Action Research as Process-Based Knowing

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Abstract: Action research has long been treated as a marginal methodology in the social sciences, largely owing to its lack of fit with modern assumptions about the nature of scientific research. These assumptions, however, are specific to an empiricist paradigm. My aim in the present offering is to lay out the logic of an alternative paradigm, a *process-based* paradigm of knowledge, adequate to the practices of action research and its relatives. This logic touches on issues of pragmatic potential, ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Such a paradigm legitimates an enormously important form of knowledge, otherwise obscured by empiricist hegemony, and opens a generative link between action research and a vast array of inquiry and practice in the social sciences. I shall also propose that the forms of research favored by a process paradigm – and most fully realized in action research – are arguably more significant in their potentials than those available within empiricist tradition. In the contemporary context of rapid change and global peril, the potential contribution of such research is unparalleled.

Keywords: action research, process philosophy, social constructionism, pragmatism.

La investigación-acción como conocimiento basado en procesos

Resumen: La investigación-acción se ha considerado durante mucho tiempo una metodología marginal en las ciencias sociales, en gran medida debido a su falta de adecuación a los supuestos modernos de la investigación científica. Sin embargo, estos supuestos son específicos del paradigma empirista. Mi objetivo en el presente trabajo es exponer la lógica de un paradigma alternativo, un paradigma de conocimiento basado en procesos, adecuado a las prácticas de la investigación-acción y sus afines. Esta lógica aborda cuestiones de potencial pragmático, ontología, epistemología y ética. Dicho paradigma legitima una forma de conocimiento enormemente importante, de otro modo eclipsada por la hegemonía empirista, y establece un vínculo generativo entre la investigación-acción y una amplia gama de indagaciones y prácticas en las ciencias sociales. También propondré que las formas de investigación favorecidas por un paradigma de procesos —y que se materializan plenamente en la investigación-acción— tienen posiblemente un potencial mayor que las disponibles en la tradición empirista. En el contexto contemporáneo de rápidos cambios y peligros globales, la contribución potencial de dicha investigación es incomparable.

Palabras clave: investigación-acción, filosofía de procesos, construccionismo social, pragmatismo.

Introduction

Action research (AR) has always had a puzzling relationship with the dominant research methods in the social sciences. To be sure, AR was *called* research, but its contours bore little resemblance to the accepted practices of modern times. This alienated relationship can largely be traced to the difficulties of incorporating action research practices into the network of assumptions presupposed within contemporary social science. The rationale undergirding the long-dominant paradigm of knowledge – namely *empiricist* – had been richly deliberated, with its two major variations represented by positivism and interpretivism (hermeneutics). While the former promised an objective mapping of the publicly available world of human behavior, the latter primarily focused on the subjective realities of the individual or shared within culture. Contrastingly, for action researchers there was neither behavior nor subjectivity to be illuminated through research. The warrant for employing the term "research" to the activities of AR have thus remained obscure, largely eliminating such initiatives from the canons of research methodology.

Yet, it must also be realized that this exclusion does not mean that action research is without deliberation on a justifying rationale (cf., Eikeland, 2015, Coleman, 2015, Toulmin, 1996). However, rather than trying to "save the scientific legitimacy" of action research by resorting to conventional methods and theories (Eikeland, et al. 2022), the aim of the present offering is to build from these earlier discussions toward an alternative: an integrated, *process-based* paradigm of knowledge, adequate to the practices of action research and its relatives. Such a paradigm would stand in contrast to empiricism, legitimating an enormously important form of knowledge obscured by the empiricist hegemony. I shall also propose that a process-based paradigm opens a generative link between action research and a vast array of inquiry and practice in the social sciences, and the form of knowledge created in these activities is arguably more significant in its potentials than what is available within empiricist tradition. In the contemporary context of global peril, the potential contribution of a process-based paradigm is unparalleled.

To achieve these ends, I divide the analysis into four parts, each treating a specific assumption central to the articulation of a knowledge generating paradigm. The analysis thus places in focus assumptions regarding *pragmatic potential, ontology, epistemology, and ethic*s. While issues of ontology and epistemology are fundamental building blocks in any account of knowledge, the inclusion of pragmatic potential and ethics might be subject to question. Concerning pragmatic potential, both positivist and interpretivist methodologies have largely been guided by truth-dependent justifications. That is, the generation of empirically grounded accounts of the subject matter constitutes the existentially sufficient goal of the science. Whether such accounts are useful to the culture outside science is a secondary matter. As traditionally proposed, the attempt of science is to determine what is true; it is the task of practitioners to deduce promising applications of this knowledge to problems of pragmatic concern.

However, after the postmodern debates of the late 20th century, it is safe to say that there are few scholars who would wish to justify scientific research on the basis of this logic. As we have come to see, knowledge claims are made within particular communities, lodged in the assumptions and practices of those communities. Claims to truth are legitimate only within the discourse and rationales shared within the community. Thus, for example, biology creates