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Conny Almekinders, Leni Beukema, Coyan Tromp  
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## BOOKS

### BEN BOOG

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This book focuses specifically on participatory research, and as such, it is intended to enhance the action repertoire of practitioners or researched parties. That is action research *pur sang*. As I have already remarked elsewhere (Boog, 2008), participation is the heart and hands of action research but is “cooperation with different stakeholders in the field” something else? Almekinders *et al.* write that:

[...] the desire to bring about social change and innovation is not the exclusive domain of action researchers. More and more we see researchers struggling with the question of implementation of

scientific knowledge in the field of study and its consequences for cooperation with different stakeholders, as for instance in agricultural science or development studies. In this way research and action are becoming increasingly linked. (p. 15–16)

The authors of this book are very conscious of this. They state on page 16 that the ideal of action research is the active participation of those being researched. The objects of the research could act as co-researchers, but the following chapters show that this is difficult. However, the authors postulate a functional difference between the scientist on the one hand and the non-scientist on the other.

These two groups have different “expertise” and the ideal of including the researched as co-researchers is discarded as “utopian” in advance, “sawing through” the upper rungs of the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969). Their action research thus loses its imaginative critical power.

Do the authors have a kind of phobia of participation, or have they internalized the excommunication of action research by the representatives of dominating social scientists? I would certainly not imagine that this is the case. “Participation” is present throughout this book, although it is given different interpretations and is also viewed as a problem. Action research is based on direct democratic or “cultural” democratic ethics. Cultural democracy (Touraine, Dewey) provides it with a foundation that is open to Western and non-Western societies. Action research has a participatory epistemology and thus a participatory methodology. This is a vision shared by many other important advocates and practitioners of action research methodology, such as Peter Reason – in many recent publications – and Orlando Fals Borda (2006). I will return to the latter work, because it is used to criticize one of my own arguments (Boog, 2003) by editor Leni Beukema in the introduction and “taking stances” of her chapter (Chapter 11). By talking about “research in action”, the barb was removed from the hook of critical-emancipatory or “participatory” action research. Just as the Randomized Controlled

Trial is the ideal type of empirical-analytical research, the equal dialogue between professional researchers and the researched party is the ideal type of action research, where professional researchers ensure that the researched party feels confident to share their experiences.

So, in this review, I will use the concepts of “action research” and “participation” as yardsticks “for (the chapters of) this book”. Using such a yardstick makes it easier to assess a book with so many different chapters and authors, even though these chapters have the common central purpose of outlining action research.

The final chapter of the book addresses a number of core questions in action research with the help of ideas and notions detailed the preceding chapters. The rest of the book consists of two parts. The first part, “Research Reports”, has seven chapters and the second, entitled “Theoretical Reflections”, only four including the final chapter. Lastly, there is a glossary including many of the concepts used in the preceding chapters. A special feature here is the list of concepts specific to the action research paradigm, which is very useful, although a number of concepts are missing, such as “life politics”(Giddens), narrative (“grand narrative” is included), (narrative) identity, “direct democracy” and ethics.

I will single out a number of chapters which report a “systemic” action research project.

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That is precisely the fourth kind of action research which I have referred to (Boog, 2003) and that was omitted from Beukema's list (Chapter 11). A reference that also appears to have gone awry concerned the content; she wrote to take another position than I did. In her argument she refers to an interview with the "king" of participatory action research, Orlando Fals Borda (Fals Borda, 2006), which appeared in the journal *Action Research*. However, anyone who reads that interview for themselves will find no discernable difference between my opinion and his. I would like to add that I also prefer scientific action researchers to be reliable in their literature references.

The first of the research reports (Hans Keune *et al.*) concerns the way social scientists are facilitating integral environmental planning in Flanders. This was a two-layered interactive process. Participants in the first layer were medical, environmental and social experts and policy representatives, who studied the relationship between environmental pollution and specific health effects. This happened within the Centre for Environment and Health, a government-funded centre for policy-relevant research in Flanders. The second layer was the involvement of actors external to the centre, such as stakeholders and local residents. The input for a learning process on the part of the various actors within the centre was a human biomonitoring project in a survey programme that measured selected

pollutants and certain health effects among the Flemish population. The programme focused on new-born babies, adolescents and adults. In the first layer of the projects, the participants worked on interpreting the data from the biomonitoring project, to try to generate a policy plan. However, no single scientist or group of scientists dared to claim the necessary and overarching knowledge to design such a plan. Therefore the facilitators decided to form a jury, which was meant to include representatives of local societal groups as well as individual citizens. The whole project became a lengthy and rather labour-intensive process. The authors describe the continual emergence of new kinds of participants and/or issues for all participants to deliberate or negotiate in a "participatory" manner – which is so characteristic of action research. This process aspect was particularly interesting as was the practice of the jury. All in all, the chapter made a good impression.

The same is true of the second chapter. This chapter is the story – referred to as a narrative – of an action research project of about six years in South Africa. Using the Participatory Extension Approach, a form of soil fertility management involving cooperation between researchers, farmers and extension officers was learned by all participants. On page 48, this very impressive process can be found in a picture, which was also used as the front cover of the book. The importance of this chapter is that the very top rung of the ladder

of citizen participation was reached in this project (Arnstein, 1969). We read on page 64 that “awareness creation at all levels of the innovation process is important for farmers to be able to take informed decisions on what to do next.”

Thirdly, there is a report of an exemplarian action research project aimed at the development of demand-driven care for the elderly by Leni Beukema and Ben Valkenburg. This is also a good example of a “systemic” action research project, such as those of the Flemish South African groups. The researchers once belonged to Harry Coenen’s research group, which coined this approach. The core process is participation, based on a cultural democratic ontology, and developed epistemologically in the process of mutual understanding coupled to reciprocal adequacy. Beukema and Valkenburg conducted this project “by the book”, according to the three phases as once described by Coenen (Coenen, 1987). Like the other two research groups, they describe how they had to cope with the problem of how to facilitate the process in such a way that the ideal type of action research was reached – in other words, so that the “highest” rung on the ladder of participation was attained. As mentioned, this is at the heart of action research. However, the idea that scientist and non-scientist are postulated as equals but with different roles and functions in the research process, purely because the differences in social expertise,

holds the researched party back. They will never become self-researchers and will remain co-researchers.

The next interesting project report is the second Flemish contribution by Rudi Roose and Maria de Bie. They conducted action research which was designed to support the reorganization of youth care in Waasland which had been promised by the government at the time. The research involved 35 youth care organizations. The most interesting point to me is that they were very seriously trying to set up and conduct a critical emancipatory action research project. They viewed participation as a starting point for care: a participatory care policy is a policy in which children and parents are acknowledged and recognized. This implied that care, in all its aspects, should be developed from the perspective of the children and parents involved. This story is thus about how to conduct action research based on this “living ideal” resulting in a “living ideal”. This group had the courage to work in this way and show us the difficulties involved.

I will briefly mention the other chapters. There are four chapters in the first part. There is a report by the Wageningen PhD programme (Chapter 5, Conny Almekinders *et al.*). Those among us who are working on an MA or PhD study programme might find some ideas here. Then there is Gemma ter Haar’s chapter (Chapter 7) about

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how she would have liked to set up her anthropological research into the Mexican social movement the Zapatistas more like an action research project. Last but not least, Gerard Verschoor's chapter (Chapter 8) concerns critical capacity development on the subject of the use of genetically modified maize. A good example of the old-fashioned mobilization of a community of militants over an ecological issue. This important practice in action research has existed since the late 1960s and it is still very much needed.

The second part on theoretical reflections contains four chapters, including the concluding chapter already mentioned. Chapter 9 (Gerard Verschoor) concerns Paradigmatic changes and Chapter 10 (Coyan Tromp) is entitled "Building bridges to the future". Together, Verschoor and Tromp give a fairly comprehensive overview of all the paradigms that provide an alternative to the hegemonic empirico-analytic paradigm. Tromp presents a paradigm based on her approach of "wide-angle rationality". It is not my intention to introduce yet another method of theorizing about "kinds of knowledge" in the latter chapter, in addition to that of John Heron and Peter Reason, which is much used by action researchers. However, both chapters present a good introduction to the "theoretical" foundations of the various approaches of action research in an MA and/or PhD custody programme. Leni Beukema's chapter (Chapter 11) is meant to give an overview of the

various approaches within the family of action research. I have already criticized that chapter in this review. Although a chapter on this subject is needed in a reader such as this one, I personally would replace it, if I were obliged to use this book in a course on action research methodology.

Then there is the last chapter, which summarizes the characteristics of action research in boxes and is very useful, as is the glossary. To conclude, if I had to use this book in a study programme, I would pick out the systemic action research project reports I have mentioned and combine them with the theoretical chapter of Tromp and the summary boxes of the last chapter. That alone would be enough reason to buy this book for this low price. Value for money.

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