

### Discussion Paper: Response to *Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research*

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This paper is a response to the paper entitled *On the Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research* by Fricke, Greenwood, Larrea, and Streck, published in the previous edition of the journal. Their paper raises several important and challenging issues upon which I offer my perspective. I have focussed upon the phenomenon of power and advocate a deeper understanding of the insidious nature of abstract forms of power. I argue that this involves the creation of practices through which such forms of power can be demystified in the interests of the development of *contextual literacy*, that is, the ability to “read” the socio-political contexts accurately and, thereby, ensure relevant strategic action. Creating this capability has implications for the development of new Action Researchers within the context of the Academy. Finally, I explore the challenges facing university-based Action Researchers in their demystification of the institutional power/logic that pre-empts political action through engagement with social movements committed to the protection of democratic ideals and social justice.

### Recognising the centrality of power to the social construction of political realities

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of Action Research, a research methodology embedded in the social constructionist paradigm, underpin the position that social realities are politically constructed and reconstructed by those who wield the most effective forms of power. More important than agentic power, which is easily apprehended and thus open to contestation, are abstract forms of power that operate surreptitiously and insidiously. The demystification of abstract power, and its dynamics, is critical to the aspirational goal of Action Research to contribute to the social construction of political realities in which democratic ideals are realised. The complex task of accurately apprehending these forms of power and their insidious influence, however, constitutes a daunting proposition for those working towards this goal.

Power manifests in many complex forms and the invention of the sophisticated technical apparatus and associated algorithms that underpin insidious forms of surveillance, has added to the forms of abstract power that operate surreptitiously in the interests of power elites. Through such power, these elites facilitate the general experience of a socially constructed political reality as “taken-for-granted”; that is, of being a “natural” and “inevitable” phenomenon of life. Unable to apprehend these forms of power, potential opposition to them is

pre-empted and disarmed. Williams (1977: 110) refers to this form of hegemonic power as manifesting in,

a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values: constitutive and constituting, which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming.

In this way, the political interests that underpin any social reality become invisible, and the potential agentic power of those whose interests are subsumed and distorted by that reality is neutralised (Gramsci, 1971; Berger and Pullberg, 1965). Embedded in everyday practices and vested in dominant discourses (ideological, institutional, cultural, organisational), this form of power shapes the experience of the status quo as an objective feature of life, and mystifies the political and financial interests served by the prevailing social order.

Almost forty years ago, Jameson (1984: 87) recognized neoliberal capitalism's investment in new technology platforms as leading to a system in which,

... not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare, but also even overtly political interventions ... are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves may well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it.

The rise of neo-liberalism globally over the past five decades, has led to an "ideological turn" that has centralised the power of global elites in mystified systemic forms that increasingly incorporate institutions and organisations (Hanlon et al., 2017; Monbiot, 2016; Whitehead and Crawshaw, 2014; Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this respect, Handy (1997) points to the contradictions that prevail in this political reality, where national democracies have become subservient to corporate capitalist organisations that are governed along totalitarian lines.

## Facilitating contextual literacy.

As Fricke *et al.* point out, to address these challenges, Action Researchers need to situate their practices clearly in the global neoliberal capitalist context. This means incorporating practices which are focused upon the demystification of the abstract forms of power that maintain this context and finding ways to counter their influence. Given the challenge of addressing what one fails to apprehend, the complexity of this task necessitates the creation of critical reflexive forums where collaborators are drawn from a broad range of social endeavour (Mastio and Dovey, 2021). Without the probing reflexive engagement of participants, the requisite contextual insight is unlikely to be gained. For such engagement to be productive, though, social capabilities need to underpin the confronting-but-never-combative collective endeavour through which relevant, though controversial, issues are scrutinised courageously (Dovey, Burdon, & Simpson, 2017; Burt, Mackay, van der Heijden, & Verheijdt, 2017). These complex relational/communicational capabilities through which contestation of perspectives and interpretations can be addressed, need to be exercised as "a form of caring" (Spicer, Alvesson, & Karreman, 2009: 548). Such caring acknowledges that the contestation is oriented to achieving the most insightful outcomes for the collective. As such, it is framed specifically by the meaningfulness of the collective purpose and their commitment to the realisation of that purpose.

The introduction of an “external critic” to an Action Research community could be useful for the development of contextual literacy (see Sarason, 1972: 250). This person (or group) accepts the invitation to hold the participants accountable to the vision and values of the Action Research; and to ensure their engagement in collaborative reflexive action. The external critic’s obligation to the group is to contrast apprehensions of the political reality as these manifest within the group. The external critic is not there to be liked, and has no obligation to any individual but, rather, to the vision and values of the action research (see Dovey and White, 2005). However, in practice, the inclusion of critical reflexive practices, such as those espoused by Cunliffe (2009), is likely to be resisted by those with formal power in the community/organisation, who often view such open and critical relational/communicative practices as “subversive” (Hanlon et al., 2017; Kezar, 2011; Pitelis & Wagner, 2019).

The notion of contextual literacy includes the reading of “self as context”. Action Researchers located in universities are especially at risk of allowing values-in-action to contradict espoused values. Personal interests (academic advancement, publication record, etc.) can diminish commitment to the principles of Action Research, resulting in politically compliant behaviour within, and beyond, the Academy. In this respect, continuous clarification of one’s values-in-action is important to an authentic commitment to the values that underpin emancipatory action research. Thus, given the insidious influence of hegemonic power, Freire’s (1972) concept of *conscientisation* and its enactment within Action Research groups is highly relevant. As Fricke *et al.* point out, Freire’s notion of “speaking one’s truth” always entails word-in-action and an awareness of “features of the oppressor” within oneself that must be addressed through critical collectively reflexive practices as part of the “emancipatory, critical, and solidary praxis”.

## The Academy as the font of Action Researchers.

As Fricke *et al.* comment, the “Academy” has a fraught relationship with Action Research. Historically rejecting it as “subjective” and its results as “ungeneralisable”, it has adopted a tactic that Marcuse (1964) referred to as *repressive desublimation*. This refers to a process whereby Action Research is incorporated into the Academy’s body of recognised research methodologies, but in a form in which its philosophical assumptions are undermined, and its political intent is surreptitiously neutralised. Furthermore, collaboration with social movements is frowned upon within the Academy, and by editors and reviewers of many academic journals. This has important implications for the nature of the development of aspirant Action Researchers.

## What do Action Researchers need to do to improve their record in addressing surreptitious and manipulative forms of oppressive power?

As Fricke *et al.* state, the entire Action Research community must take on these challenges if it is to survive and contribute meaningfully to the creation of a more equitable and humane

society. Key to such action is the formation of alliances with democratic social movements critical of the neo-liberal status quo. University-based Action Researchers can play a vital role in introducing and facilitating the critical reflexive forums that are required to demystify abstract power; enable contextual insight; and monitor the honouring of the “reflection-action” dialectic of the movement’s *praxis*. Through roles such as that of an external critic (Sarason, 1972), university-based Action Researchers can introduce and/or strengthen Action Research practices within social movements; ensure the continuous critical scrutiny of the movement’s *espoused* interests versus its *enacted* interests; and mobilise networks of sympathetic power to enhance the capability of social movements to contest the political status quo.

Within the Academy, university-based Action Researchers need to engage in the demystification of the institutional logic which operates surreptitiously in universities. Institutional logic refers to the assumptions and systems of meaning that frame everyday work practices, and through which sense is made of personal and collective experience (Thornton *et al.*: 2012). As Jepperson (1991: 149) points out, institutions are “socially constructed, routine-reproduced programmes or rule systems,” with the taken-for-granted status of these rule systems being a fundamental attribute of institutionalisation. Power and interests underpin the creation and re-creation of institutions where “rationalised myths” help to obfuscate the political interests supported by them. As university practices are embedded in an institutional field, over time they constitute a sense of experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for participants in those practices, to think critically. Manifesting in a “routine and seemingly disinterested way”, institutional logic, serves “to construct, justify and stabilise the obedience of people” without their own awareness thereof (Lawrence *et al.*, 2001: 630; Courpasson, 2000: 143). The demystification of institutional logic is, thus, a necessary precursor to the authentic operation of Action Research within the Academy’s armoury of research methodologies.

In addition to action within the universities in which Action Researchers are located, collective action is required on the conventions of academic journals and the peer review process. Traditional assumptions about what constitutes valid research can be challenged by encouraging respected Action Researchers to take on editorial roles in mainstream journals. Similarly, greater commitment from Action Researchers to reviewing papers in these journals, is required as a contribution to the contestation of the traditional (positivist) assumptions that often inappropriately frame the review of papers utilising an action research methodology.

As Fricke *et al.* point out, pro-social movements generally are not recognised or supported by academic institutions. Furthermore, contesting the power of elites and engaging in processes of demystification of their sources of power is dangerous. Paulo Freire experienced threats to his life and years of exile, and many social leaders are systematically murdered or imprisoned by political regimes across the world. Martin Luther King proclaimed that he only became a real leader once he had overcome his fear of death. His comment points to having clear sources of courage as an important prerequisite for the commitment of Action Researchers to taking on the challenges of demystifying, and mobilising opposition to, the hegemony of ruthless political and financial elites.

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## Discussion

To enrich the discussion initiated by Ken Dovey in the previous paragraphs, Davydd Greenwood and Werner Fricke, two of the authors of *On the Social Productivity and Future Perspectives on Action Research* have shared their comments.

### Comments by Davydd Greenwood:

*General comment on the paper:*

- I find this thoughtful and appropriately challenging. I will make some marginal comments on points that deserve further consideration.

*With reference to the use of the term “Action Research methodology”:*

- I personally do not accept reducing AR to a methodology. It is a politics, ethics, and a process for orchestrating a wide variety of methods in service of more just and sustainable social arrangements.

*With reference to the importance of accurately apprehending insidious forms of power:*

- While Dovey is aware of economics, his heavy reliance on the concept of power overlooks the role of sheer economic exploitation in framing our current problems. ... both political **and** economic interests underpin this exploitation.

*With reference to Dovey’s reference to the point made by Handy (1997):*

- Ok but this argument goes back at least to I. Wallerstein.

*With reference to the concept of an “external critic” being invited to participate within an Action Research community:*

- This is an interesting concept but eventually seems to be limited to academics who fill the role when it is possible for municipal actors, union leaders, NGOs and others to also fulfill this role.

*With reference to the adoption of critically reflexive practices by Action Research communities:*

- This is, of course, true but needs more development. There are options for “shuttle diplomacy” and even what Ann Martin called “guerrilla consulting” where the external critic knows it will affect some power holders negatively and simply does not tell them. The shuttle diplomacy option means consolidating various groups of stakeholders until they are strong enough to confront other power holders.

*With reference to Dovey’s point that the Academy has a fraught relationship with Action Research:*

- In my opinion, it is not a fraught relationship but one of suppression of all prosocial and democratically-inspired social and humanistic research and protection of the status quo. Saying academics should behave otherwise in Neo-Taylorist universities regulated by

neoliberal audit culture ministries is to underestimate the need for AR to reform universities or found their own.

*With reference to university-based Action Researchers playing the role of an “external critic” (Sarason, 1972) in social movements:*

- While I do not reject this role, I do not see it as exclusive to university-based Action Researchers, AR is also practiced in NGOs, some municipal governments, some unions (LO in Norway, for example) and can sit on a broader base than just the academy which itself is under siege.

*With reference to the need to demystify institutional logic as a necessary precursor to the authentic operation of Action Research within the Academy:*

- There have been 20 years of this “demystification” accompanied by an increasing hegemony of neoliberal management of universities. Demystification without “teeth” has not worked.

#### Comments by Werner Fricke:

I agree with Davydd’s comments on Ken Dovey’s discussion piece, especially with his first and second comments: According to our research experience, Action Research cannot be reduced to a methodology. AR is a rich social process, openly based on democratic values such as democratic participation and dialogue. It is, as Davydd points out, “a process for orchestrating a wide variety of methods in service of more just and sustainable social arrangements”.

My second point is about capitalist economy as a source of power. At the beginning of his paper, Ken states that “power manifests in many complex forms”; this general statement is certainly correct, but Ken distinguishes only two forms, namely “agentic power” and “abstract forms of power”. The latter form, in his view, operates surreptitiously and insidiously. “Demystifying” it by accurately comprehending the abstract forms of power and “their insidious influence however constitutes a daunting proposition” for Action Researchers, Ken argues. I fear that this wording (insidious influence, demystification) promotes a kind of mystification of power particularly when there are more appropriate categories available for understanding the phenomenon of power. Examples are:

- structural power or violence (Galtung, 1996)
- power as an aspect of all social relations (Foucault, 1982)
- capital as a form of power enforced on employees to make them hand over their products and the surplus of their work to capital owners without having a say how to use or distribute those products and surpluses
- dialogue as an enactment of power (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2021)

Conceptualised this way it is indeed difficult to understand the many different forms of power and how they are executed. It is challenging and sometimes dangerous [see e. g. the Highlander Centre’s experiences (Horton et al. 1990)] to be confronted with power in Action Research practice and trying to democratise its use. But it need not be a daunting proposition for Action Researchers’ work to favour and strengthen social democracy. Courage is needed



to face power in Action Research, but in many situations it is a test of patience, skill, and commitment our discussion paper on future perspectives for AR argues.

Finally, I want to say that I agree with Ken Dovey, when he mentions mutual advantages for both Action Researchers and social movement actors that would arise from their cooperation. As Ken points out, especially important to both groups of collaborators is the “continuous critical scrutiny of the various movement’s espoused interests versus their enacted interests”, even as their cooperation may mobilise “networks of sympathetic power to enhance the capability of social movements” (and of Action Research, I might add) to contest the social status quo. Of equal importance is Ken’s idea to encourage respected Action Researchers to take on editorial roles in mainstream journals and/or in peer review processes. All the co-authors have experience in this area, sometimes successful and sometimes difficult. Clearly academia, in its present form, is one of the strongholds supporting neoliberal, conservative forces in our societies and is indeed another arena needing democratisation.

Last but not least, the existence of a gap between espoused and enhanced values does sometimes occur in Action Research practice too. The above-mentioned book by Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen is an impressive example of Action Researchers’ self-reflexivity and self-criticism. The authors analyse several Action Research processes which were not able to avoid this espoused/enhanced-values-gap. So to be fair, social movements are not the only actors who have this problem, but Action Researchers also do encounter difficulties in acting according to their values, especially within often hostile social environments. In other words: Action Research and social movements fighting for social democracy often face the same ethical problems. To become successful allies, they must cooperate on equal footing and understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses in a collaborative way.

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## Ken Dovey’s Response

I will first respond to Davydd and Werner’s shared rejection of the notion of Action Research as a “research methodology”. I think that we need to distinguish between *praxis* as a “a process for orchestrating a wide variety of methods in service of more just and sustainable social arrangements” (Davydd’s point) and *action research* as incorporating the practice of publicly sharing the knowledge gained from the honouring of the dialectical relationship



between “theoretically-informed-action” and “action-informed-theory”. As much of the sharing of the knowledge gained from Action Research generally occurs through academic journals and conferences, conforming to the conventions of academically-endorsed methodologies embedded in the publication process, is mandatory within the Academy (this is less the case with books). As research publications are an expected dimension of the work of academics, the Academy as the font of Action Researchers incorporates the notion of a research methodology being applicable to all research activity. I have no problem with this if the philosophical (ontological and epistemological) assumptions that underpin the practices of Action Researchers are honoured. In my experience, though, these assumptions, which are crucial to the framing of the reflexive action of action researchers, are perverted and “disarmed” surreptitiously through the way action research is addressed in mandatory “research methodology” classes.

Both Davydd and Werner agree that greater collaboration between Academy-based Action Researchers and those located within social movements is needed. Such collaboration would enrich the processes through which the tacit learning gained from social action can be transformed into explicit forms of knowledge that strategically inform subsequent spirals of action, and that can be shared publicly more easily

On the issue of power, I agree with both authors on “the role of sheer economic exploitation in framing our current problems” (Davydd’s comment). However, in addition to the visibility of the privileges and abuses that economic power underpins, many important aspects of it are mystified. As my quote from Williams states, such power infiltrates “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living; ... It is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming”. In this way, the hegemony of global elites manifests in the unwitting acceptance by the oppressed of the politico-economic status quo as “natural” and “inevitable”. In this respect, as Freire pointed out, features of the oppressor are internalised as the oppressed unwittingly consent to their own oppression.

Werner feels that I am ignoring certain forms of power in my focus upon abstract forms of power. With respect to his examples, I agree that all relationships have a power dimension, and that power is a resource through which humans make things happen: good and bad. My concern is that abstract forms of power manifest in many social contexts without their influence being apprehended by participants in those contexts. As I pointed out in the paper, they manifest through ideology, institutional logic, enterprise logic, culture, etc., etc. The word limit of the paper restricted my coverage of all these forms of mystified power. Certainly, as Werner points out, structural power is another important form of abstract power (one that manifests in social movements too) that refers to organisational arrangements that over time constitute a sense of experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for embedded participants to think. As the structure and associated practices are reified, alternative forms of everyday arrangements and of problem solving are rendered unimaginable (Seo and Creed, 2002: 235). They influence practices in a routine way and predetermine the nature of the rules of the politico-economic game, inherently mobilising its self-sustaining bias (Soulsby and Clark, 2013). Hardy and Clegg (1999: 377) view structural power as permeating “the fibre and fabric of everyday life,” reflecting and reproducing the organising principles that underpin the accepted nature of social and economic behaviour. My point in listing these references to structural power is that they reflect the view of it being another form of abstract power that manifests surreptitiously and, usually, insidiously. Unless Action Researchers, whether col-

laborating with social movements or not, become aware of “the oppressor within”, their agency is likely to be compromised and disarmed.

Regarding Davydd’s point on “the need for AR to reform universities or found their own”, my perspective is that, as has been the case with historical forms of *praxis* aimed at achieving and sustaining democratic ideals and social justice, Action Researchers should operate within the “belly of the monster”. As agreed by both authors, such action will require courage and strategic sophistication, but it will also enrich the learning that can be gained from such appropriately situated action. It is unlikely that the “monster” will be slayed by hiding from it! Acts intending to demystify its power bases can only “gain teeth” if Action Researchers learn to apprehend how abstract forms of power manifest in the contexts in which their social action is executed.

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