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ABSTRACT

For nearly 70 years scholars have been discussing the characteristics of action research and it is apparent that there is an increasingly wide range of forms that action research takes in practice. Here we argue that such diversity is not haphazard and that we must be cautious about developing all-embracing standards to differentiate the 'good' from the 'bad'. Rather this diversity is inspired by different philosophical stances, which usually remain tacit in published accounts thereby fuelling ambiguity and controversy about what action research should entail in practice and as to its 'scientific' status. The aim of this article is to explain the apparent diversity of action research in the organization studies domain, by clarifying how variable philosophical assumptions systematically lead to the constitution of distinctive forms of action research with their attendant conceptions of social science. This diversity is illustrated, with examples from the relevant literature, in terms of variation in: the aims of action research; its conception of social science; the role of the action researcher and their relations with members; the validity criteria deployed and the internal tensions that arise.

KEYWORDS

action research ▪ epistemology ▪ methodology ▪ ontology

Introduction

The term action research has become increasingly used by organizational researchers to describe and justify their activities. Yet despite a long history which originates, at the latest, with Lewin's application of experimental logic

and social psychological theory to practical social problems (1946), it is simultaneously evident (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) that the meanings attached to the term, the sources of inspiration deployed and the practices it sanctions are so diverse that there appears to be no unifying theory. Indeed this diversity may be increasing with the recent appropriation of postmodernist discourse by some organizational researchers (Barry, 1997; Cullen, 1998; Treleaven, 2001).

Different views of action research abound within the literature. For instance, many influential commentators have emphasized how action research integrates theory and practice through 'systematic self-reflective scientific inquiry by practitioners to improve practice' (McKernan, 1996: 5), where tacit criteria of organizational 'health' are deployed (Schein, 1987, 1997), whilst 'the pure applied distinction that characterizes much of organizational research' is dissolved (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001: 8). Although some commentators have framed action research as 'appreciative inquiry' that builds upon organizational successes rather than ameliorating problems (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), what is usually seen as distinctive about action research is an iterative cycle of problem identification, diagnosis, planning, intervention and evaluation of the results of action in order to learn and to plan subsequent interventions (Checkland, 1991; Dickens & Watkins, 1999). According to some, these iterations must focus upon processual issues by developing an interpretative understanding of members' 'theories-in-use', as opposed to 'espoused theories', to help reduce defensive routines and thereby contribute to single and double loop learning so as to reconfigure organizational decision-making (Argyris et al., 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1989; Argyris, 1993; Grubbs, 2001). In contrast, Aguinis (1993) argues that pivotal to the action research cycle is deductive causal analysis: a process of hypothesis building, testing and modification within organizational contexts so as to solve problems with reference to clearly defined goals and observable outcomes.

So whether the theoretical imperative is *verstehen* (interpretive understanding) or *erklaren* (causal explanation), many scholars agree that action research must be implemented through the involvement of external researchers 'with members over . . . a matter which is of genuine concern to them' (Eden & Huxham, 1996: 75), 'within a mutually acceptable ethical framework' (Rapoport, 1970: 499). However others see that the relationship between researchers and organizational participants must be dialogical (e.g. Sandberg, 1985) so as to open communicative space and bring '*people together around shared topical concerns, problems and issues* . . . in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and

consensus about what to do' (Kemmis, 2001: 100, emphasis in the original). The aim of such dialogue is to 'promote a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change' (Grundy, 1987: 154).

Others seem rather sceptical about this force for emancipation. For instance, Cullen (1998) uses a Foucauldian perspective to argue that the action research model that has evolved within the Tavistock Institute has created a paradoxical stance regarding social control and social change. He suggests that on the one hand, action research utilizes what Foucault described as 'dividing practices' in that a new form of 'examination', administered through the consultant as the authority figure had been developed. Therefore, far from being liberationary, action research has been promoting more effective forms of organizational control. On the other hand, he argues that the main contribution of action research can be seen to 'open up and facilitate spaces within which alternative social and organizational paradigms could be nurtured' (Cullen, 1998: 1559).

In this article, we wish to clarify some of the evident ambiguity surrounding the label action research by explaining how this diversity comes about with reference to the competing conceptions of 'science' that inspire different forms of action research praxis. Indeed a number of authors have argued that action research has never really enjoyed the status it deserves. For instance, Sandford (1970) argued that no form of action research has been regarded as part of the mainstream social science tradition due to its multidisciplinary nature and the perception that action research can never be truly 'scientific'. This claim has been supported by a variety of scholars (e.g. Susman & Evered, 1978; Argyris, 1980; Stone, 1982) who have proposed that action research is incompatible with the scientific norms established by positivist epistemology. Although that proposition that such a divide exists has been disputed (Aguinis, 1993), Elden and Chisholm (1993: 136) claim that the discrepancies with positivism have been exacerbated by the 'emergent varieties of action research'. While some commentators argue that these departures from positivist norms should be welcomed because such norms are unsustainable (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001), others seem to want to encourage action researchers to translate positivist norms into 'quality standards' (e.g. Wilson, 2004).

Here we shall argue that the range of forms that action research takes is not haphazard and that we must be cautious about developing all-embracing standards to differentiate the 'good' from the 'bad', the 'scientific' from 'pseudo-science', and so on. Rather the emergent diversity is inspired by different philosophical stances, in the main driven by varying core assumptions about epistemology and ontology, which normatively inform

their practitioners in terms of aims and requirements. Yet the impact of such philosophical variation usually remains unnoticed in published accounts thereby fuelling ambiguity and controversy about what action research should entail in practice and as to its 'scientific' status.

Hence the aim of this article is to describe and explain the apparent diversity of action research in the management and organization studies domain, by reflexively clarifying how variable philosophical assumptions about ontology and epistemology systematically lead to distinctive forms of action research with their attendant normative and summative conceptions of social science. This diversity is illustrated, with examples from the relevant literature, in terms of variation in: the aims of action research; its conception of social science; the role of the action researcher and their relations with participants; the validity criteria deployed; and the internal tensions that can arise.

Action research, diversity and philosophy

As Reason and Bradbury (2001: xxiv) have noted, the action research 'family' includes a wide range of methodologies, grounded in different traditions, that express competing philosophical assumptions. A number of writers have sought to characterize aspects of that family, and indeed family life more generally, in different ways. For example, Raelin (1999) focuses on the different types of intervention strategies available by presenting a categorization of six different action strategies practised by organizational and management development practitioners: action research; participatory research; action learning; action science; developmental action inquiry; and co-operative inquiry. After providing a definition of each strategy, he presents a set of 14 criteria for differentiating across the various strategies. These criteria range from those focusing on the underpinnings (e.g. 'philosophical base' and 'nature of discourse') to those focused on the more practical elements (e.g. organizational 'risk and assessment'). In contrast, Chandler and Torbert (2003) have produced a conceptual typology of 27 different 'flavours' of action research which are underpinned by three dimensions of voice, practice and time. Others have also produced less elaborate distinctions between different approaches. For example, Kelly's (1985) distinction between approaches informed by 'experimental social administration' and those informed by the 'teacher researcher model' or Heller's (2004) differentiation of 'action research' and 'research action' where he argued that within the family of action research there are 'two fairly distinct and legitimate approaches' (2004: 349).

By way of contrast to the above typologies, our purpose here is to analyse some of the various approaches to action research in detail and to explain their diversity in terms of variation in the action researcher's underlying philosophical commitments. We then link these assumptions specifically to a consideration of the different types of assessment criteria that are appropriate for different action research practices, thereby producing a different account from those outlined above. Such an analysis of action research can enhance our understanding of this evident ambiguity by opening to reflexive examination the often unnoticed a priori conventions which organize action researchers' endeavours, so as to indicate the conditions under which particular perspectives and practices are deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

An understanding of philosophy is important because although their idiom varies, a number of philosophers (e.g. Bhaskar, 1978; Trigg, 1980; Bernstein, 1983; Margolis, 1986; Norris, 1996) have noted how different understandings of science are constituted by different combinations of assumptions about ontology and epistemology. Each is expressed as a particular conception of the relationship between subject (the knower) and object (what is known). These philosophical assumptions underlie the categorization of action research which we use later in this article. For instance, many contemporary positivists assume that any social science researcher, provided that they follow the correct methodological procedures, which must derive from those used in the natural sciences, can neutrally collect data from an independent social reality so as to empirically test causal predictions deduced from a priori theory. However within this realist ontological and objectivist epistemological stance the commitment to methodological monism, by imposing an observer-derived logic (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994), has led to the neglect of the role of actors' subjective perceptions in guiding their behaviour. Indeed within such a positivist stance, the accessing of actors' subjective perspectives is often considered to be inappropriate because it is presumed that this cannot be done in a direct, objective, neutral manner and therefore is scientifically inadmissible (e.g. Abel, 1958). In contrast, there are those that consider *verstehen* to be objectively viable, and hence scientifically legitimate, through, for instance, 'naturalistic' interpretative inquiry. This is where the social researcher tries to enter 'the worlds of native people . . . to render those worlds understandable from the standpoint of a theory that is grounded in the behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings of those studied' (Denzin, 1970: 166).

So here, according to some commentators (e.g. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), it is possible to detect an initial point of philosophical departure in social science research. Inductive access to, and analysis of actors' culturally derived interpretive logics is legitimized as a means of explanation of

observed behaviour. Moreover there is preservation of a positivist view of the privileged role of the researcher who, it is assumed, can still access empirical data neutrally from an independent reality. It is the empirical focus of that privileged role that changes. However, it is this very privilege that is directly attacked by other philosophical manoeuvres.

In particular, various scholars have popularized the subjectivist epistemological view that the ideal of a neutral detached observer is unrealistic: what counts as warranted knowledge, truth and reason are always conditioned through the operation of inescapable socially constructed, and hence transitive, modes of engagement (e.g. Habermas, 1972, 1974; Foucault, 1977; Bhaskar, 1978). However where epistemological subjectivists disagree is with regard to their stance upon the ontological status of social reality. For instance, Habermas (1972, 1974) combines epistemological subjectivism with ontological realism. Here social reality is assumed to have an independent existence but we can never know this reality-as-it-is because of the action of our socially derived modes of engagement which allow us to make sense of our world(s). Human cognition shapes reality through its imposition of a priori object constituting epistemological categories which 'determine the aspects under which reality is objectified and thus can be made accessible to experience to begin with' (1974: 8–9).

In contrast, other scholars have combined epistemological subjectivism with ontological subjectivism. In this relativistic position, reality becomes a self-referential and arbitrary output of discursive practices. For example, Baudrillard (1983, 1993) argues that such hyper-realities have no independent ontological status as they are divorced from extra-linguistic reference points, in which there is nothing to see save simulations which appear to be real. For Chia (1995, 1996), it follows that knowledge has no secure vantage point outside the socio-linguistic processes which constitute our worlds, yet there is a tendency to externalize and reify these social products so that our discursively produced hyper-realities are mistaken for an independent, unchangeable, external reality.

As we shall demonstrate in this article, the philosophical manoeuvres and points of departure noted above have had a significant further impact upon the forms that action research takes. Indeed these variable combinations of philosophical assumptions that underpin different forms of action research influence not just how action researchers conduct their research, but also the appropriate criteria by which it should be evaluated. Therefore such a metatheoretical analysis will enable us to consider variation in what is meant by 'good' or 'bad' research, or 'proper science', by revealing the implicit philosophical commitments which are being deployed in those criteriological[1] evaluations. A key outcome is a description and explanation

of methodological variation thereby potentially broadening the philosophical repertoire available whilst enhancing mutual and self-understanding.

Hence while we are trying to understand why such evident diversity has developed under the umbrella term 'action research', we are not implying that 'anything goes' in a relativistic sense. Rather we argue that different forms of action research are justified by the different philosophical commitments we have just outlined that simultaneously articulate specific criteriologies where anything does *not* go within a particular mode of engagement.

In order to facilitate this form of analysis and examine the different underlying assumptions behind various approaches to action research we will be using a categorization of five different approaches to action research practices. This categorization will be used as a heuristic device to enable the different assumptions underlying certain types of praxis to be outlined and critiqued. We have labelled these categories of action research praxis as: 'experimental'; 'inductive'; 'participatory action research'; 'participatory'; and 'deconstructive'. We have chosen this particular form of categorization because it enables us to highlight how the different philosophical assumptions that we have just outlined underlie a range of action research practices. The categorization is not all inclusive, but we have categorized the most commonly found types of action research that abound. Subtle variations and continuities within each category will be explained so as to elaborate how variances in philosophical commitments serve to constitute and reconstitute different forms of action research. We recognize that this form of categorization may be contentious for a number of reasons. First, inevitably although it is firmly rooted in the distinctions between the philosophical traditions highlighted previously, it is illustrative of our own interpretations of those distinctions that may not necessarily be shared by others. Second, in producing a categorization system we then must allocate different types of action research to the categories in that system. Once again here we are making judgements regarding our own sensemaking of the work and contribution of other authors. Yet they themselves may prefer to see their work categorized in an alternative way. Third, the labels we use to describe the categories may not represent how others see the field and in themselves may be controversial. Although we recognize the contentious nature of our endeavour, our aim here is to examine the different philosophical assumptions that underlie each of the categories outlined, and to point out where the boundaries are blurred, and the implications of that blurring. However we should also consider our own role in producing this account of action research. This article emerged from the two authors' own discussions of action research and the recognition that the differing ways in which we both defined the domain were underpinned by different philosophical positions which had not been sufficiently

reflected upon. Out of this dialogue, our own emergent philosophical stance has, of course, informed how we have constructed this account. This stance is articulated in our attempt to elucidate how a priori assumptions impact upon how action researchers themselves engage with organizations and their memberships. These aims in themselves articulate the epistemic commitments of critical theory by attempting to encourage critical interrogation of such engagements. Moreover, the epistemological hegemony of positivism is challenged, especially in terms of its inadvertent criteriological application to all action research practices. Therefore the aim of this article is to highlight the resultant complexity in attempting to derive general evaluation criteria from the field of action research, and we argue that this complexity derives from the variety of philosophical stances drawn upon. We will now examine each of the categories of action research practices in turn.

1. Experimental action research practices

The coining of the term 'action research' is traced by many back to the work of Kurt Lewin (Burnes, 2004). Lewin's experimental approach was underpinned, as was most social psychology at that time, by positivist philosophical assumptions. Usually these philosophical assumptions are expressed through a commitment to Popperian falsificationism (Popper, 1959) which retains an objectivist epistemology, a realist ontology, and articulates methodological monism. In other words, positivists assume that any social science researcher, provided that they follow the correct methodological procedures which derive from those used in the natural sciences, can neutrally collect data from an independent social reality so as to empirically test causal predictions deduced from a priori theory. We have categorized approaches underlied by positivist commitments as 'experimental action research practices', because they follow the tradition of experimentation. Positivist epistemological and ontological commitments are vividly illustrated by Lewin's original contribution to action research (1946). Here he emphasized how the most important aim of doing social science should be to practically contribute to the change and betterment of society and its institutions. For Lewin, ensuring such progress demanded some reorientation of social research so as to bridge the gap between what he called 'general laws' and the 'diagnosis' of specific social problems. The former dealt with:

> . . . the relation between possible conditions and possible results. They are expressed in 'if so' propositions . . . and can serve as guidance

> under certain conditions. The knowledge of general laws can serve as guidance for the achievement of certain objectives in certain conditions.
>
> (1946: 38)

However, Lewin also saw such general laws as being context-free and it was not sufficient just to know them in order to act correctly, but also one must know 'the specific character of the situation at hand'. This character is determined by a scientific fact-finding called diagnosis (1946: 38). Fact-finding occupied a pivotal position in Lewin's 'spiral of steps' for undertaking action research:

> First it should evaluate the action. It shows whether what has been achieved is above or below expectation. Secondly, it gives the planner a chance to learn, that is, to gather new general insight . . . Thirdly, this fact finding should serve as the basis for correctly planning the next step. Finally it serves as a basis for modifying the 'overall plan'.
>
> (1946: 38)

Hence the emphasis is upon scientists intervening in real-life social situations so as to ameliorate the practical problems of actors over a period of time in a manner which emphasizes gradual learning and incremental change. Despite Lewin's own public commitment to democratic inquiry through the participation of actors (see Heller, 1969), often this is de-emphasized or redirected in this style of action research. As Schein observes (1995), here the momentum and direction for change derives from the scientist's agenda while the involvement of actors or participants in the research process is principally about facilitating the implementation of the desired organizational change. Their responses are therefore only considered in that context.

So in many respects such intentions comfortably accommodate positivist commitments. Notions such as fact-finding entail the presupposition of a theory neutral observational language which allows the action researcher to objectively access the facts of an a priori reality. The enduring importance of such commitments derives from positivism's origins in the anti-authoritarian cultural changes embraced by the Enlightenment which deployed empiricism to launch attacks upon metaphysical speculation and theocratic revelation (see Gray, 1995) as subsequently expressed in Comte's (1853) desire to rid science of dogma through the examination of the 'positively given'. Similarly, Lewin's concerns with progress through the settling of practical problems resonate with Enlightenment optimism: human reason would

triumph over ignorance and its application would allow the control of human affairs. Here reason is characterized as when a person:

> . . . who in perceiving the world takes in 'bits' of information from his or her surroundings, and then processes them in some fashion, in order to emerge with the 'picture' of the world he or she has; who then acts on the basis of this picture to fulfill his or her goals, through a 'calculus' of means and ends.
>
> (Taylor, 1993: 319)

As Passmore suggests, the subsequent development of action research by Tavistock researchers:

> brought together Lewin's approach to action research with Bion's (1946) theories of leaderless groups and Bertalanffy's (1950) work on systems theory to create interventions in the workplace that strived to improve both organizational effectiveness and human dignity.
>
> (2000: 38)

This tradition clearly expresses a commitment to *erklaren*, where the overriding aim is to deductively access the causal relations that are presumed to be embedded in an a priori, cognitively accessible reality. For example, Lewin's approach included a series of hypothesis-testing experiments designed into his workshops. As both Marrow (1969) and Argyris et al. (1985) suggest, Lewin's greatest contribution was the idea of studying things through changing them and then seeing the effects of those changes so that the rigorous testing of hypotheses is not sacrificed, nor the relationship to practice lost. Thus, 'Lewin was led by both data and theory, each feeding off each other' (Marrow, 1969: 128) since actual practical outcomes can be evaluated and a modified hypothesis can be developed (Miller, 1995).

It is here that we can see some blurring with regard to the underlying epistemological assumptions behind such experimental approaches to action research. For instance, the methodological standard for *erklaren* is the experiment and its ability to methodologically create, or simulate, conditions of closure which allow the empirical testing of hypotheses and enable internal validity. So for the experimenter, 'scientific' rigour amounts to: ensuring that every respondent had experienced the same experimental treatment within an experimental group; measuring variation in the dependent variable; and matching control and experimental groups so as to rule out the influence of extraneous variables through techniques such as randomization. However, Lewin's holistic and naturalistic concern with what Argyris and Schon (1989)

call 'intervention experiments' in real-life situations militate against the full implementation of such 'true' experimental designs (Beer & Walton, 1987; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994; Gill & Johnson, 1997). Matching naturally occurring control and experimental groups, or the manipulation of treatments, etc., becomes problematic. Here a key methodological strategy is one of compensation by developing what amount to quasi-experimental designs. The latter appropriate the logic of the experiment for research in natural contexts (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Orpen, 1979; Aguinis, 1993) but in so doing confront problems arising from confounded extraneous variables which in effect constitute rival hypotheses to the one(s) under test and thereby threaten the internal validity of any findings by making cause and effect propositions tenuous.

The tensions created by the desire to apply experimental logic in 'natural' organizational contexts has led some to suggest that there is a choice between 'science' or action research (e.g. Stone, 1982; Brief & Dukerich, 1991) which, as Eden and Huxham (1996) have observed in the North American Academy, may mean that action research is rejected as 'unscientific'. But this is only a dilemma if we are adopting the particular positivist epistemological and ontological assumptions that define 'science' in terms of *erklaren*.

2. Inductive action research practices

It is clear that there is a tension between holding positivist philosophical assumptions whilst conducting action research in organizational environments (DeTardo-Bora, 2004). This has led a number of action researchers to modify these assumptions by seeking to inductively access research participants' cultures, in their natural contexts. Hence we have labelled this category as 'inductive action research practices'. This usually occurs through *verstehen* and the deployment of qualitative methods of data collection (e.g. Cassell & Symon, 2004) to produce a form of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that guides subsequent interventions. A number of potential labels could be applied to those working in this domain, such as neo-empiricist, qualitative positivist, or interpretivist, for example (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Prasad & Prasad, 2002). However we have chosen the label 'inductive' here to highlight how theory in this particular approach is generated from the data and concerns the development of thick descriptions of the patterns of subjective meanings that organizational actors use to make sense of their worlds, rather than entailing the testing of hypotheses deduced from a priori theory that causally explains what has been observed by the action researcher.

Despite the differences that arise from this focus upon accessing actors' subjective meanings, those working in this tradition still retain what many philosophers define as positivism's key epistemic characteristic – the presupposition of a neutral observational language (see also Hammersley, 1992; Knights, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). In effect, positivism's subject–object dualism is replaced by a subject–subject dualism (Johnson & Duberley, 2000), where 'the third-person point of view' (Schwandt, 1996: 62) privileges the consciousness of the action researcher who can, it is presumed, passively present inductively generated descriptions of other actors' cultural experience without contamination. So for Strauss and Corbin (1990: 27) grounded theory is a method that 'meets the criteria for doing "good science": significance, theory-observation compatibility, generalizability, reproducibility, precision, rigour and verification' (see also Lecompte & Goetz, 1982) whilst emphasizing the maintenance of 'naturalism' (Denzin, 1970) or 'ecological validity' (Cicourel, 1982).

In action research, this deviation from the experimental tradition results in the development of certain forms of inquiry which entail iterative processes of problem diagnosis, intervention and reflective learning by the researcher and participants (e.g. Cassell & Fitter, 1992). Perhaps the most well-known of these kind of approaches are those sometimes dubbed 'action science' (Argyris et al., 1985). Within this approach the emphasis is upon the researcher's interpretive understanding of organizational participants' practical reasoning as 'theories-in-use' that occupy organizational backstages and are hidden by the evasions constituted through 'espoused theories'. As such these informal realities can only be accessed by the researcher's deployment of what amount to ethnographic (Schein, 1987, 1999) or hermeneutic (Gummesson, 2000) insights based upon some form of participant observation (Gold, 1958). However, unlike traditional forms of ethnographic research, where the aim is to describe cultural forms without changing them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), organizational change remains a key issue in this form of action research. Indeed, through the involvement of organizational participants, the aim is to reflexively engender single and double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1989) where people can 'surface and question their intuitive understandings . . . undertake on-the-spot experiments . . . [and] . . . engage in reflective conversations with their situation' (Schon, 1983: 265). The action researcher retains a pivotal expert role, in providing advice about, and encouraging through processual interventions (Schein, 1987, 1999), the changes that necessarily need occur as an outcome of this interpretive, yet diagnostic, process. When outlining action science, Argyris and Schon describe the dilemma of 'rigor or relevance' (1989: 612) that the action scientist faces. The conflict which results from action scientists seeking

to understand tacit theories in use means that action scientists will always face a 'basic and consequential conflict with normal social science' (1989: 614). Clearly in this context what is perceived as 'normal' social science is equated with positivism.

Despite the focus on actors' subjectivity and their interpretations of organizational situations, the criteria those working within this tradition choose to apply for assessing the value and validity of their work are often similar to those associated with experimental traditions. An example here comes from the work of Wilson (2004). Wilson argues that there are a number of weaknesses in action research studies that emerge from it neither being conducted, nor seen to be conducted, in a rigorous manner. The assertion is that the key challenge for the action researcher is to counteract the charge of anecdotalism. Wilson presents a series of action research case studies where the potential of decision support systems to improve market planning processes is explored. The explicit aim of the research is to enable managers and directors to be more effective in the marketing planning process, through examining the barriers to effective planning. The research element therefore evaluates the factors required for the successful use of the system. To ensure that the data can be triangulated, and hence their reliability be examined, Wilson has a variety of sources of data collection. Additionally, of key interest here is that the author argues that the potential weaknesses of action research in relation to rigour can be counteracted by the use of analytic induction. This method which involves the step-by-step consideration of cases, and the building and testing of propositions 'adds to the internal validity of qualitative studies without reducing their strength in external validity' (Wilson, 2004: 383). Therefore the quality criteria used here are derived from the experimental tradition.

In these inductive forms of action research, the positivist emphasis upon action research as something which is done to, and for, organizational participants becomes replaced by a view of action research as something which is done with people so as to access their hidden everyday culturally derived realities and thereby improve interpersonal and organizational effectiveness through engendering internal critique (see Putnam, 1999). At first sight this appears to entail movement away from the role of action researcher as detached expert to one of reflective participant in the everyday lives of those in the organization in order to access cultural phenomena. But, just as in what Prasad and Prasad have called 'qualitative positivism' (2002: 6), reflection here is about objectively developing and evaluating the researcher's own inferences by an appeal to the 'directly observable', accessed through their participation in the organization (e.g. Torbert, 1999; Ross & Roberts, 1994) so that any account will correspond with organizational members'

own culturally derived subjectivities. As Chia (1996: 132) has observed in a rather different context, 'the notion of interpretation . . . is used in the research process, but not "turned back" on the researchers . . . themselves' (see also Van Maanen, 1995), thereby maintaining a positivist mandate: a philosophical stance which is maintained in our third form of action research.

3. Participatory action research

Participation is a multi-faceted term and covers an array of different practices inspired by competing philosophical assumptions. With changes in the meanings accorded to the term participation, alternative forms of action research arise and promote different sets of relationships between action researchers and organizational participants to those previously outlined. For instance, participatory forms of action research seem to imply that the people in the organization or community under investigation participate actively throughout the whole research process, from the initial design or problem diagnosis, to the adoption of action strategies (Whyte, 1991; Harrison & Leitch, 2000). Therefore the researcher's role begins to move away from one of expert to that of enabler. However, Park (1999) suggests that a distinction has developed between 'participatory action research' and 'participatory research' where the former is associated with organizational or corporate settings where the researcher usually works in a consultancy role to corporate elites. The latter is more associated with addressing the perceived needs of a particular community in its entirety, as defined in their own terms (Park, 1999). As we shall explore there are significant philosophical disputes at play here which encourage these alternative approaches and engender their differences regarding the role played by, and significance attached to, democracy in action research praxis. In labelling our third category we have been informed by Park's distinction between the two different approaches.

An example from the literature which is useful for establishing an initial point of departure comes from a report by Harrison and Leitch (2000) on an ongoing action research case study in a software company. The aim of their project is to use the Learning Company Framework (Pedlar et al., 1991) to initiate critical reflection within the company about learning processes and areas of improvement. The researchers administered the learning company instrument to the managing director and members of the senior management team to diagnose areas where learning could be facilitated. Additionally, on the advice of the senior management team, the views of a wider group of staff

working in project teams were then also collected. From the analysis and interpretation of the data an action agenda was devised which was then acted upon by the senior management team. The authors suggest that:

> The participatory action research approach adopted in this case study begins the process of analytic dialogue with individuals within the company who have access to the feedback as a starting point for a process of self-development and self-awareness.
>
> (2000: 115)

In this example what comes to the fore is that the members of staff who have the opportunity to participate in the diagnosis process and who were involved in the initial problem definition are limited to the organizational elites with whom the action researchers had a consulting relationship. In a sense hierarchy, and differences between the governed and government, is thereby reinforced presumably based upon the notion that knowledge and expertise are themselves hierarchically ordered within organizations and only the most knowledgeable individuals need to participate. In these respects, evaluation criteria relate to the extent the subjective realities of these 'higher order' participants are accessed, evaluated and developed in the light of their reflection upon their own perceived needs: a process in which the action researcher acts as facilitator. By default, the vast majority of organizational members are excluded from these processes save as sources of feedback upon ongoing practices. Although some involvement of 'lower order' participants may be necessary so as to facilitate the implementation of change, this majority of organizational members are implicitly construed as passive recipients, rather than active architects, of any organizational change. Of course, such a limited form of participation may be acceptable if one shares the tactic assumptions about meritocracy based upon a hierarchical ordering of organizational knowledge which seems to be embedded in such an approach and provides it with epistemological, and moral, legitimacy. Once those assumptions and their embedded positivistic philosophy are challenged, however, important questions around who gets to be a participant and how their participation is facilitated and expressed in organizational change come to the fore in action research practices.

4. Participatory research practices

The emphasis in participatory research on people's participation in a democratic research process can be seen as underpinned by a particular set of

epistemological commitments which derive primarily from 'critical theory'. Driven by philosophical commitments which suspect any claim to epistemic authority, critical theorists have called for the discursive democratization of social practices (e.g. Beck, 1992, 1996). Usually such demands resonate with Habermas's various attacks upon positivist epistemology (1972, 1974, 1987, 1990) whose objectivist 'illusions' he dismisses by drawing attention to the socio-cultural factors that influence sensory experience. A key implication is the undermining of any claim that action research may be morally founded as a way of improving organizational effectiveness, efficiency or health, or justified and enabled by objective analyses of how things really are. Therefore critical theory questions the moral authority of action researchers, and of course any practice based upon the exclusive mobilization of higher order participants, to impose their will upon others. Rather critical theorists are concerned to engender critique of the status quo and simultaneously emancipate people from asymmetrical power relations, thereby enfranchising the usually marginalized, and promoting alternative forms of organization.

So for critical theorists human actors make sense of reality subjectively, through their negotiation of inter-subjective meanings. A direct consequence of this ontological and epistemological stance is critical theory's concern with organizational change – not just in the form of a distinctive analysis and critique of current management theory and practice, but also in the form of a moral imperative to engender democratic social relations and thereby shift the balance of power to currently marginalized and disenfranchised groups (e.g. Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Gustavsen, 2001).

Participatory research expresses critical theory's ontological and epistemological commitments, though there is considerable diversity in how these commitments are manifested. Park (1999) argues that participatory research is motivated by action, and that the force that lies behind that action is a vision of what ought to be (1999). He argues that:

> Participatory research however, most clearly distinguishes itself from other forms of action-related research by the fact that it issues from the felt needs of the community. What motivates the initiation of participatory research is the needs of a community for ameliorating the living conditions of the people.
>
> (1999: 143)

It follows that critical theory requires that those individuals and groups whose perspectives are ordinarily silenced in organizations must be given voice through action research. The demand is for members' conscious

self-determination of social values and practices. Therefore identification and involvement of all potential communicants presumably must start with the mobilization of every stakeholder. While this in itself is highly problematic (Kemmis, 2001), the subsequent power relations between communicants could pose insurmountable problems. Following Marcuse (1965), the danger is that notionally democratic communication becomes a facade in which the more powerful deploy a rhetoric of democracy, or participation, to impose their own preferences upon, and silence or marginalize the less powerful. Moreover, an 'emancipatory intent is no guarantee of an emancipatory outcome' (Acker et al., 1991: 145). Therefore as Friere observes, democracy requires participation which requires the prior development of a critical consciousness, on the part of participants, that dismantles the current hegemony, through their recognition of their present oppression by their 'introjection . . . of the cultural myths of the dominator' (1972a: 59). For Friere, such a critical consciousness is only possible through an authentic dialogue with the educator/action researcher where both are 'equally knowing subjects' (1972b: 31).

Hence the requirement for emancipation through the development of a critical consciousness amongst participants requires the action researcher to adopt a stance 'rooted in a commitment to the long-term, broad-based ideological struggle to transform structural inequalities' (Lather, 1986: 269). This commitment also emerges from a recognition of the power that an individual researcher has to influence the status quo. As Lynch (1999) outlines:

> Academics create virtual realities, textual realities, ethnographic and statistical realities. These overhang and frame the lived existence of those who cannot name their own world; it is frequently in the context of these detached and remoter realities that public policy is often enacted.
>
> (1999: 52)

In this context therefore, it is important that there is a 'reciprocity' (Lynch, 1999: 57) in the research relationship so that participants are enabled to both understand and change their situation (Lather, 1991). Such an approach clearly enables a form of empowerment in line with the tenets of critical theory.

There have been a wide variety of approaches which draw on the epistemological themes within critical theory of shifting power balances and engendering democratic relations. These epistemological themes within critical theory are expressed by action researchers within this tradition in different ways (e.g. Torbert, 1999). For instance the epistemological demand to mobilize stakeholders usually silenced by the status quo, is clearly

articulated by commitments to 'co-operative inquiry' (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1999). Reason (1999) suggests that those who advocate co-operative inquiry focus on two important purposes. The first is to 'articulate and offer democratic and emancipatory approaches to inquiry' (p. 207). This suggests that in line with the philosophical underpinnings of critical theory, those traditionally silenced in the academic research process gain a voice in all aspects of the research endeavour, ranging from designing the research questions, to planning eventual action strategies. The second purpose has a deliberate aim of critiquing the epistemology underlying positivist research. Reason suggests that:

> our purpose is to contribute a complete revision of the western mindset – to add impetus to the movement away from a modernist worldview based on a positivist philosophy and value system dominated by crude notions of economic progress towards an emerging 'postmodern' worldview.
>
> (1999: 208)

Hence the positivist view of the action researcher as a detached expert who exercises a legitimate role as architect of change is taken to be a process that disenfranchises the less powerful who have as much claim to epistemic authority as any other change agent. So from the perspective of critical theory most organization members are only too often reduced to the objects of organizational change – objects who are often seen by many commentators (e.g. Scase & Goffee, 1989; Greenwood & Hinnings, 1996; Agocs, 1997) as irrationally resistant to the changes demanded by experts because of their fear of the unknown, their lack of trust, their pursuit of self-interest and so on. In this manner, the prevailing change-management orthodoxy (e.g. Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Kotter, 1996) separates the subjects of change from the objects of change. Guided by models such as Lewin's force field analysis, the latter have to be manipulated by the contingent deployment of the power resources available: coercion or persuasion or cultural doping and so on.

Participatory approaches to action research have been used in a number of communities or organizations with different groups, but are clearly less evident in the corporate world. The uses of action research in this tradition have been applied to the field of development (e.g. Bradbury, 2001); health (e.g. Stringer & Genat, 2004); community development (Senge & Scharmer, 2001); education (e.g. Glanz, 2003; O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003; McPherson & Nunes, 2004); conflict resolution (White, 2004), and criminology (DeTardo-Bora, 2004), to name but a few. A further tradition of emancipatory work is informed by feminist approaches (e.g. Mies, 1993; Martin, 1994).

An example in this feminist tradition comes from the work of Barrett (2001). Barrett describes her involvement as an action researcher in an early mothering project with a group of midwives. Informed by feminist principles such as consciousness-raising and empowerment, Barrett worked with a group of midwives with an initial brief of improving midwifery practice in their hospital. During an 18-month period, the participants in the Midwives' Action Research Group (MARG), worked through five action research phases which Barrett suggests incorporated: planning; implementing; evaluating; revise-planning; and continuing or discontinuing. During each of these phases the key processes at work were those of reflection, learning, prioritizing and decision-making. Barrett explains how the project was fluid and that these phases and processes were interweaved and led to the creation of an early mothering group within the hospital, designed to help women help themselves and provide mutual support. Barrett describes how the midwives spent a lot of time discussing their own experiences and that this process in itself was significant: 'MARG participants were empowering *each other* through their talking and listening' (2001: 297, emphasis in original). She also describes how through their ordinary talk, 'they gained insight into and challenged some taken-for-granted aspects of social and professional power impinging on their ability to provide sensitive midwifery care' (2001: 300). Within this action research case the concern of critical theory with enfranchisement and empowerment can be seen. Both the role of the researcher and the researched are different from that within the other approaches previously outlined.

The epistemological assumptions outlined also imply a different approach to the development of theory than is associated with other approaches. As Lather (1991) argues, dialectical theory-building is more appropriate in this context than theoretical imposition. Heron (1981) suggests that the epistemological underpinnings of co-operative inquiry require a view that there is a 'developing interdependence' (1981: 31) through the research process of prepositional, practical and experiential knowledge.

As with critical theory generally, whilst these participative and emancipatory forms of action research combine a realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology, they often do not indicate how this external 'reality-in-itself' which we can never know may also play a regulative role upon our democratically derived social constructions and interventions. For instance, a complementary means of undertaking action research that shares critical theory's philosophical commitments, yet extends them, derives from the pragmatist notion that although our conceptualization and explanation of the world must always be open to question, our ability to undertake

practical actions that are successful and our ability to reflect upon and correct actions that seem unsuccessful, implies that we have feedback from an independent 'reality' which constrains and enables practices that would otherwise be inconceivable. In other words, praxis demands and enables processes of adjudication through the feedback that derives from the tolerance of that mind-independent reality (see e.g. Arbib & Hesse, 1986; Johnson & Duberley, 2000). By admitting to the significance of social construction, and how this also entails transactions between subject and object, pragmatists develop extra discursive criteria of truth that complement and supplement the critical theorists' epistemological demand for democratic agreement (see Levin & Greenwood, 2001). These extra-discursive criteria are for Sayer (1992: 69) in the form of the 'actual realization of expectations' through interventions which enable contact with 'the tolerance of reality' (Collier, 1979) 'to differentiate between more and less *practically adequate* beliefs' (Sayer, 1992: 83, our emphasis).

Although Sayer writes primarily from a critical realist stance, there is an evident link here to Dewey's anti-authoritarian pragmatism which defined truth as 'processes of change so directed that they achieve their intended consummation' (1929: iii) where knowledge was socially constructed to aid the 'settling of problematic situations' (p. iii). This philosophical heritage has led some action researchers to argue that action research itself becomes a vehicle for judging ideas in terms of their efficacy in actual application (see Gustavsen, 2001; Park, 2001) while retaining democratic consensus as pivotal epistemic standard regarding the social construction of the ideas in the first place (Levin & Greenwood, 2001).

Thus, under the aegis of critical theory, due to the problematic status of any epistemic authority, the role of the action researcher is fundamentally reconstructed to one of facilitating democratic agreement and the evolution of a critical consciousness amongst participants. In this the term participation takes on new meaning and becomes closely allied to emancipation. Indeed the intent is to engender, through reflection, new (socially constituted) self-understandings that are consensual and simultaneously expose the interests which produce and disseminate knowledge which was taken to be authoritative and hence unchallengeable. People could thereby begin to: understand existing practices as social constructions; become aware of their own role in production and reproduction of those practices; construe those practices as mutable; identify how they might intervene in the evolution of their organizations and society. The result is a challenge to traditional management prerogatives and the negotiation of alternative democratically agreed renditions of reality which create novel questions, inaugurate new problems and make new forms of organizational practice sensible and therefore possible

(e.g. Fay, 1987; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Park, 2001). In doing so, organizational members reclaim alternative accounts of phenomena – socially constructed redefinitions which thereby become available to transformative interventions which can themselves be judged, during and after implementation, by the pragmatic criterion of 'what works' (see Gustavsen, 2001: 19).

5. Deconstructive action research practices

As we noted above, postmodernism has recently attracted the interest of many management researchers and a distinctive form of action research has begun to emerge. Despite this interest, any definitive characteristics of a postmodern stance remain notoriously nebulous, which makes this aspect of our categorization particularly problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible to establish a clear border with critical theory since postmodernists will often accuse critical theorists of 'essentialism'.

Essentialism is seen to lie in critical theory's guiding presupposition that structurally based oppression and exploitation lie hidden beneath appearances: an essentialism which is further articulated in its concern with enabling emancipation through democratization. Such presuppositions are dismissed by most postmodernists as unsustainable 'grand' or 'meta' narratives which arbitrarily 'assume the validity of their own truth claims' (Rosenau, 1992: xi) and which, in their depiction of the world, inadvertently replace the old voices of authority (e.g. managers) with a new hierarchy of truth which inscribes new power relations that negate their liberationary aims (see Humphries, 2000). Of course such radical scepticism is itself an expression of a distinctive epistemological and ontological argument.

Postmodernism is characterized by a profound scepticism regarding the idea that language can represent reality. Rather, through this 'linguistic turn' discourses are thought to construct the objects which populate our (hyper)realities rather than describe them. The result is that knowledge, truth and reality become linguistic entities constantly open to revision for we can rhetorically produce as many realities as there are modes of describing and explaining (see Baudrillard, 1983, 1993; Lyotard, 1984; Jeffcutt, 1994; Chia, 1995; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). According to this stance knowledge is produced by particular language games or discourses which, via their own rules and structures, produce a plurality of localized understandings and practices which offer no epistemological basis for preferring one such manifestation over alternatives. Lyotard uses the term 'agon' (e.g. 1984: 16) to refer to the irresolvable contest between different communities' language games and he argues that postmodernists must accept this diversity – a

postmodern science that '. . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable' (1984: xxv). Here, some postmodernists further part company from critical theorists since their view that incommensurability is inevitable and irresolvable means that democratic consensus as an epistemic standard 'has become an outmoded and suspect value' (Lyotard, 1984: 66). Indeed it is a toleration of the polyphonic (many voices) which is pivotal for the postmodernist since *any* discursive closure, whether grounded in democratic consensus or otherwise, implies the arbitrary dominance of a particular discourse which serves to silence alternative possible voices. Indeed as Gergen (2003: 51) suggests, democratic agreement can effectively 'move toward the annihilation of alterior meanings'. It is only through deconstruction where diversity becomes possible as it enables us to:

> resuscitate the subordinate terms, to elevate them, to amplify the silent voices in order to problematize the dominant understanding and rather than create a new hierarchy, re-construct a duality of awareness within conventional consciousness.
>
> (Linstead, 1993: 69)

From this relativistic perspective no organizational change, democratically grounded or otherwise, can have any epistemological authority or ontological priority. Indeed any organizational change is only possible because of an ability to hegemonize via 'a particular discursive formation a socially constructed version of reality' (Hetrick & Boje, 1992: 55) which drives out alternatives. This has implications for action research since any organizational intervention implies the exercise of choice based upon some kind of evaluative criteria. As Newton observes, the problem for a postmodernist would be 'in determining that basis, since this implies the end of endless reflexivity and a move towards the postmodernity abhorrent notion of closure' (1996: 15). In other words, any form of action, or intervention, which form the creative basis of the various forms of action research we have so far explored, would seem anathema to those who choose to locate themselves in this perspective.

Nevertheless, it is possible that a postmodern stance may avoid Newton's problem and be used to inform an action research focused on interventions that unsettle hegemonic discourses, and give voice to alternatives so as to encourage heteroglossia, rather than directing substantive organizational change. For instance, Barry (1997) outlines how 'narrative therapy' aims to help organization members understand how they have come to develop particular patterns of thought which unnecessarily constrain action. Hence by

careful reading and reflection of client stories the therapist tries to open space for the authoring of alternative stories which counter and unsettle hegemonic discourses. Barry implies such interventions may reopen discursive opportunities so that 'if organization members can better understand how they construct themselves and their organization, they will be better able to address their problems' (1997: 31). It is this deconstructive intent that informs some postmodern action research since discursive closure is avoided as any construct, including deconstructions, may be deconstructed ad infinitum as layers of meaning are removed thereby destabilizing any text (Linstead, 1993).

An example of such postmodern action research is provided by Treleaven's (2001) account of a 'collaborative inquiry' that deconstructed the gender narratives at play in an Australian university. By integrating 'the turn to action with the linguistic turn' (p. 261), Treleaven used a collaborative inquiry group to facilitate 11 female co-participants' reflexive deconstruction of critical incidents within their organizational experiences. Here co-participants reflected upon their patterns of meanings and reconstructed those meanings through the use of discourse analysis to foreground the taken-for-granted factors that shaped the language-in-use. This served to unsettle the dominant discourses and enabled the surfacing of alternatives which allowed for the production of new subjectivities for women which thereby created the possibility of change within and beyond their university. For instance, this heteroglossia entailed some of the female participants taking 'up new subjectivities while others diffused the power of binary opposites by adopting multiple subjectivities' (p. 265). For Treleaven, the various discourses surfaced and at play, offered the formation of new subjectivities based upon the liberation of multiple new understandings of their social experience by participants. However, these discourses were often contradictory and hence could provide sites for both ambivalence and resistance. So an outcome of this postmodernist deconstructive intervention was not just to destabilize the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of gender but to 'highlight unsettling actions and points of contradiction as strategic opportunities for change in the workplace' (p. 266). In some formats then, this approach can be informed by commitments to emancipation and change.

In sum, under postmodern epistemological and ontological commitments action research can only be about unsettling the hegemonic by encouraging resistance and space for alternative narratives without advocating any preference. By 'not finding answers to problems, but . . . [by] . . . problematizing answers' (Cooper & Burrell, 1988: 107), postmodernist action research can help people think about their own and others' thinking so as to question the familiar and taken-for-granted. Here multivocal authors are empowered through deconstruction to manipulate signifiers to create new

textual domains of transparency and thereby engender diversity rather than the discursive closure that critical theorists are seen to engender through their democratic and dialogical aims. As Kilduff and Mehra (1997) observe, anything goes save that the text must provoke pleasure, interest and excitement in terms of aesthetic appeal and rhetorical play. We must be careful however to recognize the diversity of approaches we have subsumed within this category. As with each of the other categories, there is considerable diversity included here.

Conclusions

Over the years, a variety of scholars have compared action research to what has been called the 'scientific method' and found it wanting in various ways and to varying degrees (e.g. Sandford, 1970; Susman & Evered, 1978; Argyris, 1980; Stone, 1982; Brief & Dukerich, 1991; Aguinis, 1993). The problem in this context is that 'science' is defined in terms of a particular constellation of knowledge constituting assumptions articulated by *erklaren*: that is, positivist norms. We have argued here that in any research, assumptions about ontology and epistemology are unavoidable as all research is underpinned by some manifestation of these assumptions. However, even a cursory review of the philosophy of science would also show how any epistemological and ontological stance is always contentious: there is no incontestable scheme of ontological and epistemological standards which may be deployed to govern action research. Therefore it follows that those comparisons noted above are based upon a very partial view of 'science' that takes little account of alternative sets of knowledge constituting assumptions.

Hence trying to articulate a set of all embracing standards of quality criteria to apply to all action research seems a rather pointless mission. Nevertheless it is possible to identify how particular epistemological and ontological positions do legitimate: particular conceptions of 'science'; particular research aims; engaging in particular research roles and relations with organizational members; and the application of particular validity criteria. This highlights the importance of evaluating any action research project from within the particular logic of justification articulated by its particular philosophical stance. By implication it also requires action researchers to reflexively articulate their particular ontological and epistemological commitments as a resource for such evaluations. This can be done when action researchers are in the process of presenting the outcomes of their research and can be part of the research account. The key issue here is that

when we are assessing the extent to which an action research account is of value, we apply the appropriate assessment criteria. It is, for example, inappropriate to find participatory research undertaken in the tradition of critical theory wanting because the lack of a control group makes the direction and impact of interventions problematic. Rather such action research should be assessed in terms of how consensus has been established amongst stakeholders and the extent to which practically adequate interventions have been implemented which have transformative potential. Simultaneously, it would be equally ludicrous to evaluate postmodern action research in terms of objectivity or correspondence as both are dismissed by postmodernists as rhetorical devices legitimated by the very regimes of truth the postmodernist seeks to overthrow through deconstructive practices and processes.

Each of the five different approaches to action research practice we have discussed has lurking within it particular tensions that may concern its practitioners. For instance those working within an experimental tradition have to cope with the competing demands that arise from their commitment to research in natural organizational settings yet seeking to build and test internally valid cause and effect models. With inductive approaches where the concern is to describe and feed back the views and understandings of organizational members, the question is how can one know if one has successfully captured those socially constructed versions of reality within the action researcher's account.

For participatory approaches the key tension relates to who should be involved in the action research process and the difficulty of ensuring that what is taken as some form of consensus about aims and desired outcomes isn't the distorted product of power relations. In dealing with the practical problems which arise here, one evident tension is that action researchers may impose their own voices and values on participants (see Quantz, 1992; Denzin, 1994) to the extent that their endeavours become manipulative and anti-dialogical by militating against participants' self-determination (Taylor, 1993). In deconstructive approaches, rather than critique it would seem that the imperative is a mandatory non-judgemental rhetorical skill where authors playfully manipulate signifiers to create new textual domains of lucidity redolent with 'poetic awe' and 'linguistic tension' (Tsoukas, 1992: 345). But just as this aesthetic imperative can potentially relativize everyone's narratives, what it ignores is the likelihood that claims to epistemic privilege by particular organizational groups will not suddenly disappear (Berg, 1989). The resultant tension may be that any (re)presentation of reality becomes a matter of taste where knowledge is commodified and reason is replaced by subtle forms of seduction where the more discursively aware use their narrative skills to manipulate organizational audiences into supporting particular change

agendas, ensure discursive closure and snuff out resistance (see Barry & Elmes, 1997).

Despite the difficulties and drawbacks in producing a categorization system which we referred to earlier, we have highlighted the considerable diversity in action research approaches and practices. In sum, this article attempts to illustrate how the label action research embraces a diverse array of techniques and research practices which articulate competing philosophical assumptions whose formative influence can remain unnoticed. We have argued that this diversity is not haphazard, rather it is an outcome of the varying knowledge constituting assumptions which legitimize distinctive perspectives and action research agendas. So what implications does our account have for action researchers?

First, given this scenario we would argue that action researchers when engaging on projects could benefit by subjecting their philosophical assumptions to sustained reflection and evaluation through the consideration of possible alternatives. In selecting and justifying an approach, the implications of their informed choices for research practice can then be presented. Additionally, it is then possible to be explicit about the validity criteria by which to evaluate the approach in use. Clearly some action researchers are currently engaging in these issues (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and we hope that this article contributes to such reflexive processes.

Hence a second consequence of our analysis for action researchers emerges: the implications for those who scathingly dismiss action research by applying a universal set of positivistic validity criteria to a diverse array of praxis. In highlighting the different philosophical assumptions that underlie different approaches, we can also highlight the different criteria through which one can more appropriately evaluate different types of action research. So rather than being condemned to 'the orphan's role in social science' (Stanford, 1970: 7) the diverse action research 'families' must only be evaluated from within their particular webs of knowledge-constituting assumptions.

Note

1 The term criteriology is used to refer to the issues inherent in assessing the quality of any given piece of research and the criteria that may be used therein. This has become a controversial area since conventional criteria, deriving from positivist philosophy, have been increasingly challenged and alternatives sought (see Seale, 1999). For instance, Bochner (2000) argues that the philosophical diversity evident in the social sciences suggests a need for considerable caution with regard to criteriology. This is because there is a tendency to misappropriate certain assessment criteria, constituted usually by positivist philosophical conventions, and universally apply them as if they were 'culture-free' (p. 267). In a similar vein, Schwandt (1996)

focuses upon how to redefine social inquiry, as a practical philosophy, with a post-foundationalist epistemology. This project entails dialogue, critique and democracy, which abandons any overarching criteria for distinguishing legitimate from not so legitimate scientific knowledge.

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