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**CHAPTER THREE: ACTION RESEARCH: CONTEXTS AND
DIMENSIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

So far we have presented action research in terms of a single fairly general definition. In this chapter we examine more closely the *variety* of action research. This variety is sometimes presented as a set of different ‘types’, e.g. ‘diagnostic’, ‘participant’, ‘empirical’, ‘experimental’ (Chen, Cook, and Harding, 1948; Adelman, 1993). But these terms seem less than helpful, since any given action research project would in some sense contain (almost by definition, as we have seen) all of these aspects. Hart and Bond use a slightly different set of distinctions: ‘empowering’ / ‘experimental’ / ‘organisational’ / ‘professionalizing’ (Hart and Bond, 1995: 43-4). But here again one might argue that some if not all of these are essential components of a coherent model. In this chapter, in contrast, we do not present the variety of action research as a set of different types (between which we may have to choose) but as a set of contributory traditions, developed in different contexts, but overlapping and displaying many common themes.

Section 1 looks at issues of power and partnership in the context of service-user research. Section 2 considers the problem of ‘collaboration’ in the context of action research for community development. Section 3 considers the long tradition of work in organisational management, and contrasts the notion of action research as a process of expert consultancy with the newer management theory which has arisen around the concept of the learning organisation. Section 4 reviews the role of facilitation in action research and suggests that all participants, including facilitators need to be ‘creatively’ involved as researchers into their own practice, including the practice of facilitation. Section 5 considers the evaluation dimension of action research in the light of the tension between ‘science’ and ‘empowerment’. Section 6 considers the nature of ‘critical reflection’ as a process common to action research and professional practice. Finally, sections 7 and 8 focus on the *politics* of action research, through analogies with feminist and anti-racist research traditions.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate key themes, not to present a comprehensive review of the whole action research literature. Thus, for example, the influential work of Peter Reason and Rowan (Reason and Rowan, 1981;

Reason, 1988) presents a conception of ‘new paradigm research’ and ‘co-operative inquiry’ which may be thought of as a general methodology implicit in our conception of ‘collaborative’ action research, but which is too broad-ranging to be accommodated in this chapter as either a specific ‘tradition’ or a particular ‘context’. It is also important to note that our presentation of many of the issues is not intended to ‘resolve’ them. In many cases the key concepts are inherently vague (e.g. ‘empowerment’, ‘collaboration’), and they merely serve to point a direction and to indicate problems that need to be addressed through the *practice* of inquiry.

In this chapter, then, we try to present the variety of action research, to provide pointers to further reading, and to illustrate the different ways in which the ideas outlined so far have been, and can be, realised in practice. This seems important: each practice context contains certain unique features and it is helpful to see action research as a repertoire of possibilities, so that we can better interpret the breadth of the general principles we have outlined.

1. SERVICE-USER RESEARCH

One of the most important aspects of action research is that it sets up processes which *question* conventional hierarchies of expertise, by recognising and involving forms and sources of knowledge and understanding which other modes of research have neglected or dismissed. Action research thus raises issues of power and authority, both within the research process and also in the definition and provision of services. The involvement of service-users in researching and contributing to the development of social and health care services thus needs to be a central theme in any comprehensive conception of action research.

The history of the relationship between service-users and research, in the health and social services, parallels in many ways that of women and members of ethnic minority groups: research was conducted on them and theory was made about them, with little if any reference to their views or the details of their own perceptions of their experience. However, the last two decades have witnessed a variety of movements by service-users and by carers’ groups (particularly in the fields of mental health, learning disability and physical disability) demanding that their perspectives should be taken into consideration in the formulation of policy and practice. And, increasingly, there has been a demand by service-user movements (and by those sympathetic to them) that service-users should pose the questions for inquiry about their own condition and treatment and should be active in undertaking the research. Otherwise, it is argued, service provision will lack a crucial dimension of understanding, which only service-users can make available (see Beresford, 1999). And unless service users take the lead in defining the issues and in carrying out the research, there is a risk of collusion with existing models of practice, many of which are discriminatory and oppressive (Oliver 1996). UK government legislation and policy documents have also recently begun to

emphasise the importance of the service-user's view in service development and related education, for example, the 'NHS and Community Care Act', 1992 and the 1997 document 'The New NHS (National Health Service)', where we read:

The Government will take special steps to ensure that the experience of users and carers is central to the work of the NHS

(DOH, 1997: 66)

Service-users and their carers can therefore be seen to have a particular interest in 'action research', i.e. in research where the purpose of inquiry is to make *changes* in the relationships and procedures which permit professionals and organisations to intervene in their lives.

The early accounts of service-users' perceptions and opinions were practitioner research (e.g. Mayer and Timms, 1970) but in a more traditional mould than that advocated by action researchers. Practitioners were indeed 'inquiring' into their own practice but not in a way that fully or equally involved service-users in developing either the area for study or lines of inquiry. Instead, they were assigned the passive role of answering the questions that practitioners or their managers had set (although the novelty, at the time, of hearing the clients' voices and raising their profile should not be underestimated). Such forms of inquiry had clear limitations. There was a tendency for users to evaluate their own practitioner's work rather than the quality of the service in general, and it was particularly difficult for clients (many of whom were 'captive' - i.e. obliged to accept a service) to criticise the work of an agency on which they were dependent. It was therefore suggested that researchers should be independent of direct service provision, so that service-users would feel more comfortable in giving their honest opinions (Fisher, 1983), leading to involvement in service-user research on the part of academics and the research departments of service organisations. This, of course, risks reproducing another sort of expertise hierarchy and the dependence of service-users on the independent researcher, so researchers involved in such work increasingly advocated the use of more participatory research methods, seeing the researcher as a facilitator of research rather than as an 'expert'.

Examples, Methods

However, the need for service-users and carers themselves to undertake research has been increasingly advocated (Oliver, 1996; Beresford, 1999). For example, the Patients' Council of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital has developed a 'Quality Assurance Framework' derived from a survey of patients' views (MacFarlane, 1998), and a service user group attached to the West Yorkshire National Health Trust undertook a revision of the official documentation, which was found to be too technical and to have too high a reading age to be an effective information source (Barton-Wright, 1998). On a larger scale, the Sainsbury Centre for Mental

Health has developed a ‘user-focused monitoring’ procedure, involving service-users as interviewers and using a framework of questions derived from the experiences of an initial ‘pilot group’ of service-users. The findings of the first series of interviews included: service users felt that their treatment did not draw on their strengths, did not offer the opportunity for discussion and did not involve them in the drawing up of their care plan (Rose, 1999). A survey of the experiences of over 400 users of mental health services (Faulkner 1997) involved service-users in managing the project, designing the questionnaire and analysing the results, concluding that service-users were dissatisfied with purely medical treatments and recommending wider use of ‘holistic’ and ‘talk-based’ therapies (p. 9, p. 18).

Some would argue that the ideal of collaborative action research aims, as far as possible, to merge the roles of researcher and researched, whereas the methods adopted in the work referred to above (reporting findings from interviews and questionnaires) retain a clear distinction between these two roles. There are sound political reasons for this: service-user research has an uphill battle to achieve credibility in the contexts where its credibility is crucial (i.e. where funds are allocated and where policy is made), and so it seemed more prudent to adopt a conventional methodology. Nevertheless, the danger that service-user researcher could recreate another conventional expertise hierarchy needs to be recognised: the ‘democratic’ or ‘participatory’ quality of a research process obviously does not depend simply on the *identities* of those involved, but also, crucially on the *process* (see section 8, below).

On the other hand, there is one research ‘method’ which does seem to be particularly appropriate for service users, namely the telling and discussion of ‘stories’. Telling one’s ‘story’ is a way of ‘bearing witness to’ one’s experience, and it is precisely by presenting the detail of their experience and structuring it in their own way, through ‘stories’ and critical analysis, that service-users can contribute to a better understanding of what these services actually ‘feel like’ (see Borkman, 1999). Again, there is a parallel with methodological traditions in feminist research, which (as with service-user research) highlights the specific value of a form of knowledge, ‘experiential knowledge’, gained only through living with or in specific health and social conditions. Such knowledge is itself a form of ‘expertise’, based on both individual and collective experience, and when shared in self help/mutual aid groups has the potential to challenge, and thus help to improve, professional conceptions and treatment in Health and Social Care (Ramon, 1997; Munn-Giddings, 1998).

‘Partnership’?

Having accepted the value of research carried out by self-help groups of service-users, the next question arises: can service-users work *with* practitioners and service providers without losing control of the research process, and if so, how? This leads us back to the problems indicated earlier. Oliver’s work illustrates the

importance of this issue by showing how both the starting point and the outcomes of research can be quite different if they are defined and conducted by service-users. He notes for example, how social services at both a policy and practice level concern themselves almost exclusively with counting the numbers of disabled people and ascertaining their needs, thereby reinforcing a 'dependent' relationship between service providers and those labelled 'disabled'. Disabled researchers, in contrast, have advocated that local authorities should construct indicators of *disabling environments*, addressing this as an issue for the community as a whole (Oliver, 1990). This example also indicates how adopting the agenda of service-users raises issues which are much broader than the 'needs' of particular individuals or groups stigmatised as 'having problems'. It also shows how such work raises the issue of the power relation between practitioner and user and indicates potential differences in their concerns. At some level practitioners who engage in inquiry to develop their practice are probably (and understandably) making a prior assumption that their practice (in some form or another) is required and beneficial, whereas that may be precisely what service-users may wish to question.

All this alerts us to the real difficulties in a 'partnership' model, in which service-users and practitioner researchers work constructively together to improve services. Nevertheless, much of the action research tradition presupposes that it is possible, as much of the argument in the previous chapters indicates. Elliott and Adelman, for example, reviewing their work as directors of one of the most influential large scale action projects in an education context, suggest that it was based on the 'hypothesis' that 'the best means' that teachers have for 'diagnosing' important problems in their classroom practice is the process of 'monitoring *pupils accounts of teaching*' (Elliott and Adelman, 1996: 17). Beresford (1992) addresses the issue in a social services context. He describes two main approaches to involving service-users and carers in research, namely 'consumerist' research and 'democratic' research. In the first model users are simply 'consulted': they participate, but only insofar as they respond to the agenda set by the service-providers. The researchers (whether independent outsiders or practitioners) are instrumental in initiating the research, defining the area for study, and persuading service-users to become involved. In the second model users are involved from the beginning, in initiating the area for study, defining the research area and conducting and interpreting research data. But the issue need not be defined quite so sharply. Holman (1987) presents a series of examples from community development projects, showing a range of solutions to the problem of how practitioners and service users might work together. These included: 1) the views of service users gathered by an independent researcher, 2) a tenants association 'commissioning' a team of researchers to gather data documenting their concerns, 3) a community worker helping a tenants' association to design and carry out their own data collection exercise, and 4) a 'steering group' of local residents with two community workers planning and carrying out an investigation where the report was 'put together and typed by the residents' (p. 679).

More recently, Bond et al (1998) provide an interesting example of what Beresford might call 'democratic' research undertaken collaboratively by practitioners and service-users. The jointly written account describes how a practitioner studying for a higher degree worked with her academic supervisor and with a group of mothers whose children had been sexually abused, in order to inquire into and develop support services for the mothers group and, more generally for mothers in families where sexual abuse has taken place. The work resulted in changes in local services, the development of a dynamic service-user group ('For Mothers By Mothers'), and the production by this group of an information service for other service-users. Perhaps a key element here was that the service-users involved consciously formed themselves as 'a group' and have since successfully developed what was originally a self-help group into an agency that provides training for those involved in child protection. This report illustrates both the mutual learning and the organisational change that can take place when academics, practitioners and service-users collaborate in ways which draw fully and creatively on their different forms of knowledge.

Summary

Finally, is there a general perspective within which we can view the relationship between service-user involvement, research and the development of professional practice, in a way which contributes to our conception of action research? Mullender et al (1993/4) provide a useful starting point. They suggest that professional practice and research into professional practice share the same value base, namely 'empowerment' (p. 17) (i. e. a concern for individual dignity and autonomy) – 'seeing people as people, not as labels ['cases', 'problems', 'disabilities'] or as research "subjects"' (p. 12).

Participatory forms of research are needed, then, which can encompass not just the subjective experience of those whose circumstances or behaviour are to be studied but their *active* contribution. Research needs to see them as the experts on the direct experience involved ... Workers and researchers who attempt to pursue empowering principles will wish to facilitate service users to make decisions for themselves and to control whatever outcome ensues – such as deciding whether to release findings and to whom. Though special skills and knowledge are employed, these do not accord privilege and are not solely the province of professionals. ... People who lack power and who would be nervous of engaging in anything bearing the grand name of 'research' can gain it through working together in well facilitated groups. (Mullender et. al., 1993/4: 12, 14)

Although we need to remember that 'empowerment' can easily lapse into an empty, simplistic or even patronising 'buzz-word', this quotation evokes quite clearly some key aspects of action research as outlined in earlier chapters, e.g. the emphasis on questioning the expertise embodied in our current knowledge through attempting to work collaboratively with others. Other issues raised by

service user research (e.g. the process of ‘facilitation’, the link between the value base of research and the value base of practice, and the power relations of research and service provision) are discussed further in later sections of this chapter.

2. ACTION RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Politics of Community Development

The idea of a ‘community’ is central to action research. Frequent references have already been made to the ‘collaborative’ principle (including participants as ‘co-researchers’; treating the researcher as a ‘member’ of the inquiry rather than as an ‘outside’ expert) and the action research literature is full of references to *group* processes, e.g. ‘co-operation’ (Heron, 1996), ‘participation’ (Reason, 1994). The emphasis in action research methodology on ‘empowerment’ refers not only to encouraging individual ‘reflection’ but including individuals within a mutually supportive collective endeavour, what Carr and Kemmis call a ‘self-reflective community’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, chapter 7).

There is also a long tradition of community-based action research and, indeed, some of the earliest influential examples of action research are set within a community development context. Thus, in Lewin’s 1945 article ‘Action research and minority problems’ – often seen as the founding text of action research – the main example describes a workshop for community workers seeking to improve ‘race relations’ i.e. to remove ‘economic and social discrimination’ against ‘minority groups’ (Lewin, 1945: 40). Then there is the work of John Collier, also frequently cited by writers on action research, including Lewin himself (Lewin, 1945:46). Between 1933 and 1945 Collier was the civil servant responsible for the United States government policy concerning native Americans. He describes his department’s attempts to counteract centuries of racist policies which had refused to recognise the diversity of native American cultures (Collier, 1945: 268) and destroyed their coherence, ‘atomising’ them into isolated individuals without land, family or belief systems (p. 272). Collier emphasises that local cultures need to be given ‘status, responsibility and power’ through fostering education and local organisation (p.274) and that the process through which this is to be accomplished is ‘action research’ (p. 294), i. e. research which is ‘evoked by needs of action ... [and which] feed[s] itself into action’ (p. 300). For Collier, action research is a form of research which must be *jointly* created and implemented by administrators and community members (p. 276, p. 300) and in which administrators, in order to be ‘faithful to ... the spirit of that knowledge which [they have] not yet mastered’ (p. 300), must see themselves above all as *learners*.

These examples show the essentially political and critical dimension to the community development version of action research. We live in a society where,

many would argue, argued, the human values of ‘community’ – social responsibility, mutual caring – have been (and are still being) destroyed by two key features of modernisation: 1) hierarchical bureaucracies, in which power is exercised at the top and those at the bottom lack control over their lives, thereby limiting the capacity of community members to exercise autonomy; 2) competitive individualism – the supposed motivating ideology of capitalism – which ‘atomises’ (Collier’s term) community life into aggregates of self-interested individuals. Community development through action research, then (as envisaged by Collier and Lewin), seeks to empower the disempowered and is thus an attempt to redress structural problems at the heart of modern societies.

An important methodological point arises here: the political dimension of community development means that there is an important sense in which researchers and facilitators do *not* see themselves as adopting a ‘neutral’ stance, since the idea of community *development* represents a critical perspective on some of the key features of current social structure. Consequently, community / research workers may well feel that an important part of their role is that they share an identity with community members (e.g. identities of class, gender or ethnicity) so that they see their task as *advocacy* or *representation* as well as analysis (cf. service-user research, feminist research and anti-racist research, discussed elsewhere in this chapter).

There is a further key question about action research *as* community development (arising from this political analysis). Can small-scale projects ‘build up to’ structural change, or are they always destined to be ‘defeated’ by the surrounding political structure (massive bureaucratic organisations seeking profits for shareholders) and the dominant culture (self-oriented individualism)? From this perspective, small-scale projects producing merely local ‘adaptations’ may even be seen as counterproductive from the point of view of more radical structural change (Payne et al. 1981).

Examples

However, contemporary society is not simply and exclusively dominated by the forces of bureaucracy and competition, though sometimes it does take some effort to remember this. There are other, contrasting political ideologies at work, which offer support to the community ideal. Firstly, the managers of formerly ‘bureaucratic’ organisations are beginning to recognise that they can only be effective if they succeed in fostering teamwork (see section 3, below). Secondly, community participation is increasingly being recognised as a necessary general strategy for addressing problems of poverty and cultural deprivation. Early examples are the community development projects of the 1960’s and 1970’s in the UK (Lees and Smith, 1975) and the anti-poverty and family advice services projects in the US (Leissner, Herdman and Davies, 1971). More recent examples include the comprehensive collection of processes and procedures for creating

community participation reported by the New Economics Foundation (1997) and the rapidly spreading 'micro-credit' Grameen Bank movement originally initiated by Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh (see Yunus, 1998). Thirdly, one may find theoretical encouragement in Kropotkin's classic argument that mutuality and collective support are just as crucial to survival as competitive individualism, and are just as firmly embedded in 'human nature' (Kropotkin, (1987) [1902]). He cites examples ranging from individual acts of dramatic self-sacrifice – e.g. an escaped prisoner who emerged from his hiding place to save a child from a burning house knowing that as a consequence he would be re-arrested (p. 219) – to spontaneous economic arrangements in which a whole village joins forces to harvest the crop of communal plots of land so that the poor benefit from the superior resources of the rich (p. 203).

The political impetus behind community development work perhaps explains why it is the strongest tradition of action research in third world countries, where the forces undermining 'the community' have had their most obviously destructive impact. The original figure here, frequently cited in action research writing both in community development and educational contexts, is Paulo Freire. For Freire education must be a process of cultural consciousness raising rather than direct instruction, a process of giving a voice to communities which have been 'silenced', as a step towards cultural and political emancipation (Freire, 1972:16). In Freire's work, as with the work of John Collier mentioned earlier, the process of inquiry starts with the researcher in the role of learner: the educator must first learn what it is that the community needs to learn; educational 'texts' must be developed from the words of community members (Freire, 1972: 46). Similarly, for Fals-Borda. 'Participatory action research' is a combination of research, adult education and sociopolitical action, an 'experiential methodology' for the construction of 'power or countervailing power, for the poor, oppressed and exploited groups and social classes' (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991: 3). Research is a 'collective' process, involving the researcher in dialogue and discussion through public meetings with villagers, to 'recover' their awareness of their own history and its political lessons (p. 8).

Problems and 'Solutions'

Valla (1994), writing about community health research in Brasil, raises a key question about the nature of 'participation' in such approaches. How can professional workers or researchers avoid dominating the interpretive process, even when their intention is to create a 'new space' outside the professional delivery of services so that professional judgement can be questioned? 'There is a great possibility that professionals may unconsciously assume responsibility for the choice of criteria and categories' (Valla, 1994:406-7). To address this problem he suggests that professional workers, in order not to 'miss' key aspects of community members' experience, need to adopt an informal approach to 'data gathering' including listening to community talk and reading community

newsletters, rather than insisting always on formal interviews, which may in some situations be regarded with suspicion (p.410).

Valla's emphasis on the difficulties involved in 'facilitating' developmental work returns us to the work of Lees and Smith (1975) in the UK, mentioned earlier, who also emphasise the internal tensions in community development work which may threaten its effectiveness. Lees, for example, notes the conflicts between researchers demanding rigorous evaluation strategies (based on before-and-after measures) and community workers whose professional emphasis is on involving community members in clarifying their own needs and making their own decisions as to courses of action. An 'emergent' self-help group cannot have its objectives spelt out for it in advance by a project director under pressure to 'prove' statistically the success of a particular programme (Lees, 1975: 61-2). Also, neighbourhood groups may well be critical of official provision, and when encouraged to express these views and to organise themselves to improve services the stage is set for outcomes which will not be welcomed by all parties (p.64). Consequently, as Smith (1975) suggests, the situations in which community development action research are attempted are always so 'turbulent' and 'messy' (p. 193; p. 198) that no clear-cut findings as to the 'success' or 'failure' of specific programmes are likely to emerge. Community development work should therefore (modestly) content itself with 'open[ing] up possibilities by presenting the range of effects from any change and bringing forward the attitudes of otherwise unrepresented groups' (p. 197).

In general, then, Lees and Smith present a somewhat pessimistic review of the problems inherent in community development programmes, focusing on the permanent tension between the objectives of 'researchers' and those of community members and local politicians. But this may be in part due to the fact that the work they report is not based on any clearly formulated methods for 'action research' as opposed to conventional social science. In contrast, Stringer's more recent account of 'community-based action research' (Stringer, 1996) – which presents a fairly positive view – is explicitly based on Guba and Lincoln's model of 'responsive evaluation', i.e. a set of procedures for evaluation which is 'responsive' to the various interest groups within a community (see section five, below). Stringer rejects in principle the 'power and control' dimension of positivist social science (Stringer, 1996: 144-150) with which Lees and Smith are struggling and which always present a problem for community development since it always installs the researcher in the roles of outsider and of 'expert'. Stringer's model of inquiry emphasises that that knowledge of social affairs is always created locally and its 'authenticity' is therefore always 'multiple' and varied (p. 156). 'Community based action research', he says, 'works on the assumption that all stakeholders – those whose lives are affected by the problem under study – should be involved in the processes of investigation' (p. 10). It is a form of 'collaborative exploration' in which community members develop 'more constructive analyses of their situation', 'create solutions to their problems', and 'improve the quality of their community life' (p. 10). Its 'working principles'

include: relationships of equality among all participants, acceptance, and co-operation, attentive listening, maximum inclusion of individuals and representative groups, and ensuring that all participants benefit from the project activities (p. 38). And Stringer also echoes John Collier's emphasis on the researcher as a learner, ending the section in which he criticises the claims to 'legitimacy' of conventional social science by quoting the words of the Aboriginal social worker Lillie Watson:

If you've come to help me you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.
(Stringer, 1996: 148)

Summary

These words are a reminder that the community development model of action research must always be seen as an attempt to intervene in the *politics* of knowledge: the *power* of the researcher's expertise always threatens to 'disempower' community members, and thus to undermine the researcher's desire to 'help'. A coherent model of community-oriented action research thus requires facilitators to recognise the wider political structures which devalue community members' own self-understanding, in relation to the interpretations of academics and politicians. From this point of view Stringer may perhaps place too much reliance on Guba and Lincoln's model of evaluation, where the central criterion of success is the achievement of consensus among the various stakeholders. The obvious interface between community development work and the structural politics of the wider society reminds us that any local consensus may be both incomplete and short-lived. Thus, in community development and in action research generally it is important to recognise the political limits of one's work and to welcome and appreciate the significance of even small improvements.

3. ACTION RESEARCH AS MANAGEMENT: CONSULTANCY OR ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING?

Expert Consultants, Learning Organisations and Team-work

At first sight there seem to be key features of large organisations which suggests that they are not fertile places for the development of action research, as we have described it. We tend to think of organisations as 'bureaucratic' structures, i.e. as a hierarchical system of roles in which staff at each level prescribe the rules to be followed and the objectives to be achieved by the level below (Weber, 1947). However, the bureaucratic model of organisational life clearly leaves out much of the reality of what goes on. Alongside 'formal' lines of authority and accountability there are always 'informal' patterns of behaviour which re-define

goals and relationships in unpredictable ways (Selznick, 1964). And an organisation can also be understood as a political system where interest groups compete or as a system of 'self-organising' groups capable of changing functions and substituting for one another (Morgan, 1986: chapter six; chapter four).

Bearing all this in mind, it is not surprising that although there *is* a long tradition of action research involving organisational managers, it is rather ambiguous in terms of some key action research principles. Thus, both Rapoport (1970) and Foster (1972) chart the continuing and expanding work of the Tavistock Institute in developing action research work in commercial and governmental organisations, starting in the 1940's, and this work continues (Tavistock Institute, 1993). Similar work has been undertaken over many years by William Foote Whyte (Whyte, 1991). However, most of this work does not describe organisational managers actually carrying out action research themselves, but the work of social science experts working in a consultancy role with managers to solve problems or to initiate change. Chisholm and Elden (1993) refer to 'early action research', in which 'researchers remained in control of key aspects of the process, [and] the nature of meaning within the organisation or system came from the outside expert, not members of the organisation'. And they go on to recommend a more 'participative' model in which the contributions of outside researcher and organisational members are combined, but which still preserves a clear differentiation between the roles of researcher and practitioner. This general problem was recognised by Sanford as early as 1970 in a paper with the eloquent title, 'Whatever Happened To Action Research?' What happened was that action research became a process in which an expert in a 'social science' discipline (such as 'social dynamics', psychotherapy, or operational research) acts as a 'change agent', revealing to managers the short-comings of the group processes within their organisation (see Foster, 1972).

Detailed discussions of the 'expert change agent' model of action research are provided by Elden (1981) and Hart and Bond (1995, Chapters 5 & 6). Elden was employed as a social science qualified expert to help management set up a 'participative' approach to the installation of a new computer system. He describes how difficult he found it to learn not to impose his own agenda or 'pre-packaged' methods, but to work with staff in developing their own priorities and their own language for analysing their situation (Elden, 1981: 265). This required new role relationships, which were difficult for staff (conscious of being short of time and pressured by events), for the managers (who needed to let go of some of their power prerogatives) and, in particular, for Elden himself, who found that he needed to discard much of the expertise which he had originally thought of as his main qualification for his role. Hart and Bond's account brings out even more clearly the conflictual position of the external consultant called in by senior management to work within an 'autocratic organisational culture' in order to achieve 'empowerment among groups lower down the hierarchy' (Hart and Bond, 1995: 104). They show the major political problems this generates, leading even to the rejection of the research report (p. 109).

Given the inherent conflict between action research and the bureaucratic model of organisational management, the recent emergence of the notion of the Learning Organisation is potentially both significant and helpful. It is a model of organisational learning which is not concerned with formulating a socially relevant role for social scientists but with the roles and purposes of managers themselves, as practitioners. In describing this 'new' model it is appropriate to start with the work of W.E. Deming. In the late 1940's Deming achieved fame through his introduction of statistical performance data to enable managers to control the quality of the operations for which they were responsible (Hutchins, 1988: 146). But in 1986 Deming published a deeply worried account of the 'crisis' of organisational life to which his own ideas had led. Pre-specified standards, statistical outcome measures, and hierarchical appraisals of staff performance were creating a climate of distrust which inhibited innovation, teamwork, critical thinking and effective long-term planning, and leading to simplistic decision-making based on what was easily measured rather than what was important (Deming, 1986: 54, 60, 97, 123).

This is not just a crisis of morale but a crisis of effectiveness. The argument originally underlying the work on Learning Organisations was that the renewed intensity of global competition meant that organisational survival required increased responsiveness to client demand in a rapidly changing market, and this in turn required the creativity and continuous learning fostered above all by collaborative teamwork (Senge, 1990: 4; Peters, 1987, chapter one). Thus, as early as 1982 Peters and Waterman's popular best-seller argued that in order to survive commercially an effective organisation needed to focus on creating autonomy for small, fluid, experimental task forces (Peters and Waterman, 1982, chapters 5 and 6), and Peters' follow-up text (1987) is even more explicit. Organisational survival requires 'constant change and constant improvement' (Peters, 1987:4), so managers should see themselves as 'facilitators' of 'self-managed teams', each responsible for evaluating the quality of its own work and for continuous innovation through listening carefully to clients' responses (p. 43; p. 75; p. 58; p. 145 ff.). Similarly, Hakes (1991: 14-16) emphasises that each organisational operation must be fully 'owned' by those who are involved in it and can influence it on a 'minute-by-minute' basis, so that staff can offer criticism of, and suggest improvements for, their own work, as part of a culture of free and open discussion. Senge's book on 'The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation' summarises and elaborates these various themes. In order to survive, all organisations must become Learning Organisations (Senge, 1990:4). And in order to do so, organisations must transcend defensive inter-departmental politics, create an open exchange of ideas (chapter 13), delegate decision-making down to 'local' contexts (chapter 14), and (above all) develop 'team learning' (chapter 12), i.e. encourage the sharing of different perspectives, using a 'systems' analysis of how perspectives influence one another (chapters 5 – 8).

As yet, of course, the Learning Organisation is not so much an observable reality as a remote ideal or even merely a political buzz-word, often masking a deceptive ideology: for many of us, life in organisations feels *increasingly* bureaucratic, as computerised information systems create new forms of hierarchical control (Huws, 1999: 51). However, it is arguable that the new responsive, interactive model of management is part of a real historical change (Heckscher, 1994:43-44) and two of the historical factors tending to encourage this development have already been referred to: 1) the intensification of competition for markets, and 2) the increasing recognition, by writers on organisations and on education, of the crucial importance of team working (Dixon, 1994; Heckscher, loc.cit; Gibbons et. al. 1994).

Management and the Unpredictability of Social Events

Another factor tending to push management theory in the direction of action research is the increasingly widespread acceptance of the fundamental unpredictability of social events (Omerod, 1994; Aspden, 1994). This argument is at the heart of Stacey's elaborate account of how management theory must be re-thought to take into account the *theoretical* (as well as practical) uncertainties of organisational processes (Stacey, 1996). His argument is largely based on systems theory (p. 250 ff.) and chaos theory (p. 319 ff.), both of which emphasise the continuous feed-back mechanisms operating over time between social events, leading to patterns which are so complex that they cannot be predicted except in very general terms. Hence, the 'technical rationality' model of management (the collection and processing of all relevant information followed by prescriptive decision-making *by managers for staff*) is usually ineffective, since the amount of relevant data is too enormous to be fully analysed in the time available. Stacey's argument is thus based on a much broader set of considerations than the unpredictability of markets, and helps to emphasise that the notion of the Learning Organisation is equally applicable to management in organisations such as social services departments, hospitals, medical centres and schools, where the role of purely commercial markets is less clear-cut. His point is quite general: except in very rare circumstances *effective* management must recognise the *lack of certainty* in its field of operations and allow maximum *flexibility* and *discretion* (Stacey, op. cit.: 33-35). In other words, organisations need to encourage 'states of instability, contradiction, contention and creative tension in order to provoke to new perspectives and continuous learning' (p.xx).

Feminist Theory and Workplace Learning Cultures

A number of gender-based differences have been proposed which would be highly significant for the establishment of the sort of workplace 'learning culture' which action research requires. For example, Tannen (1992) suggests that men tend to approach conversational interactions as a negotiation for status and independence, as a 'contest . . . to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can'; whereas women treat conversation as a negotiation for 'connection' in which 'people try to

seek and give confirmation and support and to reach consensus' (pp. 24-5). From this point of view it is interesting to note the difference between Nancy Kline's description of the 'Thinking Environment', with its emphasis on listening, expression of appreciation, encouragement, and recognition of feelings (Kline, 1993, chapter 2) and the competitive, antagonistic version of 'dialectical' discussion proposed by Mike Pedler and his (male) colleagues in their evocation of 'The Learning Company' (Pedler, et. al. (1991: 62). That there may be a gender-based cultural difference between 'adversarial' and 'empathetic' modes of collaborative understanding is also suggested by Belebenky et. al. (p. 96: 100-122). 'Explanations' of gender-based difference are notoriously contentious: our argument here is merely that the increasing participation of women in managerial roles may perhaps bring into organisational life a significantly new range of abilities, from which organisational staff in general (including men) will be able to benefit. Perhaps a more 'feminised' organisational culture might find it easier to follow Deming's urgent advice that 'leadership' must be reconstructed so that it involves, instead of acting as 'a judge' towards one's staff, acting instead in the role of colleague and counsellor, 'learning from them and with them' (Deming, 1986: 117).

Summary: An Example of the Manager as Learner

So, there are various grounds for taking seriously an emerging school of thought which seems to suggest that effective management needs, above all, the qualities which we have associated with action research. What might this look like in practice? To conclude this section, here is a summary of a project based explicitly on a model of management practice *as* an action research process and specifically intended to foster the ideal of a Learning Organisation (Bishop, 1995). When he undertook this piece of work Leo Bishop was Senior Manager of Inspection Services for Essex Social Services Department. This meant that he had managerial responsibility for staff carrying out inspections of Residential and Day Care centres for children, elderly people and people with physical and learning disabilities. The problem he wished to address was as follows. The UK government had recently introduced a policy change which affected the work of inspection staff and had issued a policy statement concerning the new practices required, but this statement was of a very general nature. So how could Leo Bishop, as manager, oversee the creation of a more detailed document containing guidelines on the actual practice of inspection? He recognised that although he had management *responsibility* for the inspection work he did not know *how* (exactly) it should be carried out. He also recognised that a document which staff could fully 'own' (because they had created it themselves) would be much more effective than a prescriptive document 'issued' by management (Bishop: 19). In other words, Leo Bishop suggests that the task required his staff to learn from each other and for him to learn from and with them (See Deming, 1986: 117). In this way the document would be used more intensively, and creating it would enhance morale.

Leo Bishop explicitly places his approach within the Peters and Waterman conception of the Learning Organisation (Bishop, 1995: 18) and, more particularly, the 'Learning Local Authority' (Stewart and Clarke, 1992). His model is one in which 'The role of the manager becomes ... action research into the actual work of inspection and the manager's own work of communicating with his / her staff' (Bishop, 1995: 3). His method was in many ways quite simple. He conducted a series of workshops where staff 'brainstormed' a list of the key features of their work as inspectors, which entailed recognising, and learning from, the tensions between their different perspectives. He then edited the list (organising it and removing repetitions) and circulated it to the participating staff for amendment. The staff amendments were then incorporated into a final 'Draft Statement of Practice Principles'. Finally, staff were sent a questionnaire form on which they could register (confidentially and anonymously) how they had experienced the project. Almost all said they were 'pleased' with the outcome, and that their views had been 'genuinely sought', and approximately 50% said they had felt the process to be 'empowering' (p. 56).

Of course, an organisational culture is not transformed overnight or by a single project, and 50 % of Leo Bishop's staff did *not* report that they had experienced the 'empowerment' intended. But the project does represent an attempt to make use of the professional 'space' which remains even when governments are prescribing policy guidelines and a recognition that *actual* practice (the 'How') always remains a matter for individual discretion even after 'guidelines' have been published. It also demonstrates that a senior manager can consciously adopt an action research model of her / his role in order to initiate a process which accomplishes an obvious management task (generating practice guidelines) in a way which involves the staff concerned as creators rather than as recipients, and which involves the manager also in a process of learning.

4. 'FACILITATION': ISSUES OF POWER AND LEARNING

It was helpful, as a starting point, to think of action research as, typically, an 'insider' process – in which the members of a situation work together to develop their own practices (see Chapter One). But this is in some respects an oversimplification: action research traditionally does also formulate an important role for an 'outsider' contribution to the research process. In management and community development contexts this role has often been presented in terms of a social scientist acting as a 'consultant' (see sections two and three, above). More generally, action research projects are often initiated from within universities, organisational research units or public funding bodies, so that the project initiator becomes the 'facilitator' of action research, often co-ordinating work in a number of different work contexts. This is obviously likely to be the case with large-scale initiatives, and these large projects have of course played a significant part in raising the profile of action research as an approach to social inquiry. Not surprisingly, therefore, 'facilitation' has played a key role in some of the most

widely influential action research projects, especially in the context of nursing, community work and school-teaching; indeed, Webb treats the facilitative process as the key relationship in the action research model of inquiry (Webb, 1991: 156). In this section, therefore, we consider the meaning of ‘facilitation’, and how it relates to the general action research principles already outlined.

An early example of an extended action research project in a nursing context (Towell and Harries, 1979) is built around what might be called the institutionalisation of the facilitator role. It describes how Towell (working in conjunction with the Tavistock Institute) and Harries (originally appointed as Senior Nursing Officer) developed their roles as ‘social research advisers’ in a large mental hospital. ‘This role was intended to provide a service in the hospital such that any group of staff could seek help in identifying, investigating and tackling problems arising in their day-to-day work’ (Towell and Harries, 1979: 14). An important feature of the book is that ward nurses co-author the various accounts of the different projects, along with the research advisers. Although the funding for this arrangement was relatively short-lived, the project provides a valuable model of how a care organisation can institutionalise action research in such a way that ‘support’ for action research by staff is made permanently available, thereby blurring the distinction between insider and outsider research.

However, there are tensions implicit in the role of action research facilitator, as Towell himself admits (p. 34), and an insight into the origin of these tensions, as well as a full statement on the nature of the facilitator role in general, arises from a consideration of the account provided by Brown et. al. (1982). For Brown and his colleagues, the role of facilitator arises directly from the action research principle of collaboration: a *group* of participants always needs to be co-ordinated, group processes need to be organised, group assumptions need to be challenged, and there will be gaps in the group’s collective expertise which need to be filled (Brown, et. al., 1982: 4). The facilitator thus provides an outsider perspective, a focus for activity, emotional support, practical assistance, and resources. The facilitator acts as critic, recorder and methodological teacher (pp. 5-7). The problem about all this, however, is that the ‘objective’ of the facilitator is ‘the enhancement of the autonomy’ of the participants and ‘the reduction of their dependency on others’ (p. 11); and from this point of view there is an obvious danger. All the well-intentioned work of the facilitator risks becoming counterproductive – merely substituting another form of authoritative expertise within yet another hierarchical power relationship.

Facilitation and Power

It is this issue – the implicit power relation within the facilitator role – which has provided the impetus for much of the writing by action researchers on facilitation. Posch, for example, writing about his work on a Europe-wide action research project on environmental education, notes the ‘temptation’ for the facilitators to ‘dominate’ the interpretation of events with their own understandings, which, he

says, may well seem 'clearer' than those of the participating school teachers, even to the teachers themselves (Posch, 1993:454). Losito and Pozzo (1997) - also writing from within an international project, 'Management For Organisational and Human Development' - describe the facilitator role through two contrasting images, both of which allude to the power and authority of the facilitator over other participants: 1) the facilitator as an 'experienced sailor' advising the crew of a ship navigating without a captain (p. 290); and 2) the facilitator as the weaver of a tapestry pattern from the multicoloured threads provided by participants (pp. 291-2). Messner and Rauch address the power issue in terms of three 'dilemmas'. How does the facilitator provide 'support' without 'taking control' (Messner and Rauch, 1995:45)? How does the facilitator provide both a critical outsider perspective *and* encourage participants to have confidence in their own experience (p. 50)? How can the 'pressure' provided by the facilitator's presence be 'stimulating' rather than 'inhibiting' (pp. 51-2)?

Somekh (1994) attempts to point a way forward from such dilemmas. Her argument is that there is a fruitful division of labour at work within large-scale action research projects. *All* participants are 'researchers', and indeed they define and publish their own work (Somekh, 1994: 359), but they are researchers with a differing final emphasis: individual participants are largely concerned with developing and understanding the practical detail of their own work contexts, whereas project facilitators are more concerned with generalisations across the many contexts covered by the overall project (p.376-7). In this way the issue of whether facilitators necessarily 'take over' is addressed. By working in partnership with each other, the members of an action research project (facilitators and 'other participants') can, together, create knowledge which is both locally effective and has some degree of generalisability. However, Somekh's implied distinction between the local and the general does not sit easily with action research's claim that there is potential general significance even in the individual case (see chapter two, p.??, '*Generalisability*'), reminding us of the threat (for action research) that the role of the facilitator will somehow reinstate the outsider's expertise as 'superior' to that of the 'insider' participants.

Another response to the issue of the facilitator's 'superiority' is Elliott's influential proposal that facilitators always have a double task. They must support the 'first order' action research of participants working within their own individual contexts, but, in addition, they must also engage in a separate, 'second order' action research study of their own work of facilitating the work of the other participants (Elliott, 1991: 27: 30; Elliott and Adelman, 1996: 17). In this way facilitators are faced with the same task as any other participant: they are challenged to investigate and to develop their own practice and their understanding of their practice as facilitators. In other words, the tendency of the facilitator role to foster a sense of superiority is, partly at least, counteracted by a requirement to adopt a *critical* stance towards their own work. This idea, that facilitators must in some way place themselves, methodologically, 'alongside' other project participants by systematically subjecting themselves to the risks and

challenges of investigating their own work as facilitators, is one way of attempting to reduce, to some extent, the status and power differentials within the research process.

Action Research AS Facilitation

In some ways, *all* participants in an action research process may be thought of as engaged in a process of facilitation, in the sense of providing mutual support within a developmental process (see Losito, Pozzo, and Somekh, 1998). The work of Titchen, in the context of nursing, provides a clear example. Titchen acted as facilitator for a ward sister who was in turn acting as facilitator for the nursing staff on her ward, to help them develop a more 'patient-centred' conception of their role (Titchen, 2000). Titchen's model of facilitation involves mutuality, reciprocity, attention to particulars and 'care'. The key processes include 'observing, listening and questioning', 'feedback', and combining challenge and support within a 'critical dialogue'. Her model has at its centre not 'expertise' but the reflexive and 'accepting' awareness of the human relationships at work in the inquiry. Titchen calls this relationship 'critical companionship', and what is most important to note is that it describes the ideal underlying *all* the relationships of the action research process: the relationship between project facilitator and ward sister, between ward sister and staff nurses, *and* between nurses and their patients.

Summary

To sum up, action research's central principles of collaboration and empowerment mean that the relationships it seeks to establish in work contexts are the same as the relationships of the inquiry process itself. And these relationships can be thought of as 'facilitation' – as opposed to those of authoritative or expert 'instruction'. The initiators / co-ordinators of action research projects (whether large or small in scale) are not privileged by their experience or their expertise to simply 'get others to engage in' action research: they themselves are also, always 'participants'. As such, their stance towards their own practice within the action research inquiry process must be no different from that of other participants. Their assumptions are available to be questioned by others, their strategies will change through the course of the inquiry, their aim is to *learn*. Even though facilitators *initially* provide support and advice, their work must, in the end, 'model' the collaborative relationships and principles of action research. Otherwise 'facilitation' will become self-contradictory, tending to re-create the relationships of authority and dependency which an action research project is always attempting to overcome.

5. ACTION RESEARCH AS 'RESPONSIVE' EVALUATION

Two Models of Evaluation

The cyclic pattern of action research – its repeated alternation between practical action and reflection (see chapter two, p. 4) – suggests immediately its close links with the activity we call ‘evaluation’. An action research project may or may not *start* by evaluating current practice (whether long established or recently introduced) but there will always be an explicitly evaluative *phase* at some point in the work. The essence of evaluation is the making of judgements: does this practice ‘need’ changing; has this attempt at improving practice been ‘effective’? Evaluation focuses our understanding of experience by setting data and analysis against values and criteria. And, as with action research in general, the key questions are: what sort of data is to be collected, who devises the criteria, and who makes the judgements?

The general shape of the debate about evaluation is indicated by the influential paper ‘Evaluation as illumination’ by Parlett and Hamilton (1977) in which they begin by presenting two contrasting models of the evaluation process. The first is based on the quantitative measurement of outcomes in relation to pre-specified criteria. In the pure form of this model evaluation takes the form of comparing ‘before-and-after’ measurements of the effects of a given ‘intervention’ and measuring the differences between experimental and control situations or groups. Parlett and Hamilton call this the ‘agricultural-botany’ model, since they see it as most appropriate for evaluating the yields of crops or plants! They also call it the ‘traditional’ model, because of its longstanding influence in experimental psychology (as well as in the testing of *medical* procedures – see below). Their argument is that this model is generally *not* appropriate for evaluating *human* situations, for a number of reasons. 1) Variables can never be wholly controlled, and even inadequate attempts to do so are ‘artificial’ (i.e. they have a distorting effect on the situation), unrealistically expensive and ethically dubious. 2) The attempt to control variables discourages flexibility and improvisation. 3) Focusing on purely quantitative measures restricts the scope of the data considered. 4) Local variations are ignored. 5) The differing concerns of the various interest groups are ignored (Parlett and Hamilton, 1977: 8 - 9). In the light of these criticisms of the ‘traditional’ model, the authors propose their alternative, namely ‘illuminative evaluation’:

The aims of illuminative evaluation are to study the innovatory programme: how it operates; how it is influenced by the various [institutional] situations in which it is applied; what those directly concerned regard as its advantages and disadvantages....It aims to discover what it is like to be participating... In short it seeks to address and to illuminate a complex array of questions.

(Parlett and Hamilton, 1977: 10)

The two models of evaluation obviously echo the distinction between ‘positivist’ and ‘naturalistic’ inquiry presented in chapter two, and also the difference between what Simons calls ‘product’ and ‘process’ evaluation (Simons, 1982a).

The continued relevance of Parlett and Hamilton's distinction is illustrated in more recent writings. Thus, Oakley (1996) – acutely aware of the public pressure to be able to 'guarantee' the effectiveness of social work interventions – argues that decisive evaluation must take the form of randomised controlled trials (RCTs), involving quantitative measurement of outcomes and comparing an 'experimental' group which receive the innovatory 'treatment' with a 'control' group which do not. The two groups are supposed to be established by purely statistical techniques in an attempt to ensure that the two groups do not differ in any way which might 'bias' the results. McDonald (1999) echoes the demand for RCT's in social work, but Taylor and Thornicroft (1996), writing in the context of mental health service provision, analyse in detail the difficulties involved and show that, in practice, neither treatment conditions nor the motivation and awareness of participants can be fully controlled (Taylor and Thornicroft, 1996: 144-148). Fuller (1996) also argues that the random allocation of participants to experimental and control groups is often impractical, and that evaluation therefore usually involves comparisons carried out on a more informal basis, i.e. by comparing 'cases' (Fuller, 1996: 62). Fuller also points out that evaluating 'effectiveness' is not a straightforward matter, since the *intentions* of service managers and professionals may be at variance with the *concerns* of service-users (p. 56), and statements of objectives often involve ambiguous and contested concepts, e.g. 'interests', 'needs' and 'well-being' (p. 58). Fuller's emphasis therefore has much in common with that of Parlett and Hamilton: evaluation evidence can rarely be scientifically controlled; instead (in order to be usefully 'illuminating') it needs to be *varied*, so that it reflects the *complexity* of actual situations (Fuller, 1996: 59, 63).

Two Models of 'Evidence'

In many ways the key questions for evaluation are: what sort of judgements are to be made and what sort of evidence is therefore appropriate? Stenhouse, one of the central figures in the recent development of action research, provides a clear-cut reply in favour of the illuminative model. Illuminative evaluation, he says, does not simply seek a judgement in the sense of 'a verdict' but judgements which may provide a basis for future developmental work (Stenhouse, 1985b: 31). Moreover, since developmental work is located in a particular context, evaluative judgements need to be based on a 'dossier' of evidence, representing 'the case' as a whole and in depth, (p. 31 –2) not the abstract, fragmented statistical 'results' generated by experimental 'trials'. The term 'trial' is suggestive here, reminding us that it is *lawyers* who have the most explicit concern with making judgements based on 'the evidence'. And *legal* 'trials' are based on accumulating a *mass* of evidence in the form of different 'stories' and interpretations from a variety of witnesses and competing advocates. Moreover, writers on legal theories of evidence emphasises that a legal judgement is always a matter of interpretation and discretion (Elliott and Phipson, 1987: 41) involving simultaneously many different types of decision (Twining, 1990: 362) and a recognition that 'reality' is elusive and complex since it is differently constructed by each of us (Twining: 367-8).

It is thus highly misleading when the advocates of so-called ‘evidence-based practice’ attempt to hi-jack the term ‘evidence’ to mean, exclusively, *statistical* evidence of the sort generated by randomised control trials (Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group, 1992). The authors of this article suggest that the use of such evidence will provide ‘superior patient care’ (p. 2421), although the example they give is hardly convincing. We are assured that a (male) patient informed simply that there is ‘a high risk’ that his acute condition might recur will be left ‘in a state of vague trepidation’ and fear. In contrast, if he is told (using the ‘evidence-based’ approach) that the risk is between 43% and 51% after one year, between 51% and 60% after three years and that if he has had no recurrence after 18 months the risk would be 20%, then he will have ‘a clear idea of his likely prognosis’ (p. 2420). But such statistics do *not* provide a full basis for judgements in individual cases, since they refer to large samples (cf. Stenhouse’s argument, above), so even according to statistical theory this patient has hardly been given ‘a clear idea’ of his individual ‘prognosis’, even if the statistics in this case were less obviously confusing. Of course, professional judgements must be (and always are) based on ‘evidence’, but statistical evidence of this sort, although clearly important, is necessarily only part of the picture, as the Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group themselves admit (p.2423). This argument would of course apply all the more strongly if one were making judgements outside of a purely medical context, such as the likelihood of a recurrence of abusive behaviour in the context of social work with families.

The Politics of Evaluation

So far the discussion has focussed mainly on methods and forms of data, but there is also the question of audience and purpose. Macdonald (1977) poses this issue succinctly. He argues that evaluation is necessarily and by definition concerned with making *value* judgements, and since social situations always involve ‘competing interest groups’ an evaluation process is always inherently *political* (Macdonald, 1977: 224). To illustrate this, MacDonald presents three contrasting possibilities. 1) An evaluation may adopt the objectives of the powerful agencies which control resources and dictate policy (‘Bureaucratic Evaluation’). 2) An evaluator may adopt her / his own ‘independent’ objectives (‘Autocratic Evaluation’). 3) An evaluation may be constructed as a process which ‘recognises value pluralism and seeks to represent a range of interests in its issue formulation [with the evaluator acting as] a broker in exchanges of information between different interest groups’ (‘Democratic Evaluation’) (p. 226).

From what has been said so far it is clear that it is the ‘illuminative’ / ‘democratic’ model of evaluation which aligns with the action research principles outlined in chapter two. Further elaboration of this model is provided by the work of Guba and Lincoln. Their starting point is the concept of ‘responsive evaluation’ first proposed by Stake (1967). In responsive evaluation the process ‘responds to’ a) the values and concerns of different individuals and interest groups, as ‘stakeholders’, and b) to the emergent issues as the inquiry proceeds (Guba and

Lincoln, 1981: 33-6). In their later work Guba and Lincoln also call their model 'constructivist' - in that it rests on the philosophical argument that, since we have no direct access to any 'objective' reality existing independently of our interpretations, we necessarily 'construct' the reality of our experience (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 43-4). For evaluation, therefore, the 'key dynamic' is negotiation between the differing 'realities' of the various participants – a 'dialectical' process of discussion and mutual learning (p. 44; p. 56), in which the aim is clarification (p. 56) and, eventually, consensus (p. 45). They also note that evaluation always threatens to place participating stakeholders 'at risk' (p. 51), so that care must be taken to ensure that the impact of the evaluation is not oppressive but 'educational' and 'empowering' (p. 149). In responsive / constructivist evaluation, therefore:

All parties' ...initial constructions are given full consideration and... each individual has an opportunity to provide a critique, to correct, to amend, or to extend all the other parties' constructions.

(Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 149)

Practical Problems

So far we have been concerned with a theoretical ideal of evaluation – as a democratic, responsive, illuminative process which shares many of the principles and ideals of action research. But practice never coincides exactly with theoretical ideals. One obvious problem is that of time. The process of negotiating and checking accounts needs to be completed within the time scale of a developing programme of action, which means that it can never be wholly comprehensive or exhaustive; and this in turn poses a question about the 'credibility' of the evaluation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 236-7). Similarly, most evaluation work in small-scale localised projects will suffer from a shortage of resources, leading to the same problem. There is also always the tension between different audiences. An evaluation report may be both a means for self-evaluation within an institutional community (Simons, 1982b) but also part of the mechanism of accountability to a wider public. In theory these two functions can be made to coincide (Simons, 1982b: 287) but the potential conflicts (of motive, for example) are obvious.

Summary: Some Contrasting Examples

So, in the light of these various general arguments, let us now end this section by briefly considering a few specific examples of evaluation reports. Ovretveit (1986) began his evaluation of a new format for social work record-keeping by creating a set of general statements concerning practice values in conjunction with a group of social workers. From these statements a set of 'objectives' was devised which Ovretveit then used, in stage 2 of the project, as criteria for assessing the utilisation of the new record-keeping forms by various other groups of workers. Although this work is described as both an evaluation and an action research project, it is clear that Stage 2 participants were simply *subjected* to the

assessment procedure, and were not involved either as ‘stakeholders’ or as ‘co-researchers’. In contrast, Ward’s (1996) evaluation of assessment procedures in child-care also began with a small ‘working party’ devising a set of assessment procedures, but the second stage of the work was used as an opportunity for refinement and revision by *broadening* the range of stakeholders, as Guba and Lincoln might have wished:

The social workers, carers and children who completed these assessments have made numerous suggestions as to how the materials might be improved, and their comments will be taken into account as the materials are revised...Feedback from users has led us to look more closely at issues such as the relative roles to be played by health professionals, social workers and educators in undertaking assessments, and to question whether the assumptions on which the materials are based are appropriate to the upbringing of children from a variety of cultures.

(Ward, 1996: 84)

Loveland (1998) is a further example of evaluation carried out by a social worker with the specific aim of consulting service users and involving them in the development of service provision.

Turning now to examples from the health professions, Batteson (1997) describes the development of a training programme designed to improve communication and collaboration between nurses and occupational therapists. Like Ward, Batteson’s evaluation phase is a process of continued refinement of the programme, rather than (as with Ovretveit) a process of *assessment* against previously established criteria. In this context it is worth noting Elliott’s observation that one of the ‘criteria for good action research’ is that it should involve participants in discussing and *defining* ‘quality indicators’, rather than taking for granted the relevance and adequacy of a pre-defined checklist (Elliott, 1995: 11). The Royal College of Nursing ‘Dynamic Standard Setting System’ (1990) is a clear example of this process at work. Groups of nurses were involved in defining ‘standards’ of patient care to which they themselves wished to subscribe and which they judged to be feasible. They then monitored their own practice in the light of the criteria they had specified. A schematic approach, emphasising quantitative measures rather than illuminative documentation, but very obviously *self-evaluation*, even within a set of procedures for institutional accountability.

Finally, an example which allows us to consider the *form* of an evaluation report. MacVicar’s evaluation of a respite care unit is interesting in that his report consists very largely of quotations from service-users describing their experiences and perspectives, even though it begins with a series of very closed questions, e.g. ‘Is the project meeting the aims and objectives which have been set?’ (MacVicar, 1995: 151). In this case, then, the evaluation report can be seen as ‘empowering’ clients, simply by providing them with an officially audible (i.e. published) ‘voice’. This example shows how an evaluation can be ‘responsive’, even when it

is conducted within the general framework of a purely administrative decision as to whether or not a facility should continue to be funded.

6. ACTION RESEARCH AND ‘CRITICAL REFLECTION’

One of the central principles of action research is that the initiator of the research *learns* about her / his own practice (see sections on facilitation and management in this chapter). Consequently, action research has become popular as a form of *education* for professional staff, in which learning arises from the process of engaging in practice-based *inquiry*. Two important points follow from this. Firstly, a significant dimension of action research is its link with the concept of ‘reflective practice’, based on Schon’s emphasis on the continuous reflection required by the complexities and uncertainties of professional practice (Schon, 1983). Secondly, one of the most significant contexts where action research has been influential over the last twenty years is that of education, i.e. teaching. If action research is itself a form of education, it means that, for teachers, engaging in an action research inquiry has a direct similarity with the activities of their own professional practice. Thus, ‘Teachers-as-researchers’ (Bartholomew, 1972, Stenhouse, 1975) are also ‘teachers-as-learners’ – learning *with* their students about the processes and structures of learning in which they are *jointly* engaged: teaching is itself a *research* process (Stenhouse, 1975:141-3). In this section, therefore, expanding upon the first part of chapter two, we generalise this linkage (between action research and professional work) from teaching to other professions, using the concept of ‘critical reflection’ as a bridge between the two.

Action Research and the ‘Reflective’ Professional Practitioner

Schon’s model of the reflective practitioner has a number of links with the rationale for action research. For example, he argues that professional decision-making is too complex to take the form of simply ‘applying’ general rules to specific situations, i.e. ‘technical rationality’ (Schon, 1983: 29). Instead, the reality of social interactions (including professional decision-making) has to be ‘*constructed*’ by those involved (Schon, 1987: 36) as a process of ‘reframing’ experience (1983: 132) and of ‘experimenting’ with possible interpretations (1983: 141). The importance of Schon’s ideas has been widely acknowledged. Palmer’s introduction to *Reflective Practice in Nursing*, for example, emphasises the role of reflection in developing self-awareness and personal knowledge, combining patient care with learning from professional experience, and improving practice through critical self-questioning (Palmer, 1994). Yelloly and Henkel make a similar argument for social work (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995: 8-9). It is important to note that for all these writers reflection is conceived as a ‘critical’ process – a process of change and transformation. We need to consider, therefore, how action research contributes to *critical* reflection.

Writing in an educational context, Elliott (1991) draws an explicit parallel between Schon’s ‘reflective practice’ and action research (p. 50), arguing that collaborative action research, as a form of practitioner-based ‘evaluation and development’ (p. 56) is ‘a unified conception of reflective educational practice’

(p. 54). For Elliott, a further important link is that professional *values* play a central part in defining both reflective practice and action research. Consequently, 'improving' practice (either within reflective practice or within an action research project) is never merely a technical matter of, for example, efficiency or productivity.

The improvement of a practice consists of realising those values which constitute its ends ... [Thus] Improving practice ... necessarily involves a continuing process of reflection on the part of practitioners. This is partly because ... what constitutes an appropriate realisation of values is ultimately a matter of personal judgement in particular circumstances.

(Elliott, 1991: 49-50)

Action research, says Elliott, thus involves a 'reflective critique' of the value interpretations embedded in practice' (p. 51) because values are 'infinitely contestable ... infinitely open to reinterpretation' (p. 50).

Two potential problems in this sort of argument need to be addressed. 1) It might be thought to emphasise the discretion of professionals at the expense of their clients, and thus to reinforce their power *over* clients. But this would be to misread the significance of the 'values' at issue – which are always about the *rights* of clients (to justice, care, health, education etc.) and the *responsibilities* of workers to 'realise' these rights *with* and *on behalf of* clients. And a continuous theme of educational action research is the transformation of authoritarian relationships between teachers and pupils into a relationship based on mutual respect and dialogue, involving teachers in *questioning* their own decisions (see, for example, Schindler, 1993). 2) There is also a danger that instead of saying that action research involves asking the always difficult question, 'How shall we *best* put our professional values into practice on *this* occasion?' (Elliott's argument), we ask, 'What is the *contradiction* between my professional values and my current practice, and how shall I resolve it?' (Whitehead, 1989).

What is Being 'Critical'?

This latter question, as presented by Whitehead, provides one interpretation of what might be meant by 'being critical' but it does so in a way which is unhelpful in several ways (in spite of its simplicity and thus its appeal). Firstly, values represent ideals, and ideals are by definition never fully realisable in practice; so the relationship between values and practice is not simply a 'contradiction' which can be 'resolved'. Secondly, real contradictions exist *between competing values* in a given situation (e.g. the potential conflict between responding 'equitably' to different clients and responding fully to the 'unique individuality' of each client's circumstances); so 'practice' is a matter of 'working with' dilemmas or trying to 're-frame' them in order to find a constructive way forward. Thirdly, real contradictions exist between the practices, interests and aims of different parties in a situation; so 'improving' a situation is often about negotiating new patterns of communication. In other words, the 'critical' dimension of action research cannot simply rest on an initial 'confession' of one's own 'failure' to enact professional values, still less with an invitation to others to do so; nor should it ever end with

self-righteous claims to have ‘removed a contradiction between’ values and practice. The first makes action research seem unduly threatening, and the second renders action researchers’ conclusions both implausible and suspiciously self-righteous.

The work of Carr and Kemmis (1986) is organised around a more complex conception of critical reflection, namely a process of ‘emancipation’ from cultural and institutional constraints (p. 192). For Carr and Kemmis the critical thrust for both reflection and action research arises from a socio-political ideal:

The criteria of rationality (in communication) justice (in decision-making) and access to an interesting and satisfying life (in relation to work) provide benchmarks against which practices of communication, decision-making and work can be evaluated... Educational action research ... allows ... teachers and others ... to identify those institutional patterns of practice which limit the achievement of more rational communication, more just and democratic decision-making and access to an interesting an satisfying life for all.

(Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 193-4)

These criteria of rationality, justice and self-fulfilment are derived from the work of Habermas (see Carr and Kemmis, chapter 5), and Habermas’s conception of rationality is particularly significant for a theory of action research, as follows. The ‘collaborative’ principle of action research has as its ideal a form of discussion in which any hierarchical differences of power, status or authority between the various participants in a situation are temporarily ‘suspended’ (see chapter two), so that, in Habermas’s terms, ‘no force except the better argument is used’, only genuinely common interests will be agreed and any attempts at deception will be exposed through critical scrutiny (Habermas, 1976: 108; Winter, 1987: 82).

But it is important to note that Habermas presents this explicitly as an *ideal* (Habermas, 1978: 314) and, again, the problem is: how can action research be ‘critical’ without simply pointing to the obvious and inevitable gap between a messy, contradictory reality and a pure but unrealisable ideal? On this point, Carr and Kemmis seem ambiguous. For example, at several points their analysis depends on a distinction between ‘distorted’ and ‘non-distorted’ (i.e. ‘critical’, ‘emancipated’) patterns of communication (e.g. p. 192; p. 194), and they identify participants’ ‘ideology’ with ‘erroneous self-understanding’ (p. 193). But if this is interpreted crudely it can easily seem as if the initiator of action research is claiming to be already in possession of a rational, emancipated perspective and inviting prospective participants to confess that they are as yet languishing in a state of error – not a good start for establishing *collaborative* work, fully owned by all concerned!

Carr and Kemmis are aware of this danger (p. 149; p. 201; pp. 203-5) and an important part of their argument is that action research must be founded upon ‘the

meanings and interpretations of practitioners' (p. 149). In order to reinforce this latter emphasis, the definition of 'critique' proposed by Winter (1989, 1996) shifts the focus of 'critique' so that it more obviously starts from participants' own analysis of their situation and is less dependent on a pre-existing set of ideals. From this perspective, critical reflection has two major dimensions: 'reflexivity' (i.e. *self*-questioning, i.e. taking one's own interpretations of events as 'data' to be subjected to examination) and 'dialectics' (i.e. focusing on the contradictions, tensions and dilemmas inherent in a situation) (Winter, 1989: 39-55; 1996: 18-21). Within this perspective, 'ideology' is not a 'distorted' perspective but a not-yet-questioned perspective, and 'critique' is not the embracing of an 'emancipated' point of view but simply the *process* of *questioning* any point of view (Winter, 1989: 186-191).

It is important to emphasise that both of these strategies (reflexive critique and dialectical critique) arise from forms of awareness that we *already* possess. They arise from our spontaneous recognition of the complexities of our experience. And they arise directly from the collaborative process of an action research inquiry, in which participants representing different roles (and thus different interests) *share* their differing perspectives upon the same events. This sharing process enables us to recognise the existence of alternative rationalities, the limitations of our immediate interpretations, and, consequently, possibilities for change.

The Ideal of Learning Through Dialogue

Hence the important link in meaning between 'dialectics' and 'dialogue', and the significance of Schon's emphasis that the 'reflective' model of professional work requires a professional-client relationship based on 'conversation':

[The professional worker] attributes to his [sic] clients, as well as to himself, a capacity to mean, know and plan. He recognises that his actions may have different meanings for his client than he intends them to have, and he gives himself the task of discovering what these are. He recognises an obligation to make his own understandings accessible to his client, which means that he needs often to reflect anew on what he knows.... The reflective practitioner tries to discover the limits of his expertise through reflective conversation with the client.

(Schon, 1983: 295-6)

Hence, the professional is 'accountable to' the client (p. 297), and by 'reflect[ing] publicly on his knowledge-in-practice [makes] himself confrontable by his clients' (p. 299). All this, of course, links with the suggestion in chapter one that action research is a process of *mutual learning*, between colleagues, between group members, between practitioners and managers, and between staff and clients. It also serves to emphasise that action research as a learning process for professional workers is closely linked with action research as the involvement of

service-users as full participants in (and frequently initiators of) the inquiry process.

Action Research and Learning Through Practice

This brings us back to the analogy between the relationships of action research and the relationships of professional practice. In education the analogy centres on the curriculum process (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 7; Elliott, 1991, chapter 2). Through the dialogue of inquiry teachers-as-action-researchers reconstruct and develop their understanding of their practice in the same way as pupils and teachers (through the dialogue of the teaching-learning process) reconstruct and develop their knowledge of, say, maths or geography. In nursing, Titchen uses the concept of 'skilled companionship' to describe both the 'helping relationship' between action research facilitator and practitioner and between nurse and patient (Titchen, 2000). More elaborately, Heasman and Adams trace the parallel between the 'helping cycle' of social work and the 'research cycle', neatly showing how both can be described in terms of a similar spiralling sequence: assessment – planning – implementation – evaluation – further assessment (Heasman and Adams, 1998: 341). Munn-Giddings draws the parallel slightly differently, arguing that social care practice and the practice of action research share the *values* of empathy and empowerment and, consequently, a critical stance towards the power relationships in which both are inevitably situated (Munn-Giddings, 1993: 275; p. 284). And Hart's work (already referred to – see chapter 2) makes the general point explicitly: practitioners' strategies for making professional decisions provide a guide to the strategies of reflection required by 'practitioner research' (Hart, 1995).

Summary

To sum up: the impetus towards critical reflection is already implicitly present in the complexities of 'professional' situations, i.e. those in which we struggle for such always elusive values as 'health', 'well-being', 'care', 'justice', 'equity' or 'education'. 'Critique', in other words, does not depend on 'importing' the criteria of a theoretical ideal but on realising our inherent potential for imagining people and situations in different ways, which effective work in these areas (i.e. health, social care, education, etc.) always requires. Thus, action research, from this perspective, is an activity which reinforces those forms of relationship and reflectivity to which professional work, almost by definition, aspires. To be 'critical' is not (simply or necessarily) to be 'oppositional', but to recognise that in order to realise values in each different practice situation we must be ready to *learn* from those whose perspective is different from our own.

7. ACTION RESEARCH AND FEMINIST RESEARCH

Although most feminist research would not explicitly be identified as action research, the two traditions share a number of key themes. For example, in both action research and in feminist research (in its many forms) there is an emphasis on 'experiential knowledge' (i.e. direct, personal knowledge, gained from 'living with' a situation or condition) as the basis for constructing research questions. In both cases there is also always a political purpose for 'knowing', since the pursuit of knowledge is explicitly dedicated to bringing about change and improvement in the lives of participants. Rose argues that 'empathy' and 'caring' need to be seen as inherent aspects of rationality itself (1994, chapter 2), and Hammersley (1992) draws attention to the fact that both feminist research and action research are concerned to develop a 'collaborative' form of inquiry, i.e. 'involving the people studied in the research process' (p. 95). In other words, like action research, feminist research emphasises inquiry undertaken *with* and *by* participants, rather than investigation *of* people, 'from the outside'. Hollingsworth (1994) elaborates the parallel in more detail, describing her own action research work as a 'feminist approach', while using terms which echo the general model of action research. In contrast to 'traditional research', her method, she says, involves: conversation, beginning with observations of one's own experience, clarifying differences, coding data by listening to and using personal theories, emphasising the social and political context, presenting results as tentative, and aiming for personal transformation (p.63).

Interviews, Power, 'Study groups'

Let us, then, consider some of the ways in which feminist writers on research have made specific suggestions which are particularly relevant for action research. An early example is Ann Oakley's work on interviewing (Oakley, 1981). She argues that the traditional approach to interviewing is 'a masculine paradigm' (p.31) with its emphasis on avoiding self-disclosure by the interviewer, avoiding any expression of feelings, and treating interviewees as merely sources of data whose role is simply to answer questions, not to pose their own questions. The social relationship of the conventional social science 'interview', therefore, is an expression of a hierarchical power relationship. For example, if the interviewees are, say, 'housewives' or 'single mothers' or 'rape victims' and the interviewer is male then the interview process echoes and may even subtly reinforce the very societal power relations which are the topic of the interview. For feminist researchers, interviewing women in the 'detached' manner required by conventional social science text books is not only inappropriate but contradictory: a feminist researcher recognises that she *shares* a crucial part of her identity with the interviewees, and that 'personal involvement [rather than impersonal detachment] is the condition under which people come to know each other' (Oakley, 1981: 58). For feminist research, therefore, as for action research, 'interviews' are an opportunity for mutual education, not simply the gathering of objective data. Thus, there is a similarity between the collaborative learning that

occurs in action research and the processes involved in women's self-study or 'consciousness raising' groups (Wadsworth and Hargreaves 1993). Both have a similar model of people gathering to discuss the matters that trouble them, taking responsibility for sharing personal views about these concerns and discussing critically what others have said, undertaking some form of action (personally and collectively) and reviewing these actions to decide on where next to go. All this is very similar to the 'evaluative cycle' of action research, outlined in chapter two.

Feminist research also places a general emphasis on the political and practical purposes of inquiry. Acker et. al. include as one of the 'principles of feminist research', that it should 'contribute to women's liberation through producing knowledge that can be used by women themselves' (Acker et. al., 1991: 137), which echoes the familiar argument that the knowledge created by an action research inquiry should enable all participants to critique and develop the practical work with which they are concerned. As an example, Lather (1988) describes a research project set up in South Carolina, which involved a group of low-income and under-employed women working as researchers on a study of the lives of the low-income women in their community. The project was constructed to ensure that all the women involved in the project (the 'researchers' and the community members) raised their awareness, through discussion with each other, of the sources of their economic circumstances. The project examined the structure of community based leadership and developed a self-help network for low-income women.

The Importance of Personal Experience

The feminist emphasis on personal experience has particularly important consequences for research methods. Griffiths suggests that the single 'thread' underlying the many varieties of feminist thought is that 'they all emphasise the subjective consciousness or the self of an individual [as opposed to] the "objective" "view from nowhere"' (Griffiths, 1994: 74). She goes on to describe her use of autobiography as a key method in her action research with school children, presenting extracts from her research journal which show how it is based on detailed accounts of her personal experience. But, she continues, autobiographical accounts also need to move on to include reflections on issues of power and to generalise from individual experience to collective or group experience – two further key 'connecting threads' in feminist thinking (p. 75). In more general terms, Marshall (1992) argues that researchers need to be aware of the ways in which their own life themes contribute to the purposes and motives with which research is undertaken: an inquiry is not simply a search for 'objective truth', but involves one's emotions and values, one's 'personal and political biography' (Marshall, 1992: 289).

Research from a 'Standpoint'

One important way in which feminist writers on research sum up the various ideas we have been considering is by emphasising that research is always conducted from a particular 'standpoint' (Harding, 1990). What is taken to be the 'objective' methodology of conventional social research is an expression of the particular standpoint (the values, the culture, the priorities and concerns) of male academics and administrators (Harding, 1990: 92). And since the lives of men and women in our society are dramatically different in so many ways, the exclusion of the female standpoint from the conduct of social research is more (even) than a problem of political and cultural exclusion. It also means that research is impoverished and indeed 'distorted' (Harding, 1990: 93) by the absence of crucial forms of experience and thus by the absence of crucial dimensions of understanding. Clearly, this is of particular importance where we are concerned with research into social and health care and education, where so many of the staff and service-users are women but where so many of those who determine policy are men. In this context, the arguments of feminist 'standpoint theory' point in exactly the same direction as those of collaborative action research. Inquiry must begin with the experiences, perspectives, and agendas for inquiry of those whose personal experience is at the centre of the enterprise (e.g. Ungersons policy research on caring, which stems from her own experience as a carer – Ungerson, 1987).

Including the standpoint of those whose standpoint has been ignored is a way of noting the *critical* thrust of both feminist theory and of action research. Dorney and Flood (1997) combine both perspectives in their account of an action research project aimed at 'breaking gender silences'. This work focused on developing strategies to enable female teachers and students to break their silence concerning their experience of anger and to enable male teachers and students to do likewise with the experience of tenderness. Clearly, as this example suggests, including ignored standpoints begins by including the emotional detail of personal experience in the 'data' of research, and by including men as well as women in their project the authors suggest a further general point. Women are not the only group whose voices are diminished by the oppressive qualities of the dominant culture; the same is true of people who are (for example) black, working class, disabled, disfigured, ill, impoverished, old or children. And, indeed, the sexism which directly oppresses women also demeans and impoverishes men. However, 'white middle class males are always tempted to ignore or repress such knowledge because the way is clear for us to regain our voices fairly rapidly simply by joining the chorus of the powerful' (Winter. 1994: 425). The strength of the feminist work on research methods is that it reminds *all of us* that our experience of oppression must not be excluded from our inquiries into social affairs, that this experience too is a source of knowledge, insight and understanding.

Summary

Feminist theories of the 'silences', omissions and distortions in conventional research procedures have deep analogies with many of the central arguments in

favour of action research. The cultural ‘silencing’ of women by the processes of conventional social science (opposed by feminist theory) has parallels with the silencing of care workers and service-users in the formulation of professional knowledge and practice, which is opposed by action research. And both are aspects of the institutionalised politics of knowledge, in which the citizen’s ‘voice’ is silenced by the power of managerial and academic definitions of acceptable research agendas and procedures. It is also important to remember that the potential problems of ‘cultural silencing’ do not immediately disappear just because one is doing action research. Although in theory the action research ideal is of collaboration between ‘equal’ participants, in practice the status hierarchies of the wider society (based on gender, ethnicity, class, age, etc.) always threaten to distort this ideal. Unless we bear this in mind, therefore, and remain continually alert to the danger that certain individuals or groups will not be fully ‘heard’ within the process of the inquiry, the relationships of an action research project, like that of conventional social science, could echo and reinforce societal patterns of dominance and oppression.

8. ACTION RESEARCH AND ANTI-RACIST RESEARCH

The Impossibility of a ‘Value -neutral’ Social Science

One of the most significant dimensions of critical thinking about health and social care policy, research and practice in recent years focuses on the oppressions and injustices created by racism. Like action research, the anti-racist perspective emphasises the need for practical change and a generally *critical* stance towards current practices and the forms and relationships of knowledge and research which reinforce them. Like feminist research, anti-racist research involves a particular emphasis on the politically structured power relationships underpinning our knowledge and our modes of inquiry, and this is an important message for action research, as indicated in this final section.

Let us begin by noting some anti-racist criticisms of the methods of conventional social inquiry and comparing them with the arguments we have presented in favour of action research. An early example is Joyce Ladner’s book *The Death of White Sociology* (1973). Ladner describes the way in which conventional social science researchers determine the topics and methods of inquiry and impose them on the ‘subjects’ of their inquiry as a relationship of ‘oppression’, analogous to the oppression by colonialists of a ‘subject’ people. (Ladner, 1973: 419). And Gorman (1999) corroborates the point: ‘researching others’ is ‘a form of oppression among stigmatised groups’ (p. 178). For example: white sociologists present negative interpretations and explanations of black family life in terms of their assumptions and political fears that such ‘inadequate’ families constitute a potential threat to social order (Billingsley, 1973). More recently, Hugman also notes the use of white norms and black deviations as a framework for interpreting differences in styles of parenting (Hugman, 1991: 167), and Billingsley’s general

argument is corroborated by Troyna (1998). Troyna confesses that that the conceptual scheme he had used (in an earlier piece of work) to classify the 'lifestyles' of Afro-Caribbean teenage boys unwittingly interpreted their lives in terms of his own (white) assumption of a *unified* underlying 'mainstream' culture and how far the boys' lifestyles did or did not pose a 'threat' to this unity (Troyna, 1998: 104).

The anti-racist research tradition thus builds on Gouldner's (1962) argument that the notion of a politically neutral, 'value-free' social science is a 'myth' (Gouldner, 1962, quoted by Ladner, p. 421): there are always political interests and values behind the selection of topics, methods and conceptual schemes (Ladner, 1973: 419 – 422). Blair (1998), writing on racism and research methods in the context of education, also rejects the claims of social science to political neutrality. Ladner herself concludes that, since her *interest* is in researching people with whose problems she identifies, her research must therefore include advocacy and commitment to practical change on their behalf: mere observation from a position of detachment would mean implicitly accepting existing patterns of disadvantage (p. 422). Ladner's 'colonial' analogy thus provides a precise historical and political perspective on what we have written so far on action research's desire to involve participants in practical change, on their own behalf, through 'participatory', co-operative, 'emancipatory' forms of inquiry. Dalal (1997) gives an interesting psycho-analytic explanation as to why researchers might seek to claim 'neutrality': when we make formal interpretations of social events (e.g. when we speak as 'researchers' or 'analysts') we adopt an identity in which we feel we can speak with 'authority'. And in order to do so, we unconsciously split off and project onto others all those aspects of our own selves that we wish to deny.

Social Research and Oppressed Identities

The question of identity is clearly central in all research: conventional, 'positivist' researchers wish to establish a *different* identity from their 'subjects' (an identity of detached authority), whereas in feminist and anti-racist research and also in action research, the emphasis is on acknowledging or creating a *shared* identity (based on common experience). Identity, of course, is a complex issue. Ethnic categories in themselves are often too broad to be helpful and indeed often reproduce the cultural stereotyping at the heart of racism (Ahmad and Sheldon, 1993), and other dimensions of identity such as gender, age, class and even cultural 'style' can in particular circumstances be equally significant (Mirza, 1998; Troyna, 1998).

However, within a research process the identities of those involved are important because they affect relationships, communication and interpretations, and the anti-racist research perspective serves as a particularly dramatic reminder that for many people in many social contexts their identity leads to a real experience of oppression. Black patients are regularly subjected to racial harassment in

healthcare organisations (National Health Executive[UK], 1998: 3), their 'problems' are exacerbated and even actually created by the racist context of service delivery (Hugman, 1991: 165), and black staff regularly experience discrimination and abuse on the part of (white) managers, colleagues and patients (Healy, 1995). Attempts to set up collaborative relationships between white and black workers are often fraught with resentment and disrespect (Jackson et. al., 1999) and attempts to address such matters are often publicly ridiculed as a naïve and unrealistic search for 'political correctness' (Singh, 1994).

The main lesson from anti-racist research is not, however, simply its emphasis on how we perceive and manage identity (sameness and difference) during the process of inquiry, but its recognition that there are powerful *conflicts* at work within a culturally diverse and politically unequal society, and that not all participants may wish to acknowledge this. The anti-racist' perspective emphasises not simply that differences in culture must be valued and appreciated ('multi-culturalism' – Gerrish et. al., 1996:15) but that the relationships between different cultures are rooted in, and still influenced by, longstanding historical patterns of oppression. The anti-racist emphasis on the long history of colonial exploitation (Stevenson, 1992; Chomsky, 1993) serves as reminder (in the context of action research) of other deep-rooted and ancient patterns of oppression – of women, of the poor, of people who are homeless and people who have mental illness, physical disability, or learning difficulties, etc. The anti-racist perspective reminds action researchers that the attempt to establish patterns of equality and collaboration in order to resolve conflicts of interest and perspective will not be easy, will probably encounter resistance, and requires a broad awareness of deep-seated political divisions. In this context, Neil Thompson's (1993) 'PCS' (Personal / Cultural / Structural) model of 'anti-discriminatory' practice is helpful. Working within an action research project will require us to understand the links between our Personal Practices and Prejudices, the Cultural Consensus within which we locate ourselves and to which we tend to Conform, and the Structure of Socio-political divisions and the Social forces of power in which we are embedded. (Thompson, 1993: 19-20).

Empowerment: Processes, Relationships and Communication

So how does the anti-racist perspective relate to action research principles concerning the *relationships* of research and practice development? First of all, the important emphasis is not on simply 'acquiring knowledge about' different cultures but about careful and empathetic *listening*. Hugman (1991) observes that *power* is a dimension both of care and of control, so that the caring professions always have a complex task in seeking to be 'democratic'. More precisely, he argues, the experience of 'autonomy', implicit in a democratic model of professionalism, must not be just an experience for professionals themselves but for professionals and service-users working in partnership together (Hugman, 1991: 216-7). Ahmad (1990) gives an example of such a partnership relationship emphasising that it must lead to 'empowerment' on the part of both the (black)

client and the (white) professional worker involved (pp. 36-42). Ahmad presents the interaction as a process in which each learns from the other, with the social worker recognising the limitations of her knowledge, the client recognising the pain and disappointment of the social worker faced with criticism, and both parties accepting responsibility for developing good practice. Similarly, Turney (1997) argues that non-oppressive interpretations of situations can only emerge through dialogue between those involved ('dialogic understanding'), in which each recognises that they do not know about important aspects of the situation and therefore need to 'allow for the possible truth of other views' (Turney, 1997:118). This model of understanding based in open and critical dialogue is, of course, implicit in much writing on action research, as we have seen (e.g. Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 31). But the anti-racist perspective warns action researchers against excessive optimism: cultural and political divisions in the situations with which we are concerned mean that 'dialogue' risks being undermined by deep-seated defences (Cooper, 1997).

Gerrish et. al. (1996) present the problem in terms of 'inter-cultural communication' and the skills and qualities it requires (pp. 24-32). The starting point must be 'reflexive honesty' and self-understanding concerning one's own sense of ethnic identity (p.20) and a general recognition that our communications are indeed attempts to *cross* cultural boundaries (rather than familiar moves within a single culture). We all therefore need to adopt the cautious, tentative, analytical stance of 'the stranger' (Gerrish et. al. 1996: 24) – i.e. treating our current knowledge concerning the situation as *probably* inadequate and therefore in need of continuous checking and revision (Schutz, 1964). This suggestion echoes the argument that for action research 'reflexivity' is a key principle: we need to be ready to see our own current interpretations of events (and our role in them) as data-to-be-analysed (Winter, 1989: 38 – 46; 1996: 18-20; section 6 above). It is also a reminder that 'empowerment' within the research process is not always or simply a matter of being able to give direct voice to previously 'silenced' spontaneous thoughts and feelings (see section 7): our spontaneous interpretations are influenced by historical and political pressures and therefore need to be subjected to *critical* analysis (see section 6).

Summary

The antiracist perspective can thus be seen as reinforcing the central action research themes of empowerment and collaboration, and as contributing to a model of action research an emphasis on relationships based on self-questioning as well as questioning others. But it also suggests the scope of the difficulties we are likely to encounter, both at a personal and a wider political level, through its emphasis that particular interactions within an enquiry are always structured by historical, political and cultural forces.

CONCLUSION

Although each of the sections above describes either a different research context or a different aspect of action research, it is clear that, together, they present a number of common themes, values and principles. In each case there is an emphasis on the value of experiential knowledge (of practitioners and service-users) and, in particular on the knowledge created through the experience of being 'marginalised' in some way, either within the social and political structures of society or within an organisation. Equally, there is an emphasis on developing this knowledge in collaboration with others. Consequently, there is as much emphasis on the process of the research as on its final outcomes; because it is within the process of the research that both the learning and the practical change occur. Action research is just as much about social relations as about the formulation of 'new knowledge'.

Some of the sections explicitly highlight and address the power relations within which research is conceived and conducted, and others do so more implicitly. But in all cases they bring our attention to the wider structural relations that impact at a local level within a particular study. Thus, there is also a general emphasis on the importance of critical personal reflection, on clarifying one's own position in relation to the study – both one's position in the social hierarchies of status, gender and race and in terms of one's personal value commitments. *All* the social contexts of action research are structured by hierarchies of some sort, and the attempt to create new forms of understanding and practice within such contexts therefore involves action researchers in a project of both personal and political development.