

Binnengekomen 13 augustus 2008
Geaccepteerd 20 oktober 2008

Ben Boog, Masters Advanced Nurse Practitioner of Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Tilburg, P.B. 347, 5600 AH Eindhoven and the Masters of Art Education of the Hanze University & NHL University, Groningen, School of Performing Arts, Prince Claus Conservatoire, Veemarktstraat 76, 9724 GA Groningen, The Netherlands.

Meindert Slagter, University of Groningen, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 TJ Groningen, The Netherlands.

Jacques Zeelen, University of Groningen, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 TJ Groningen, The Netherlands.

BEN BOOG
MEINDERT SLAGTER
JACQUES ZEELEN

DEVELOPING ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN ACTION RESEARCH

15

DEVELOPING ETHICS AND STANDARDS IN ACTION RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

In a globalizing world, what role can social science research – particularly action research – play in order to address the risks of exclusion, poverty, social and physical insecurity and environmental deprivation? More specifically, how can this type of research be conducted in a participatory, responsible, transparent and scientific way? In other words: what about ethics and standards in action research?

This was the main focus of the ALARPM 7th & PAR 11th World Congress Action Research, organized in the Netherlands in August 2006 by the University of Groningen and the Higher Education Group of the Northern Netherlands¹. Three hundred participants from 35 countries presented and discussed current action research practices in both developed and developing countries. The congress inspired the initiation and subsequent publication of a book in September 2008². Its main contents are the plenary and workshop contributions presented at the congress as well as additional contributions provoked by the challenging issue of ethics and standards. In this article we present the important findings of the congress and additional considerations surrounding the issue of ethics and standards. For a more detailed analysis and discussion we refer readers to the book mentioned above.

Here we begin by discussing the core characteristics of action research, which pertain to both theory and practice. Reflection and action are the key constituents of the process throughout the enactment of action research. The middle section of this article deals with the research findings presented at the congress and published as such in the book. Citing the authors of chapters of the book, we discuss the four important themes: 'participation, power and rapport'; 'quality of research and quality management'; 'learning to solve your own problems in complex responsive social systems'; and finally 'heuristics (rules of thumb) for action research practice'. Finally, we make some remarks on quality improvement in action research.

CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTION RESEARCH

In the landscape of social science, action research favours developing the connection between knowledge production and social change by creating partnerships between researchers, practitioners and a variety of client stakeholders. Action research seems in a position to develop a modest yet relevant contribution to combat the challenges of globalization, social exclusion and marginalization. It uses a whole range of approaches, including, for instance,

participatory action research, cooperative inquiry and action learning. These approaches address the implementation of the action research concept (see among others: Moser, 1977; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Coenen, 1987; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Whyte, 1991; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury (Eds.), 2001; Boog, 2003; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006; Ponte and Smit (Eds.), 2007; Burns, 2007). The common focus is on providing the means to improve people's self determination – to empower them in their roles as professional practitioners or citizens.

Participatory action research and learning processes enable participants to improve the impact of services and programmes in, for instance, education, health care, urban and regional development, business, agriculture, arts, care of the elderly, and leisure. Inherently collaborative inquiry practices seek to improve individual well-being by enabling better practice in democracy and social justice at personal, local and global levels. Many action researchers reflecting on their practices emphasize the need for improving the quality of their research, especially in relation to ethics and scientific legitimization. Action research contains various orientations and methodologies that sometimes clash and compete, but the varieties share a participatory ethos and epistemological grounding in human action. All are oriented towards the concept of participation as inherently democratic and fully involved in the ongoing decision-making processes of daily life in the worlds of work, health care, politics, community and family, education, sports, etc. This democratic ethos is inspired by the work of John Dewey and Kurt Lewin and is based on the notion of a shared ontology of progressive human development as social learning, emancipation and empowerment towards a socially just and sustainable world community. The various orientations in action research share a subject-subject epistemology; researcher and researched subject become researcher and participant researcher in a mutual learning process. They use the typical action research design, which is a cooperative process of problem solving, where social scientists – researchers – and the research subjects are peer-partners, and the latter behave more as co-researchers. Action research

generates new action scripts, derived from the inquiry into social action.

Recently, the prototype of action research as a research practice in general has identified the following core characteristics:

1. It is formulated as a double helix, or spiral, of valid social research and 'deep' or social learning.
2. It is oriented towards empowering the people being researched, in the social learning processes, and also towards enhancing their performance capacities in their discrete social situations.
3. The relationship between the people being researched and the researcher is understood to be a subject-subject relationship.
4. Interactions in the research process between researcher and researched are seen as dialogical and cooperative, since they are embedded in the ethical concept of fully democratic society acting for social justice and sustainability.
5. Action research processes reflect an emerging or 'narrative developing' process. This entails dialogue and research, action, reflection, social learning, and the application of diverse methods and techniques used in parallel as well as in sequence. These methods and techniques can be qualitative, quantitative or communicative. The use of specific methods and techniques is decided upon by all the research partners through the dialogical and participatory process.
6. Assessment of the validity and reliability of the generated knowledge is an ongoing process that occurs through dialogue. This is known as communicative validity (see Kvale, 1995). The important role of the commune in terms of validity and reliability is also stressed by Cronbach (1982). Research partners assess, together and individually, whether the research findings up to the moment of assessment are adequate in relation to the intended enhancement of capacities for empowerment and enactment. Coenen (1987) coined this process 'mutual adequation'.
7. Action research is an additional inquiry and self-inquiry process for social learning organizations set up by professional researchers, initially as a partnership between the researchers and the subjects being researched – functioning primarily

in a research relationship. However, this organizational relationship also includes inquiry relations with wider stakeholders concerned with the social situation of the people directly involved in the study.

LEARNING FROM THE CONGRESS AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE BOOK

We will now discuss the research findings presented at the congress in terms of four subthemes: 'participation, power and rapport'; 'quality of research and quality management'; 'learning to solve your own problem in complex responsive social systems'; and finally 'heuristics (rules of thumb) for the action research practice'. In this context we refer to selected authors of the chapters contributed to the book.

These subthemes form the basis of our reflections, a combination of analysis and comment. Obviously, they are interdependent and overlapping, especially the fourth. Despite the risk of redundancy, however, we formulated this subtheme to emphasize the importance of practicing the craft of action research, since it can make or break an entire participatory project. Action research requires more than the standard research skills of the professional researcher; it demands more than merely following the steps of an (empirical) research cycle as used in qualitative, quantitative or mixed method research designs. It requires specific additional skills that ensure adequate communication and understanding.

Subtheme 1. Participation, power and rapport

Arnstein (1969) made a classic typology of citizen participation as an arrangement of rungs on a ladder. The lowest rungs, 'manipulation' and 'therapy', stand for the lowest degrees of participation. The three upper rungs, the highest degrees of citizen participation, rise from 'partnership' through 'delegated power' to 'citizen control'. At Arnstein's time of writing, democratization was in the air, all over the world critical social movements were fighting for social justice, liberation and emancipation. Citizen control was seen as the main target, as the ultimate goal in all areas of public policy such as education,

urban and regional development, and health care.

These movements gave birth to new forms of participatory and critical action research. The emancipatory approaches of Dewey, Lewin and Moreno from the first part of the last century were reapplied and further developed with renewed enthusiasm. Action research became an instrument for working towards global emancipation. Participation at the highest rung of Arnstein's ladder was the ideal held out for the relationship between professional action researchers and the subjects they were researching. Professional action researchers often sought to move their relationship from partnership to a co-control shared with their research subjects. Co-control leads to reciprocal learning and understanding wherein the researched subjects become co-researchers in the research process.

In harmony with the participatory ethos, social learning (i.e. becoming co-researchers) should ideally begin at the start of the research. Clearly, the question is: at what point do professional researchers and the subjects of research become ready to take on their co-controlling roles? A key aspect of participation is the rapport professional researchers have with their subjects. Their relationship should be symmetrical, trustworthy and open. This requires that the professional researchers gain as much understanding as possible of their subjects' world, including their multitude of multifaceted identities, claims to legitimacy, justifications and discourses. Participation becomes co-control by participant researchers through the authentic engagement of professional researchers in the lives of their research subjects. The research project becomes an organized partnership between researchers and subjects that also includes other actors – the stakeholders – of importance to the action problem being researched. There are possible gradations of participation in the action research process. A distinction is made between primary subjects and other actors, that is, the stakeholders concerned with the socially situated action of the subjects. Initially, the professional researcher and the subjects define the bounds of participation, meaning they define who belongs to the group having the problem being researched (primary subjects) and who

else is involved or forms part of the problem (others/ stakeholders).

The critical, radically democratic aspect of the participation concept of the 1960s and 1970s still exists today, although in the decades following the 1970s it was moderated, made more realistic and supplementary. In the past decade, participation as a concept has also been used in the sense of social participation in society, for instance, in the sense of having a job, attending church meetings, taking part in sports, or in the sense of people being self-supportive and self-determining in contrast to being marginalized. Moreover, the concept has grown in significance in the sense of 'becoming part of the whole earth ecological system', especially with the rise of environmental awareness.

Participation is directly connected to 'power'. As noted above, the lowest rung on the ladder of citizen participation signifies the least control citizens have over public policy. Power is direct ('I have power over you, here and now'), and indirect (being subject to institutions or internalized rules). Power also has a dual character (Giddens, 1984). On the one hand it means agency, that is, having the 'power to' or 'capacity of', or being 'empowered'. A power can be an authority in some way, such as an authority on state law or on playing the piano. On the other hand, power also means being forced or coerced. Power, in all its forms, is present in an action research project, in the reciprocity between the professional researcher and the subjects being researched, and in the relationships among these actors and other stakeholders in the social system.

Contributions to this theme

The basic interest is 'extraction'. As Wilmsen (2008) says in his chapter, conventional research can successfully generate the empowerment of subjects being researched. Important elements in the case of participatory action research are the 'relationships of reciprocity and trust' between researchers and the subjects being researched:

'... it is necessary to separate participation and these other elements analytically because of the tendency to conflate participation and empowerment, because

of the frequency with which participation is done "by the book" without genuine efforts to empower community members, and because empowerment may be achieved by research that is not participatory' (Wilmsen, 2008, p. 139).

Wilmsen presents several guidelines for dealing with the tensions of interests on both sides (that of the professional researcher and the subjects under research) including managing the entanglement of extraction, credibility, robust research, discrete problem-solving, empowerment and (social) learning. The most important tips are to conduct an analysis of power (relations) before the start of a participatory action research process and to set up:

'an open, inclusive process of analysis that addresses the tensions between the different interests of scientists and community members' (p. 144).

On the one hand, the important lesson is to carry out an in-depth conceptual analysis of participation that functions as a tool for reflection on this subtheme in action research. On the other hand Wilmsen advises us to deal adequately with the tensions in practice.

Tromp (2008) arrives at the concept of participation after sketching diverse turns made in the philosophy of science. She develops a reflexive approach to knowledge production and thus tailors the main quality criteria of research, that is, reliability and validity, to the art of action research. Tromp situates participation at the core of the quality of the relationship between professional researchers and the subjects being researched. Both reliability and validity of knowledge generated in the action research process are continually evaluated in terms of 'adequacy'. Tromp employs the concept of 'reciprocal adequacy', coined by Coenen (1987) and follows Wilmsen's arguments. Participation enhances empowerment of the subjects being researched, as being involved in (social) learning, and it increases the reliability and validity of the knowledge produced. However, professional researchers (and the subjects being researched alike) have noted questions related to 'sampling'. These are, the selection criteria for

participants, the timing of the selection (or invitation to participate) and the actual practice of participation.

Eikeland (2008) also discusses the philosophy of science. His core concern is the quality of research, especially its validity. Action research is practitioner research. Methodology has to be a matter for research practitioners and not the unique competency of specialized methodologists. The debate among methodologists is basically on practitioner research. The work of Aristotle is important as he was at the beginning of the philosophy of science which is fundamental to action research. Unsurprisingly, Eikeland finds the roots of action research rationality in the work of Aristotle. Like Tromp, he places participation at the heart of the knowledge-generating relationship between professional researchers and their subjects. He argues that this strengthens the validity of social research. Action research is co-generative learning (Whyte, 1991). Mainstream research is faced with challenges to validity, which are met by overcoming the division between 'othering' and 'othering effects'. Eikeland (2008) states that the first generation action researchers (Dewey, Collier and Lewin) transformed social sciences by:

'... inviting the subjects of research to join the community of researchers in the primary interpretation of findings. Through these steps the gradual deterioration and removal of the division line between the knowers and the known was initiated. This move was motivated not merely from democratic convictions and ideology, but just as much from a conviction that it would strengthen the validity of social science' (p. 33).

With reference to Aristotle he indicates that:

'While modern social science has abhorred "participation", Aristotle's main view was that it is impossible to be truly "scientific" or "epistemic" without participating and acquiring practical experience, and even "going", or rather "being and staying native", in a certain sense' (Eikeland, 2008, p. 35).

In their chapter, Marshall and Reason focus on the professional researcher's attitude of inquiry. Participation means a truly subject-subject relationship between the subjects being researched and the outsiders, professional researchers, wherein underprivileged people are engaged in self-investigation. Participation opens spaces in communication:

'In a more immediately human sense, the social constructionist perspective emphasizes a shift of perspective from the individual to relationships in which we all participate. Thus an attitude of inquiry seeks to recognize the profundity of this active and increasing participation with the human and more than human world' (Marshall and Reason, 2008, p. 72).

Professional researchers have to build a relationship with their subjects as co-researchers in a joint exploration into justice and sustainability.

'Researching with people means that they are engaged as full persons, and the exploration is based directly on their understanding of their own actions and experience, rather than filtered through an outsider's perspective. Participation is also political, asserting people's right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and claim to generate knowledge about them. And, in addition to producing knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people, it can also empower them at a second and deeper level to see that they are capable of constructing and using their own knowledge' (Marshall and Reason, 2008, p. 72).

In this way, participation becomes the core of democratic culture. In action research participation, the radically democratic rapport between professional researchers and subjects being researched is based on reciprocal understanding.

Van der Linden and Zeelen (2008), Koch and Mann (2008), Hudson, Rogers and Coleman (2008) characterize a problem of participation as primarily the quality of the professional researchers' understanding

of the world of the subjects being researched. They stress that the first task of the professional researcher is to get to grips with the way the subjects are embedded in their communities, their legitimizations, their stories, what they like, dislike, and value, and the way they are subjected to power relations within their environment. These authors extract their examples of research practices from all over the world. Van der Linden and Zeelen evaluate several studies from Africa, Koch and Mann report on an Australian participatory action research project, while Hudson, Rogers and Coleman base their arguments on projects in both North and South America and Europe.

20 Subtheme 2. 'Scientific' quality of research and quality management

The second subtheme questions the quality of an action research project in terms of well-executed 'scientific' research practice. This concerns the requirements of specific types of research design, as agreed by professional researchers and as taught standardly at universities. One should be aware of laymen beliefs, generally held, that requirements such as these stand for the way scientific research is basically conducted, 'like it is in the hard sciences'. This subtheme covers, for example, what the authors have to say about the paradigmatic status of action research, and their stances on the validity and reliability of knowledge generated by action research. In increasing numbers of methodological handbooks, the contrast between 'positivist' and 'naturalist' paradigms is usually the starting point, whereas action research is seen as emerging from a third paradigm, that is, the 'critical' paradigm. Although action research thinking has its origins in philosophical pragmatism, it has blended with the critical systems thinking of Lewin's humanistic psychological approach and Moreno's critical psychoanalysis. It became partly 'critical' with the democratizing and emancipatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Boog, 2003), and partly when action researchers began basing their approaches explicitly on Habermas (1981) and Moser (1975, 1977) (see also Kemmis, 2007). In the past, when it came to quality aspects, many approaches in action research set off from the way quality was conceived and problematized in the

naturalistic paradigm, often dubbed 'qualitative research'. Naturalistic and action research paradigms share several characteristics. Both kinds of research employ 'positivist' approaches, methods and techniques. However, the overall stance on the process of generating knowledge lies in the epistemology of naturalistic and action paradigms. To conceptualize the aspects of validity and reliability, action researchers often start with the aspects used in naturalistic research, such as trustworthiness, credibility and authenticity. The criteria here are the stability of data, whether the researched subjects confirm the data, and to what extent the results of the research can be transferred to other, more or less same situations.

Qualitative research and action research are often seen as studies generating local knowledge only.

Generalization in positivistic research is not possible. However, the results may function as an exemplar or heuristics for others (not involved in the research project) in comparable situations. Smaling (2000) mentions 'exemplary generalization'. Though action research shares much of its epistemological basis with qualitative research, it tends to be 'critical' and 'pragmatic'. Alternative conceptualizations of validity, reliability and generalization which emphasize the special characteristics of action research have been suggested, such as 'reciprocal adequacy'.

Contributions to this theme

Tromp (2008) and Eikeland (2008) offer the most all-encompassing foundations for action research. They anchor their proposed standards for the validity and reliability of knowledge production in action research in the philosophy of science (Tromp), and the practice of action research in organizations in the practice-oriented epistemology of Aristotle (Eikeland), respectively. Despite their different conceptions, they arrive at similar stances on standards that are focused on validity and reliability and do justice to both the specific character of action research as reciprocal (interactive, participative) research and the learning process involved in discrete problem-solving. In the course of her argument Tromp accentuates the theoretical (rationality) and critical aspects of validity. Her purpose is to develop a sound philosophical foundation:

'If there is one reason why I have found it useful to take up an exposé about the philosophy of science, it is because I think that it provides us with a sound philosophical foundation that is often still missing in action research. In my view such a carefully considered foundation is a necessary condition if action research is to be seen as a serious scientific option beside other forms of research' (Tromp, 2008, p. 16).

Tromp begins by sketching the shifts in rationality behind knowledge production in social sciences, leading us from modernity to the present through diverse 'turns', such as the linguistic turn and the interpretative turn. Along the way 'causal' science comes into play as a narrow-angled rationality that to some extent supports law. Finally, she arrives at the 'reflexive turn'. This last turn is based on a wide-angled rationality which takes different sources and kinds of knowledge into account, including causal laws and interpretation as well as human interaction. This is knowledge of 'in vivo' or naturalistic origins as well as artificial, laboratory-based origins. Reality is reality as given meaning by human beings, be they scientists or laymen. Science is now predominantly viewed as an argumentative learning process.

Tromp proceeds from this outline of the situation in the philosophy of science to dealing with the implications of wide-angled rationality on research, a critical reflexive approach to knowledge production. She follows this by translating this approach into the methodology of action research. Action research does justice to important implications of the reflexive turn, she says. On the other hand, incorporating the insights of the reflexive turn is a challenge that faces action researchers. In the closing part of her chapter Tromp presents an ideal type of action research methodology. Her chapter thus provides action researchers with a broad overview of the aspects and elements of internal and external validity. It also further develops Coenen's exemplary action research approach, which in turn was based on work by Freire, Negt, Habermas and Giddens.

Eikeland, however, classifies action research as transformed experimentalism, modelling his stance on the views of Dewey and Lewin. He justifies action

research within the context of mainstream approaches. He starts with Lewin's turn to practice, inspired by Dewey. Lewin moved the research situation out of the laboratory into reality (in vivo) and invited the subjects being researched to be co-interpreters of the data (extracted from them). To quote:

'Re-thinking the experimental tradition in order to adjust it to action research, would have to imply, then, 1) field-experimentation, not laboratory experiments, letting a certain kind of technical control-ambitions go, 2) a wider and better understanding of causality and causal connections than the quasi-experimental tradition, which seems to operate with simple efficient causes producing stimulus and response, 3) experimentation with others, together, exploring common realities, not on others as if they were external objects, and 4) control of causal factors, not through strict laboratory design and control or through randomisation, but through critical, experiential dialogue, bringing tacit, subconscious, or unconscious elements working "behind our backs" to common consciousness by bringing them into the dialogue for everyone to see and to share' (Eikeland, 2008, p. 34).

Eikeland found the basis of his extended action research in organizations, especially the creation of learning organizations in the Aristotelian model. Aristotle's theoretical philosophy, he argues:

'... is based not so much on "empirical observation" (and certainly not on fanciful "speculation") in a modern sense, as on the acquired, practical experience of the inquirer-knower-thinker-reader. Aristotle was, of course, also a pioneer of empirical research in a more modern sense, but basically his thinking is a practitioner's thinking. He thinks as a practitioner and speaks to reflecting practitioners more than to disengaged spectator researchers' (p. 35).

Marshall and Reason (2008) direct their arguments for the quality of action research as science toward the researchers. They emphasize the 'personal and role'

aspects of the perspective on thinking about quality. They offer:

'... the notion of "taking an attitude of inquiry" as a quality process in action research, enabling researchers to be aware of and articulate the complex processes of interpretation, reflection and action they engage in. This is considered as a complement to more procedural quality approaches' (p. 61).

And:

'We see taking an attitude of inquiry as a core facet of first person action research, which is itself foundational for more participative forms of inquiry. ... We want to express a quality which is both disciplined and alive, which points toward the underlying continual challenge of living in the world as a question; which points out how, if you think you know what you are doing as an action researcher, have it comfortably in hand, you are really not doing it, are not on a learning edge' (Marshall and Reason, 2008, p. 62).

We would recognize another inward although complementary 'turn' in their argument, towards the 'attitude of inquiry'. Marshall and Reason proceed with a (preliminary) list of items, aspects and elements in their phenomenological analysis of the practice of taking an attitude of inquiry as a form of dialogue between a description of the named element and their own practice. They:

'... hope it offers threads into your own reflection, into what you might like to consider about your own practices of "Taking an attitude of inquiry"' (Marshall and Reason, 2008, p. 64).

Pålshaugen's idea of the quality of ethical theory (Pålshaugen, 2008) is directed at the importance of pragmatic ethics; ethics that are literally at work in practice. He proposes distinguishing a theoretical modus from a practical modus, and a theoretical discourse from a practical discourse. Initially discourse analysis might help us to understand. However, with

the help of this understanding, practical discourses must be set up – dialogues from within practice to change (democratize) practice. Too often theory or ethics become detached concepts with no practical potency. Pålshaugen (2008) argues that:

'... the point is to create common dialogues, a common practical discourse within the organisation(s). What is needed in order to develop more democratic work organisations is not a common theoretical understanding of what a democratic organisation might look like. What is required is a common practical discourse, which allows for everybody to participate, and which allows for different understandings and interpretations to come to the fore. Thus, the really big challenge in this kind of democratic organisation development is to organize those who perform the action – the local actors – in practical discourses' (p. 93).

Hudson, Rogers and Coleman's argument (2008) about the quality of action research as science has two elements. First, to consider the cultural differences and social background of the subjects being researched; the way they enact dialogues, power structures, etc. This point is also emphasized by others, by Van der Linden and Zeelen (2008), and Koch and Mann (2008). Second, to generate knowledge by the process of reciprocal understanding which grows out of the meeting of professional researchers and the subjects being researched. Hudson, Rogers and Coleman call this 'upward epistemology'. Koch and Mann use the concepts 'co-creativity' and 'character of community ownership' for the same kind of interaction (a process of social learning).

Subtheme 3. Learning to solve your own problems in complex social systems

The action problem in research projects is eventually solved in a process of practice-oriented learning in cooperation with the subjects being researched, facilitated by the professional researcher. Subjects being researched enhance their self determination, first in relation to the present problem, which might also stand as an example for self-determined problem-solving in the future.

An important aspect of this co-generative learning process is that action research projects become emergent; they develop as narratives evolving from the initial problem, through its definition, to reach a conclusion. Especially in large systems, we must come to grips with the complexity of the action system of the subjects being researched and the responsiveness of the stakeholders. Theoretically as well as practically defined boundaries may change during the process: what is at stake, which actors are crucial in the definition of the situation? Both generated knowledge and social learning are important here. Also important is the concrete success of an action research project and the difference this makes on more general social learning and the quality of the participation experience.

Contributions to this theme

Härnsten and Holmstrand (2008), Eikeland (2008), Tromp (2008), Van der Linden and Zeelen (2008) and Pålshaugen (2008) explicitly focus on the learning element. For nearly all, (social) learning and the production of knowledge by research procedures are intertwined. We describe this core characteristic of action research as the double helix of research and learning. For Eikeland and Pålshaugen, learning develops naturally in human beings, as a result of the continual transactions that begin at birth. Learning communities, learning organizations and practitioner-research as practice development fit this view. This pragmatic notion of social learning was coined 'co-generative learning' by Whyte (1991). Hårnsten and Holmstrand (2008) base their critical educational and feminist action research on Negt's ideas about experiential learning. This is:

'... an active, critical and creative process that demands a particular form and a particular content. Negt emphasises three decisive ingredients in the content and form of the education: 1) its closeness to individual interests, 2) the parts of the participant's experiences that has a potential to exceed immediate interests and provide a more social understanding, 3) the importance that the content might have in supplying the participants with a strength and a readiness for their continued

life, and thus connecting to both satisfying individual needs and to providing an insight about the structural conditions' (Hårnsten and Holmstrand, 2008, p. 175).

This critical concept of social learning has much in common with Freire's concept of problem-oriented learning and was combined with his notion in exemplary learning as the basic interactive methodology in Coenen's exemplary action research (1987). In turn Coenen's approach was identified as an ideal type of action research methodology by Tromp in her context of applying the insights of the reflexive turn.

Marshall and Reason (2008) make a strong point of learning from one's own experience as a professional action researcher. Their reflections about the attitude of inquiry help other reflections on the action researcher's role, competencies and function in concrete processes. Action research generates new action scripts that must be tested. Only after passing the test will they have (external) validity and can be generalized as an exemplar.

Subtheme 4. Heuristics (or rules of thumb) for action research practice

Techniques derived from various disciplines ranging from social-cultural sciences, psychology, communication, counselling and the dynamics of group-learning are employed in action research as part of its ethos. The choice of a specific method must be carefully done and supported by all participants in the research project. Many authors offer rules of thumb for evaluating the chosen methods in specific action research projects. These rules concern many aspects of the quality of participation. Authors speak of 'openness', 'creating a trustworthy conversation space'. They evaluate the chosen methods in special action research projects.

Heuristics and methodology have much in common. Heuristics is an interconnected set of rules of thumb, which must be made operational in specific circumstances. These operations in turn result in adaptation and further development of the rules. Epistemology is easily translated into methodological rules of thumb. We began this thematic analysis by

positing that the 'characteristics of action research are characteristics of the practice of action research and refer to both theory and practice. Reflection and action are moments in the enactment of action research. We can reflect on the ethos, while the ethos is being enacted'. As a whole, this configuration is changing and developing. When rules of thumb are made operational, they are 'new' and 'unique' and provide feedback on the original formulations, the rules of thumb, which are in turn qualitatively changed.

Contributions to this theme

Tromp (2008) presents several methodological rules of thumb, based on the reflexive point of view on knowledge production in research. In summary these are:

- Be explicit, open and critical (for the professional researcher especially).
- Reciprocal adequation, a transactive process to assess reliability and validity between (primarily) professional researcher and the subjects being researched.
- Test new action scripts (exemplars) on a small scale initially.

The rules of thumb that Hudson, Rogers and Coleman (2008) promote fit in with the reflexive view on knowledge production. They give priority to creating a conversation space – as inspired by Gadamer. They set out the following guidelines:

- Action research in this sense means participatory scientific investigation of a problem, leading to action by anyone with the means to implement solutions.
- Some problems require gaining first-hand experience of problems, actually living in the context where the problems occur, and not just making field observations or attending planning sessions. 'Living' means sharing the home life of host communities, even if just for 24 hours.
- Action research adds another criterion that may be more important than cost-effectiveness – namely, the choice among local solutions that can be acted upon immediately and that engages those living with the problem.

- Creating the conditions for people to engage in their own learning and creation of solutions makes an upward epistemology, a way of knowing that makes the solution a more powerful and lasting one for the problem at hand. The power of common ground built around conversation, relationships, and locality helps to create the conditions for a way of knowing unique to them (the subjects being researched – in this case Native Americans), a form of upward epistemology which may be a vital component of any solutions undertaken for and by the communities themselves.

We recognize Marshall and Reason's notions of taking an attitude of inquiry as valuable rule of thumb. They sum up their following notions, which are not yet complete, but which cover a number of do's for action researchers. The following combines Marshall and Reason's own words (2008) and our own summary of their text.

- Start by learning to ask good questions and with a commitment to a serious exploration of the implications of asking. This involves being authentically committed to finding out about something of significance in our world, and paying attention to the issue through action and reflection, with 'inner and outer arcs of attention'.
- Being willing to explore purposes, and open to renewed insights into them, however provisional and shifting, is an underlying value in much action research. This also requires attention to the processes through which the researcher constructs things as 'good' or 'true'. Action research is explicitly value-oriented.
- Be able to be open to different framings.
- Develop participation in the broadest sense and in all its facets; create a rapport with subjects, provide control opportunities for all research participants, including equal control and decision power. Participation necessarily involves power and an understanding of the dynamics and practices of power.
- Develop and hold awareness of where the boundaries of the system are drawn, however fleetingly and by whom, questioning at the edges

of what might conventionally be seen as the boundary of the system, developing an ability to 'see' or be aware of the 'wider' system and potential connections. This often involves seeking to invite active engagement from others who may be regarded as stakeholders in the matters to hand, checking the boundaries to ascertain what they are. Researchers/facilitators may sometimes decide that consultation is inappropriate or unnecessary and take unilateral action, listening for systemic feedback.

- Draw on a wide range of evidence in seeking confirmation or disconfirmation of sense-making and of positions held. This is an iterative process, feeding earlier views into cycles of active testing. This implies that knowing is rooted in a preverbal, unmediated encounter with 'what is'; it is articulated in presentational form – verbal story, physical gesture, graphic art. Such a first form may be elaborated into what we may call 'the arts' of storytelling and theatre, dance and mime, painting and sculpture. It may also be developed as idea and theory, expressed more abstractly and symbolically in concepts and propositions. Our knowing is then consummated in practice, in the skill or knack of doing things in the world, which of course gives rise to new encounters.
- Be more appreciative and positive than critical. Marshall and Reason say action research must be 'dancing in beauty rather than fighting ugliness'.
- Show humility.

Van der Linden and Zeelen (2008) raise arguments for guidelines directly connected to the ethos of participation. First, they stress the importance of an adequate analysis of the existing social cultural system, and especially of the existing power relations. This is a necessary condition to produce knowledge that leads to the solution of social problems. Second, they argue that the reconstructive analysis of action research projects meets the obligation of the professional researchers to build theory and creates possibilities for exemplary generalization of the new knowledge by other actors in different but similar situations. With regard to adequate analysis and reconstructive analysis by professional researchers, they plead for the

organization of communities of practice for professional action researchers, the subjects being researched and other actors involved in action research projects. Organization in a democratic learning platform will ensure the quality and continuity of specific projects. These guidelines are embedded in a vision of rigorous methodical analysis of the participation possibilities of all the actors involved.

FINAL REMARKS: TOWARDS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN ACTION RESEARCH

Clearly there is wide concern for the central question of 'How can action research be conducted in a participatory, responsible, transparent and scientific way?' Fortunately, the question has some preliminary answers. We summarize the issues which seem in our view to have high relevance for the way forward in action research.

1. The participatory claim of action research is well-founded. Implementation of real participation, however, remains a difficult enterprise. It is not easy to establish a dialogue between the actors, especially in conditions with significant differences in power levels. Action researchers are advised to first undertake rigorous stakeholder analysis in terms of power relations, to take the time to invest deeply in building up relations in the field, and to carefully judge the most appropriate and realistic levels and forms of participation.
2. The ambition of action research to contribute to knowledge production and social change needs to be considered strategically. Does the research project aim to produce practical knowledge? How can the perspectives offered by the knowledge gained be used to guide sustainable solutions for social problems? It has proven to be very difficult to complete the full action research cycle, including implementing proposed solutions, evaluating those with stakeholders, and making improvements. When starting an action research project, it is advisable to be aware of possibly unrealistic expectations and, as suggested above, to analyze the stakeholder power dynamics, if possible in dialogue with the stakeholders concerned.

Establishing a committee that includes important policy stakeholders to provide feedback on the research process is a way of connecting the research to implementation possibilities. This committee would not only help action researchers access their target research environment but would also safeguard opportunities for implementing the results. To strengthen sustainability, it is utterly essential to develop communities of practice wherein university researchers, professionals in the field, social movements, local people and policymakers work together for longer periods.

3. As indicated above, action research should also include an iterative cycle of action and reflection to produce knowledge applicable in other contexts or new theoretical insights. From this point of view the researcher should add another facet to his or her role of facilitator and agent of change, namely that of an academic, learning from experience and sharing this learning with others. The danger inherent to knowledge produced by action research is that it is not tested against the broader, existing body of knowledge; it remains scattered as over-contextualized bits of knowledge. Therefore, action research projects require systematic reconstruction (scientific validation) to do justice to the theoretical ambitions of action research.

NOTES

1. The abbreviations stand for: Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) and Participatory Action Research (PAR).
2. Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) (2008) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.

REFERENCES

Argyris, C. and Schön, D.A. (1978) *Organizational Learning: a theory of action perspective*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Arnstein, S. (1969) 'A ladder of citizen participation'. *American Institute of Planners Journal*, 35, 216-224.

Boog, B. (2003) 'The emancipatory character of action research, its history and the present state of the art'. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 13(6), 426-438.

Burns, D. (2007) *Systemic action research. A strategy for whole system change*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Coenen, H. (1987) *Handelingsonderzoek als exemplarisch leren. Een bijdrage aan de fundering van de methodologie van handelingsonderzoek* [Action research as exemplary learning: A contribution to the foundation of the methodology of action research]. Groningen/Utrecht: Konstapel/Jan van Arkel.

Cronbach, L.J. (1982) *Designing Evaluations of Educational and Social Programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eikeland, O. (2008) 'Aristotle, Validity, and Action Research'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.

Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society. An outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Greenwood, D.J. and Levin, M. (1998) *Introduction to Action Research*. London: Sage.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Habermas, J. (1981) *Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns 2Bd* (Erste Auflage) [The theory of communicative action]. Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Härnsten, G. and Holmstrand, L. (2008) 'Democratic Knowledge Processes in Participatory Educational Research for Social Change'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.

Hudson, B., Rogers, K. and Coleman, G. (2008) 'Cross-Atlantic Dialogue on University-Based Action Research: Paths to Upward Epistemology'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.

- Kemmis, S. (2007) 'Participatory action research and the public sphere'. In: Ponte, P. and Smit, B.H.J. (Eds.) *The Quality of Practitioner Research. Reflections on the Position of the Researcher and the Researched*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R.M. (1988) *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria: Deakon University.
- Koch, T. and Mann, S. (2008) 'Understanding Chronic Illness Experience: Story Telling in Participatory Action Research'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Kvale, S. (1995) 'The social construction of validity'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1(1), 19-40.
- Linden, J. van der and Zeelen, J. (2008) 'Action Research in Africa: Challenges and Perspectives'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Marshall, J. and Reason, P. (2008) 'Taking an Attitude of Inquiry'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Moser, H. (1975) *Aktionsforschung als kritische Theorie der Sozialen Wissenschaft* [Action research as critical theory for the Social Sciences]. München: Kösel Verlag.
- Moser, H. (1977) *Praxis der Aktionsforschung* [Action research in practice]. München: Kösel Verlag.
- Pålshaugen, Ø. (2008) 'The Ethics of Action Research: Transcending Theory'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Ponte, P. and Smit, B.H.J. (Eds.) (2007) *The Quality of Practitioner Research. Reflections on the Position of the Researcher and the Researched*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Reason, P. and Bradbury, H. (Eds.) (2001) *Handbook of Action Research*. London: Sage.
- Smaling, A. (2000) 'Inductieve, analoge en communicatieve generalisatie' [Inductive, analogous and communicative generalisation]. In: Wester, F., A. Smaling and L. Mulder (Eds.) *Praktijkgericht kwalitatief onderzoek* [Practice-oriented Qualitative Research] (p. 155-171). Bussum: Coutinho.
- Tromp, C. (2008) 'Criteria for a Reflexive Approach to Knowledge Production'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Whitehead, J. and McNiff, J. (2006) *Action research: Living Theory*. London: Sage.
- Whyte, W.F. (1991) *Participatory action research*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Wilmsen, C. (2008) 'Extraction, Empowerment, and Relationships in the Practice of Participatory Research'. In: Boog, B., J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*. Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992) *Professional development in higher education: a theoretical framework for action research*. London: Kogan Page.

SUMMARY

In a globalizing world, what role can social science research – particularly action research – play in order to address the risks of exclusion, poverty, social and physical insecurity and environmental deprivation? More specifically, how can this type of research be conducted in a participatory, responsible, transparent and scientific way? In other words: what about the ethics and standards in action research? This was the main focus of the World Congress on Action Research and Action Learning (August 2006) organized by the University of Groningen and the Higher Education Group of the Northern Netherlands.

We begin by discussing the core characteristics of action research with reference to theory and practice. Reflection and action are key constituents of the process through the enactment of action

research. The middle section draws upon the research findings presented at the congress and published in a book [B. Boog, J. Preece, M. Slagter and J. Zeelen (Eds.) (2008) *Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. Developing Ethics and Standards*, Rotterdam/Taipei: Sense Publishers].

Citing authors who contributed chapters to the book mentioned above, we analyze four important subthemes: 'participation, power and rapport'; 'quality of research and quality management'; 'learning to solve your own problems in complex responsive social systems, and 'heuristics (rules of thumb) for action research practice'. Finally, we comment on possible quality improvements for action research. Our remarks relate to the problems of implementing the concept of participation, the ambition of action research to contribute to both knowledge production and social change and the need for systematic reconstruction (scientific validation) of action research.