Action Research.
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Action research (AR) is an orientation to inquiry rather than a particular method. In its simplest form it attempts to combine understanding, or development of theory, with action and change through a participative process, whilst remaining grounded in experience. Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) offer a working definition that draws on different AR practices:

> *AR is a Participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worth-while human purposes, grounded in a participatory world view 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.*

Action research extends well beyond psychology and whilst we will be alluding to different kinds of AR we will focus our discussions on its use in psychological work, and in relation to psychological issues.

Historical background

There are a number of converging routes to contemporary action research in psychology.

Reason and Bradbury (2001:3) remind us that action research has its roots in pre-scientific, indigenous approaches to knowledge and invention. However, in psychology, conventional histories of action research identify its social psychological and clinical origins, all of which in one way or another derive from action theories (Boog, 2003).

In the USA, in the1940's, prominent social psychologists along with other social scientists, concerned with enhancing inter-group relations and reducing prejudice developed processes of work in which they sought to understand a social problem by changing it and studying the effect (Lewin, 1946). Through their work in the Research Center for Group Dynamics and the Commission on Community Interventions, they moved out from universities into communities: into the very places where people lived and where conflicts and tensions develop (Cherry 1998). Elden and Chisholm (1993) note that two other currents emerged at the same time in the USA - the first was a concern to understand and improve American Indian affairs through action-oriented knowledge (Collier, 1945) and the second was to adopt a similar approach in education (Corey, 1953).

In the UK, psychologists, social anthropologists and psychiatrists (mostly with a psychoanalytic orientation) developed a parallel action research orientation in the then Tavistock Clinic, to become the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations (Rapoport, 1970; Trist and Murray, 1990). There, work developed to address the practical, post war problems of personnel selection, treatment and rehabilitation of wartime neurosis, and casualties and returning prisoners of war. In a related development, Revans (1971, 1982) initially at the National Coal Board, developed an approach to action learning for organisational development, focussed on action learning sets made up of diverse participants.

Whilst both in the USA and UK, action research developed in response to important social problems, as Elden and Chisholm note, AR soon began to be applied to intra-organisational and work-life problems. Furthermore, a schism arose between applied and basic research. Whilst there had, initially, been considerable enthusiasm for community based action research, by the early 1950's, *"increasingly the social psychological mainstream was disconnecting research and graduate training from the immediacy of solving social problems ..(between 1950 and 1970 social psychology) practitioners would devote their energies to a practice bounded by the parameters of laboratory experimentation, based primarily on individual behaviour, and geared towards managerial concerns. Removed from the intergroup context, the study of discrimination would quickly reduce to attitude and personality measurement"* (Cherry, 1998 p. 14). Sanford (1981: 176) links this shift in the USA to the behaviour of funding organisations, suggesting that:

Contrary to the impression I had in the 1940"s, (AR) never really got off the ground. By the time the Federal funding agencies were set up after WW2, action research was already condemned to a sort of orphan's role in social science, for the separation of science and practice was institutionalised by then, and has been to the Federal bureaucracies ever since. This truth was obscured for a time by the fact that old timers in AR were still able to get their projects funded. Younger researchers, soon discovered, however, that AR proposals per se received a cool reception from the funding agencies , and were, indeed likely to win for their author the reputation of being 'confused'.

Whilst AR had declined in Anglo-American social psychology during the 1950's to 1970's, the crisis in social psychology of the 1970's (Strickland et al., 1976) and the advent of *new paradigm* research, with an anti-positivist call and non-reductionist emphasis (Gergen, 1982; Reason and Rowan, 1981) opened the way for its re-emergence.

A different strand of development in AR lay in the application of action science (Argyris and Schon,1989) in organisational work - especially in the application to practices of social democracy and organisational learning. A strong Scandinavian tradition emerged, linked to the Norwegian Industrial Democracy Project (see Karlsen, 1991). In Scandinavian work life, participatory action research had, as its core "*political values concerning increased democracy, political equality and social justice* " (Elden and Levin, 1991 p. 128). Elsewhere in Scandinavia a radical *practice research* developed

from German critical psychology, with its roots in the political left. It shared with action research a concern to understand the relations of theory and practice (Nissen, 2000).

Histories of Action Research in psychology generally reproduce the USA-UK axis of development. However, in Latin America, action research has been in existence for as long (Montero, 2000). In 1946 a book on action research methodology was published in Brasil (Thiollent, 1946). Montero suggests that early forms of action research borrowed heavily from the socio-technical orientation of Lewin, but gradually evolved into a participatory practice, in part through other influences. She emphasises the writings of Marx and Engels and of Gramsci (1975); the popular mobilisations of the 1960's; liberation theology during the 1970's and philosophy of liberation (Dussel, 1988) in the 80's. Particularly important to Latin American social psychological action research, was the critical pedagogy of Freire, (1970). Freire encouraged the viewing of research participants as active members of inquiries concerning themselves and their environment, as well as the role of dialogic method for exploring ideas participatively, in order to arrive at new understanding. and the popular mobilisations of the 1960's. She also recognises the crucial influence of cultural anthropologists and critical sociologists (Fals-Borda, 1979,1980; Swantz, 1978; Swantz et al., 2001) to the participatory turn in action research. The work of Fals Borda and colleagues has been particularly influential in the Latin American developments of community social psychology (Sánchez and Wiesenfeld, 1991).

Psychotherapy and existential learning offer another route to the development of action research. Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest that T-group training and encounter groups were characterised by mutual inquiry into the here and now processes of group development. Rowan (2001) and Taylor (1996) both argue that mutual enquiry and change underpin some forms of psychotherapy, self-help groups, and co-counselling, and can be viewed as action research.

Whilst social psychological applications of action research to real life social problems retreated, action research became and has remained an acceptable research strategy in the context of organisational behaviour and education. Its use is increasing in information systems and health contexts. It is a central strategy for community psychology (Kelly and van der Riet, 2001) and critical psychology (Parker, 2005). It is probably the case that far more action research has been going on in psychology than is formally defined, particularly as both evaluation research and service development.

Why action research?

Reason and Bradbury (2001:2) summarise the main purposes of action research as:

- To produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives;
- To contribute through this knowledge to increased well-being - economic, political, psychological, spiritual - of individuals and

communities and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with wider ecology of the planet;

And

- To combine practical outcomes with new understanding "*since action without theory is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless."*

In this context, Sanford's observation is interesting:
"*nearly all of applied social science emphasises the application to problems of what is already known, rather than the study of action as a means for advancing science*" Sanford 1981, p. 175.
While AR has considerable potential to enhance basic understanding, this promise has not generally been realised.

From the above brief review, we can see that although not all action research is carried out from within the disciplinary base of psychology, its central concerns are psychological, with the interests of people at its heart and well-being as its goal. Furthermore it is a deeply collaborative process of inquiry, operating at one and the same time at individual, interpersonal, group, organisational community (and indeed societal) levels. Thus, action research involves:

- a focus on practical issues
- reflection on ones own practices,
- collaboration between researcher and participants,
- a dynamic process of spiralling back and forth among reflection, data collection and action,
- development of a plan of action to respond to a practical issue,
- sharing of findings with all relevant stakeholders.

It is a process that can link psychology with social change issues (Brydon-Miller, 1997).

As an iterative process, different parts of the action research process can be identified. Whilst different researchers describe the process differently, all involve, in one way or another, the following in a cyclical process taking place within a particular context and system infrastructure (Figure 1):

- idea: socially produced within a particular context. May include conception or initiation, problem identification and analysis, exploration and fact finding;
- plan: devised collaboratively and participatively;
- do: carry out actions collaboratively and involving others;
- evaluate: be collaborative and participative and make creative use of methods;
- reflect: jointly leran and understand and further plan, do, evaluate and so on.

Figure 1 about here

The process may continue to move on, return to an earlier step or be diverted to a different cycle of action. Once a cycle is complete, it may lead to another full or partial cycle. In practice, action researchers may begin to be involved at any of the stages. Thus in our own work we sometimes begin our involvement through evaluation (as in evaluation research); at the fact finding, exploratory stage (as in feasibility studies or needs analysis); at the conception (as in project development studies) or at the reflection stage (as in accompaniment research).

Types of action research

Grundy (1982) distinguishes three broad types of action research: technical, practical and emancipatory.

Technical action research

The work of Lewin and his followers adopted a technical approach to action research. This involved the researcher identifying a problem and an intervention, which was then tested. The goal of this kind of action research is the promotion of efficient and effective practice. The collaboration between researcher and practitioner is largely technical and facilitatory. Whilst this type of action research continues in psychology, it tends to be applied as a positivist approach and will not be discussed further here.

Practical action research

In practical action research, practitioners and researchers come together to identify potential problems, their underlying causes and possible change projects. Mutual understanding is sought, and the goal is understanding practice and solving immediate problems. It adopts a non-positivist, flexible approach to change. It is this kind of action research that is common in the field of education and in both practitioner and human service development arenas (McKernan, 1991; Burton, 2000). Cohen and Manion (1994:192) summarise practical action research thus:

> *(it is) essentially an on the spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation … unlike other methods no attempt is made to identify one particular factor and study it in isolation, divorced from the context giving it meaning.*

Carr and Kemmis (1986) suggest three conditions which are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for critical, practical action research to exist:
1. The project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement
2. The project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated
3. The project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually

to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process.

Example:
A learning disability service had reviewed its planning procedures (existing social practice) for support to individual people (problem identification). All those staff and family members concerned with the experience of a man and woman, both with severe and multiple impairments, agreed to introduce a person-centred planning process with both people, in order to improve their experiences (improvement). Workshops were held with relevant staff so that they had the skills to do this (planning and action). The process of introducing the new way of working was monitored carefully and assessed in terms of the difference made to the focal people's lives (evaluation). Little difference was made initially, and on reflection, it was thought that the overall service culture created barriers to effective change (reflection). After discussion within the service and the research team, specific aspects of service culture were identified (problem identification) and a programme of organisational change initiated (action) and evaluated, leading to the introduction of person centred planning more widely across the service and creating change for those disabled people affected (widening participation in the project) . This experience led, over a further five years, to the development of collaborative, person centred planning processes that have become a model of good practice, and have influenced national policy nationally (continual cycles of planning, action and evaluation). (Sanderson, 2000; Ritchie et al., 2004).

Emancipatory action research

Emancipatory action research promotes a "*critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change*" (Grundy, 1987: 154). The goal is to assist participants in identifying and making explicit fundamental problems by raising their collective consciousness. Critical intent determines both the development of a theoretical perspective and guides action and interaction within the project. Here the challenge is not so much a collaboratively defined practical problem as the collaborative exploration of an existing social problem in order to achieve social transformation.

Example: Through work with and involvement in radical psychiatry networks (Such as those supported by *Asylum* magazine) the isolation of and challenges experienced by people with paranoia had been identified and a |paranoia network launched in November 2003. Isolation was identified as a major problem (problem identification). A conference was held the following summer, involving those with experience of, and interest in paranoia and how disabling practices and institutions could be challenged (action). During the conference, participants were able to discuss and explore common experiences, share resources and identify future collective action and networks (further action; raised collective consciousness) (Harper 2004; Zavos, 2005).

Whilst all action research is participative, a particular form of participatory action research (PAR) was developed in Latin America and elsewhere and

adopted by Latin American community social psychology (Sánchez and Weisenfeld, 1991; Montero and Varas Díaz, in press) and those working within the approach of liberation psychology (Burton, 2004) It fits within the emancipatory domain insofar as it has a concern with:

- development of critical consciousness of both researcher and participants

- improvement of the lives and empowerment of those involved in the research process

- transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships

Montero (2000:134) suggests participatory action research is a *Methodological process and strategy actively incorporating those people and groups affected by a problem, in such a way that they become co-researchers through their action in the different phases and moments of the research carried out to solve them*. Their participation:
- places the locus of power and of control within their groups;
- mobilises their resources;
- leads them to acquire new resources
in order to:
- transform their living conditions,
- transform their immediate environment
- transform the power relations established with other groups or institutions in their society

Practical action research and emancipatory or participatory action research are both forms of action research with relevance and application to contemporary psychology. It has been suggested that the two forms reflect different concerns of the industrialised countries of the North and the developing countries of the South. Practical action research reflects Northern concerns with problem solving in organisations for greater efficiency through working with organisational decision makers. Emancipatory or participatory action research reflects Southern concerns with understanding and changing communities and societies through a commitment to working with grassrooots groups to promote fundamental social transformations (Brown, 1993; Brown and Tandon, 1983; Rahman, 1985). However, this risks a simplistic picture of both Northern and Southern societies. The two tendencies can be distinguished from each other in a number of ways.

TABLE 3: Practical and emancipatory action research compared

	Practical action research	**Emancipatory and participatory action research**
Nature of reality	Multiple and socially constructed	Multiple and socially constructed, located in the social, economic and political

Concern with	Studying local practices involving individuals or team based inquiry	Studying social practices and issues that constrain people's lives
Purpose of research	Understand what occurs and the meaning people make of phenomena	Understand, challenge, and change to greater equity and social justice
Goal	Problem solving. Reform	Liberation, empowerment. Transformation.
Focus on	Professional development and reflective practice	Life enhancing changes, empowerment and social change
Problem	Negotiated by change agent (researcher) Interpreted in situation by participant experience. Different interpretations of success	Emergent from members' experience and negotiated in the situation based on values. Competing definitions of success.
Involvement	Collaborative problem identification, planning, action and reflection	Participant determination of problem, solution, information gathering and learning
Resulting in	Practitioners as researchers and enhanced practitioner research capability	Emancipated researcher and changes in social structures
Power	Shared by participants but emphasis on individual practitioner capacity for action	Resides within the group through collaborative action and authentication of authenticity
Locus of learning	Learning organisation Reflective practice	Learning communities Consciousness raising and empowerment
Research Relationship	Action and research merged	Action and research integrated, with shared roles

In part based on Brown, 1993; Creswell, 2002; Darwin, 1999; Grundy, 1982; Masters, 1995

Whilst the two traditions can be separated in this way as 'ideal types', there are examples of them merging (for example, Kagan and Burton, 2000; Nissen, 2000). Whether as separate or merged practices, they have a number of features in common, including:

- *Value based, future oriented practice*
- *Cross disciplinary*
- *Cyclical process*
- *Combines methods of data collection*
- *Learning through dialogue and sharing*
- *Combines theory and action*
- *Context bound*
- *Concerned with change*
- *Sustainable over time*

Each of these features of Action Research gives rise to a number of issues in practice.

Main Issues Associated with the Method

The main issues associated with the process of action research will be considered as we discuss the core features outlined above.

Purposes and value choice.

Action research is future oriented and is built on a shared understanding, between participants, of what *could* be, not what is. This means that at the conception stage, action researchers will often facilitate a process whereby the different participants or stakeholders envision the possibilities for the future. Before any action can be planned, the future orientation must be agreed. This does not necessarily mean that specific end points have to be identified, but rather the general direction for change is clarified. This may take some time and can lead to some frustrations that no additional action is being taken (although, if we adopt a position of researching action, we can describe the very process of negotiation and understanding of the future as an action to be researched). Through this process, the different perspectives and orientations of different stakeholders are surfaced, along with different value positions which will have to be negotiated. Right from the outset, then, in action research, it is understood that multiple, socially constructed perspectives exist and are to be worked with. Elden and Chisholm (1993:135) go further and suggest that the very process of visioning followed by action " *… enables participants to envisage a possible future they previously had not considered and then set into action to achieve it. This could be seen as the intentional use of a systematic proven method in the social construction of reality."*

The task here is not to expect full agreement about or capitulation to a particular perspective, but rather to explore, through dialogue, the complexity of the relationships between participants. Right form the outset, too, power issues come to the fore and it is necessary to be aware of how the power interests of particular participants are being played out, and to work in ways that enable all participants understand - and possibly change- this. The future orientation of a project also gives a framework to the evaluation and reflection stages of action research, as participants can use this as a guide to assessing whether or not change has taken place in the required direction.

It is in the conception and planning stages that participants can articulate their vision for changethat has a positive social value (Elden and Chisholm, 1993),such as for a healthy community, a socially responsible organisation, reduced energy consumption, services that put user interests at the core, and so on.

Techniques that might be used at initial stages of project could include:

Needs analysis; dialectical inquiry; visioning; strategic assumptions testing; appreciative inquiry. Some of these same methods can be used in evaluations and reflections (Taket and White2000; Flood and Jackson, 1991)

Example: Our research team was commissioned by a 'Health Action Zone' to undertake a project concerned with the capacity building for evaluation amongst community groups. Thus some initial problem identification had taken place. However, before we could initiate further action, we had to take a step back and explore with some community groups their ideas of what would be possible as well as their current skills and experience of evaluation. So we introduced a stage of consulting with 55 community groups about their current situation and possible future (Boyd et al., 2001). Only then were we in a position to plan, collaboratively with members of a broad-based steering group, specific interventions for change. This initial process contributed to each community group's own understanding of their skills and future possibilities, so was, in itself, part of a change process, as it contributed to increasing the "..*systems' purposeful adaptive capacity, ability to innovate, or self-design competence*" Elden and Chisholm, 1993: 127).

Cross disciplinary and participative

Action research has, at its foundation, problems or issues identified by participants within a system, whether this is a boundaried system like a classroom, or a work organisation, or an extensive system like a region or society. This is in contrast to forms of resrach in which inquiry arises out of a single discipline or practice interest or is closely linked to a previous discovery. Thus action research is a cross discipline practice, drawing on different kinds of knowledge and world views. Because it is a collaborative activity, 'expert' knowledge of researchers is combined with 'tacit' or popular knowledge of other participants. In practical action research this combined knowledge leads to more effective and durable change. In emancipatory action resrach, this combined knowledge is the very basis of action and the two are inseparable. The integration of different world views and understandings means that attempts are made to work with and understand diversity and difference, whether this is in terms of gender, age, race, ethnicity, culture, class and so on. The ways in which social position influences people's participation must be understood and all attempts made to ensure that pre-existing power relations between and within groups do not determine and distort the activity. Not only does power influence the overall action research process, it also plays out in similar ways within research teams (Burman, 2004).

Example: We were commissioned to explore the impact of participatory arts projects on health and wellbeing of participants (planning and action stages had been completed). The problem identified prior to the commission was the need to provide an evidence base for funders. From the outset we had wanted to work in collaboration with those participating in the projects, in part so that they were able to gain skills and esteem through their active involvement. However, the artists involved were concerned about how this might distort their (the artists and participants) relationships. Thus those participating in the projects were prevented by the artists' concern for their

wellbeing from contributing to the planning and design of the evaluation, and also of taking part in collecting and analysing data. However, we were still able to work collaboratively with artists. Considerable tensions emerged between the different discourses, underpinned by different knowledge and value systems of the artists and the researchers. Furthermore, schisms emerged in the research team, due to pre-exisiting relations and depth of experience. We employed both discussion and other team building techniques, particularly those based on appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 1999) to develop trust and a common understanding from which we could progress the work (Kagan et al., 2005; Sixsmith and Kagan, 2005).

Cyclical process
Action research is cyclical. It is not always possible to know the end point from the start as each cycle is partly determined by the previous one. In terms of social change there is no end to the number of cycles that might be possible. However, any particular action research project may involve one particular stage, a part cycle, or any number of full cycles. Research can start at any stage, and it is rare for action research to begin at conception and proceed to reflection and learning in an orderly manner. Each stage may precipitate a return to an earlier stage and 'spin off ' actions might emerge in the course of implementation of some other action. Thus action research is a truly iterative process which cannot be described in advance or fully controlled. As the research proceeds, different people may become involved and different activities introduced. Furthermore, the time needed for each stage cannot be predicted in advance. Unintended impacts of the work will almost certainly arise and decisions made about whether the project moves in a different direction.

Example: A community based clinical psychology programme was charged with improving the mental health of an inner city, multicultural community. After a developing and introducing a number of initiatives, in conjunction with other projects and different parts of the community, it became clear that there was a major problem between fathers and sons in one part of the community (Problem identification from reflection and learning from previous stages). Thus a project specifically designed to enhance communications between fathers and sons was initiated in a participative manner. This had not been on the work schedule for the project but had emerged as a priority over time (Fatimilehin and Coleman, 1998).

All of this means that it can be difficult to approach action research in a conventional way. Research protocols may be able to identify who might be involved in doing what, at an initial stage, but may then be unable to outline explicitly what will then happen to and with whom, for how long and to what ends. From a University or professional base, this kind of protocol can be impossible for funders, or ethical panels to understand and support. For these reasons, much action research takes place unfunded or by generating its own funds. Alternatively, resources and permissions to undertake action research go on under a different guise - as project or practice development; as evaluation research; or as consultancy.

It follows from this, then, that not all action research finds its way into scientific journals, although there will be a commitment to disseminate knowledge as widely as possible to those who will benefit form the insights and experiences gained - facilitated recently by the internet. For those ,then, from Universities or the professions, whose career advancement is based on numbers of publications in peer reviewed journals or successful procurement of external grants, engagement in action research can be risky. Indeed this amounts to a systematic institutional bias against AR.

Combines methods of data collection.
Whilst action research will typically imply a broad social constructionist approach, it is not wedded to any particular orthodoxy of method (Burton and Kagan, 1998). Pragmatic concerns , linked to the problem in hand, determine the most appropriate method. Cresswell (2002) suggests data collection as one of the three 'E's' : Experiencing (wherein the researchers draw on their own involvement), Enquiring (wherein the researchers collect new information in different ways); and Examining (wherein the researchers use and make records). Table 1 identifies some of the data collection methods that have been used in action research projects under the three 'E's'.

Table 1 Data collection: Experiencing, enquiring and examining

Experiencing	Enquiring	Examining
• Participation • Performance and other creative arts including photography, writing, folk customs • Story-telling • Self-reflection • Intentional conversations	• Interviews: unstructured and informal; semi-structured; structured and formal; e-mail or internet • Focus groups • Whole system events • Questionnaires • Guided conversations	• Archives • Texts • Maps • Audio and videotapes (CDs and DVDs) • Artefacts • Narratives • Field notes of observations, feelings, reflections

The more the action research process tends towards emancipatory action research, the more involved all participants are as co-researchers, in the collection and analysis of data. Even when the action research project has proceeded through agreement as to purpose and method, when it comes to data analysis, participants' different standpoints will influence their interpretations, and the process involves, again, another period of negotiation to mutual understanding.

Example: In our work evaluating participatory arts with a view to project improvement, the kinds of data collection involved included: semi-structured interviews with artists, participants, managers or arts and linked projects, commissioners (face to face and e-mail); reflexive diaries kept by researchers and artists (structured and unstructured); participant observation by and field notes of researchers; focus group discussions; feedback questionnaires; private written accounts of participants and artists; graffiti board comments; creative techniques, including social role atoms, creative writing and poetry,

photographs along with commentaries, artistic products; and attendance registers (Sixsmith and Kagan, 2005).

Learning through dialogue and sharing

The learning that takes place for all participants is central to action resrach and comes from a commitment to continual reflection and self-reflection. Action research offers opportunities for meta-learning, that is, participants learning how to learn to develop their own, more effective practical theories. As Elden and Chisholm (1993:138) say, *Becoming a better practical theorist is a key to empowerment* .

Good action research makes the learning explicit, at individual, group and organisational or community levels, and looks to consolidate learning as a key component of ensuring that any change achieved is sustainable in the longer term. Just as dialogue between stakeholders was important at the early stages of the process, so it is too at the stage of learning. It is through dialogue and shared action and understanding that the learning takes place.

A commitment to learning is also a commitment to making findings about both outcomes and processes of change, as widely available as possible. All participants have a role (the more so, the more emancipatory the action research) in making sense of and diffusing knowledge. Thus dissemination of information is not confined to formal academic and professional outlets. Different formats, including workshops, celebrations, videos and so on are also legitimate forms of dissemination.

Example: We have been working with a small group of community activists over a number of years on a project which seeks to understand the impact of being an activist at individual group, community and systems levels. We work with the activists to identify the particular question to be asked and then how to go about collecting and analysing information. Methods have included observation, interviews, the collection of accounts and content analysis the press. We have reflected upon the processes of working and disseminated information at conferences for professionals and academics, as well as published material in professional journals as well as pamphlets written in lay language for wider consumption. In addition we have produced detailed reports and videos, edited and prepared by the activists themselves. All the written reports are available on the internet. Thus information is available in different forms and targeted at different levels of learning (Raschini, Stewart and Kagan 2005; Kagan, 2006 ; Kagan et al., 2005; Edge et al., 2004; www.compsy.org.uk)

If information diffusion extends beyond the academic and professional arenas, it is not confined to theory development that is left for others to take up in a practical sense. Instead, opportunities for policy and strategy development become part of the planning and learning from action research, and need to be exploited, as well as the development of wider alliances for change beyond those formed through the specific action research project. The use of the

internet and other networks for sharing of information amongst like minded people are perhaps more important than academic publishing, which is in any case inaccessible to most people outside the universities. A further disadvantage of academic publishing is that few journals are interested in the types of detail about process that is central to learning from action research.

For the wider action research community, it is particularly useful to have available accounts of different participants' views of the same action research process. Adams and McCullogh (2003) and Boyd et al. (2003), for example, comment on the same project with street children from academic and streetwork perspectives, reminding us that even with carefully planned, negotiated and participative work, perceived power and control over the process varies.

Combines theory and action

One of the things that makes action research different from consultancy and audit for practice improvement, is the link between action and theory. Not only does theory contribute to the understanding of the problem in the first place, it also emerges and develops as the action research process continues. Theory applies not only to the focus of the action research, but also to the process of working. Thus serious theoretical development, ideally undertaken collaboratively, enhances understanding about social phenomena and change processes. Action Research therefore attempts both to change the world and to increase understanding of how such change can be brought about (Kagan and Burton, 2000).

Example: A project was developed in collaboration with local agencies to identify the support needs of black and minority ethnic women escaping domestic violence in a large inner city area, including the highlighting of what works, service gaps and developing proposals for addressing barriers. It also piloted strategic interventions to support women to make successful transitions into productive and independent lives. Theoretical work on 'race', 'class' and gender informed the study (combining theory with action) in a way in which those intersecting axes of oppression could be re-conceptualised without reducing one to the other. New theoretical propositions emerged from the project (combining action and theory), in addition to changes to practice and service delivery and contributions to local and national policy (Chew-Graham et al., 2002; Burman, Smailes and Chantler, 2004).

Xx expand?

Context bound

Action research is a situated practice. That is, problems emerge from, and action research takes place within , particular historical and social contexts, and usually within particular institutional or organisational contexts. It is necessary to understand these multi-layered contexts in order to define the relevant stakeholders and participants in the process as well as to explore the extent to which learning from one action learning project is applicable to other problems and situations. The very problems that are at the heart of a specific

action research project are grounded in the context of the participants. This can lead to dilemmas in deciding who it is that defines a propjet or who collaborates in the definition of a problem. These dilemmas are essentially, boundary judgements. They define not just who it is that is involved at all stages of the work)amd who is not), but also what the scope of the problem under consideration is and the time-scale to be applied to the change project. The process of 'boundary critique' (Kagan et al., 2004; Midgley et al., 1998), that is the questioning of the boundaries between the problem and its context, and between the project and the wider programme of intervention or policy context, can be applied at all stages, and indeed, forms a crucial part of reflexive practice. Decisions made about the different boundaries involved can be participatory, and nearly always will reveal the values underpinning different participants' connections with the problem in hand, and their differing positions and power in the system of social relations.

In addition to being important for making decision about what project is to be implemented by whom in what ways, context can be constraining and/or enabling of the action research process. Indeed, if action has not been possible, it may be to context that we need to look to understand why this is, and at the same time the very inability to create change tells us more about that context. Kagan and Burton (2000) suggest prefigurative action research as a practice that puts the societal context at the heart of action resech implementation and learning, making a bridge between the practicalities of one project or study and the broader aims of principled social change. They say:

Prefigurative action research (is) a term which emphasises the relationship between action research and the creation of alternatives to the existing social order. This combined process of social reform and investigation enables learning about both the freedom of movement to create progressive social forms and about the constraints the present order imposes. (Kagan and Burton, 2000:73).

Example: Work done with families of disabled people in rural areas of Bengal highlighted different ways of families supporting each other and linking with other agencies. Building on this experience a project was developed to explore how best to support families in slum areas of Kolkata. We worked alongside colleagues from Cardiff University and the Indian Institute for Cerebral Palsy to design and implement a project working in three quite different kinds of slum areas and with three different kinds of non-governmental sector community partners. Prefigurative action research was used as a framework for understanding and exploring the conditions under which it was possible or not to implement changes in how health projects worked with families with disabled children in the different context of their work. This framework enabled a historical, social and organisational context to be mapped an understood as a facilitator or barrier to change. (Goldbart and Mukerjee, 2001; Kagan and Scott-Roberts, 2002)

Context is complex and as action research proceeds over time, insight into this complexity grows whilst at the same time increased complexity has to be

built into the action research process. These changes over time are difficult to anticipate, and decisions have to be made about whether or not to continue to work with the ever more complex system, or re-define a project as part of the system. What a detailed understanding of the context does imply, is that attention to, and understanding of the process of action research is as important as the outcomes. Indeed, if outcomes are difficult to achieve within a specified time-scale, it might only be learning about the process - and the context - that is possible.

Concerned with change

Action research is always concerned with change. As we have seen this can range from changes in practice to organisational change to societal change. It differs from other types of research into change insofar as it places equal value on participants' and researchers' experiences. Researchers can be outsiders to the process of change, or insiders, and each beings different dilemmas. For insider action research, there are ethical issues and the potential for role conflict (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001; Holian, 1999). For outsider action research there is the need to develop rapport with insider-participants and clarify the extent of researcher-participation in the process as well as commitment over time.

As the change project proceeds, changes will almost certainly take place in the type of data required. Data need to be collected about both intended and unintended change, and researchers need to be observant about any unintended consequences that arise. Unintended consequences may take the form of additional problems to be addressed through spin-off cycles of action research, or take the form of resistance to change. These then have to be negotiated and understood by all those involved.

There is a danger that any change produced will be dependent on those participants involved at the time, and strategies will be needed to ensure that organisations, groups or communities are able to sustain progressive change once it is achieved. Strategies for sustainability are closely linked to decisions about participation. In the more emancipatory action research, the community begins by defining the problem and is well placed to sustain change, with the researcher taking a more facilitatory role throughout. In more practical action research, it is likely that the change process is more dependent on the researchers' activities and sustainability is under greater threat.

Example: A method was devised to routinely monitor and evaluate the outcomes of a community service to people who are learning disabled. A government grant was obtained to evaluate a system-wide implementation. While the method was found to be broadly useful in enabling staff and the orgnisation to understand what outcomes for people were being produced, the project met considerable resistance from staff who felt uninvolved in the design and implementation and who thought that the method neglected significannt aspects of their work. As a result, and despite good

organisational ownership, the innovation was not sustained beyond the evaluation phase (Hunt, Burton and Chapman, 2000)

Main issues associated with the 'method'

Firstly, as already noted at several poinnts, Action Research is a process and not a method. Different methods, both qualitative and quantitative, can feed this process. The core of AR is a process of change and reflection with collaborative self reflection at the core. This means that selection of Action Research as an approach is the beginning of methodological dilemmas and not the end of them! For this reason the action researcher needs to have a broad competence in research methods from both traditional and non-traditional paradigms, recognising where they can be useful and where limited, but at all times in relation to the overall goals of principled social change within and beyond the action project. Methodological competence is perhaps more important here than anywhere - we have to offer our particiupant colleagues the best information and knowledge that can be obtained to illuminate their struggles and actions.

Models of AR vary with their purpose - reform or transformation and these goals broadly map onto emancipatory or participatory , and practical action research, both of which are relevant to psychology. Nevertheless, all action research projects are compromised: there is no such thing as a purely particiupative project - there are always limits on the participation possible, there are always power relations that silence some voices, at least relatively. This is not a counsel of despair, but one to use the tools of action research to make such situations less compromised, maximising shared enlightenment as the process procedes.

Different models of AR involve, to greater or lesser degrees the steps of planning, implementing, reflecting, evaluating and more planning etc. But the linear, (or even cyclical) model implied here is an abstraction. Just as the Japanese agronomist Masonobu Fukuoka devised a system of 'simultaneous crop succession', so the action researcher will often be simultaneously planning, implementing, reflecting, evaluating, and more besides.

End points will not always be identifiable from the outset, although general direction probably will. Indeed, in many cases the definition of the 'project' within a broader social process will be somewhat arbitrary.

Reflection and learning is an integral part of the process. As Argyris (1976) noted, such learning takes place through iterations on several levels. It will cover learning from within the change project as well as learning about the nature of change, about the broader aims themselves, and about the context (Kagan and Burton, 2000). It is not possible to predict what will be learned, by whom, and what the effect will be, and indeed there are likely to be a variety of spin-offs from any action research project, as well as unintended consequences, good and bad, that should be looked out for.

Dilemmas

Funding may be difficult to secure: most funders want a boundaried project and AR cannot always deliver this. Sustainability of change needs to be considered. Commissioners of research will rarely support open-ended projects, so an important consideration is the decision that is made over the start and end of a change process. Indeed the reputation problem identified by Sanford is still with us: AR grant proposals can risk appearing 'too vague to fund'. Conference organisers, academic publishers will often not consider projects without complete data collection and analysis. Tensions here in terms of building the body of knowledge although there are some specialist publishers (such as the journals *Action Research; Community, Work and Family; Journal Community and Applied Social Psychology; Qualitative health Research;*) that are interested in process issues.

Time taken for meaningful change to be achieved is critical and often only becomes clear as the process proceeds. Time taken building relationships is closely linked to the ethics of AR and responsibilities to collaborators, participants or to improving the issues under investigation. This contrasts with the positivist ideal of impartiality based on independence and distance of the researcher. There is also at times a conflict between 'moving onto the next project' and carer advancement, and the discharge of ongoing responsibility to those with whom the action research relationship has been established. It is important to to have unrealistic goals, especially in reltion to time (Rapoport,1970). Latin American Participative Action research has a specific concept, 'inserción' (insertion) to describe the organic, committed way the researcher joins the host community. The more participative the AR, the more stakeholder interests, involvement, resistance and boundary decisions all have to be clarified, at entry, during the work, and at exit. This commitment is more about a way of being, rather than an approach to a particular research project.

Critical appraisal of AR

So what can be said about the usefulness of AR for a socially relevant, non-positivist psychology? There is no one form of AR, but rather a family of approaches, and AR is not a method but rather an ontological and epistemological orientation (with a standpoint on both the nature of the social world, and on how it can be apprehended). It follows then, that a critical appraisal would have to capture both the diversity of AR and its status as a meta-methodology.

The above review would suggest that at least the practical and emancipatory approaches to AR are most appropriate when:-
1. Problem definition is relatively open.
2. Participation is pluralistic, and in particular, includes those with most to lose or gain.
3. The aim is to create and understand social reform or transformation.
4. The project is understood and can be conceptualised in relation to a broader programme of social transformation.

5. Methods can be selected from the broad range available to social scientists, but that these will be transparent and understandable to participants and capable of revealing the unexpected.
6. There is ownership of the change project by those affected and those involved.
7. The researcher(s) are not overly compromised by their institutional base, the funding, and the intentions of any sponsors.

AR is probably of less use in elucidating individual psychological processes, describing characteristics of groups or populations, although AR projects might reasonably include emancipatory versions of such aims (e.g. in the self-definition and re-appropriation of difference by groups such as mental health system survivors, or those with unconventional identities - processes of conscientisation).

AR may also be of limited usefulness in studies conceived within tight timescales and with predetermined aims, such as evaluations of standardised treatments or some needs analyses. However, again AR could suggest an alternative way of approaching such questions, as when therapy participants reflect on the process from their own perspectives and experience, or when a community group carries out its own community needs audit.

AR is no more immune from ethical scrutiny than other research strategies (Khanlou and Peter, 2004). Its emphasis on change means that the question of (potentially unreasonably raised) expectations is at the forefront in project initiation, while the dilemmas of project and participant/non-participant boundaries have already been highlighted. The authentic nature of the research relationships may be a better guide to the ethical standards of the research, when, as is often the case, precise methods and definitions of particpants cannot be identified at the start. Real participation can mean that the use of the project findings may not be in the gift of the researcher, nor the perceived interest of the other participants who may reasonably object to the exploitation of collective knowledge products for academic purposes. Similarly, authorship may reasonably many of those who involved in the work and not just those who have formal researcher roles.

Finally, disengagement and sustainability raise questions in an arguably sharper way than for more 'touristic' research paradigms. AR claims the moral high ground but its practitioners then have to live by the implied high ethical standards.

Future of AR within psychology

Interest in AR has grown in psychology over recent years, particularly as the two traditions discussed here, of practical and participatory action research find resonances, in their amalgamation with the interests of critical psychology (see Bostock and Freeman, 2003; Fryer and Fagan, 2003; Parker and Goodley, 2000; Parker, 2004). A number of other trends bode well for the development and expansion of action research within psychology.

Community psychology is growing, worldwide, as a practice that reflects both the critical edge of psychology and a concern with addressing change at structural levels (Nelson and Prilleletensky, 2005). In professional psychology arenas, there is a growing interest in the involvement of those using services into explorations of the appropriateness and effectiveness of services. Again, in the professional arena, whereas tight discipline boundaries were valued in the past, there are moves to create more permeable disciplines, and good inter-agency and multi-agency methods of working, exploiting the synergies of overlapping concerns and expertise. This opens the way for professional psychological practice and concomitant research to merge with traditions that have more experience of action research, particularly, for example, community development and health promotion and the management of change.

Action research is growing in health areas, as health itself diversifies and includes new and different practices (see for example the arts for health movement), and calls are made for psychologists to become more involved in public health (Abraham and Michie, 2005).

Tension will be to work in ways that encourage the more emancipatory and participatory forms of AR to keep a hold and to resist a pull back into practical and technical AR. The context of psychological work in the West makes this latter scenario likely. The influence of neo-liberal policies places a value on 'short term' fixes to complex psychological and human problems.

In the UK the British Psychological Society exerts an unprecedented control over the psychology training curriculum, not just at professional, but also at undergraduate levels. A shift in the thinking to include societal issues and participative research strategies in the prescribed curricula will be required if action research is to take its place as an essential skill. The renewed calls for an integrated applied psychology training curriculum may assist this process (Kinderman, 2005).

But maybe AR is not a skill - it is more a way of life, or as Reason and Bradbury 2001: xxiv) suggest *Full integration of knowledge and action in inquiry as a practice of living*. Indeed, Reason and Torbert (2001) describe three broad pathways within action research, cutting across all the issues discussed above.

> First person - ability to research and foster inquiring approach within his or her own life.
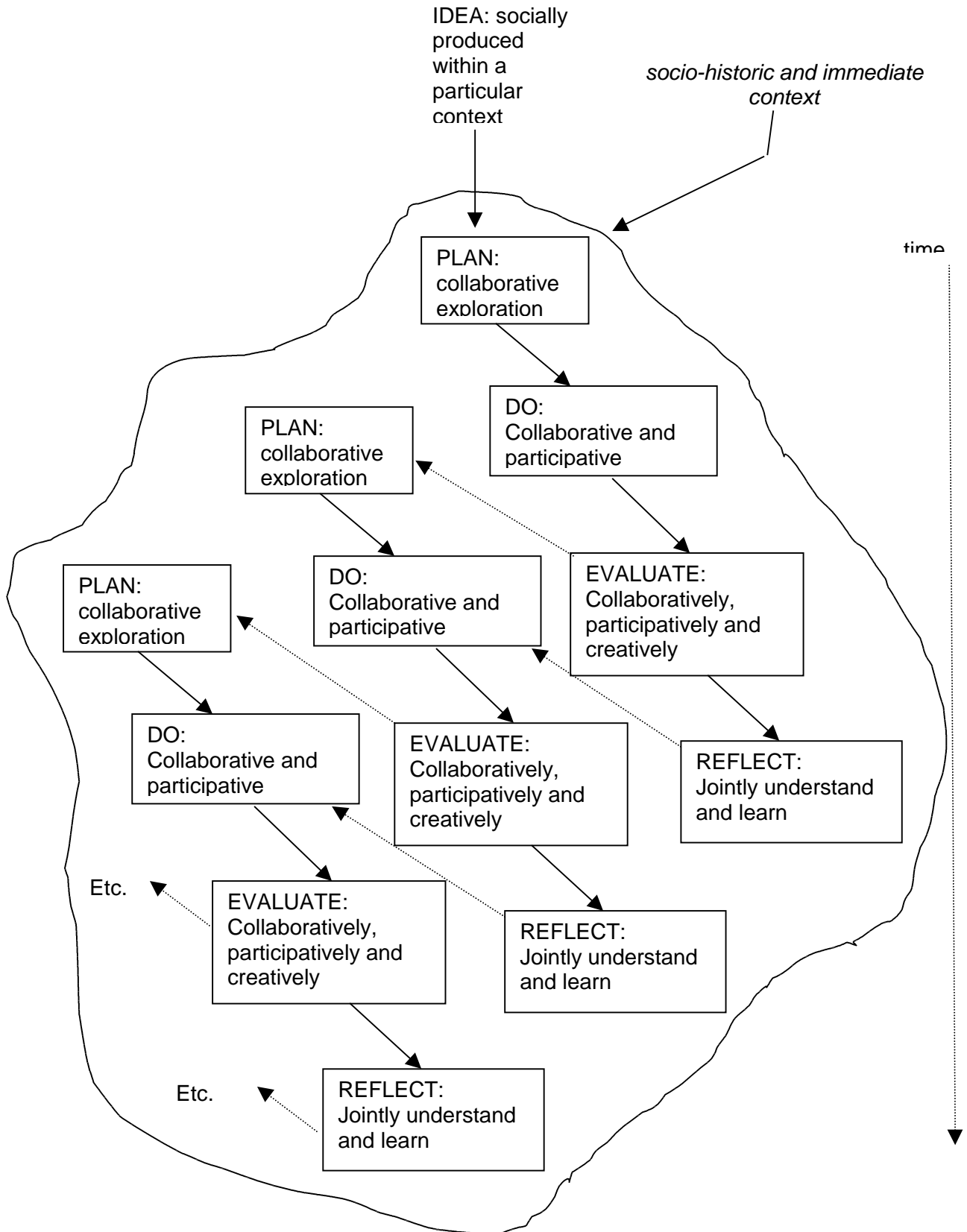>
> Second person - ability to inquire, face to face with others in to issues of mutual concern (e.g. in service of improving our professional and person practice). Starts With interpersonal dialogue and includes development of communities of inquiry and learning organisations.
>
> Third person - aims to extend these relatively small scale projects so that they can be considered 'political events', not just scientific happenings. Third person strategies create wider community of

inquiry, involving people who cannot be known to each other - impersonal quality (writing, and reporting outcomes of processes of inquiry can form third person AR)

Most compelling AR involves all three.

Figure 1: A model of Action Research taking place over time within a particular contex

IDEA: socially produced within a particular context

socio-historic and immediate context

time

PLAN: collaborative exploration

DO: Collaborative and participative

PLAN: collaborative exploration

DO: Collaborative and participative

EVALUATE: Collaboratively, participatively and creatively

PLAN: collaborative exploration

DO: Collaborative and participative

EVALUATE: Collaboratively, participatively and creatively

REFLECT: Jointly understand and learn

Etc.

EVALUATE: Collaboratively, participatively and creatively

REFLECT: Jointly understand and learn

Etc.

REFLECT: Jointly understand and learn

22

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Action Research Resources (including Action Research International, an online journal) http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.htm
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