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Generating Change through Research:
Action Research and its Implications

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Summary

Action Research is an approach to socio-economic research that is participatory and action-oriented. It is underpinned by a strong belief that research should help effect change. Action Research has its roots in a wide-range of seemingly disparate philosophical traditions and research contexts. This paper briefly traces the history of Action Research, setting out some of the key philosophical and conceptual traditions which have shaped its development, and paying particular attention to the sometimes difficult relationship between Action Research and conventional approaches to social science. It describes the main forms that contemporary Action Research takes and explains the core features of its practice. It goes on to examine some of the implications of adopting an Action Research approach in the context of a doctoral research project in the field of rural development.

Introduction

Action Research is an umbrella term covering a variety of approaches to research but it has a single idea at its heart. This is that the research should be directed at achieving some form of social, economic or organisational change. Action Research has two key features. First, it is 'action-oriented' and is underpinned by the belief that "the study of society is not worth the trouble if it does not help its members to grasp the meaning of their lives and to move to action for progress, peace and prosperity for all" (Fals Borda, 1995, p.6). Second, it is participatory and thus involves researchers working *with* and *for* research subjects. In essence, Action Research is values-based and therefore tends to have a more overt political and often emancipatory purpose.

There has been increasing interest in Action Research over the past two decades (*e.g.* Reason and Bradbury, 2001a; Pain, 2003). A search of the Web of Science provides a simple illustration of the exponential growth of the Action Research literature. Searching for "Action Research" produces a list of 106 publications for the period 1970-79, 148 for 1980-89, 691 for 1990-99 and 1,137 for the 7-year period 2000-2006.[1] Despite this proliferation, there have been few attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the historical development of Action Research, and there is no single generally accepted narrative of its origins. This is largely because Action Research has its roots in a disparate set of research and intellectual traditions. The histories that have been produced tend to reflect the sectoral interests of their authors, whether they be in education research, management and organisational change, community development or rural poverty alleviation. Early histories of Action Research went to great lengths to stress the difficulties in establishing a single, definitive account of where Action Research had come from and how (Masters, 1995; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Stringer, 1999). More recently, however, there have been attempts to develop over-arching accounts of the development of Action Research, largely as a consequence of the growing market for Action Research handbooks and readers (*e.g.* Reason and Bradbury, 2001a; 2006; McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). As a result, while acknowledging that no one individual or collective of researchers can really lay claim to being the sole founder of Action Research, it is possible to identify some of the key ideas underpinning the approach and explain how they have developed over time.

This paper traces the history of Action Research, setting out the key philosophical and conceptual traditions which have shaped its development and discusses the sometimes difficult relationship between Action Research and conventional approaches to social

[1] The Web of Science is a prominent online academic database (http://scientific.thomson.com/products/wos/). This search was conducted on 22nd December 2006.

science. It describes the main forms that Action Research takes and explains its core features. It goes on to examine some of the implications of adopting an Action Research approach in the context of a doctoral research project in the field of rural development, conducted at the Centre for Rural Economy at Newcastle University and supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and One North East — the regional development agency for North East England.

Roots and Branches

Accounts of the history of Action Research paint a complex picture. At first glance, Action Research might seem to involve a relatively common set of principles, motivations, and practices.   However, histories of Action Research usually stress the multiple and highly varied origins of the approach.   Its roots can be found in different geographical contexts and in different professional research communities. Greenwood & Levin (1998) explain the absence of any generally agreed account of the development of Action Research by the fact that the practice is multi-disciplinary and takes place in a plethora of contexts (*e.g.* social services, health, international development, industrial organisation). A consequence is limited cross-sectoral dialogue between practitioners working within different professional communities and research literatures. In addition, some Action Research guides are highly oriented to particular professional/practitioner communities (*e.g.* McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). Others (*e.g.* MaGuire, 2006) are pitched more at what we might call academic 'activist researchers' — that is researchers who are explicitly committed to a social or political cause.

It is only in the last three decades that there have been significant attempts to draw together these disparate traditions and practices within the umbrella term 'Action Research'. More recently, attempts to synthesise experiences in Action Research include the production of Action Research readers and handbooks such as *The Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a; 2006). The conceptual and philosophical roots of Action Research have been reviewed by Reason & Bradbury (2001b) who trace diverse origins from philosophy, social science, psychotherapy, critical theory, systems theory, education, spiritual practices, indigenous cultures, liberationist thought and complexity theory. Some of the most commonly cited roots are briefly considered below.

Philosophical roots
Greenwood & Levin (1998) emphasise pragmatic philosophy as an important influence upon Action Research, and especially the work of John Dewey (1859-1952) in the 1920s. Dewey was an academic educationalist and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. He

promoted his pragmatic principles in professional philosophical journals and applied them in social and educational settings. Pragmatism has been defined as:

> *a method of philosophy in which the truth of a proposition is measured by its correspondence with experimental results and by its practical outcome …. (it) stands opposed to doctrines that hold that truth can be reached through deductive reasoning from a priori grounds and insists on the need for inductive investigation and constant empirical verification of hypotheses* (The Columbia Encyclopaedia, 6th Edition).

Dewey's concern for participative democracy and the generation of knowledge by all members of society through action and experimentation have provided a foundation for Action Research. The emphasis on study that seeks to solve common problems sits comfortably with the goals of Action Research which also strives to achieve positive change in the lives of research participants.

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is also widely recognised as influential in the development of Action Research. Freire worked in adult education, particularly with the disenfranchised. He began his career as a progressive educator in his native Brazil and went on to work in adult literacy programmes in Chile before becoming a visiting Professor at Harvard (1969-70). He developed an educational methodology designed to enable previously illiterate people to understand and articulate a critical view of the world and is a founder of what has become known as critical pedagogy. His most widely known work, The *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was published in 1970 (Freire, 1972). He maintained that knowledge and action are *both* necessary for transformation to occur and argued for the right of everyone to be able to participate in the process of transformation and to be heard and respected.

Freire believed that a pedagogy which could help oppressed people to regain their humanity 'must be forged *with,* not *for*,' them (1972, p.33). He emphasised the importance of both reflection and action and the necessity for the oppressed actively to participate in the research process through dialogue, rather than be given information ('education') by well-meaning outsiders. This insistence that knowledge and understanding must be created *with* people and not *imparted to* them. What he termed 'co-intentional education' underpins a key principle in Action Research.

Action Research has also been influenced by critical theory, initially developed by philosophers and social scientists at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Critical theory disputed the objective and value-free stance of the empirical approach to social science and argued for recognition of the role of values and beliefs. It proposed that the objective of theory should be not only to develop understanding of the social world, but also to offer practical ways of improving it in order to promote human flourishing (Finlayson, 2005).

In '*Knowledge and Human Interest'* (1971), Habermas, a prominent member of the second generation of the Frankfurt School and an influential theorist for Action Research, argued that knowledge production is always driven by and cannot be separated from, human interest.

The emergence of postmodern theory has also shaped the development of Action Research. Where modernism was founded on assumptions about objective truth and rationalistic notions of linear progress, postmodern thought tends to reject notions of unifying theory or narrative and is more accepting of fragmentation, heterogeneity and the ephemeral. The roots of postmodernism lay with the counter cultural movements of the 1960s and the increasing questioning of universalising notions of progress. Reason & Bradbury (2001b) argue that "in its refusal to adopt one theoretical perspective [Action Research] can be seen as an expression of a post-modern sentiment" (p.3). Harvey (1989) also links the re-emergence of pragmatic philosophy with the development of postmodern thought, arguing that in a world with no unified theory pragmatism becomes "the only possible philosophy of action" (p.52).

Origins in Practice

The work of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) provides the first well-documented example of an explicit Action Research programme and histories of Action Research usually refer to his work as foundational (*e.g* Burnes, 2004, p.978). Lewin grew up as a Jew in Germany but moved to the US in the 1930s. His main interest was conflict resolution, and he argued that in order to prevent social conflict, democratic values must penetrate all levels of society (Burnes, 2004). He produced a theory and practice of Action Research that included the now widely used 'iterative spiral' of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, which could be employed by groups to undertake their own research and solve problems (McNiff, 1988). Lewin's work is foundational because he introduced the practice of knowledge production in real-life situations, created a new role for the researcher (from distant observer to involved participant) and developed criteria for judging theory based upon its ability to deliver solutions to real-life problems (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). In the US, Lewin's ideas were widely taken up in the field of organisational development (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

Action Research in the UK was invigorated in the 1970s by Lawrence Stenhouse, an educational researcher at the University of East Anglia. He promoted the idea of 'teacher as researcher' as opposed to the conventional model of research being undertaken by the outside expert. He argued that teachers were best placed to judge their own practices and therefore he valued teachers' interpretations of their own practice above that of external researchers. He proposed that research undertaken by teachers could improve their educational practice, and his approach influenced subsequent work in the field of educational action research (McNiff, 1988).

Another fertile area for the development of Action Research was the involvement of workers in decision-making in agriculture and industry. In the early post-war period, Lewin's writings had inspired the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations[2] in London which experimented with industrial democracy to challenge the Taylorist scientific management systems of the time. Worker participation was employed in the 1960s in attempts to improve quality of working life and later to solve problems of efficiency and production. Participatory approaches to agricultural development work in the Majority World[3] started later but grew faster. Chambers describes the development of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in the 1970s (Chambers, 1983) and the subsequent development and spread of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) from the 1980s (1993). Chambers describes RRA as a method that moves away from the conventional approaches of extensive survey or intensive anthropology in favour of an approach that produces timely, useful information that can be utilised by policy makers and practitioners. When faced with the problems of the rural poor in the Majority World the need for easily accessible, up to date information was regarded by RRA practitioners as more important than sticking rigidly to conventional research methodologies. In the late 1980s the use of the word 'participatory' began to be used to describe some RRA projects in India and Kenya. 'Participatory Rural Appraisal' spread quickly, especially in South East Asia (Chambers, 1993). Echoing Lewin's spiral of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, Chambers defines PRA and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) as:

> *a growing family of approaches, methods, attitudes, behaviours and relationships to enable and empower people to share, analyse and enhance their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor, evaluate and reflect* (1993, p.3).

The 1970s saw the growth of an emancipatory, activist, Participatory Action Research (PAR) movement in Latin America and some other parts of the Majority World. According to MacLure and Bassey (1991), PAR emerged in the Majority World in order to "make development assistance more responsive to the needs and opinions of local people" (p.190). Fals Borda (2001) traces the origins of Action Research in Latin America to a growing concern amongst academics in the 1970s about poverty and living conditions. A radical critique of social theory and practice emerged that abandoned the remoteness of academia, and some activists left traditional academic institutions altogether. Freire's '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* gave impetus to this movement which was critical of a science that was capable of putting men on the moon but could not tackle poverty and injustice. In short, science was "in need of a moral conscience" (Fals Borda, 2001, p.29).

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[2] http://www.tavinstitute.org/
[3] We use the term Majority World to refer to those countries where industrial and technological development is poorer in comparison to the so-called advanced industrial nations.

Forging an Action Research Movement

The 1970s saw marked growth in the use of Action Research and increased networking activities between those involved in participatory research methods in different geographical and professional contexts. Fals Borda sees 1970 as a crucial year (2001, p.27) when concerned scholars who were beginning to question conventional social theory and practice began to see the need to get together: "It was like telepathy induced by the urgency for understanding the tragic, unbalanced world being shaped, and by the stimulation of recent revolutions" (p28). Early networking efforts culminated in the First World Symposium of Action Research in Cartagena, Columbia in 1977. Since then, eleven further symposia have been held, the most recent in August 2006 in the Netherlands. Cartagena provided a new impetus for the international diffusion of Action Research philosophy and method (Fals Borda, 2001). Reflecting on this process Budd Hall (the first International Co-ordinator of the International Participatory Research Network (IPRN), 1977 – 1980) recently observed that:

> *Participatory research and its sister concept participatory action research have in the past 15 years been taken up in many universities around the world both as a teaching subject and as a research method for graduate studies. One might say that, participatory research has come "in from the cold", that it has come in from the margins to become an accepted member of the academic family* (2005).

He argues that the best evidence for this was the publication of the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001a). Peter Reason is Director of the Postgraduate Programme in Action Research at the University of Bath.[4] Hilary Bradbury is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Case University in the US.[5] In 2006, Sage published a concise paperback version of the handbook (Reason and Bradbury, 2006).

Action Research and Traditional Social Science

Action Research challenges many of the basic assumptions and values of traditional social science (Herr and Anderson, 2005). The most distinctive challenge is epistemological. The inclusion and recognition of local and tacit knowledge as part of the research process challenges the concept of the 'researcher-as-expert'. It questions the assumptions about who can do research, taking it beyond the realm of the professional academic.

The role of the researcher in Action Research differs from that in traditional social science research in two fundamental respects. In Action Research, the researcher becomes one participant among several in a collaborative project, and the research participants are either fully in control or have a shared input into the process (Herr and Anderson, 2005). The researcher may have specialist expertise and knowledge but their role is not as an elevated

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[4] http://people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/
[5] http://weatherhead.case.edu/wise/

'expert' but more as a facilitator or 'resource person' (Stringer, 1999). In addition, in mainstream social science, research and action tend to take place separately, with the researcher less involved in linking research to action (Whyte, 1991). In Action Research there is no such distinction.

Some attempts are being made to overcome the tensions between Action Research and other approaches to social science. Denzin & Lincoln (2003), for example, suggest that the growth of qualitative research is an important driver in producing a more participatory approach to social science. There remain, however, differing views on the place of Action Research within social science. Some see it remaining very much on the margins (*e.g.* Greenwood, 1998; Herr, 2005), whilst others like Hall (2005) claim that it has "come in from the cold" and is now a respected part of academic work. However, he qualifies this by acknowledging that Action Research does not fit comfortably within academic structures where knowledge production is closely related to career progression, leading to pressure to produce knowledge in more traditional and conventional ways. Collaborative research, with non-academic partners having equal ownership of the direction and results, remains a challenging proposition. In his Keynote speech at the 2006 Participatory Action Research World Congress, Yoland Wadsworth set out the paradox. On the one hand, Action Research continues "to be marginalised, contested and delegitimised"; on the other hand, the principles of Action Research are appearing in numerous different guises and have been mainstreamed in such diverse areas as health, community development, agriculture and environmental work, education, business and industry (Wadsworth, 2006).

Contemporary Forms of Action Research

We have seen that Action Research is a label that is an umbrella for diverse practices. Fals Borda (1995) identified 36 different strands of PAR represented at the world congresses. Contemporary Action Research might be characterised within three broad groupings: Action Research in organisational change (*e.g.* Argyris and Schön, 1991); in education research (*e.g.* Kemmis and McTaggart, 2003); and Participatory Action Research. We turn to examine Participatory Action Research in more detail because of its potential to be operationalised in a PhD study in the field of rural development.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) tends to see Action Research as "emancipatory practice" (Herr, 2005). It is more strongly rooted in the study of the political economy of power structures and is more likely to involve work with oppressed groups. The term Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been attributed to Orlando Fals Borda (Hall, 2005), is highly influenced by the legacy of Paulo Freire and grew out of the concerns of practitioners

in the Majority World with issues of knowledge, power and justice. In an address to the Southern Sociological Society in Atlanta in 1995 – an event which marked a "homecoming" and recognition of acceptance – Fals Borda identified the specific contribution of Majority World participatory researchers as the concept of "committed research" (1995). He outlined four guidelines for PAR practice (p.3):

- Do not monopolize your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities, taking them as full partners and co-researchers. That is, fill in the distance between subject and object;

- Do not trust elitist versions of history and science which respond to dominant interests, but be receptive to counter-narratives and try to recapture them;

- Do not depend solely on your culture to interpret the facts, but recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organizations; and

- Do not impose your own ponderous scientific style for communicating results, but diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people, in a manner that is wholly understandable and even literary and pleasant, for science should not be necessarily a mystery nor a monopoly of experts and intellectuals.

There are many parallels between Action Research and feminist theory, a fact which has been largely overlooked in the literature (but see MaGuire, 2006). Greenwood and Levin (1998) attribute feminism with resurrecting an interest in Participatory Action Research and admit that Action Researchers have sometimes been guilty of proposing ideas and agendas from feminist theory without acknowledging (or maybe understanding) the source.

Broadly, feminism and Action Research both tend to share a strong commitment to democracy and social justice (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). The feminist critique of positivism also provided a platform for debates about Action Research (Greenwood & Levin, op cit). Feminist epistemology challenges what is considered as valid forms of knowledge and values subjective knowledge (Madge *et al*., 1997) and the voice of the 'silenced' (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In stressing the non-neutrality of the researcher and analysing power relations involved in the research process feminism can clearly complement Action Research.

Reason & Bradbury argue that although there is no short answer to the question 'What is AR?' (2001b, p.1), the main points of agreement revolve around the *process* and *goals* of Action Research. These can be summarised as:

- Action Research is **participatory**; it is undertaken **by** or **with** insiders, but never by an outside 'expert' researcher *on* people who are research 'subjects'. It is **collaborative** and ideally should involve all those who have an interest in the outcome of the research (stakeholders).

- Action Research involves the **democratisation of research** by changing the role and relationship of the researcher to the participants; responsibility for, and ownership of, the research is shared and participants are involved in all or most of the processes. Knowledge to inform practice is **co-generated** by participants and researcher(s).

- Action Research is a **reflective, systematic process** adopting some form of a reflective cycle of planning, action, observation, and reflection. This involves ongoing **intervention** in the research setting; it is an **emergent** and flexible process.

- An important goal of Action Research is to **effect change or action** which is agreed or desired by the participants. This is usually associated with issues of social justice and/or improving the quality of life of the participants. Action Research is "research practice with a social change agenda" (Greenwood, 1998, p.4).

Sources: Greenwood, 1998; Reason, 2001b; Kemmis, 2003; Herr, 2005.

Attempts at succinct definitions tend either to be short and over simplistic, or lengthy and better expressed as a list. An example of the first is from McKernan (cited in Herr & Anderson, 2005, p.4), who defined Action Research as: *"a form of self-reflecting problem solving, which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings."* Reason & Bradbury (2001b, p.1) offer a more complex working definition:

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

Practitioners of PAR have constructed more prescriptive lists of key characteristics. Maclure & Bassey (1991) identify three attributes that they consider distinguishes PAR from more traditional research strategies. First is shared ownership of research. Second is a method of community-based learning as groups learn to critically analyse their situations and find solutions, and researchers learn from the process and reformulate their research questions. Third is the aim to stimulate community-initiated action.

More detailed lists are proposed by Hall (cited in Hagey, 1997) who suggests seven key characteristics of PAR, Kemmis and McTaggart (2003) who name eight key features of PAR, and McTaggart's (1989) list of 16 Tenets of PAR presented to the Third World Encounter on Participatory Research in 1989. In contrast to these prescriptions are Greenwood & Levin's (1998) pragmatic approach, which leaves decisions about specific methodologies to be determined by the local situation, and Reason & Bradbury's (2001b) 'broad and wide' characteristics which are applicable to all forms of Action Research. In summary, these are:

- *Human Flourishing*: Action Research aims to contribute through practical knowledge to the increased well-being of human persons and communities.

- *Practical Issues:* Action Research produces practical outcomes and new forms of understanding, "action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless" (p.2).

- *Participation and Democracy*: Action Research is participative research, with, for and by persons and communities. All stakeholders should be involved.

- *Emergent, Developmental Form*: The process of inquiry is as important as the outcomes and it is an evolutionary and developmental process over time, starting with everyday experience.

- *Knowledge-in-action:* In Action Research "knowledge is a verb rather than a noun" (p.2) as knowledge creation is an ongoing process of coming to know and is not defined in terms of hard and fast methods.

In spite of its complex and sometimes fragmented historical and philosophical roots, Action Research has sufficient cohesion to be recognisable as a distinct approach in social science. The key points of departure from mainstream social science are its purposes, relationships, and ways of conceiving knowledge (Reason and Bradbury, 2001b).

Some Implications of Action Research

In adopting an Action Research approach, a host of thorny issues have to be faced. Some of these might be reflected upon at the outset of a piece of research. Others arise, often unexpectedly, during the research process. These issues can be summarised as revolving around positionality, quality and reflexivity. We consider these in turn.

The Positionality of the Researcher and Ownership of the Research
Herr and Anderson (2005) see the question of positionaility as fundamental to framing issues of methodology, ethics and epistemology. They acknowledge that it is not always easy to define a researcher's position and that it may change throughout the course of the study. Awareness of positionality is important and explicit discussion of roles helps establish what each party wants out of the research.

Collaborative research and joint action should also mean co-ownership of the research. In reality the extent of shared ownership is shaped by a project's origins (researcher- or participant-initiated) and funding sources. The problem of co-option by powerful external organisations or elites within organisations is frequently mentioned in the literature. It is important that there is an open dialogue about ownership between the researcher and other participants, including agreement around ownership of results and writing.

Research Quality and Validity

Action Research poses difficulties in developing criteria for research quality and validity. According to Greenwood and Levin:

> *The conventional social research community believes that credibility is created through generalizing and universalizing propositions of the universal hypothetical, universal disjunctive and generic types, whereas* [Action Research] *believes that only knowledge generated and tested in practice is credible* (1998, p.81).

There is general agreement that the quality of the action is an important criterion for judging the success of Action Research. So questions that might be posed are: Did the work solve the problem initially posed? Did it satisfy the participants? Has it contributed to human flourishing? What was achieved, and for whom? Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest five quality indicators for Action Research:

- *Outcome Validity*: the extent to which actions resolve the initial problem posed.

- *Process Validity*: the extent to which problems are framed and solved in a way that enables ongoing learning.

- *Democratic Validity*: the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all stakeholders.

- *Catalytic Validity*: the extent to which the research process "reorients, focuses, and energises participants towards knowing reality in order to transform it" (Lather, cited in Herr, 2005).

- *Dialogic Validity*: Peer review.

Action Research is strongly linked to democratic ideals and challenging existing power structures (Greenwood, 1998). It thus has a more overt political dimension than other forms of social science research (Herr, 2005). Herr and Anderson identify different levels through which Action Research interacts with politics: the micro-politics of the institutions where the research takes place; the political implications of first person action researchers in redefining their professional roles; the politics of knowledge creation (who, how, and who uses it); and the wider macro-politics that impact upon any local setting. The potential for unintended or unexpected outcomes as a result of Action Research needs to be understood by agencies supporting an Action Research programme and they must be prepared for possible uncomfortable challenges to their existing culture.

Subjectivity and Reflexivity in Action Research

The questions of subjectivity and researcher bias need to be addressed in all scientific research. However, Action Research sits at the end of a continuum of views on the place of

subjectivity in that it openly accepts the involvement of the researcher in the research process and rejects the idea that the researcher should take the stance of an objective outsider. Action Research works within a paradigm "in which subjectivity is acknowledged as unavoidable" (Ladkin, 2005, p.123) and bias and subjectivity are "natural and acceptable in action research" (Herr, 2005, p.60). Because it is accepted that impartiality is unattainable and all research is interested and partial, Action Researchers tend to see themselves as intellectually honest in 'nailing their colours to a mast'. In a way, they seek to overcome subjectivity by taking on the perspective and interests of the groups they choose to identify and work with. Subjectivity is replaced with explicit commitment.

Interestingly, the Action Research literature contains little engagement with fundamental critiques of the participatory process in research. One exception is Schafft and Greenwood (2003) who, despite being fully committed to participatory approaches, acknowledge a shortage of critical perspectives. They use two Future Search case studies in which they were involved to illustrate three particular dilemmas in Participatory Action Research. The first was the practical problems experienced of involving a broad spectrum of people from the community, especially the difficulties of including "hard to reach" groups (*e.g.* unemployed, low income, disenfranchised youth) — an issue for participatory research in general. As a result, certain concerns and issues were never or rarely addressed by the process. They concluded that the difficulties of achieving a sufficiently broad representation to make participation meaningful should not be underestimated. The second difficulty was the observation that the "pre-existing dynamics of power continued to structure community interactions and planning efforts" (p.27). The core groups of existing community activists that the researchers worked with initially were fairly homogenous and middle class. In spite of their willingness and efforts they were not able to fully involve other groups and deep divisions and differences were not overcome. Again, this is a common problem in participatory research, which can sometimes naively assume a consensual model of 'community'. Schafft and Greenwood conclude that participatory methods may help to "level the playing field" but that existing and historical power relations will still play a significant role (p.21). The third dilemma was the initial failure of the community members to take forward the actions identified. A criticism of much literature on participation is that it assumes that people have both the will and the time and energy to commit to these processes (Schafft, 2003). In practice, this is often not the case. The Action Teams formed to take forward the ideas generated by the process quickly collapsed due to lack of volunteers and time pressure on those involved. This problem was eventually overcome by the employment of co-ordinators to provide an organisational structure and facilitate liaison between the different groups.

Concluding Discussion

This paper has traced the history of Action Research from its beginnings in the first half of the 20th Century, through the growing momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, to the wider adoption of its principles and practice outside academia. Its focus on generating change through research using participatory approaches poses challenges and opportunities for academic researchers. The dilemmas for traditional research approaches have been briefly reviewed and it is acknowledged that Action Research does not always fit comfortably within academic structures where knowledge production is closely related to career progression.

The paper has been produced to inform doctoral and other research by postgraduates and other researchers at the Centre for Rural Economy (CRE). The CRE specialises in interdisciplinary social science and applied policy research orientated towards the achievement of a sustainable rural economy. Its mission and values statements emphasise using research "to engage, inform and make a difference to others".[6] Action Research therefore offers some potential for bringing this aspiration closer to the heart of research practice. This need not imply uncritically adopting Action Research as a set of definitive prescriptions about how to 'do' research, but does suggest the value of learning from the experience of a wide range of researchers internationally who have placed 'making a difference' at the heart of their ambitions in their work.

Indeed, as we have seen, some of the core principles embodied by Action Research have come to gain greater purchase among academic social science researchers in recent years, in part as a consequence of the growth of qualitative research methods and the spread of postmodern and post-structuralist thought and social theory. From a post-structuralist perspective, Law & Urry (2004) have recently argued the case for a re-examination of methodology in the social sciences. They describe social science methods as being 'performative', that is "they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover" (p.393). They argue that "if methods are not innocent then they are also political. They help to **make** realities" (p.404, emphasis as in original). They go on to ask if it is possible to develop methods which will produce some forms of social reality and erode others. Adopting Law and Urry's performative perspective on social science, we can point to Action Research as a set of research principles and practices that make explicit — and even celebrate — the ways that research can contribute to producing the social world.

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[6] http://www.ncl.ac.uk/cre/about/

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