

Action research and the problem of the single case¹

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Abstract

In his article in Volume 7, No.2 of *Concepts and Transformation*, Greenwood lays the ground for a self-critical review of action research. This is very much called for, but there is a need to avoid this review becoming a revival of yesterdays “famous cases”. Major parts of today’s action research is oriented towards social movements, learning regions and other levels of organisation far beyond the small group. The associated research challenges can be met only by developing new research platforms and seeking new alliances with other branches of research.

Key words: Action research, social constructivism, development programs

Investigación Acción y el problema de los casos únicos

Resumen

En su artículo Volumen 7, nº2 de *Conceptos y Transformaciones*, Greenwood plantea una autocrítica de la investigación acción. Se trata de una reflexión necesaria ligada a los problemas derivados de los casos únicos pero no deberíamos caer en revivir los 'casos de éxito' del pasado. La mayoría de los procesos de investigación acción actuales están orientados a los movimientos sociales, los territorios que aprenden y otro tipo de organizaciones que van más allá de grupos reducidos. Los retos derivados de dichos procesos se pueden abordar mediante nuevas plataformas de investigación y alianzas con otras disciplinas de investigación.

Palabras clave: investigación acción, constructivismo social, programas de desarrollo

Action research may be something that the world needs, but it is also something that the world seldom wants. This is the point of departure for a recent article by Greenwood where the purpose is to look into why this is so (Greenwood 2002). Some of the reasons he places at the door of action research itself, for instance much sloppy reporting and even when the reporting is adequate it often pertains to issues of limited interest outside the action research community itself. Among the last are the epistemological and moral reasons why action research is superior to all other forms of research and detailed presentations of all the whys and hows of action research on project level. This focus is, it can be argued, akin to a sur-

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vey researcher continuously discussing the epistemological challenges of survey research and the construction of items, scales and questions, without ever doing any survey.

The purpose of this note is not primarily to disagree but rather to see to what extent some of the problems of action research can be even further highlighted. In this contribution, focus is on the last of the themes covered in the Greenwood article: the issue of scale (page 136):

While most people interested in society level issues tend to pose their questions and concerns in more or less general terms: what to do about poverty; participation in work, the process of globalization, the answers provided by action research are generally based on “local cases”. The cases are, furthermore, not only local; they tend to be very local in the sense that the great majority of action research studies pertain to processes between one or a few action researchers and very small groups of other people, often even during fairly short periods of time. Can, however, questions of concern to other actors than those directly involved in the project be answered on the basis of cases of this kind?

The standard research response to this challenge is to write a report where experiences from the case are set down, often in terms of theoretical and methodological reflections. This is what the researchers bring with them when facing the next group with which to do action research. The knowledge gained from the previous situation will help understand the new one better, it will enable the researcher to move faster to the point of identifying appropriate action, and so on. However, what is to emerge from the *second* case if the knowledge from the first is sufficient to do the right things? Theory and methods can always be improved on and the second case can help do that. This can continue with a third case, a fourth case, and so on.

But is there a limit? Do we ever reach a stage when action can be *suspended* and texts take over? Can a number reports from a number of cases eventually provide a reasonably “full” theoretical-methodological package? It will, of course, never be 100 % , but can it be completed to such an extent that further development can be converted to implementation of theory rather than continued action research?

Most action researchers would say no: Each new situation will always be more open than the idea of “applied research” presupposes and the need for action research will never end. But if the need for action never ends it means that no “complete theory” can ever be delivered. All the answers that action research can provide will be of the type: We can give you some points for consideration, some ways you can take but you have to add a strategy for action in your own context. Only through going into action is it possible to gain those additional insights and understandings that are necessary to act fully appropriate in your own context.

Most action researchers: and certainly Greenwood, would argue that if what action research delivers is limited, so is what other kinds of research deliver: The difference is that while action research sometimes admits that all conclusions are inputs into new action rather than self-contained theories, other kinds of research generally pretend to offer texts that in themselves give, if not a full, so at least an adequate understanding of the situation.

So far, however, the balance between action research and other research is at a draw. Both deliver limited products, the difference may be that action research does it in a way that is slower, more expensive and generally even more limited in terms of number of peo-

ple that express their views through the project than what is the case for other types of research. At this point something can obviously be done on the research side. Greenwood has a good point when he argues that by suspending at least some of the more or less endless discourses on "internal issues" of epistemology, morality and methodology, more space can be created for presenting and discussing the social constructions that we actually contribute to and their social and human meanings and functions. This will, in itself, go some distance towards giving action research a more visible position in the discourses of society. Even small scale examples can be of interest and good examples well presented are quite clearly of more interest than diffuse examples that are buried in discussions of what the actors concerned did rather than in discussions about what came out of it. However, the core issue does not lie here. Although there is room for substantial improvement these improvements will not radically change the position of action research in society.

To make this more radical change there is a need to face another problem: How can the unique property of action research: the fact that it does action, be turned into a positive asset in the discourses of society? Are there ways in which action research can *transcend* the single case without losing the action element along the road?

There is no simple response to this challenge but there is at least some experience in working with it. Greenwood credits this author with the development of broad programs rather than single case projects: the point about these programs is just to approach the problem of scale from an action research perspective. He argues, on the other hand, that there is little adequate reporting from these programs, in particular concerning the relationships between the programs and the cases that constitute the parts of each program. This may be true. However, to approach this question we need to look at how scale :or "critical mass" as it was once called, is meant to be reached:

First and foremost: the idea is not to replace the single case with a number of cases, but to create or support *social movements*. A social movement is a series of events that are linked to each other, and where the meaning and construction of each event is part of a broader stream of events, and not a self-sufficient element in an aggregate. There is little point in replacing the single case with a number of disconnected cases. What is here called a social movement can emanate from many sources, and pertain to a wide range of themes; in the case of this author the core concern has been democracy and participation, with a main focus on the role and significance of work (Gustavsen 2000).

To initiate or relate to social movements the research resources must generally be of some size. This is the reason for programs rather than projects. When it has been possible to create programs of some scale: say, up to the level of 50 research-years over some years, it is often, by outside observers, ascribed to particularly favourable political circumstances that are not paralleled outside the Nordic countries. To this one may make several points:

In the same way as a social movement does not have a single centre, the action research programs do not have such a centre. The research resources are applied in a *distributive* way. The ongoing workplace development program in Norway (Gustavsen 2002) is organised in altogether 9 so-called "modules", that is: geographically distributed units of researchers and networks of workplaces, in principle covering most of the country from the north to the south. Given the present political intentions in most countries of spreading educational and R&D resources it is far easier to finance this kind of pattern than one big "na-

tional action research centre". A fairly similar program in Finland has much of the same pattern (Alasoini and Kyllönen 1998).

Second, much of the action element is financed by other sources, such as regional authorities, making it possible to increase the scale without being completely dependent upon research money.

Third, the programs actually deliver what they promise and what the sponsors are paying for. In Gustavsen et al (2001: 39-70) there is a fairly detailed presentation of how one of the programs was evaluated; the book as a whole contains a presentation of its outcome. This outcome was found fully satisfactory by the Research Council of Norway, the social partners and others concerned.

This, it can be argued, is all very well. But where is the report of "global significance"? Greenwood may be right when he argues that it is hard to find. However, this author also believes that it is sometimes a question of where to look.

At this point we need to turn to what is involved in working with social movements rather than single cases. If we use action research in a distributive way to create social movements, it becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries, than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a "case". Instead of using much resources in a single spot to pursue things into a continuously higher degree of detail in this spot, resources are spread over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible.

But how can this be defended in research terms? Unless we deal with sharply featured events that can be turned into research cases, each one to be scrutinised in as detailed a way as possible, how can knowledge travel from event to event? The point is that *knowledge does not travel from event to event purely through research channels*. If we assume that the collaboration with, and action from, partners in joint projects is an essential element it means that no interesting event can be created by research alone. Research can never fully take over the construction of each separate event. To reach scale there must be two processes of "diffusion" running in parallel: one within the research community, one among the people concerned. Action research has to design its points and modes of intervention in such a way that it is *the combined effect* of both processes in interaction with each other that is maximised.

Emerging as a partner in the construction of social movements, research does not stand or fall purely with its own efforts. Instead, it shares success as well as failure with other actors. In this sense it is part of what can be called "development coalitions" (Ennals & Gustavsen 1999) rather than a "branch of research" struggling for recognition among numerous "branches of research".

This may, however, seem to leave action research with an even more difficult family of tasks than before. How can we research and report adequately on "movement level" rather than case level? It would be futile to argue that this has been very well done from the programs for which this author has carried some degree of responsibility. The point is, however, that this weakness is not remedied by turning back to classical single case reporting. What is needed is a new generation of efforts to catch initiation, development and results on movement level.

And in turning to this task we do not start completely from zero point:

First we need, as pointed out by Greenwood himself, to more actively use what is done by, for instance, Latin American contributors like Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda: with them focus has all the time been on movements, not on cases². In fact, the study by Greenwood and colleagues of the Mondragon co-operative (Greenwood et al 1992) is much more about a social movement than “an organisation”. There are, however, other works that are often overlooked in discussions about action research. One example is the evaluation by Frieder Naschold of the LOM program in Sweden (Naschold 1993). It would take us too far, in this context, to present the approach and content of this study. It goes, however, a long way towards doing just what Greenwood argues should be done: to link micro and macro, to place each event in a broader context. In doing this, however, each event has to move into the background and be a part of a larger scene rather than stand out as something to investigate in detail. This study was fully read by few, but its impact was major. When action research in working life was made subject to a fierce critique by two American and one Danish-American social scientists (an episode referred to in Greenwood, page 132) the Naschold report did not only block this review from having any effect, it actually turned the tide in the sense that the Research Council of Norway decided to increase investments in action research rather than decrease them. The point in this context is, however, that we cannot face the larger questions of society by digging continuously deeper into an endless series of disconnected groups, however interesting the relationship between the action researcher and each group may be. The shift in focus has far deeper implications. I am, on the other hand, in perfect agreement with Greenwood in the sense that even though there may be some studies that point in the right direction, they are far from sufficient.

Looking at the debates on action research that have occurred over the years one may possibly say that action research has won most of the epistemological debates and lost most of the research policy ones. In spite of occupying the moral high ground, as well as being fully in line with the dialogically oriented, interactive social constructivism that has more and more emerged as the epistemological main ground for the social sciences, action research is still struggling with its legitimacy. There is, after all, limited interest among policy makers, research councils, development agencies, governments and even the people concerned by the social movements to which we relate, in the internal workings of action research and its self-perception in moral and epistemological terms. What these and other bodies and actors are looking for is what does action research deliver to society and what is the scope, solidity and functional properties of these deliveries. The impressive effort of Reason and Bradbury (2000) to bring together much of what today constitutes action research in a global perspective has for the first time made something approaching an overview possible. This constitutes a platform for a renewed debate on action research and Greenwood has made it abundantly clear that on top of the new discourse agenda is the society level impact of action research.

2 See Eduardo Almeida (Mexico) “How to create a social movement” in: “Concepts and Transformation”, vol 7:3 (2002) and Cenio B. Weyh, Danilo R. Streck “Participatory budget in Southern Brazil: A collective and democratic experience”, this issue (editor’s note)

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