

# *A Handbook for Action Research in Health and Social Care*

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## **PART FOUR: ACTION RESEARCH AS A FORM OF SOCIAL INQUIRY: A 'THEORETICAL' JUSTIFICATION**

**(Action Research, Relativism, and Critical Realism)**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Action research is controversial. At a common sense level, we know perfectly well that different forms of knowledge are expected and recognised as valid in different social situations. In some contexts (e.g. making policy decisions within large organisations) those responsible generally expect quantitative data drawn from questionnaire surveys of large population samples; in other contexts (e.g. conveying our opinions and beliefs to friends and colleagues) we expect the testimony of personal experience. However, we live in a society where *politically influential* knowledge conventionally takes the form of statistically or theoretically based generalisations, established by academic or professional experts and promoted through organisational power hierarchies. In contrast, as we have seen, action research tries to create *non-hierarchical* relationships as a key aspect of the inquiry process. And action research reports tend to present knowledge in the form of narratives of personal experience, giving a voice to those who are (relatively at least) culturally and politically silenced by the conventional structures of social inquiry. Thus, action research emphasises the importance of practitioners' knowledge (vis-a-vis academics), service-users' knowledge (vis-a-vis professionals), and community members' knowledge (vis-a-vis government officials). And it prides itself on producing specific practical changes and 'empowerment effects', at least as much as on any generalised 'findings'.

These contrasts between action research and conventional social inquiry create real and practical problems for action research. Action research reports risk being marginalised, or even rejected, by senior managers or academics or officials in charge of allocating research funds, as merely partisan or sentimentally idealistic, as merely voices of dissent or exercises in raising morale, as simply *lacking* the validity and reliability of 'proper research'. Such anxieties on the part of those with political and professional influence have to be taken seriously, not least because of action research's own practical responsibilities. 'Good practice' in action research is about *justifiable* decision-making in situations directly involving human well-being.

Action research projects, therefore, if they are to be influential, must seem convincing and professionally ‘sound’, and consequently they must be clearly seen to be justifiable as expressions of our *best current understanding* of the nature and processes of inquiry. Various justifications of action research have already been presented in chapter two: as an ideal of reflective practice, and as a ‘culture of inquiry’ in the workplace. But chapter two focused on the way in which action research is *different* from conventional forms of social inquiry.

In contrast, the purpose of this final chapter is to show that action research is not a way of ‘ignoring the challenges’ of conventional social inquiry but, on the contrary, a way of addressing real philosophical difficulties, which are widely recognised as being inherent in the task of undertaking *any* form of social inquiry – large scale surveys, theoretical analyses, randomised control trials or local development projects. Thus, we return briefly once again to the philosophical basis for action research, in order to demonstrate that the characteristic features of action research presented so far can be justified in terms of the general theoretical considerations underlying social inquiry in general. The argument focuses first on the issue of relativism and then on the concept of ‘critical realism’.

## **ACTION RESEARCH AND RELATIVISM**

Let us start by articulating a general criticism of action research, as it might be seen by a sceptical senior manager or fund-holder, or indeed by anyone conscious of the worries outlined above.

Action research seems to accept that the ‘validity’ of its outcomes resides in the formulation of *consensus* among a particular group of participating stakeholders (see, for example, chapter two, on ‘qualitative research’; chapter three, section five). Similarly, action research seems to accept that its findings are limited by *what can be effectively implemented in a specific context* (see for example, chapter two, on ‘organisational politics’). But, surely, this is to admit that the value and the validity of an action research project may be entirely limited to the specific context in which it is undertaken. Moreover, some contexts may be ‘backward’: what can be implemented may be distorted by oppressive power relations, and participants may form a consensus around an understanding which is not properly informed by recent ‘advances’ in the published research literature.

How might we, as action researchers, counter such criticisms? Our first response might be, indeed, to emphasise the value of ‘local’ advances in practice, no matter how limited, and to stress that action research in no way condones not being ‘up-to-date’ in one’s professional field of knowledge.

More generally, we might also point out that notions such as ‘backward’ and ‘up-to-date’ states of knowledge are theoretically problematic. Knowledge in the social sciences, one might say, (e.g. theories concerning ethnic identity, models of nursing care, policies concerning child protection) does not simply ‘advance’: it *changes* along with social and political *values* and even ‘climates of opinion’. A substantial body of currently influential philosophy, therefore, emphasises that human knowledge is always situated within, and thus limited by, the discourse of a particular culture and that there is no single ‘universal’ language which can adjudicate between the discourses of differing groups (Wittgenstein 1968). Consequently (it is argued) philosophical inquiry can never be more than a ‘conversation’ motivated by the ‘hope’ for mutual understanding and dependent on the recognition of inevitable differences between individuals and between groups (Rorty, 1979: 315-9). ‘Truth’ can have no universal foundation, no ‘common ground’ (Rorty, *ibid.*).

Two aspects of this philosophical emphasis – that all truth is culturally relative – seem to provide strong theoretical grounds for the context-bound, action-oriented work of action research (see Stringer, 1996: 151-6). The first is frequently summed up in the ‘postmodernist’ doctrine that there is no longer a single ‘Grand Narrative’ of the advancement of Truth, but only ‘little narratives’, i.e. ‘local determinism’ (Lyotard, 1984: 60, xxiv). The second is the ‘pragmatist’ tradition, which stresses *practically effective* knowledge and inquiry as a *communal* enterprise (Peirce, 1992: 52-5, 131).

An important element in both postmodernist and pragmatist arguments is the rejection of a ‘correspondence’ theory of truth. Statements made in a particular language cannot be claimed to be true because they ‘correspond to’ an objective reality external to the language, since we have no way of referring to such a reality except through the language itself; so such claims are circular. Instead, it is argued, the truth of each statement in a language depends on its ‘coherence’ with other statements (Ramberg, 1989: 44; Murphy, 1990: 108, 116). In the case of statements such as, ‘There is a flower in the garden’ the significance of this theoretical point is fairly trivial. But in the case of statements like, ‘Adopted children need to maintain contact with their birth parents’, rejecting the correspondence theory of truth raises crucial practical questions. Does it imply that the validity of such statements can never be established, by theoretical clarification and empirical evidence? Are such statements culturally circumscribed as merely ‘what some people currently believe’? Can there never be any firm foundations for a *general* policy or for guidance protocols requiring us to act in a particular way?

There are two rather different responses to this crucial question. On the one hand, we might easily agree that scientific findings are never ‘proved’ but are always ‘so-far-not-refuted’ in the on-going ‘conversation’ of inquiry within a scientific community (Popper, 1959; 1963). The current state of our knowledge is therefore always open to question as part of an always incomplete (*communal*) narrative of

inquiry, and the presentation of knowledge must therefore always include the (*individual*) narrative of its production (its 'method'), to enable others to continue the process of questioning, refinement or rejection. From this point of view the difference between an action research report and the report of a conventional piece of scientific inquiry is but a shift in emphasis.

Alternatively, we might go further, and argue that 'hypotheses' can never be properly refuted, since the facts required for refutation of an experimental hypothesis do not exist separately in the world of our experience; they are always conceptualised in advance and 'produced' by the experimental conditions themselves (Habermas, 1974, p.201). Once this is admitted, the way is clear for the argument that the knowledge created by scientific method does not simply draw on the *rationality* of scientific method itself but also on the *political power* of scientific and professional institutions (Lyotard, 1984: 45-7). The creation of knowledge, is therefore always influenced by political, practical *motives*, including solidarity within a professional culture, for example (Kuhn, 1962: 151-2) and by value judgements which, in a secular and culturally divided society, are always open to dispute.

But although this line of argument – that truth is entirely relative – may be presented as a form of philosophical 'rigour', many would say that it is both tendentious and politically dangerous: it threatens 'a wholesale levelling of value distinctions between truth and falsehood [and] a generalised scepticism with regard to issues of truth and justice' (Norris, 1996: ix-x). In particular, a relativist conception of social inquiry does not address the practical problems of those who are responsible for making and justifying specific decisions in which the well-being of human beings is at stake.

To agree that our knowledge is incomplete, socially constructed and fallible does not mean that we can never have rational empirical grounds for making judgements that have a genuine purchase on the reality we experience (Bhaskar, 1989: 24). Indeed, human discourse is founded on the assumption that we can discriminate between well-founded and less well-founded judgements concerning reality. Otherwise, most human interactions would be unintelligible, not only decisions about when it is safe to cross a road but also philosophical arguments in favour of relativism, which always include the selection of 'supporting evidence' (Bridges, 1999). And if truth is wholly relative, then inquiry can play no part in helping us to contest injustice, lies and oppression (see Norris, 1996: 61-5).

This means that, for action research at least (with its concern for the improvement of human well-being), the debate about the validity of the outcomes of social inquiry needs to be moved away from a simple opposition between 'absolute, objective truth' and total relativism, in which each local 'reality' has its own 'subjective' or culturally determined truth criteria. Instead, we might, for example, follow Hilary Putnam and start by accepting that 'empirically established' general statements about the world we experience are always only true 'under normal

conditions' (Putnam, 1987: 24). We can then move on to acknowledge that agreeing a description of the 'normal conditions' under which 'water boils at 100 degrees centigrade' involves a different (and rather simpler) process from agreeing the normal conditions under which 'chemotherapy successfully eradicates cancer' or 'adopted children need contact with their birth parents'. Thus, instead of simply using a dichotomy between statements which are 'objective' and those which are 'culturally relative', we can redefine the issue in terms of a 'continuum' (Putnam: 27-32) on which different types of statements can be placed at different points. In this way we can differentiate statements, according to what sort of process is needed to create a consensus as to the conditions needed to verify them.

From this perspective, the value and purpose of the 'local narratives' of action research are not dependent on the theory that there are multiple realities and that truth is contextually relative. Indeed, the relativist argument leaves action research dangerously exposed to the sort criticisms previously indicated. Action research inquiries are closely bound up with criteria for 'good practice', and this obviously entails a strong link between the rationale for the inquiry process and 'a reality' that is fully (officially and intensively) *shared* between practitioners, service-users and accountable managers at local and national level. (Even though specific values and priorities may be contested.) Instead of claiming, therefore, that action research can (or should or does) simply operate with truth criteria that are entirely local, we might suggest that action research reports describe the *local process* (of challenge and negotiation) whereby eventual agreement is reached concerning the *generally shared truth criteria* implicit in their various conclusions and outcomes. This would certainly be one way of describing most of the action research projects presented in this book.

In the light of the problems of relativism outlined above, the rest of this chapter tries to establish a link between the principles and procedures of action research and a sophisticated '*realist*' model of social inquiry. Such a model of inquiry needs to avoid the crude assumptions of positivism, i.e. that the methods of social inquiry can achieve some form absolute objectivity for its results (see chapter two). But it also needs to accept that social action always presupposes the existence of an external reality which provides a final constraint upon (and a source of criteria for) interpretation. To keep the argument brief and focused, it concentrates mainly on the example of Roy Bhaskar's influential work on 'critical realism'. (Bhaskar's work is a philosophical analysis of the basis for *all* scientific inquiry, including the natural sciences, but the following summary focuses on his account of the theoretical foundations of *social science*.)

## **CRITICAL REALISM**

### **Realism and the Limits of Human Knowledge**

According to Bhaskar, our *experiences* are not to be equated with objective reality (the doctrine of ‘empiricism’), because our *experiences* are always structured by our concepts. But this does not mean that our concepts are the only reality to which we have access (the doctrine of ‘idealism’): we do not simply *construct* our reality (Bhaskar, 1986: 102). In contrast to both of these, the doctrine of ‘realism’ asserts that the existence of an objective reality is ‘implied’ in all our actions (p.33) and that we must *assume* the existence of an objective reality insofar as our knowledge makes any claims concerning cause and effect relationships (p.102). ‘For realism, it is the nature of the world that determines its cognitive possibilities for us’ (ibid.). In other words, although we are free to conceptualise many different interpretations of the world, events and structures independent of our concepts can show us that some of our interpretations were wrong!

But critical realism asserts that while we have no option but to assume the existence of an objective reality, our knowledge of it is destined to be forever ‘fallible’ (Collier, 1994: 16, 50) for two main reasons.

Firstly, our inquiries can never be undertaken from an independent standpoint (Bhaskar, 1986: 160). There are no ‘foundations of knowledge’, no pure data: we experience the world in terms of the ‘stories’ we tell about it – we are members of ‘a story-telling species’, and we ‘produce’ our experience in the form of our narratives and concepts (ibid.). Inquiry, therefore, must be seen as an ongoing and never completed process of practical *work* (1989: 22) – of checking our narratives and concepts against events, using whatever cognitive resources (theories, evidence) we may happen to have available at a given point in history (1986: 107-8; 1989: 120). Thus, in some respects, any existing state of knowledge may be seen as an historical ‘accident’ (1986: 102). We have to accept that social inquiry is always situated within, and part of, the historical development of the social world it seeks to explain. It is therefore necessarily ‘self-reflexive’ (1989: 24): it will always need to explain *itself* and to recognise explicitly its limits. In other words, it must give up any claim to have ‘permanent, neutral, a-historical ... foundations’ (1989: 179) and recognise that it is inherently value-laden (1986: 169).

Secondly, our knowledge of objective reality is limited because the phenomena of real world experience constitute an ‘open’ set of variables, unlike the ‘closed’ systems of experiments; the experimental conditions from which ‘laws’ are derived are not found in naturally occurring situations (Bhaskar, 1989: 148-9). For any given event, therefore, there are always many ‘causes’ (1986: 107) and experiments never produce results which are only consistent with a single interpretation (1986: 36). Hence, *finally decisive* tests of our hypotheses are not possible (1989: 185). In other words, conventional social science can only *explain* (1986: 107); it can help us decide between alternatives (1989: 186) but it cannot tell us what to do for the best in a particular situation (1986: 187).

## **Realism, Transformation, Critique**

But although critical realism emphasises the limitations of social science, it also emphasises its practical function. The work of inquiry, it is argued, should attempt to identify the objective structures which generate the form of the events we subjectively experience, in order to *change* the social world we inhabit (Bhaskar, 1989: 2). This is the reason why social researchers must keep themselves ‘in touch with’ the external world, seeing themselves not (as is sometimes suggested) as passive observers but as engaged in an active process of ‘work’, i.e. as engaged in a ‘causal exchange with nature’ (p.22).

For critical realism, therefore, social inquiry is, like any other form of social action, necessarily a ‘transformative’ process (1989: 3-4). Each of us finds ourselves involved in social relationships and sets of ideas which were in existence before our involvement, but these pre-existent structures (patterns of relationships, modes of thinking, etc.) never wholly constrain us. All human activity and thinking has an interpretive, creative dimension, so that the structures we (as it were) ‘inherit’ are always, to some extent, *transformed* through our own activity (p.173-4). In this sense, social inquiry must be seen as always ‘intrinsically critical and ... evaluative’ (1986: 183) of existing ‘vocabularies and social practices’ (1989: 175).

## **Dialectics, Emancipation**

Evaluation and critique, of course, never yield a final truth, only historically situated conjectures, which in turn require further practical work of evaluation and critique, in a continuous ‘dialectic’ (1989: 20). Dialectics is a key aspect of critical realism. It is both a model of social reality and a model of inquiry. It starts from the recognition that our current understandings are determined by, among other things, the social world we inhabit, but it goes on to identify the specific *freedom* inherent in the form of our understanding (Bhaskar, 1993: 378), which enables us to engage in transforming both the world and our understanding.

The basic principles of dialectics are:

- a) that societies (and social relationships) consist of opposing forces;
- b) that social change is created by the practical struggle between these opposing forces;
- c) that adequate understanding must involve a grasp of these contradictions and the processes of social change through which they are temporarily resolved and continuously transformed;
- d) that adequate understanding thus includes both critique and causal explanation of social events, in order to establish the possibilities and limits of change;
- e) that the growth of knowledge is a self-emancipatory process based on practical action.

(Bhaskar, 1989: 124-5).

The need for an ‘emancipatory’ dynamic at the heart of the social inquiry process has its origin in the obvious point that we frequently do not fully understand the events in which we are caught up. Our actions frequently have unintended consequences, because they are affected by motives, tacit skills or external conditions of which we are unaware (1989: 4). Critical realism asserts that the fundamental purpose of social inquiry is to explain the forces at work within a situation by seeing them in terms of ‘structures’ underlying immediate experiences (1989: 2). But the point of such ‘explanation’ is so that we can better understand how to change the situation in such a way that it is no longer determined by forces we experience as unjust or oppressive but by those we accept or desire (p.178). The critical realist model of social inquiry thus aims to enhance social justice and human ‘autonomy’, by enabling participants to ‘see themselves under a new description which they have helped to create’ (ibid.).

In this way, social science is *not* value neutral. Whereas the positivist model of social science *can* be used as an instrument for political domination, for critical realism, social science must always be conceived as a means for increasing the autonomy of human action (Bhaskar, 1986: 182). For Bhaskar, the *values* of justice and equality are implicit in our relationships and transactions, just as the values of truth and rationality are implicit in our use of language (Bhaskar, 1989: 114). (Liars make the assumption that others mean what they say and have good grounds for their assertions, and oppressors anticipate respect from their colleagues and care from their doctors.)

### **‘Ideology’ and ‘Critique’**

Any account of a *critical* model of social inquiry, through which we ‘emancipate’ ourselves from politically powerful ideas that serve the interests of others, needs a theory of ‘ideology’, i.e. of how ideas are related to social interests (Bhaskar, 1986: 242-3; McLellan, 1995: 83). This is particularly important if we are to clarify the relationship between the freedom of thought and the constraints within which it always operates, since it is within this relationship that we need to explain the crucial processes of ‘reflexive’ analysis, critique and evaluation.

Let us begin with the notion of ‘critique’. This does not simply mean being ‘critical’ in the sense of stating that one disagrees with something, or putting an opposite point of view. Rather it means taking a set of ideas and *questioning* them, making them ‘problematic’ by subjecting them to ‘analysis’. The concept of ideology explains why this is necessary, why it is difficult, and how it is possible.

In one sense ‘ideo-logy’ means the science of ideas, discourse about ideas (McLellan, 1995: 5). As an extension of this, the term is usually used to suggest that our ideas do not come from nowhere, they are not ‘independent’, but that they have causes and motives. In other words, the concept of ideology gives us our sense of cultural *identity*, and it also suggests that it will be difficult for us to *change* our thinking, because it is powerfully influenced by forces beyond our



direct control. It therefore also suggests that our ideas (including our beliefs, our concerns and the way we interpret events) cannot be taken ‘at face value’, that they need to be *examined*, as interesting ‘data’. But how can we do this? If our ideas have causes and motives and are part of our sense of identity, how can we stand ‘outside’ them in order to subject them to examination (‘critique’)?

Ricoeur (1981) argues that the term ‘ideology’ refers to the way in which ideas and beliefs can be understood as part of the ‘culture’ of a *social group*, i.e. as the way in which the members of different groups gain their sense of *identity* through seeing the world from a particular perspective (p. 225). Thus, there are political ideologies, religious ideologies, racial ideologies, class ideologies, gender ideologies and ideologies of age groups (e.g. parents, teen-agers, pensioners). There are also managerial ideologies, professional staff ideologies and service-user ideologies. Indeed, *any* clearly identified and organised social role or activity will have its supporting ideology, e.g. academic research, cookery, gardening, football, mountaineering, rambling, community activism, slimming, etc!

However, the important point about Ricoeur’s argument is that each of us belongs to a variety of different groups, so our ideas, beliefs and concerns are influenced from several directions at once. In other words, our identity is complex and ‘multiple’. (We may be a political Conservative *and* a Buddhist *and* a manager *and* a gardener *and* a parent *and* middle class *and* a keen mountaineer.) This in turn, means that our ‘ideology’ is not a single force which traps our thinking within a narrow set of constraints but a rather loose structure, containing tensions, gaps and contradictions. It is not like an enclosing prison wall, but an entangling mesh, with holes in it, so that it does not, in the end prevent our ‘critical self’ from examining the ‘components’ of our ideology and *posing questions*, i.e. conducting a ‘reflexive critique’ of our ideologies – and thus obtaining, for a moment, some notion of a ‘reality’ that lies ‘behind’ them.

The ‘critical self’ here can refer not simply to an individual seeking to clarify her or his own self-understanding. It also describes the ‘collective self’ of a community of researchers as they seek to clarify the basis for their critical, evaluative interpretation of a social situation in relation to the various ideological / political forces tending to influence their interpretation in various and often contradictory ways.

But if we can, in principle, achieve this ‘critical’ understanding of our social ‘reality’, as critical realism claims, what are the processes involved? One of the methods we have available is, precisely, action research, which brings us to our concluding section.

## **ACTION RESEARCH AND CRITICAL REALISM**

The argument of this section is that action research is a way of attempting to realise in practice the theoretical ideal of social inquiry proposed by critical realism. In many respects, there is nothing very surprising about critical realism: it can be seen simply as an attempt to avoid the naïve claims of positivism and the exaggeratedly destructive doubts of relativism in order to synthesise a ‘middle path’ for human knowledge, combining both scepticism and hope. Furthermore, although critical realism is a model for inquiry in general, it also seems to be generally compatible with the values and processes of action research. Indeed, as indicated below, in some respects the model of action research described in the early chapters of this book offers a way of addressing certain aspects of critical realism which remain highly problematic within the framework of conventional ‘academic’ social science. In the following analysis, each paragraph begins with a restatement of one or two key elements of critical realism, from the account in the previous section. It then draws a parallel with corresponding aspects (ideals, values, procedures) of action research, with key phrases, drawn from the presentation of action research in chapters two and three, presented in italics.

1. Critical realism asserts that the complexity of social situations is such that no general laws can prescribe action for particular instances. Hence the value of – indeed: the necessity for – the *contextually specific* inquiries of action research, as *narratives* of our attempts to *interpret the here-and-now implications* of bodies of generalised knowledge.
2. Critical realism asserts that social inquiry is always a part of the social world it describes. (Hence the action research principle of *reflexivity*, which emphasises that the *process* of the research is always also a topic for inquiry.) It therefore follows that social inquiry does not have an external ‘platform’ from which researchers can conduct ‘objective’ observations of ‘those-being-researched’. Hence the significance of the action research ideal of research as a *participatory, collaborative* process, in which participants are encouraged to take a *creative* part in *negotiating* the focus and the conceptual framework for interpreting data.
3. Critical realism asserts that any current state of knowledge is fallible, incomplete and influenced by historical factors such as the ideologies, values and interests of particular groups. Hence the important emphasis, within action research, that ‘analysis’ (of data, events, situations) is always *a mutual process of critical, evaluative reflection*.
4. Critical realism asserts that the purpose of social inquiry is to understand situations in such a way that we are able to bring about *change*. This, of course, is explicitly one of the central, defining principles of action research.
5. Critical realism asserts that social activity does not simply reproduce situations; it transforms them: there is always a ‘space of freedom’ between, on the one hand, initial conditions and contextual constraints and, on the other hand, what we actually, finally do. This is what makes it realistic to propose that

inquiry *can* bring about change (point 4). If, in principle, structures of power do not wholly or finally determine individual action, there are theoretical grounds for optimism on the part of action research participants in their pursuit of *change in particular contexts*.

**6.** Critical realism asserts that inquiry is a process of ‘work’; our understanding develops through a continuous process of ‘causal exchange’ with objective reality. This is the ‘dialectic’ whereby knowledge develops through an interaction between creative conjecture and the ‘test’ of experience. For academic social science this is problematic: its methods (surveys, controlled experiments, ethnographic observation, etc.) always interpose a pre-defined conceptual framework between any hypothesis and the experiential world in which (supposedly) it is tested, so that the ‘reality’ of any ‘findings’ is always in question. For action research, however, the dialectic between conceptualisation and reality is considerably clearer. In seeking *practical change* action research necessarily places a primary focus on the ‘real world’ of participants’ experience. Action research includes the *experiential realities* of professional practices, clients’ situations, institutional structures and social relationships, as essential elements of the *dialectic between action and reflection* which constitutes the inquiry process.

**7.** Critical realism asserts that social inquiry seeks to identify objective ‘structures’ and ‘forces’ underlying subjective experiences. For academic social science this is problematic, because researchers’ conceptual frameworks for interpreting a situation are not necessarily derived from the experiences of those involved in the situation-to-be-interpreted. For action research, however, the objective structures and forces at work in the situation are identified as the basic shape of the inquiry, i.e. as the set of ‘*stakeholders*’ who need to be involved as *participants in the research*. The form of an action research inquiry is thus directly derived from the ‘objective structure’ of the situation in which it takes place, since it consists of *dialogue and negotiation between the potentially conflicting forces which make up the situation*, as an attempt to identify and resolve contradictions among a variety of interest groups, both at the level of theory (‘ideology’) and practice.

**8.** Critical realism asserts that social inquiry is not value-neutral; it must assume and seek to enhance the values of justice, rationality and truth. Its purpose is to increase the autonomy of citizens, to enable them to re-describe their experiences in terms which they themselves have helped to create, and to re-recreate it in the form of a collectively desired state of affairs. For academic social science such values normally remain a set of criteria for evaluating the purpose and the impact of an inquiry. Action research, however, seeks also to *embody these values in its processes*, i.e. in the attempt (never fully successful, of course) to carry out inquiry through suspending hierarchical role relationships in favour of a *free and collaborative interchange of critical analysis among all interested parties*.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis presented here has attempted to reply to the criticism that action research is not ‘proper research’, that action research simply *lacks* the formal characteristics that give other types of research their theoretical authority.

In reply to such criticisms, it is important to compare action research not with the naïve claims of positivism but with a sophisticated account of the philosophical basis of social inquiry, one which recognises, on the one hand, its fallibility and inconclusiveness and, at the same time, its responsibility to contribute to human well-being in a real world of practical action.

And when such a comparison is undertaken, the various characteristics of action research emerge as having a clear theoretical basis. Action research (with its narratives of reflexive critical evaluations of current practices and theories, describing collaborative negotiations among stakeholders with differing interests in order to agree and implement practical changes) may not be the only way of contributing to the progress of human knowledge and certainly not the easiest. But, speaking philosophically as well as practically, it has much to recommend it. In other words, as the argument presented above has tried to suggest, it represents a coherent response to theoretical issues which have been identified, in contemporary philosophy, as raising important questions of purpose, methodology and validity for social inquiry in general.