanted to participate. Even when the parties share overall goals and analyses, their priorities and interests may vary on more specific matters. Such differences can be the source of creativity and synergy, but they can also lead to conflict or deadlocks that undermine joint work.

A third area of potentially potent difference is in researcher and practitioner standards of ethical practice and accountability. Researchers may focus on the standards of their disciplines and academic audiences, while practitioners are sensitive to the concerns of their constituents. A potential problem for both researchers and practitioners is that ethics assessment in many research institutions has become increasingly bureaucratized, and their requirements may not match the real issues in the field. The Building Movements project found that assessment by the university Institutional Review Board was not required for projects undertaken by a practitioner – but chose to comply with that process anyway. In the Gender Relations project, NGOs agreed that the researchers would supervise their staff during data collection, and do random cross-checks to ensure data accuracy. Systems for helping PRE initiatives cope with potential conflicts in ethics and accountability standards are not yet commonly available. Tensions over
different standards of ethics and accountability can be particularly acute when parties perceive themselves to be separated by large power inequalities, as in engagements – like the Building Movements project – that bring together elite researchers and representatives of marginalized groups.

The problems of integrating framework differences, goals and interests, and ethics and accountability can be exacerbated when engagements involve researchers from multiple disciplines (e.g. economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, management) and practitioners from diverse institutional bases (e.g. government officials, corporate managers, social activists) or occupational fields (e.g. health, agriculture, engineering, education, community development). The Building Movement project struggled with holding together practitioners from very diverse organizations, and the Intersectoral Cooperation study grappled with building shared perspectives across cases from many sectors and countries.

What approaches and resources can help bring together diverse frameworks, goals, and interests in PRE initiatives? An initial step is recognizing and acknowledging those differences as important topics for discussion, rather than assuming that there is agreement at the outset. Building agreement about frameworks and goals can be supported by advances in collaborative decision-making and conflict management. Work on consensus-building (Susskind, McKearnan & Thomas-Larmer, 1999), multiparty collaboration (Gray, 1989), and finding common ground through future search conferences (Weisbord, 1992) can contribute to building agreement across large initial differences in frameworks, interests and goals. The evolution of ‘interest-based negotiations’ and their applications to multi-party bargaining also offers considerable help for achieving mutually acceptable accommodations of different interests (Fisher & Ury, 1981; Raiffa, 1982). Both the Gender Relations study and the Intersectoral Cooperation study involved negotiations and consensus-building among many parties, particularly in the early phases of their work.

For shared standards of ethics and accountability, early exploration of differences can help identify areas of ambiguity or disagreement. We need clearer expectations about responsibilities of practitioners and researchers when engagements bring together unequal parties for social problem-solving (see Jordan & van Tuijl, 2000). We also need to develop better understanding of how the parties can be held accountable, especially when performance standards are unclear or difficult to measure. Advances in evaluation methods and approaches to shared assessment offer possibilities for better standard setting (e.g. Estrella, 2000; Fetterman, Kaftarian & Wandersman, 1996). In our cases, engagements heightened awareness of the need to accommodate different standards of ethics and accountability. The Gender Relations project emphasized transparency and collective decision-making as ways to remain accountable to stakeholders with very different levels of resources and formal power. The Heroin Trial project focused on an extensive iterative feedback process to provide opportunities for
many actors to learn about project results, both interim and final, and to enable them to voice their own perspectives for incorporation.

Relationships and organization

The course and the results of PRE are shaped by the relationships and organization that govern joint activity. We focus here on the challenges posed by:

1) power differences,
2) suspicion and distrust,
3) control and ownership of decisions, and
4) the division of work among the parties.

Relationships can be undermined by power differences embedded in many aspects of PRE – for example, in hierarchies between scholarly and practice knowledge, between research and practice institutions, and among individual actors. Some forms of power are ascribed by the social context; others are claimed or derived from internal capacities. Power is often associated with access to and control of funding. Many practitioners feel less powerful than researchers. In many PRE initiatives funding is controlled by researchers, exacerbating power relationships in which some practitioners already feel disadvantaged. Practitioners may control access to important information, but they often exercise this power through silence and passive resistance rather than active pursuit of their interests. In the first meeting of the Building Movement project, when invited to raise questions, practitioners challenged the researchers’ intention to record the discussion for later transcription. When the project leader dismantled the equipment and sent the technician away, participants’ willingness to participate actively in the discussion increased substantially.

Power imbalances, prior history and mutual stereotyping often create suspicion and distrust among the parties that erode the quality of information and analysis generated by the engagement. If the parties cannot share controversial information with one another, potentially critical issues may go unnoticed or undiscussed. Participants in the Building Movement project came with considerable suspicion and distrust of Harvard – clearly an institutional bastion of the US establishment. Experiences in the first conference – such as the recording decision – reduced participants’ distrust of the practitioner fellow and the project – ‘As long as it’s you that is doing it.’ Successful PRE may require investing considerable effort in building trust among key actors, especially where there are histories of large power differences or conflict.

Control, decision-making and ownership of activities and results are also potential bones of contention, and the creation of formal and informal organizational arrangements for PRE may privilege some actors over others. In projects defined as research activities, for example, researchers may be privileged in deci-
sions about research goals, strategies and methods, interpretation and dissemination, with relatively little input from other participants. While researchers controlled most of the decisions in the Australian Heroin Trial project, they used their power to broker better understanding between powerful and marginalized stakeholders. In other cases, practitioners – particularly those who control funding – may control many decisions, as did the practitioner leaders of the Building Movement project. In still other cases the organization of PRE may involve both researchers and practitioners in many decisions, such as the India Gender Relations case. Participation in decision-making can affect both the quality of the decisions and the commitment of parties to their implementation.

Organizational arrangements also define the division of work by which PRE is carried out. Such arrangements shape how issues are identified or problems are defined, how possible solutions are conceptualized, how data collection is structured and implemented, how and when the results are interpreted, and how recommendations for action and dissemination emerge. Some divisions of work, such as those of the Building Movement and Gender Relations projects, engage practitioners early in identifying issues and defining problems. Others start with well-defined problems and questions and engage practitioners in more narrowly defined roles. Parties may disagree about the value and legitimacy of some divisions of labor. In the Heroin Trial project, for example, some parties had to be persuaded that heroin users or police union representatives would make valuable contributions to the study.

What resources and approaches are available for fostering effective PRE relationships and organization? The emphasis on ‘participatory’ in ‘participatory rural appraisal’ (PRA) and ‘participatory action research’ (PAR) reflect the importance accorded to building mutual influence between researchers and practitioners. PRA focuses on ‘handing over the stick’ to enable grassroots participants to take charge of the engagement (Singh, 2001). PAR emphasizes building communities of interest and mutual influence between researchers and practice communities (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Whyte & Greenwood, 1991). In our examples, the Indian Gender Relations study worked with local NGOs to develop and use research methods sensitized to the power realities of rural settings, and the Intersectoral Cooperation study systematically chose case writers who had good access to grassroots participants in their cases. Successful PRE needs to empower both researchers and practitioners to be influential contributors to their joint inquiry. The Australian Heroin Trial study, for example, sought to legitimate the voices of both heroin users and on-the-ground police as stakeholders with valuable insights about the problem.

The issue of trust is multifaceted, involving concerns about motives, competence, dependability and respect (Ferguson & Stoutland, 1999). In the Heroin Trial engagement, the researchers dealt with trust by active listening to stakeholders and taking care to behave in a trustworthy manner. In the Gender
Relations and Intersectoral Cooperation projects, trust was built in long-term relationships. The Building Movements project increased trust by responding to practitioner concerns, such as the objection to recording early discussions. It is probably less a question of any one particular organizational arrangement than it is a question of creating arrangements seen as appropriate and legitimate by participants. It is important to divide work in ways that use the special resources of different parties well. The India Gender Relations project, for example, made good use of the trust between NGO staff and local women to collect good data about sensitive topics, like domestic violence or reproductive decisions. But dividing work, particularly by ascribed roles, may also obscure other potential contributions. The decision to include land ownership as a variable in the Gender Relations study emerged from consultations with local women and NGOs about ways to understand village gender relations. Insight into the value of existing social capital for the Intersectoral Cooperation project emerged from conference discussions with a thoughtful practitioner. So effective division of work for PRE may require both roles for recognized resources and mechanisms that create opportunities for unexpected contributions to emerge.

**Inquiry strategies and methods**

The variety and complexity of strategies and methods of inquiry available is bewildering to researchers, let alone to practitioners. We focus here on four combinations of inquiry strategy and methods that have emerged as common patterns in PRE for social problem-solving:

1) focused puzzle-solving,
2) issue exploration and agenda setting,
3) intervention and assessment, and
4) long-term domain development (Brown, 2001).

These patterns use quite different technologies and methods, and represent different entry points for researchers.

How can PRE carry out inquiries that provide unambiguous answers to clearly framed questions? Sometimes PRE goals may be met by a relatively brief and straightforward contact between practitioners and researchers. *Focused puzzle-solving* deals with well-defined problems for which existing methods may provide useful results. For example, researchers may seek practitioners’ assistance to generate information within the context of a clearly established research design. The Australian Heroin Trial project, for example, wanted a state-of-the-art assessment to shape national policy, and recognized that the inputs of many constituencies were important to understanding the issues. Puzzle-solving PRE is most useful where the problem is well understood, many constituents agree about
desirable outcomes and existing strategies and methods are appropriate to generating authoritative answers.

When problems are novel, poorly understood, or rapidly changing, other approaches may be more useful. Such situations may call for an inquiry strategy and method like issue exploration and agenda setting. This approach can enhance our understanding of complex and poorly understood problems and set agendas for future work by drawing on the insights of diverse disciplinary and practice perspectives. Issue exploration can enrich analysis or even redefine issues. But methods of inquiry may be needed that enable participation of many actors, across disciplines and fields of practice, in exploring and defining the issues and generating initial ideas about effective action. The Building Movement initiative explored the needs of grassroots activists in the US, for example, through a series of open forums to articulate issues and identify important dilemmas. More focused inquiry only became relevant after the exploration process identified critical concerns. Increasingly technologies are available for issue exploration and agenda setting across research and practice perspectives, such as ‘executive sessions’ on critical policy initiatives (Moore & Hartmann, 1999) or ‘future search conferences’ that build common ground for joint action among many stakeholders (Weisbord, 1992).

Some problems require inquiry that can test ideas about problem-solving. PRE strategies and methods organized for intervention and assessment can develop and evaluate approaches to solving particular problems. This inquiry strategy often combines the insights of practitioners and the comparative analysis tools of researchers to assess the efficacy of problem-solving and factors that contribute to success or failure. Such engagements can improve existing programs, identify effective practices, test theories of change and develop frameworks for adapting interventions to fit new contexts. The study of Intersectoral Cooperation, for example, employed a case comparison methodology that combined the perspectives of many actors to develop new knowledge. The results shaped future problem-solving by actors in the cases and policy-makers concerned about wider application of intersectoral initiatives. Many PRE initiatives combine intervention and assessment of impacts. Participatory action research, for example, involves practitioners and researchers in joint efforts to solve problems in organizations (Whyte, 1991) and communities (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). More recently analysts have sought to learn across those approaches (e.g. Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Selener, 1997).

Finally, some experiences with PRE build relationships that evolve into long-term collaborations among the parties. The pattern of long-term domain development builds new knowledge and innovations in practice through significant investment over long periods of time. Such initiatives often grow out of initial contacts that create the social capital necessary for risky, difficult, but potentially rewarding domain development. Domain development may involve
creating new areas of knowledge and practice, and going against ‘conventional wisdom’ to do so. The Gender Relations study in India, for example, created an ongoing relationship between the research center, its NGO partners, and the local women’s groups that served as a base for ongoing learning, advocacy and further research on gender relations. Domain development initiatives can span countries, disciplines, actors and long periods. And they can reshape knowledge and action on problems for years to come.

Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics and the advantages and disadvantages of this range of strategies and methods.

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Source: Brown, 2001, p. 34.
Contextual forces and institutions

Up until now we have focused on the elements of PRE associated with the interaction among researchers and practitioners within the PRE oval in Figure 1. But those interactions are also subject to pressures from the context in which the engagement and its parties are embedded, such as:

1) external political, economic, social, cultural and technological forces
2) the engagement’s institutional home, and
3) the organizational bases of its participants.

PRE initiatives are inevitably vulnerable to broad contextual forces that can facilitate or frustrate joint work. Some of these forces are painfully obvious: Economic declines can erode the resource base required to support the initiative, or political polarizations can undercut participants’ abilities to engage in constructive discussions. Reductions in international assistance to the region in the 1990s made it difficult to include Latin American cases in the Intersectoral Cooperation study, even though many creative examples were emerging there. Still other contextual forces may be quite subtle, especially to outsiders. In South Asia, for example, the caste system is deeply embedded in people’s consciousness, and it privileges scholars and thinkers (the Brahmans). So researchers in the Gender Relations study promoted local participation in the project against strong cultural biases. Contextual forces may make it quite difficult to carry out PRE that contradicts established expectations.

Global forces that have transformed the world in recent decades also affect PRE. The internet has promoted unprecedented access to information and knowledge, while the ‘digital divide’ has deeply polarized such access. International actors like the World Trade Organization have helped strengthen the ‘knowledge economy’ through stricter controls on trademarks and copyrights, and economic restructuring has reduced public funding of research and made research agendas more market-driven. Budget fluctuations of private foundations and shifting aid priorities of international funders greatly affect the availability of resources for social research.

PRE initiatives may also be affected by the organizational imperatives of their institutional homes. PRE based in university departments may be pressed to define productivity in the terms of academic disciplines, so practitioners may feel subtly (or blatantly) discriminated against. The Building Movements project, for example, has been uneasily located in a research-focused institution, and sometimes feels misunderstood and disrespected as a result. PRE based in practice-focused institutions may feel pressed to privilege practice priorities over research results. Some institutional homes are designed to be responsive to multiple constituencies. Professional schools sometimes respond to practice constituencies as well as to academic disciplines, and research-based consulting firms may pay
attention to multiple stakeholders. The Intersectoral Cooperation project was based in an NGO ‘think tank’ that valued both research and practice innovations. Institutional bases are likely to constrain PRE in accordance with their own priorities.

The organizational bases of participants also shape PRE initiatives, for participants must fulfill responsibilities both to the initiative and to their organizations. When PRE initiatives demand activities that contradict expectations and incentives from their base institutions, participants can be caught in uncomfortable conflicts of interest. The Gender Relations Study, for example, found patterns of land ownership that raised real questions about the success of past work by its NGO partners. So clarifying institutional constraints and negotiating arrangements to manage them may be important to enabling participation by key actors in PRE initiatives.

In short, the context of PRE – its institutional home, the organizational bases of its participants, and the contextual forces that surround it – has important impacts on its outcomes. One implication is that it is important to use a framework like the map in Figure 1 to assess the initiative at the outset, so participants understand early what kinds of external opportunities and threats as well as internal challenges can be expected. The Heroin Treatment proposal, for example, was mindful of UN treaties that restricted the options for making heroin available legally. Parties to the Building Movement initiative very early raised questions about the project’s base in an elite university, and the project is now establishing an independent institutional base.

More generally, a proliferation of possible bases for PRE is already underway in many industrialized countries. The rise of ‘socially distributed knowledge production’ has created a variety of research settings outside of universities for work on practice-related problems (Gibbons et al., 1994). The influence of practice and research stakeholders may be balanced by constructing institutional arrangements that are accountable to both. A consortium of practice- and research-oriented partners, for example, carried out the Intersectoral Cooperation program. Creating networks that span the research–practice divide seems to be an increasingly common approach to balancing the demands of diverse constituents (Brown, 1999; Gaventa, 1999; Wenger & McDermott, 2002). For enduring issues and continuing PRE it may be necessary to create new institutional arrangements that can provide better support.

**PRE and democratizing knowledge**

We now come to the links between PRE and democratizing knowledge, in the sense of enabling poor and marginalized groups to create and use knowledge for sustainable social transformation. We have argued that PRE can produce
valuable outcomes for researchers, and we have suggested a number of issues associated with organizing for PRE. We believe that many of these arguments apply to PRE for many purposes. However, our illustrations and much of our experience has been focused on PRE for democratizing knowledge to catalyze sustainable social transformations that benefit poor and marginalized groups.

We believe that PRE is particularly important in a world that is increasingly dominated by the ‘knowledge economy’, in which PRE is widely applied to the challenges of economic competition. In such a world, PRE might also make great contributions to fostering political, economic and social democratization. Strengthening PRE for democratizing knowledge, however, requires special attention to several of the general challenges we have identified.

First, in the arena of frameworks, goals and standards, PRE for democratizing knowledge must articulate compelling theories of change if it is to foster sustainable social transformations. PRE to solve organizational problems (e.g. improving business processes) may not require a theory of the larger context, and PRE to improve services to consumers may focus on well-defined markets. PRE for democratizing knowledge, however, is unlikely to lead to sustainable social transformations without shared frameworks to guide that process. So PRE for democratizing knowledge must be concerned about explaining and catalyzing long-term social learning and transformation.

Second, the dominant problem of relationship and organization in PRE for democratizing knowledge is likely to be balancing power relations among diverse parties. This is a critical problem in part because the parties to such PRE often come from backgrounds that are very different in wealth, education, political clout and other obvious sources of power. But it is also critical because failure to deal with power differences in the conduct of PRE for democratizing knowledge will reproduce those power differences – reinforcing the very asymmetric relations the initiative seeks to change.

Third, while PRE for democratizing knowledge may make use of a wide range of inquiry strategy and methods, we believe that there is a special need for long-term domain development strategies. One reason is that the problems of democratizing knowledge are not well understood, and long-term approaches to developing frameworks and interventions will be needed to cope with them. Finding resources is also a problem: While business and government actors with deep pockets can often be found to fund initiatives that fit their interests, they may be skeptical about democratizing knowledge. Long-term domain development relationships may be attractive to researchers who share practitioner commitments to democratic social transformations and the possibility of engagements that make major contributions to new perspectives, and so be more willing to participate in domain development activities than in shorter-term initiatives.

Finally, some of the contextual forces currently operating, such as the revolution in information and communication technology, may support PRE for
democratizing knowledge. But others support knowledge production controlled by those who provide financial resources – such as businesses and governments. PRE for democratizing knowledge will have access to fewer financial resources than other topics, and it will remain a difficult area for most university-based researchers. So the emergence of institutional bases friendly to PRE for democratizing knowledge will be important. Research institutes, consulting firms, civil society think tanks and learning networks that support PRE for democratizing knowledge may well become critical actors in the evolution of the field.

**Conclusion**

We have argued that practice research engagement is expanding in a wide range of fields, and that it is essential to many arenas of knowledge-based societies. In particular we have argued that engagement with practitioners offers special advantages to researchers concerned with applied problems. We also have suggested that organizing such engagements poses special challenges: negotiating shared frameworks, goals and standards; building relationships and organization for joint inquiry; articulating inquiry strategies and methods; and dealing with surrounding contextual and institutional forces. Finally, we have suggested that supporters of practice–research engagement for democratizing knowledge need to articulate social transformation theories, balance power differences, create long-term domain development strategies, and find institutional settings that can support their democratization agendas as well as their integration of research and practice. PRE can make catalytic contributions for building a better future – but its supporters must be creative about its own organization and context as well as innovative in working on societal problems to fulfill that potential.

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**Note**

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Pragmatist philosophy and action research

Readings and conversation with Richard Rorty

Peter Reason

ABSTRACT

Richard Rorty’s distinct brand of positivism is explored in relation to action research. Rorty’s opposition toward the dualisms which haunt western philosophy is briefly described, his nonfoundationalist, anti-metaphysical pragmatics and his views on the contingency of the language that we use outlined. Since we can neither appeal to universal reason nor to an external reality as foundations for our claims, argument must move through a process of redescription. It is argued that just as Rorty is redescribing philosophy, so action researchers are redescribing inquiry. Rorty’s ideas are compared with five basic characteristics of action research: practical knowing, democracy and participation; ways of knowing; human and ecological flourishing; and emergent form. Finally, Rorty’s notion of the ironist is compared with the action researchers as reflective practitioner. The stimulating quality of Rorty’s thought suggests that action researchers must find new language to describe their work, rather than be caught in the old academic metaphors of research.

KEY WORDS

• action research
• pragmatic philosophy
• redescription
• Richard Rorty
In the preface to *Philosophy and social hope*, Richard Rorty sets out a position with which many action researchers would agree:

> We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve co-ordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999, p. xxv)

This suggests that a further exploration of his philosophy might be useful as we work to develop action research as a complement and alternative to the dominant models of ‘disinterested’ social science, and to reframe questions of quality and address a broader range of quality questions than traditional questions of validity (Bradbury & Reason, 2001).

This article is based on a reading of Rorty’s work, starting with *Philosophy and social hope* (1999) and *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989), and moving on to more technical works, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1979), collections of critical essays concerning Rorty’s work and his responses (Brandom, 2000; Festenstein & Thompson, 2001), and some of Rorty’s most recent essays available on the internet at the time of writing (2000, 2001). In addition, I visited Rorty in Paris and explored some of the issues raised with him personally. I much appreciate his willingness to give me time for this conversation.2 This article cannot begin to address the full breadth of Rorty’s work, nor the controversies he has stirred up. I have a simpler aim: what might be the relevance of the questions Rorty raises and the positions he adopts for the theory and practice of action research? In doing this I am building on the work of Greenwood and Levin (1998) in identifying important links between pragmatism and action research.

Richard Rorty is described as ‘one of the most original and important philosophers writing today (Brandom, 2000, p. ix) and as adopting a ‘distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism’ (Ramberg, 2002). The characteristic idea of philosophical pragmatism is that ideas and practices should be judged in terms of their usefulness, workability and practicality and that these are the criteria of their truth, rightness and value. It is a perspective that stresses the priority of action over principles. Rorty tracks his pragmatism back to his intellectual hero, John Dewey, whose philosophy centred around questions of how life should be lived and addressed the social issues of his day (see, for example, Hanson, 1995; Rescher, 1995).

In his autobiographical essay ‘Trotsky and the wild orchids’ (in Rorty, 1999, p. 3–20), Rorty describes how as a young man he was captured by Yeats’ ‘thrilling phrase’ that one might ‘hold reality and justice in a single vision’ (p. 7). In *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, Rorty addresses the question of ‘reality’, setting out his arguments against the ‘correspondence theory of truth’ and the idea that the task of inquiry is to ‘mirror’ the real world and thus approach ever
closer to a true description of reality. In Contingency, irony and solidarity, he explores the view that his earlier quest to hold reality and justice in a single vision was actually a mistake, that one cannot and should not weave together one’s ‘moral responsibilities to other people with one’s relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one’s heart and soul and mind’ (p. 13).

Reading Rorty we can find many echoes of the project which is action research. For don’t we try to hold ‘reality and justice’ in a single vision? Are we not also interested in having something to say about ‘reality’ while at the same time addressing issues of social justice? Do we not worry about how best to do this? Whether it is possible?

In response to these concerns about reality, truth and justice, Richard Rorty has taken on the task of ‘redescribing’ philosophy. Redescribing is an important term for Rorty: if we want to argue persuasively for a new view of phenomena, and we can no longer lay claim that our view is a better representation of reality, we are caught in a ‘contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things’ (1989, p. 9). So redescriptions refers to ‘a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well’ as ‘the chief instrument for cultural change’ (p. 7).

The ‘entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance’ is that set of distinctions – appearance–reality, matter–mind, made–found, sensible–intellectual etc. – which lie at the heart of western thinking. He recalls Dewey’s description of these as ‘a brood and nest of dualisms’ that dominate the history of western philosophy and can be traced back to Plato’s writing. For Rorty, these traditional distinctions have become an obstacle to our social hopes – hopes for a global, cosmopolitan, classless, casteless society (1999, p. xii).

Rorty continues to argue that we must ‘slough off a lot of intellectual baggage which we inherited from the Platonic tradition’ (1999, p. xiii), in particular the distinction between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’, ‘finding’ and ‘making’. He particularly resists the use of the term ‘relativist’ to describe himself and other pragmatists who do not accept the correspondence theory of truth, for this defines the issue in the Platonists’ vocabulary:

I think it is important that we who are accused of relativism stop using the distinctions between finding and making, discovery and invention, objective and subjective.

We should not let ourselves be called subjectivists . . . We must repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use, and not let them impose it on us. (Rorty, 1999, p. xviii)

I remember my delight, on first reading this argument so clearly made. For action research has at times adopted the ‘vocabulary our opponents use’: we have allowed ourselves to be influenced by taken-for-granted dualisms such as subject–object, researcher–subject, action–knowledge, at times accepting these distinctions unawares, and at others fiercely arguing against them rather than elegantly side-stepping them. This has not been very helpful to us: we must develop
our ‘talent for speaking differently’. Rorty allows us to see that we must create our
own vocabulary to describe what we take as quality in our research.

For just as Rorty is undertaking to redescribe philosophy, the action
research movement is engaged in redescribing inquiry: we are attempting to speak
differently in the face of an entrenched vocabulary. As Hilary Bradbury and I
emphasize in the Handbook of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a),
action research must not be seen as simply another methodology in the toolkit of
disinterested social science: action research is an orientation to inquiry rather than
a methodology. It has different purposes, is based in different relationships, and
has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice. Hence the
importance for developing a talent for speaking differently and articulating what
we do with new metaphors rather than being caught in entrenched vocabularies.

Before I turn to explore Rorty’s contribution to our thinking about action
research I need to say a little more about Rorty’s anti-metaphysics and his views
on human language.

Rorty and anti-metaphysics

Part of Rorty’s fierce opposition to the ‘nest of dualisms’ is that they lead us back
to metaphysics, to a distinction between the absolute and the relative, to a view
that there is some higher reality outside the human condition. With Yeats, Rorty
refuses to stand in awe of anything other than human imagination (in Festenstein
& Thompson, 2001, p. 133). Rorty is out to radically ‘de-divinize’ the world: not
just to get rid of God but also ‘devotion to truth’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 45) outside of
human discourse.

So in its ideal form, Rorty’s culture of liberalism would have ‘no room for
the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be
responsible’, including the idea of a truth outside human imagination. This also
means that inquiry does not naturally converge on a consensus, to some end point
of Truth or Reality or Goodness. Rather our only useful notions of ‘true’ and
‘real’ and ‘good’ are extrapolations from human created practices and beliefs,
which will necessarily change over time (Rorty, 1979, p. 377).

This stance is ‘non-foundational’ in that there are no foundations for
knowledge outside human discourse, no appeals to an ultimate Reality that can
be made. It is a position that also questions the idea that human inquiry and
science itself depends on a particular methodology. Rather, ‘all that remains of
Peirce’s, Dewey’s and Popper’s praise of science is praise of certain moral virtues
– those of an open society – rather than any specifically epistemic strategy’
(Rorty, 1999, p. 36). This perspective will appeal to the action researchers who
would claim that the fundamental strategy of action research is to ‘open com-
municative space’ and help the emergence of ‘communities of inquiry’.
Once we give up the notion that anything can have an intrinsic nature to be represented and drop the idea of language as representation, we must be ‘thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language’ (Rorty, 1989, p. 21). Language is seen as making our world rather than representing the world:

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\text{Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. (Rorty, 1989, p. 5)}
\]

All this points to the contingency of the language that we use: ‘there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes into account all possible vocabularies’ (Rorty, 1989, p. xvi, emphasis in original). The difference between what is taken as ‘literal’ and what is taken as ‘metaphorical’ is the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar vocabularies and theories (p. 17). We can neither appeal to universal reason nor to an external reality as foundations for our claims. This leads, as we have seen, to the key notion of redescription:

\[
\text{The . . . ‘method’ of philosophy is the same as the ‘method’ of utopian politics or revolutionary science . . . The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it . . . it says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’. (Rorty, 1989, p. 9)}
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A recent paper (McArdle & Reason, 2003) draws on the idea of redescription to look at the experience of young women in management in a co-operative inquiry group. As the young women examined their experience of certain difficult incidents at work, they were able to stop seeing what was happening to them in terms of their own inadequacies and ‘redescribe’ this as ‘bullying’ on the part of senior managers. They were also able to place this within a wider context of the culture of the organization as based on values of competition and winning rather than values of collaboration and inquiry, and so were beginning to create a new vocabulary – ‘redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways’ – which had implications for personal and cultural change. It is not a question, as Rorty might say, of whether ‘bullying’ corresponds to ‘the way things really are’; rather it is a question of whether it is useful because it invites the young women to stop feeling and doing some things and start feeling and doing others which are more fruitful for them (for a full description of this inquiry, see McArdle, in preparation).
Reflecting on Rorty and action research

In the *Handbook of action research* Hilary Bradbury and I articulated five characteristics of action research: it is an approach to human inquiry concerned with developing practical knowing through participatory, democratic processes in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, drawing on many ways of knowing in an emergent, developmental fashion. In the following sections I set out some of Rorty’s views relevant to these characteristics, and then turn to draw parallels and contrasts between his views and the perspectives of action research.

Practical knowing

A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being – economic, political, psychological, spiritual – of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 2)

Rorty’s view is that human inquiry, as it ceases to be an attempt to correspond with an intrinsic nature of reality, becomes an exercise in human problem solving:

Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein’s words, ‘holds us captive’ – the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment – doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed. (Rorty, 1999, pp. xxii–xxiii)

Rorty’s view is that ‘No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality’, it is a Cartesian error to think of the mind as somehow swinging free of the causal forces exerted on the body. So we should give up seeing inquiry as a means of representing reality, and rather see it as a means of using reality. The relationship between truth claims and the world becomes ‘causal rather than representational’ and the issue becomes whether our beliefs ‘provide reliable guides to getting what we want’ (Rorty, 1999, p. 33).

The question of proof (which Rorty the anti-metaphysician sees as an attempt to escape from the world) can be replaced by the demand for imagination:

One should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one’s present beliefs. (Rorty, 1999, p. 34)
In conversation, Rorty agreed with me that there appear to be links between his pragmatism and action research. But he was skeptical throughout the interview as to whether this was a form of social science:

> What I was dubious about . . . was, do (people) really need a new kind of language or do they just need less talk about what it is they are doing or what our method is? It's as if you are giving them a new meta-discourse instead of just saying skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it.

> When you define action research . . . you might just as well be describing democratic politics, it doesn’t bear particularly on social science, it is just what people in democratic societies hope to be doing.

This is, of course, precisely the point: action research practitioners aim to remove the monopoly of knowledge creation that has been endowed to academics doing social science, and contribute to the development of inquiry as part of everyday practice. As I wrote with Bill Torbert:

> The action turn in the social sciences is a turn toward a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings. (Reason & Torbert, 2001, p. 7)

**Democracy and participation**

In the *Handbook of action research* we argued that building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to the work of action research, that action research is only possible with, for and by persons and communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 2). Similar arguments can be found throughout the action research literature (for example in Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron, 1996; Kemmis, 2001).

Rorty similarly celebrates democracy:

> The democratic community of Dewey’s dreams . . . is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters . . . Dewey . . . called pragmatism ‘the philosophy of democracy’ . . . a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind. (Rorty, 1999, p. 20, 24)

Rorty’s anti-metaphysical stance leads him to reject final answers and ‘redemptive truth’. Rather, he sees philosophy as needing to ‘keep the conversation going’ (Rorty, 1979, p. 377), a phrase borrowed by Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 86) and applied to action research:

> To keep the conversation going is a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is seeing human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately. (Rorty, 1979, p. 378)
When I suggested that the role of the facilitator of inquiry was to open new arenas for discourse, he replied:

I guess I am sort of skeptical about the idea that there is anything general to be said about how people can be more democratic or more participatory. . . . I am dubious about the idea that there can be expertise in the matter of participation or being democratic. . .

And he later asserted that democracy was not necessarily an indicator of creative social change, but that we owed much to imaginative elites. We explored his idea that ‘strong poets’ are the heroes of his liberal utopia (e.g. Rorty, 1989, p. 60); when asked for examples, he suggested:

The founders of social movements, the Protestant reformers, the founders of the trades unions, Mary Wollstonecraft, people who suggested that we could do it differently, are heroes . . . People who suggested a new self image for women and gays. People picked it up and ran with it, but it didn’t emerge from anything participatory. It was an achievement on the part of people with more powerful imaginations than most . . .

Some say that Rorty, ‘proposes a relatively modest political agenda’ (Conway, in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, p. 55). And indeed, he is uncomfortable with the word ‘radical’, quite clear that what he wants is . . . just the conventional social democratic utopia in which everybody has enough to eat and freedom from fear and all the usual ideals of the Enlightenment and European liberalism . . . Nothing new or interesting about it . . . It seems to me that if we’re going to get the ideals of the Enlightenment its going to be by piecemeal reforms, here, there and all over the place.

What some may see as a modesty in political agenda is another reflection of Rorty’s anti-metaphysical stance. He claims to be ‘neither complacent nor frivolous’ (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, p. 219), but rather is skeptical about great big transformational projects which don’t seem to link with what is done everyday, and would want action researchers to be careful about bandying about a rhetoric of democracy.

But there is a dimension to Rorty’s thinking on democracy that remains very individualistic. While seeing language and conversation as the basis of human understanding he doesn’t seem to have embraced fully the kinds of relational ways of thinking and being articulated, for example, by Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) from a feminist perspective, or Gergen and Shotter from a social constructionist view (Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993). From a relational perspective, social form emerges as ‘joint action’, not from individuals, but from the dialogue ‘in between’ them; the very idea of an individual self is called into question (e.g. Gergen, 1991). I also
wonder whether if we don’t continually explore what we mean by democracy we are in danger of complacency, as suggested by the Nobel Laureate José Saramago:

The world today behaves like a madhouse . . . Priorities need to be redefined, but there’s no chance of redefining those priorities if we don’t confront the need to know what democracy is. We live in a very peculiar world. Democracy isn’t discussed, as if it was taken for granted, as if democracy had taken God’s place, who is also not discussed. (quoted in Evans, 2002, p. 13)

Rorty’s political agenda may be modest, and he believes we must ‘build solidarity piece by piece’, but his pragmatist, anti-foundational view means that he keeps coming back to the human process of working together:

So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing sensitivity, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. Just as pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearances which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of every larger groups of people . . . so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people. (Rorty, 1999, p. 81)

Such thinking about justice and democracy must be based not on arguing from appearances to some grand theory, but by imaginative articulation of ‘still only dimly imagined future practice’ (Rorty, 1998, p. 218): we need to tell imaginative stories of new possibilities rather than build political theories. Here I think are important links with the work of describing and developing the practice of action research. We must learn to give good accounts of our practices in the development of democratic dialogue, to justify both to our colleagues and to a wider public our claim that we open communicative space. Any theories of democratic engagement we develop must avoid taking off into flights of speculation and grand theory, but must remain grounded in what we actually do.

Ways of knowing

Action researchers often argue that their work is based on ways of knowing that go beyond the orthodox empirical and rational western epistemology, and which start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition (see, for example, Belenky et al., 1986; Heron, 1996; Park, 2001; Torbert, 1991). These many ways of knowing:

assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 9)

So how does Rorty see knowledge in a non-foundational world? He is quite
clearly opposed to a conception of knowledge as fitting facts, and in this he is in continual disagreement with Habermas, who wishes to hold onto ‘the intuition that true propositions fit the facts’ and that there is an ‘internal connection between justification and truth’ (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, pp. 39–40).

Instead of truth as correspondence Rorty argues for truth as justification, warranted assertability, ‘what our peers will, ceteris paribus, let us get away with saying’ (1979, p. 176).

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists and philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to see conversation as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards justification. (Rorty, 1979, pp. 389–390, original emphasis)

This position provides support for the argument that action research returns the process of knowledge creation to the community of inquiry, and the proposition that what is important in inquiry is the quality of the conversations that are taking place. But Rorty believes that the concept of knowledge itself should be limited to the propositional and linguistic:

I would prefer to confine the word knowing to what you call propositional knowing . . . and say it’s knowledge if it is belief that can be justified to other people in language (rather than in practice) . . .

I don’t think there is anything wrong with the term knowledge. I just think it is misused when we say that emotions give us knowledge, art gives us knowledge. That is just a way of saying the emotions are a good thing, art is a good thing. The term is most useful confined to justified true belief, that’s the philosophical textbook definition of knowledge. Or leave out true and just make it justifiable belief.

Again, his concern is that by extending the concept of knowledge beyond the linguistic we are in danger of appealing to some kind of essential reality:

If you think of knowledge as getting in touch with reality, as the traditional definition has and the pragmatist tradition doesn’t, then you are inclined to say the emotions put us in touch with reality, art puts us in touch with reality… But for pragmatists there’s no such thing… you know, you are never more in touch with reality you are just better or worse able to justify your views to other people...

As Habermas puts it, ‘For Rorty, every kind of representation of something in the objective world is a dangerous illusion’ (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001, p. 36).

My own feeling, as I review this discussion, is first to re-assert that ‘knowing’ is a more appropriate term than ‘knowledge’ for action research. ‘Knowing’ implies ‘a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience . . . a verb rather than a noun’ (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a, p. 2); while
‘knowledge’ is more fixed and thing-like. Then it seems that an extension of the concept beyond the propositional is important in directing our attention to different territories and qualities of knowing. There is an important political dimension to this, since to limit knowledge/knowing to the propositional favours the articulate and further disempowers those whose voices have been silenced. Further, the linguistic perspective, as used by Rorty and by social constructionists such as Gergen (e.g. Gergen, 1999), can focus our attention too much on what we say rather than what we do. I am reminded again of Macmurray’s argument that ‘I do’ rather than ‘I think’ is the appropriate starting point for epistemology (1957, p. 84), and that

... most of our knowledge ... arises as an aspect of activities that have practical, not theoretical objectives; and it is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. (Macmurray, 1957, p. 12)

So I think we can refer to many ways of knowing if we so wish, while attending to Rorty’s point that as we move between them ‘there is no transition that needs explanation or mediation’ (Rorty, in Brandom, 2000, p. 57): different ‘ways of knowing’ will have their own qualities and criteria for justification. I would suggest, contra Rorty, that it limits our vision to see ‘knowing’ in purely cognitive terms.

What about Rorty’s assertion that human beings are never more or less out of touch with reality? I think many action researchers would agree that in practical terms people and communities can be seen as ‘out of touch with their reality’ – for example, Argyris and Schön (1974) pointed to the difference between theories-in-use and espoused theory, to incongruencies between what we do and what we think we do. Learning to work toward a congruence between our intentions, frames, behaviour and ‘what actually happens’ is an important developmental process to which action research practices can contribute (Torbert, 2001). Certain attentional exercises in the individual, and information collection and feedback processes in a community, can help us to see what we were previously blind to. But there is also a paradoxical quality to this reality: as the Buddhist Heart Sutra has it, ‘form is precisely emptiness and emptiness precisely form’. Maybe it is better to say we can be in touch with, or out of touch with, the process by which we create our reality, rather than reality itself (see Crook, 2001, for the Heart Sutra and a commentary).

So I think one may find force in Rorty’s arguments for truth as justification while still having some sympathy with Habermas’ claim that ‘language and reality interpenetrate in a manner that for us is indissoluble’ (in Brandom, 2000, p. 39). We can hold to local realities while recognizing the absurdity of seeking one Reality. I would recommend interested readers look at Rorty’s powerful arguments, and particularly Habermas critique and Rorty’s response (in Brandom, 2000, p. 40) and consider these matters for themselves.
Human and ecological flourishing

The fourth dimension of action research we considered in the handbook was that it is intended to contribute to the flourishing of human persons, communities and the ecosystems of which we are part. This raises questions of values, morals and ethics.

Rorty’s anti-essentialism leads him to argue that just as we can have truth without correspondence with reality, so we can (and indeed must) have ‘ethics without principles’. Pragmatists question the Kantian traditional distinction between ‘morality’ based on reason and ‘prudence’ based on self-interest, arguing that ‘Moral choice . . . becomes always a matter of compromise between competing goods rather than a choice between absolutely right and wrong’ (Rorty, 1999, pp. xxvii–xxix)

As we have seen, Rorty’s view is that the whole point of human inquiry is to find better ways to cope with the environment – to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Pragmatists share with action researchers a desire that our inquiry be ‘useful’:

When the question ‘useful for what?’ is pressed, [pragmatists] have nothing to say except ‘useful to create a better future’. When they are asked ‘Better by what criterion?’ they have no detailed answer . . . [they] can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked ‘And what exactly do you consider good?’, pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, ‘variety and freedom’ or, with Dewey, ‘growth’.

They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology . . . but rather than the future will astonish and exhilarate. (Rorty, 1999, pp. 27–28)

In conversation, Rorty again stressed the everydayness of the process of moral choice:

All discussion between human beings, one way and another, is about what’s worthwhile. It’s about what are we going to do next! I guess what I am suspicious of is the notion that there is a separate activity called discussion of worthwhileness. How could we not be discussing that? . . . Plato thought you could sort of rise above the transitory quarrels of the day and think about worthwhileness as such. Dewey’s point was you can’t do that. Discussion of what to do is discussion of what it’s worthwhile to do. When things get too bad you begin to think radically and ask if the whole project was worthwhile, but you are not going to do that until things go wrong.

Above all, and again following Dewey, moral progress is about increased imaginative power (Rorty, 1999, p. 87), which is why in his later writing Rorty emphasizes the importance of a literary culture, and in particular the novel (see Rorty, 2001). But imaginative power and the ability to see the world from points of view other than ours is not only provided by novels and a literary culture, and it does
seem rather limiting to focus on these. What is important, surely, is that we find ways to develop storied cultures, whether these are in a formal ‘literary culture’ or oral and vernacular. There are many practices in action research which allow us to see the world from different perspectives, notably the Public Conversations Project which promotes constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views and positions about divisive public issues (Public Conversations Project, nd).

I am attracted to Rorty’s argument that the question of value, of what is worthwhile, permeates all our conversations, and that there is not a special form of dialogue about worthwhileness. This position provides powerful arguments against the positivist view that knowledge about the world is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable, and supports action research as a practical form of inquiry in which knowledge and values are intertwined: as we create practical knowledge about our world we also shape that world with our imagination. And the arguments for widening our sense of who is the other chimes with Gergen’s view (in this issue) that we must not limit ourselves to the first order democracy of the immediate group but also attend to wider circles of second order democracy.

On the other hand, I do think it important that we find a place in action research projects for explicit reflection on what we value and want to enhance in our lives, and articulate this in our writing. As those writing about appreciative inquiry point out, the questions we ask are fateful (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001, p. 189). As Rorty says, moral choice is nearly always between competing goods: how we chose between these must always be part of our inquiry.

However, Rorty was also very clear that he was happy with a human-centred value perspective. When I asked if his perspective ignored our relationship with the non-human world and the environmental issues humanity is facing, he replied:

> There is one way of being environmentalist which is saying human beings are going to suffer if we don’t pay attention to the environment. And there is another way which says there is something non-human out there to get in touch with. I don’t think there is anything non-human out there to get in touch with. I think one should be an environmentalist because it is going to be tough on humans if we are not.

To suggestions from deep ecologists like Thomas Berry (1999) that we need to widen our experience to see ourselves as part of a ‘community of all beings’ he was dismissive:

> I think we are the best thing that evolution ever came up with. I don’t really care much about getting in touch with the other critters . . . I think we have so much trouble forming a community of humans, I would like to think about that first.

While I am sure there will be a huge range of views on this within the action research community, I find this narrow humanism frightening.
Emergent form

Rorty takes an evolutionary perspective which conforms to his anti-essentialist perspective: if there is no real reality to be described, if there are no absolute moral choices, human inquiry must be seen as a pragmatic process of continual problem-solving. Action research is similarly concerned with the emergent deepening of our understanding of the issues we wish to address, and the development over time of communities of inquiry.

But in his writing, Rorty does articulate a wider sense of moral progress, again fuelled by his anti-essentialist project. Our inquiry must not be driven by a desire to get closer to some ideal, but rather we should address the questions ‘What breaks us out of our parochial contexts and expands the frontiers of inquiry?’ ‘What keeps us critical rather than dogmatic?’ (in Brandom, 2000, p. 60). For Rorty this is linked with the key notion of hope, hope of progress toward the ideal of a liberal utopia, for a society

... whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than by force, by reform rather than by revolution, by free and open encounters... which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. (Rorty, 1989, p. 60)

There is a strong link here between social hope and action research, which can be seen as a way of articulating and practising new ways of living together fruitfully: we are not trying to pin down one truth, but to articulate one of many truths, that are creative, liberating for ourselves and others.

The reflective practitioner as ironist

One of the questions I took to my conversation with Rorty was whether there is a connection between his description of the ironist and the idea, common to many action researchers, of a reflective practitioner. An ironist 'has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses' and is 'always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change' (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73–74). He or she therefore continually faces up to the contingency of their language, identity and community, and combine strong commitment 'with a sense of contingency of their own commitment' (p. 61).

Similarly, it seemed to me, a reflective practitioner, engaged in 'first-person inquiry', is attempting to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to continually question the frames through which they see their world, to act with awareness and with choice, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002; Reason & Torbert, 2001; Schön, 1983; Torbert, 1991).
Rorty’s development of the notion of ironist comes from his examination of contrasting trends in philosophy. Very briefly, the argument in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* is that there is, in the western tradition, an incompatibility between arguments for autonomy and self-creation on the one hand, and solidarity on the other – between ironists who refuse to be liberals, and liberals who refuse to be ironists. The kind of personal autonomy which self-creating ironists (represented by Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault) seek is at odds with attempts to build a philosophy around the needs of a democratic society (represented by Habermas, Dewey and Berlin). Rorty’s conclusion is that the vocabulary of these two streams of western thinking are different and need to be kept separate, and the longing for irony confined to the private sphere (see Rorty, 1989, pp. 61–69).

However, those of us who have argued the importance of first-person inquiry might still see parallels with Rorty’s description of the ironist. The practice of action research in public spheres cannot be separated from a well lived, inquiring life, in which one is always seeking to question one’s assumptions, to see through one’s own framing of situations. For example, Marshall illustrates what she describes as inner arcs of attention as she attempts to behave inquiringly in her organization:

> . . . seeking to notice myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out and so on. I pay attention for assumptions I use, repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas, key phrases which are charged with energy or that seem to hold multiple meanings to be puzzled about, and more. I work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more knowings. (Marshall, 2001, p. 433)

The purpose of first-person inquiry disciplines within an action research practice is to step outside the everyday common sense of one’s presuppositions, to attempt (and it can only be an attempt) to avoid taking the frames one habitually uses as reflections of ‘reality’. One is then more likely to be able to explore one’s behaviour for potential incongruity with one’s purposes leading to more effective action; and also recognize that others’ framings of a situation are important for them and have a claim to recognition, leading to the potential for increased mutuality. The aim is to help create wider communities of inquiry in which those involved can

> . . . discover the tacit choices they have made about their perceptions of reality . . . about their goals and their strategies for achieving them. The fundamental assumption of action science is that by gaining access to these choices, people can achieve greater control over their own fate. (Friedman, 2001, p. 160)

However, Rorty was alarmed at the potential link between his view of the ironist and social practice:
Sometimes ironists are completely self-involved and unconvonversable and useless to their fellow man except very indirectly by the books they write, which may catch on 50 years later. I don’t see any particular connection between being an ironist in the sense of what I was talking about in Contingency, irony and solidarity and being socially useful. Some of them are, some of them aren’t.

I think of irony as working better for people alone in their studies than people doing things with other people. I use it as a peculiar cast of mind, so to speak. . . . The figure I had in mind was someone obsessed with self-doubts, and that is different from making imaginative suggestions to a group. The same person might do both, but there’s no predictability. There are obvious similarities, but I’d like to keep the distinction.

My own view is that there is a link between Rorty’s irony and reflective practice – and indeed Torbert uses the term ‘ironist’ to describe one of the later stages in his developmental scheme. I think that a reading of Contingency, irony and solidarity would be profitable to any would-be action researcher, alerting them to a range of issues concerning the contingency of language, self and community, and challenging whatever remnants of foundationalist, metaphysical assumptions they retained. As one does this, one must realize that Rorty’s argument is framed within a philosophical discourse, it is about people alone in their studies rather than people doing things with other people, as he says above.

The limitation of Rorty’s view of the ironist, from the perspective of action research, is that he has no account of disciplines of practice; while the reflective practitioner is interested in the congruence or otherwise of their language and theory with their practice. Just as I argued above that action researchers must give good accounts of practices in the development of democratic dialogue, the challenge is for action researchers to show in their behaviour and their accounts more fully and more vividly what they mean by terms like ‘reflective practice’ and what disciplines of practice might look and feel like (see, for example, Wadsworth, 2001; Whitehead, 1989, 2000). If Rorty’s account of the ironist helps in this, so much the better.

Reflections on Rorty and action research

What, at the end of this reflection on Rorty’s pragmatist philosophy, might we say are the lessons for action research? For me, whatever conclusions I reach about his views on a particular issue, Rorty’s writing on the practical nature of inquiry, on democracy, on justification, on ethics and what is worthwhile is hugely educational and instructive. Above all, he shows how the vocabulary of dualism permeates western thinking, and radically refuses to accept a trace of transcendental, metaphysical thinking, thereby inviting us to scrutinize our own vocabularies and presuppositions. His non-foundationalist perspective urges us
not to put principles above practice, not to attempt an appeal from transitory appearances to a permanent reality.

Through reading Rorty we can also see that while philosophers may be hugely suggestive and challenging, they will not themselves answer the questions that we in the field of action research need to address. As he said, he was glad if his writing was useful, but was concerned that I might think it more useful than it actually was: *skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it!* Rorty is out to de-divinize the world, and certainly doesn’t want himself or any other philosopher to become an essential reference point, to take the place vacated by Truth or God. What we can take from Rorty is good questions, suggestive ways of addressing some of the issues that arise for action researchers.

So one of the most important lessons I take from Rorty is that as action researchers part of our task is to re-describe inquiry, and that we must not be limited by the taken-for-granted dualisms that underlie much of orthodox social science, nor over-influenced by the passing fashions of academia. We must fashion our own language, and at the same time, not get ourselves so caught up in the nuances of our language that we start to create new orthodoxies. There is in the field a proliferation of ways of addressing these questions, and we must, I suggest, celebrate and live out our epistemological heterogeneity.

Rorty’s skepticism as to whether it is possible to actively create democratic, participative conversations, and his worry about ‘big transformational projects’ must be taken seriously, but clearly is not the last word. Action researchers have come a long way in learning how to develop mutuality in conversation, collaboration in small groups, and wider networks of participative relationships. Reading Rorty can challenge us to articulate more clearly just what it is we can do to facilitate emergence of communicative spaces, to create more public accounts and practice theories to justify our claims.

Rorty’s challenge of the notion of many ways of knowing is at least in part rooted in his deep suspicion of metaphysics, that there can be an appeal to any reality outside human conversation. Even if we don’t accept this position, we would do well to honour the tenacity of his non-foundationalism, and take from this a challenge to think through our own underlying assumptions. We can learn to adopt the perspective of ironist, to combine a commitment to our position with continual doubts about the language we use.

Whether this leads us to the humanist position that Rorty adopts, that there can be no recourse except to human imagination and human discourse, remains open to question. As I come to a resting point in my inquiry into Rorty’s work I am struck with what seems like an unacknowledged paradox in this position. While he challenges us not to be caught in the dualisms of appearance and reality, finding and making, I can’t help feeling that, in the end, he is unable to hold the paradox open and his emphasis on human language creating our world in effect brings his down on the side of appearance (this seems particularly so in the open-
ing pages of Contingency, irony and solidarity). This, I believe, leads us to an anthropocentrism which is intolerable given the damage human action is doing to our living space of the more than human world.

It seems to me that the metaphor of participation provides us with an alternative position. Our world neither consists of separate things, nor is it constructed through language, but rather emerges through relationships which we co-author and in which we partake. We can, with Rorty, reject the correspondence theory of truth while holding that experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of our being and knowing, and is prior to language. In this perspective, what is important is not to confuse our meeting with the elemental properties of the living world – the I–Thou encounter with a living tree or person – with our symbolic constructs expressed in language (Heron & Reason, 1997) As Abram has it, ‘underneath our literate abstractions, a deeply participatory relation to things and to the earth, a felt reciprocity’ (Abram, 1996, p. 124).

I think what we share most powerfully with Rorty is a concern for the relationship between truth and justice. As a philosopher, Rorty’s view is that it is not possible to bring these together in one language, hence his view of the ironist. Action research does attempt to bring truth and justice together, and action research practitioners are scholar-practitioners, not philosophers, and we may wish to extend the notion of irony to include the self-questioning awareness of the reflective practitioner ‘living life as inquiry’.

So reading Rorty will help us ask ourselves good questions. But in the end each of us, in conversation with those others with whom we are working, have to use our imaginations to come to our own conclusions about the best way forward in the particular circumstances of our inquiry practice. This requires courage as well as good questions, and while Rorty clearly demonstrates courage in asking challenging questions, we cannot take from him the kind of courage required to take these questions into practice, to scrutinize our own behaviour and assumptions and to take the risks of engaging fully with others. The best we can do, in a journal such as this, is to describe those choices and the practices they led us to adopt. If we can do that fully, richly, imaginatively, we will be doing very well indeed.

Notes

1 Extracts in the text are taken from an interview with Richard Rorty in Paris in November 2002.

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