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Management Research News

Special Issue: International Perspectives on Validity in Action Research

Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue has its roots in a series of meetings at the annual EGOS¹ conferences held between 2001 and 2007. The Action Research sub-theme at these annual meetings has attracted almost 200 papers from authors on every continent. A particular focus of the group has been the socio-economic approach to action research developed by Henri Savall and the ISEOR team which discusses what Savall describes as "Generic Contingencies" and a "qualimetrics research methodology" (2003). The meetings have drawn together a truly international grouping of researchers who share a common interest in working closely with the world of practice to "make a difference."

Over the years, many eminent scholars have commented that much of the management research appearing in top-rated academic journals is of little relevance to most practitioners (see Smith and Robey, 1973; Schein, 1987; Gopinath and Hoffman 1995; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002; Aram and Salipante, 2003). Elsewhere, this has been

¹ EGOS is the European Group for Organization Studies. EGOS hosts an annual colloquium in July and the SAGE journal Organization Studies is group's premier publication.

described as “the complex and sometimes problematic relationship between management practice and the practice of management research” (MacLean and MacIntosh, 2002).

Yet, there are no signs concerns over relevance are receding. Those of us who dedicate our lives to the study of management and organizations sometimes seem unsure whether practitioners even know that we exist. The vibrant action research community, established through the annual EGOS meetings, regard calls for greater relevance as nonsensical since action research takes relevance as something of a given.

Whilst this may seem encouraging, it is worth pointing out that action research has an uncomfortable relationship to the mainstream of management and organizational research. Qualitative research is sometimes styled as the poor cousin of “real science” and something which is best kept in “the closet” (Sutton, 1997). If this is the case, action research is the poor cousin’s downtrodden neighbour.

Action research does not feature regularly in most major international journals. Indeed, a recent analysis of publications showed that action research appeared only sporadically in top journals and that two thirds of the papers written on the subject were actually discussions of the merits of the method itself. Excluding these method papers, some top-ranked academic journals featured as few as one example of action research per decade (MacIntosh and Wilson, 2003).

This special issue of Management Research News, draws together contributions from leading scholars in the US, Australia and Europe to consider the tricky question of validity in the conduct of action research. In particular, the contributors offer views on the relative standing of action research in their own national communities. Individually the papers are thought provoking and interesting. Collectively they point to clear international differences in the way(s) in which action research is perceived by peers, funders, publishers and students.

Judi Marshall and Peter Reason open the special issue on validity in action research by discussing their passionate concern “with the *doing* of quality research.” Their paper discusses characteristics such as curiosity and humility which they have found useful in the pursuit of quality research. They point out that they are acutely aware that “research [is] a political process.” Placing their own work into a specific UK context, they observe that the formal assessment of research activity in universities² tends to encourage conformist behaviours. They conclude that research funders, in the UK at least, seem hesitant to sponsor action research despite being drawn to the promise of greater user engagement which it offers.

Next, David Coghlan’s paper discusses the particular challenges and opportunities presented to those who research their organizations from the inside. For Coghlan, “insider action researchers need to build on the closeness they have with the setting,

² In the UK, the Research Assessment Exercise or RAE is an audit performed every few years by the UK government as a means of assessing the level of activity in every UK university, ranking the relative quality of individual departments and distributing research funds accordingly.

while, at the same time create distance from it in order to see things critically and enable change to happen.” Coghlan also acknowledges that insider action research has its difficulties in gaining acceptance within the academic community. In his experience, the dominant view is still that research paradigms which hold closeness and involvement dear are inimical to good research.

Peter McInnes, Nic Beech and Paul Hibbert focus their paper on an analysis of the language games within which any research activity takes place. Action research is considered within a particular set of dominant narratives and the authors point to the egalitarian notion of research practitioners and clients working together in a climate of participation and empowerment is one that is deeply embedded in action research. The next paper in the special issue, by Richard Badham, Karin Garrety and Michael Zanko, takes this constructionist perspective a step further. Writing about their experience of action research in Australia, these authors offer an account of triumph and disaster coexisting in a single project. Interestingly, in the Australian context, Action Research was seen as helpful in terms of securing funding from the Australian Research Council, yet their paper suggests that even this is not unproblematic. Badham and his colleagues also point to the potential benefits and limitations of being close to the client organization when they note that “although publishing controversial material is risky, the scope for doing so is increased when long term links with companies are tenuous [and when] personal ethics and basic anonymity requirements are addressed.”

Abraham Maslow is credited with the saying that when you only have a hammer you tend to approach all problems as if they are nails. The penultimate paper of this special issue adopts a similar line when Mark Hillon and David Boje postulate that “action researchers impose a set of unrelated constraints on every environment that they encounter.” They go on to argue validity is dependent on the ideology, worldview and experiences of those making the judgment. Their paper also points toward fascinating issues such as the legal liabilities of Action Researchers, which is certainly an under explored theme.

Finally, the special issue closes with a fascinating assessment of validity and epistemology based on ancient philosophy. Olav Eikeland offers a succinct overview of the evolution of Action Research in both the US and Europe and makes a real contribution to the special issue on this basis alone. However, he goes on to comment on the “turn to practice” which characterizes recent debates in subjects like strategy (e.g. Whittington, 2006) and points to the emergence of so called Mode 2 knowledge production (see Maclean et. al., 2002). He argues that “the conditions are ripe for a permanent suspension of the division between the researcher and the researched” and offers a detailed dissection of ways of knowing in action research.

In drawing the articles together for this special issue, we hoped that we could shed some light on the relative standing of action research in a variety of international contexts. These vary hugely from the widespread acceptance of the method in the Scandinavian countries to the feeling of being “on the fringe” alluded to by those from the UK, the US and Australia. We hope that you enjoy the articles and that they provoke in you some reflection on your own attitudes toward action oriented forms of research.

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