

Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice

Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (Eds.), Sage Publications, 2001

Review by Ph.D. Student *Peter Musaeus*

This is a book with 45 relevant, short, original and well-written chapters about Action Research (AR). It presents itself as an overview of how the researcher can come to terms with the demands posed to social science by the shift from the linguistic turn to practice. The phenomena associated with this turn include the following: The fundamental situatedness of inquiry, the impossibility of a detached or objective researcher, the need for reflexivity and a practice epistemology; in short the overcoming of dichotomies between action and research, policy and research, practice and theory etc. The book opens with some well-written background chapters tracing the AR tradition back to two lines both inspired by Kurt Lewin: The Lewin AR school and the Tavistock Socio-technical school.

Many themes in the book will be familiar to (other) qualitative researchers including cooperative inquiry, large scale, small scale, the intersection of the personal level with the social, feminist Foucauldian post-structural discourse, collaborative research, appreciative inquiry, ethnodrama etc. As is evident the scope of the book is wide as epitomised in a thought provoking chapter by William Torbert on self-observation among others learned through: "*Quaker meetings, civil rights demonstrations, Sufi dancing, Tavistock conferences, Buddhist retreats, coitus interruptus etc.*" (p. 250). This exotic list is outstanding in the otherwise sober chapters stressing the many possible roles of Action Researchers as teachers, entrepreneurs, spiritual aspirants, board members, deans, etc. Though there are no chapters devoted to qualitative research, or the relationship between AR and qualitative research, this handbook is relevant to readers of this Newsletter.

In my view there are two interpretations of AR. On the one hand AR is often positioned as being more enmeshed in practice than other strands of qualitative research. AR justifies this by striving to merge the first person narrative ("I" the researcher, "we" the researching participants), second person ("you" the reader or "you" the subject becoming co-researcher) and the third person narrative (about "the subjects" or about constructing "the other"). Thus Action Research (AR) strives to overcome a number of dichotomies, where the obvious between thinking-action is only one example. Ideally AR unites different spheres of civil society, such as local community with Academia. Then (again ideally) in AR it is impossible to talk about ownership of expertise. This is no surprise given that AR has grown out of dissatisfaction with social science purporting to study the subjective, yet divorcing itself from the subjects as agents capable of changing their world. AR in contrast makes a virtue out of involving researchers as well as participants in participatory practice. Thus AR strives to let

participants set the agenda alongside with researchers. This might give connotations to leftist policy, liberation philosophy or new Marxism. But alongside is an even more powerful epistemology or ideology, namely that of pragmatism (e.g. Chris Argyris' action science and Donald Schön's criticism of technical rationality). Such battles of ideologies could well have been elaborated in this book. At any rate these attempts of structured intervention and of overcoming the notion of an orderly world being studied by detached spectators make an ideal representation of AR such an exciting enterprise.

On the other hand there is AR at its worst. Here the picture is one of academics pretending that they actually make a difference in the world, or practitioners that they are participants in great research, which benefits themselves. These faulty conceptions are quite detrimental and could well have been discussed at length in this handbook. Another problematic issue is, when AR is used by academics as ways of legitimising their well-paid consultant jobs in various organizations. As readers we are not adequately informed about the economic transactions between researchers and participants/co-researchers, though Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer discuss this double role as researcher and consultant. Many chapters are written by highly respected acting as (I presume sometimes paid) specialist consultants/researchers to various firms. Yet how do these issues interfere in the relationship between Action Researcher and client?

As mentioned these shadow sides of AR are not sufficiently covered in this otherwise comprehensive handbook. There is a general lack of self-criticism pondering, whether AR really overcomes any theory-practice dichotomy or in reality just deepens them through discourse. So what else is lacking in this handbook? In the chapter by Olav Eikeland about the "hidden curriculum" behind Western Education I lacked the just-plain-folks of Jean Lave. And one chapter about Vygotskian accounts of AR could have been in place. Nevertheless as it stands this handbook seems very comprehensive. Yet naturally it is not without its focus and distortions (see e.g. chapter by Ken Zeichner supposed to review the main traditions of AR in Education, but with an exclusive focus on the Anglo-Saxon world).

So what does the book give? It includes contributions from many experts within AR, organizational psychology or management such as Edgar Schein, John Heron, Peter Senge and of course the editors: Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury. The handbook gives scholarly accounts of Habermas' communicative theory (by Stephen Kemmis), system theory (Robert Louis Flood), Humanistic (John Rowan), cooperative inquiry (which in Heron and Reason's chapter is called research 'with' not 'on' people) and a few fine discussions of the problems of doing real world research (e.g. by Whitmore and McKeein) or descriptions of practice (e.g. by Rudolph, Taylor, Foldy). So given what it gives, and not what is left out, this handbook is highly readable and no doubt a testimony to AR today.