Action Research

Editorial

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What is This?

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Editorial

Striding across the battlefield, Liberty holds the banner of freedom aloft, rallying the people and leading them to ultimate victory over their oppressors. Delacroix' famous painting seems to capture the sense of purpose and dedication of action research. But purpose and dedication have the nasty habit of turning into self-righteousness and an unquestioning conviction that one's actions are morally superior and beyond reproach. Liberty seems not to see the burning buildings behind her nor the many dead bodies lying at her feet!

Action research takes many different forms, draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks for inspiration, and builds on the work of researchers from a broad range of different disciplinary backgrounds, but in general we do seem to articulate a shared set of values. Reflecting these values, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, the editors of this journal and of the *Handbook of Action Research*, define the practice as, 'a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes' (2001, p. 1). But, as Boser points out (p. 14), 'democratic intentions do not obviate the need for thoughtful examination of the ethical implications' of our research. It is with this intention that this special issue devoted to a critical examination of ethics and action research has been developed.

The articles included in this special issue reflect some of the many ethical issues action researchers must address if, as a community of scholars/practitioners, we are to live up to this shared set of values. We begin with two articles that provide theoretical and philosophical frameworks for this examination of ethics. Susan Boser suggests in the introduction to her work that, 'this movement toward participatory research brings new sets of social relations for research and, as such, presents a new set of ethical challenges' (p. 9). She explores this new set of ethical challenges paying particular attention to the importance of maintaining a focus on issues of power and calls upon us to consider how these relations of power might influence practice. These are critical questions which are examined within specific research settings in the two exemplars included in this issue. Drawing on her own work in the field of industrial democracy and focusing on the issue of age discrimination, Anne Inga Hilsen discusses issues of power by examining them within the context of human relationships. Hilsen suggests that we understand the practice of action research as a covenant between the researcher and the other

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participants in the process, a relationship that requires us to consider seriously the ethical implications of our work. As she observes, 'because the social sciences *can* make a difference in people's lives, power and responsibility are unavoidable issues' (p. 32). This demand for critical self-reflection is especially important in action research, then, precisely because it defines itself as a social change process. The final contribution to this first section is a book review contributed by Olav Eikeland who points to some wider philosophical and methodological ramifications of the ethical challenges described in a recent book on ethics and practitioner research and in the contributions to this special issue.

The second section of the special issue is devoted to an exploration of the issues of ethics and action research as they arise in practice. In the first of these exemplars, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern describe their work with the Ardoyne Commemoration Project, an action research project in which the authors collaborated with community participants to create a document chronicling the lives and deaths of local residents who were the victims of conflict-related violence in this republican community in the North of Ireland. The potential for psychological harm faced by community participants, the friends and family members of the victims, in discussing and recording their losses, is weighed against the importance of participating in the process of 'truth-telling', and strategies for ensuring that local community members have a sense of ownership and control over the experience are emphasized as an important factor in negotiating such an emotionally charged process. Educational action research is the focus of Mary-Lee Judah and George Richardson's examination of the tensions involved when teachers' participation in action research projects is mandated by the school system. This raises an important ethical dilemma for those in positions of power who honestly feel that action research might provide an important tool for professional development, but who recognize that requiring one's subordinates to take part in such processes in some fundamental way undermines the very values of democratic participation that underlie the practice. Rather than suggest some simple conclusion to this issue, Judah and Richardson provide the teachers themselves with the opportunity to describe their own experience of participating in action research projects, expressing both positive and negative responses to the process. One critical concern related to ethics and action research that was not addressed in the articles submitted for this special issue is the issue of intellectual property. In order to address this important question, Davydd Greenwood, Mary Brydon-Miller, and Carla Shafer prepared a brief article exploring some of the key problems and possible remedies to this important challenge to the ethical conduct and dissemination of action research.

The final section of this special issue looks at the question of pedagogy and challenges us to consider how the ethics of action research might better inform the teaching of action research. Examining this issue within the context of her own participation in two of Davydd Greenwood's courses at Cornell University,

Nimat Hafez Barazangi discusses the fundamental ways in which an action research pedagogy challenges traditional roles and methods of teaching, and acknowledges the difficulties encountered by both faculty and students in making such changes. As Barazangi observes, this discussion has implications for those conducting action research in community settings as well, and suggests the need for local communities to become learning communities in their own right. We conclude this section on ethical challenges facing action researchers working within university settings with a brief article by Mary Brydon-Miller and Davydd Greenwood examining the role of Institutional Review Boards in shaping (or mis-shaping) the action research process. After briefly reviewing the genesis of this review process, Brydon-Miller and Greenwood discuss the tensions that arise when review boards are confronted with proposals from action researchers. Readers might note the connections between this discussion and many of the points raised in Eikeland's review. This suggests the importance of shifting under-standings of the positionality of the researcher within an action research para-digm to include consideration of the ethical implications of our work.

Finally, we conclude this special issue by reviewing the questions raised in the articles included here and by offering strategies that we believe are crucial if we are to address the ethical challenges facing action research. These recommenda-tions address concerns at each level of our individual and shared practice as action researchers and will, we hope, offer a springboard for a continuing dialogue.

In closing this introduction, we wish to thank all of our contributors for their insightful examinations of the challenges of conducting action research that lives up to our shared values of democratic practice and positive social change and in addition, to express our gratitude to the other scholars whose work we were unable to include in this special issue. While acknowledging this work, and the work of other action researchers who have in the past been willing to tackle these important issues, (including authors such as DeTardo-Bora (2004) whose work appeared in earlier issue of this journal), we have, frankly, been surprised and dismayed by the apparent overall lack of interest in this crucial issue. This is reflected not simply by the relatively small number of submissions received for this special issue, but by the overall dearth of literature exploring ethics and action research and by the failure of most action researchers to include in-depth examinations of the ethical dilemmas they encounter in their discussions of their work. It is our hope that this special issue provides the impetus for an expanded and on-going discussion of the ethical challenges we face as practitioners, scholars, and educators of action research, and we invite your comments and reflections on this important issue.

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Olav Eikeland

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