LIVING INQUIRY: PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDINGS FOR ACTION RESEARCH PRACTICE
Chapter One

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A key objective for the second edition of this *Handbook* was to reflect the variety of ways in which action research is grounded in our lived experience and ideas. In keeping with the participative ethos of action research, and inspired by the success of the first paper of the inaugural issue of the journal Action Research, called simply ‘Why Action Research?’ (Brydon-Miller et al, 2003), we contacted members of the Handbook’s Editorial Board and asked them to send us a brief outline sharing the most significant perspectives that ground their action research practice. We received many thoughtful and engaged responses to our request.¹

What struck us as particularly significant was the degree to which our colleagues underscored:

- The importance of *practice* and *life experiences* (and these as integrated with – and often preceding – philosophical, political, and intellectual underpinnings).
- The *web* of relationships, events, influences, role models, and experiences which underpins action researchers’ practice (and which has done so over time).

The contribution this chapter seeks to make is to detail the scholarly and intellectual threads identified by our colleagues and friends in the action research community, and to point to further reading for those interested in pursuing these. Additionally we hope to offer evidence of some of the ways in which the thoughtful integration of various theoretical perspectives and life experiences gives rise to well-developed personal paradigms which both shape and explain action researchers’ being and acting in the world.

**Living life matters**
The majority of respondents place life experiences among the primary influences that underpin their action research. These experiences often sit alongside, or even give rise to, interest in particular philosophical and intellectual perspectives, so that both theory and practice are seen as providing grounding. For example our colleagues shared that,

“…practice was my real learning ground…” (Yoland Wadsworth)

“…My philosophical self is kept in motion by my pragmatic and practical self, and here my education has come from the community activists I’ve worked with over many years.” (Mary Brydon-Miller)

“Conscientisation and the cyclical action-reflection-action as articulated by Paolo Freire gave grounding to the notion that knowing can be rooted in critical reflection of one’s actions; Myles Horton’s practice at Highlander Center with literacy and voter registration in Appalachia and struggles against racial discrimination during civil rights movements provided practical validity to the notions of ‘making the road while walking’.” (Rajesh Tandon)

“The most significant philosophical and political influences continue to be the living theories of practitioner-researchers…” (Jack Whitehead)
“My research, action and participation journey has been influenced more by field and life experiences and the excitement and fun of epistemological puzzles than by philosophical or political perspectives.” (Robert Chambers)

Furthermore, a number of Editorial Board members responded to our request with detailed accounts representing their life journeys and describing the web of influence that have sustained and contributed to their work over time. These webs encompass a wide range of influences, including personal and collegial relationships; encounters with role models; political and other significant events; spiritual disciplines; literature (fiction and non-fiction); activism and engagement with practitioners. For example:

“My deepest understanding of the relevance of participatory forms of inquiry for action comes from my research experiences with practitioners and activists, first in Colombia and then in the US. I have shared with them the dream of a different world and their wisdom has contributed to transform me as much as it has helped transform their practice and sharpen their skills to change the world.” (Sonia Ospina)

“Thinking over the influences I draw on in my daily work, it seems to me that people and experiences have on balance been more important than ideas and theory, although the latter have been important too.” (Bob Dick)

“It is difficult for me to clearly distinguish ‘philosophical and political’ influences from general intellectual and spiritual influences as well as from the
experiences, practices, and relationships in which many of those influences are embedded.” (Victor Friedman)

Some respondents describe a gradual and ongoing process of developing understanding, while others talk about ‘Aha!’ moments through which significant meaning emerges. Orlando Fals Borda was one of the last to respond to our request, and so was able to reflect on other responses in his own reply:

“I tend to identify such collective examination as a praxiological experiment. Theory and practice, thinking-persons and life-experiences (vivencias), how they interact, fuse, and react in the search for explanations to understand realities and promote social progress appear to have been a driving force for respondents.” (Orlando Fals Borda)

Fals Borda’s description of different influences interacting and fusing with one another in the search for explanations seems particularly apt. There is conscious and meaningful integration in people’s stories: integration of theory and practice; of scholarship and activism; and more generally, integration of numerous perspectives and life experiences into meaningful accounts, each of which seems to be intimately tied to the particular context, place, time, and life history of each person. It is evident that each person’s understanding and practice of action research does not to stand in isolation from other aspects of their being-in-the world; instead, action research both emerges from and contributes to a complex and panoramic view of the world in which one lives and one’s own particular place within it. Judi Marshall has described this elsewhere as ‘living life as inquiry’ (1999).
Grounding ourselves in the participative, interdependent ecology of life

A number of the contributors to this chapter refer—in different ways and with varying degrees of explicitness—to a participatory worldview underlying their work. For example, Werner Fricke refers to “participation as a central dimension in human life as well as in nature and between humans and non humans” and in so doing points to the work of Peter Reason (1994) and of French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour (1993), and specifically his ‘parliament of things’. Furthermore, Fricke acknowledges the influence of the ‘philosophy of process’ formulated by German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1995), and puts forward the following perspective:

“All situation, any context, any institution or structure we find ourselves in is just a historical moment within a process of permanent change. This means we are coming out of the past going into the future. Everything is changing and may be changed. Humans and society are open to the future.” (Werner Fricke)

In his response, Orlando Fals Borda speaks of the “moral urge [which] undergirds (Participatory)Action Research”, referring to a participatory epistemology which he locates in the work of Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), Fritjof Capra (1982, 1996), Paul Feyerabend (1975), and more broadly, systemic analysts and some quantum physicists. Certainly, Bateson’s argument that the conscious, purposive human mind which sees itself as separate from the ecological whole leads to ‘pathologies of
epistemology’ parallels the concerns expressed by many within the action research community (see Reason, 2007).

The participative nature of life was approached from a variety of perspectives: Yoland Wadsworth, for example, refers to the interconnectedness of life with a bow to the biological and ecological sciences:

“…Perhaps the earliest truly transformative influence of all was ‘The Web of Life’—a then-new Australian biology textbook in 1967 for upper secondary students—that opened my eyes at the age of 15 to an ecological perspective. When I edited the school magazine the following year I re-named it ‘Cell’ and wrote a ‘systems piece’ as an Editorial on the varying meanings of ‘cell’ from biology to a monk’s! And two years later in August 1970 in a sociology lecture I suddenly realised with a blinding flash EVERYTHING was connected—from humans to duckponds to women's magazines to mining companies.” (Yoland Wadsworth)

Reference was also made to a range of religious and spiritual influences underpinned by participatory understandings. Mary Brydon-Miller refers to the Quaker notion that “there is that of God in each of us, and in all of creation”, pointing out that this is a philosophy that Quakers share with many other world religions. This perspective, although framed in religious terms, is in line with the epistemological challenge to subject-object and matter-consciousness dualisms articulated in other chapters of this Grounding section (xxxx, see also xxxx). Victor Friedman, drawing from the Hebrew Bible and a wide variety of Jewish thinkers, identifies a central influence in the view
that “people are partners with God, and each other, in an on-going process of creation”. Along similar lines, Peter Reason identifies the “Buddha’s teaching that attachment to a sense of separate self is the cause of suffering” as an essential perspective influencing his work. Bill Torbert refers to the interplay of consciousness, knowledge, practice, and consequences to which he was first introduced by the work of Russian writer and mystic George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1963) and Russian mathematician, philosopher and journalist Peter D. Ouspensky (1931). He explains that “these [authors] spoke of a secret and lost knowledge that linked the spiritual and material worlds through a work of continual self-observation that the aspirant must conduct within him or herself, with the help of others”. The resurgence of Buddhist practice in the West also plays with the same sense of locating the self in experience of the world, very far from discovering through intellectual effort alone.

The spiritual perspectives outlined by respondents lay emphasis on the conviction that life is not a spectator sport but that participation is fundamental to the nature of our being, or an ontological given, a view articulated both by action researchers (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 1997; Reason and Bradbury, 2001) and other contemporary writers (Ferrer, 2002; Tarnas 1991, 2006; Berry 1999). These perspectives have clear implications for practice and for how our colleagues mentioned above choose to live and act in the world. Peter Reason, for example, suggests that Buddhist teaching sits comfortably with the emerging Western traditions of reflective practice that find expression in the work of Chris Argyris (1985) and Donald Schön (1983; Argyris and Schön, 1974). Similarly, Bill Torbert claims that “because the Gurdjieff work penetrated most deeply into my moment-to-moment awareness practice, it can be said
to have left the deepest influence-trace on my work”. Mary Brydon-Miller explains that she draws on her spiritual understanding in the practicalities of her work, while Victor Friedman forges strong links between his participatory religious understanding and questions of how to live one’s life:

“My current work focuses largely on questions related to ethics and action research, and here I find that I am most influenced by the example set by the Society of Friends…” (Mary Brydon-Miller)

“…the world is good but evil exists; our lives have purpose and our actions matter; we sanctify life through right action but we can never be sure what those actions are; we need to strive for justice but also for humility and acceptance of the limits to what we can know and do; living is meeting, dialogue, love, and relationship (Martin Buber, 2000).” (Victor Friedman)

Confronting the question of how we know in a post objectivist world

In addressing the epistemological questions of how we know what we know and what it is that we value as knowledge, many contributors referred to the theory of scientific revolutions and paradigm shifts articulated by Thomas Kuhn (1962). Similar mention was made of theories as changing social constructs as expounded by Karl Popper (1959), Paul Feyerabend (1975) and Stephen Toulmin (1990), amongst others. Peter Reason, for example, explains that he was particularly influenced by “the historical argument of Stephen Toulmin which places Cartesian thought as in part a response to the political needs of the times”. Meanwhile, Jack Whitehead explains that his
advocacy of “living epistemological standards of judgment” is strongly influenced by Feyerabend, “when he wrote about the meaning of freedom being understood in the course of its emergence through practice”. Whitehead points to Habermas (1975), Foucault (2000), Bernstein (1983) and Winter (1989) as focussing his attention on the importance of transforming the epistemological standards of judgment in the Academy: “I continue to use [Habermas’] four criteria of social validity in reaching understanding”.

For many, epistemological debates are closely linked with the social construction of reality perspectives articulated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), John Searle (1995) and the ‘linguistic turn’ heralded by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) and Richard Rorty (1970). Kenneth Gergen commends this stream of work for “demonstrating the ways in which assumptions about the real, the rational and the good issue from relationships.” “Thus, we may use research not simply to reflect the past, but to create new futures”. Gergen also identifies perspectives on the pragmatics of language as a key influence: “shifting from a picture theory of language to a use-based (or game) understanding of language raises questions about the aims of social science to develop general theory, and invites a more pragmatic and dialogically based orientation to research”.

Along similar lines, Victor Friedman is explicit about the influence of American mathematical social scientist Herbert Simon’s (1969) argument that social life is a ‘design’ process. In line with Simon’s interest “not with how things are but with how they might be” (1969:xx), Friedman points also to the elements of choice and agency in processes of social construction. He identifies as a key influence the belief that
“there is a link between individual theories of action, collective theories of action, and the realities we create. Most important, we have choices about these realities”. In doing so, Friedman points to John Dewey’s (1982) pragmatism and ‘theory of inquiry’. The pragmatist position suggests that knowledge is acquired through responding to a real need in life, something also identified as a key influence by Morten Levin and Hilary Bradbury. Hilary also specifically highlights how, for her pragmatism rescues our appreciation of learning from academic understanding and instead allows us to also emphasize active experimentation. Hence what GE managers may call ‘quality improvement,’ and indeed what Deming the father of the quality movement in the USA called ‘quality’ is but one iteration of the action research cycle of reflection on action.

Stephen Kemmis’s account suggests that, like many of the action researchers who responded to our request, he has played an active role in weaving together the different threads of influence with which he was presented over time, resulting in a well-grounded conviction that alternative epistemological standards were required:

“As a young researcher in educational psychology at the University of Sydney and then as a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the 1970s debates in history and philosophy of science (Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos [1986], Paul Feyerabend, Stephen Toulmin, Donald Campbell [1974], especially evolutionary epistemology, overturned my ‘inherited’ empiricist and positivistic understanding of science, alerted me to the ‘linguistic turn’ (Wittgenstein) and pushed me towards interpretivism and historical understanding…and what later became known as qualitative
research…I began to explore dialectics through Hilary Putnam [1975] and the Marxist tradition, including a fine account of dialectics offered by the now-disgraced Mao Tse Tung [1972]. I became convinced that a science was needed that properly acknowledged each person’s capacity to develop knowledge – their own and others’.” (Stephen Kemmis)

**Critical perspectives on the politics of knowledge generation**

Many of the contributors reported being influenced by the tradition of critical social science. Kenneth Gergen, for example, notes the importance of wide-ranging theoretical domains which break the fact/value binary and demonstrate that all knowledge claims are political in their implications. As a result many responses were embedded within critiques of domination and marginalisation, and referred to frameworks and traditions that advocate critical examination of issues of power, identity and agency. These include civil rights and feminist movements; liberationist adult and trade union education; post-colonial and critical race theory; anti-war and ecological protests as well as the student democracy movement. L. David Brown, for instance, suggests that he was “more influenced in the long term by the more macro perspectives than the social psychological tradition that [he] was steeped in as a graduate student”, and refers to the perspectives on oppression and liberation voiced by Paulo Freire (1972), Frantz Fanon (2004), Karl Marx (1970), William Gamson (1992) and participatory researchers in Southern contexts. He mentions also the perspectives on power, conflict and collaboration given expression by such commentators as Stephen Lukes (1974), Lewis Coser (1998) and Ralf Dharandorf (1959). Along similar lines, Stephen Kemmis credits Pierre Bourdieu (2004) and
Michel Foucault (2000) as key influences: “In different ways, [they] enabled me to understand that structures of oppression could be described as well as ‘unmasked’.” He continues:

“Anthony Giddens (1984) helped me understand the nature and role of agency in dialectical relationship with social structure – and the resistant and transformative possibilities of agency. Alain Touraine (1983) made this even clearer in his analysis of social movements (as disturbing and challenging settled social orders).” (Stephen Kemmis)

That epistemological pathologies—including the notions of an objective, value-free, expert science—were responsible for perpetuating and reinforcing social injustices and inequalities is a perspective also held by Yoland Wadsworth. She gives due credit to those influences which, during the 1980s, provided “a new epistemological paradigm of engagement [which went] beyond the narrow exclusivity of replicative and objectivist science”. This was made possible, she suggests, by sociologists like Howard Becker (1997) and Alvin Gouldner (1976) and feminists like Mary O’Brien (1981). Robin McTaggart also acknowledges the influence of critical social scientists such as David Held (1989), Walter Feinberg (1975) and Henry Giroux (1983) “for showing us that thinking interpretively alone was deafeatist and failed to inform transformative practices”.

The emancipatory power of critical perspectives on social science is emphasized in Patricia Maguire’s account of the key influences which were significant to her. She explains that it was while simultaneously engaging in feminist community activism
and studying feminist scholarship (including Shulamit Reinharz [1992], Renate Duelli Klein [1985], Sandra Harding [1987], Marjorie DeVault [1991], Liz Stanley [1992] and Ann Oakley [1984]) that she was able to ‘see’ the androcentrism or male-centricness of much early PAR work, and the conspicuous lack of attention to issues of gender dynamics, gender inequities and feminist scholarship. The ‘ah-ha’ moment described by Maguire below appears to resonate with the experience of a number of respondents, for whom integration of a variety of perspectives and experiences in a specific time and place brought forth step changes in clarity and understanding:

“The early critiques (1980s) of the entire development paradigm and enterprise by feminists in the ‘south’ (e.g. DAWN with Peggy Antrobus [2004] and Patricia Ellis [2003], and the ISIS network) created a grand ‘ah-ha’ for me. There ARE other ways to ‘see’ and make sense of the world, so make room for them at the table of meaning making.” (Patricia Maguire)

Maguire explains that she is also influenced by the work of feminist action researchers such as Marjorie Mbilinyi (2003), Patti Lather (2007), Gunilla Härnsten (2001), Brinton Lykes (1996), Alice McIntyre (2000), Yoland Wadsworth (1997), Nimat Hafez Barazangi (2004) and Colleen Reid (2004), amongst others.

Like so many action researchers, women and men, for whom feminism offered a new lens through which a transformative vision of the world could come to consciousness, Hilary also mentioned the work of ‘constructive feminists’ (in contrast with critical theory feminists). These include ecofeminists (e.g., Susan Griffin) and cultural theory feminists such as Riane Eisler. Eisler offers a vision of culture anchored no longer in
the dominator hierarchies of Barbarian past but rather in the partnership principles from the still deeper past of Minoan (Crete’s) Civilization. Hilary writes that ‘while the historicity may still be contested, the language and vision of partnership has been so constructive in my thinking about action research.’” Moreover, given her particular commitment to convening decision makers from the business world to work collaboratively in action research mode in developing joint innovations that contribute to a more sustainable society --or at the very least, actions that create significant pollution reduction-- the idea that we hold our ecological interdependence in our DNA is very empowering.

How do we teach given all we know?

Unsurprisingly, many respondents identified critical perspectives on pedagogy as a key influence. Frequent reference was made to Paulo Freire’s (1972) work on the pedagogy of the oppressed, conscientisation and liberationist adult education and to the work of Budd Hall (1978) and Mohan Singh Mehta (1974). Along similar lines, perspectives which problematised the institutionalisation of education and called for ‘de-schooling’ and non-formal democratic education were singled out (including the work of Herbert Kohl [1984], Neil Postman and Carl Weingartner [1969]). Robin McTaggart, for instance, explains that his interest in participatory action research originated from a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the ‘educational research’ tradition to which he was introduced as an undergraduate and postgraduate student training to be a high school science teacher:
“Educational research’ was then really a form of applied psychological research and suffered the failings of psychology as a research field at that time, [the] preoccupation with emulating the natural sciences in social enquiry. I found the generalisations sponsored by educational psychology to have little applicability in the early days of my high school science teaching career. My problems were immediate, pedagogical and reflexive. I required the perspective of an educator, not a psychologist, or sociologist, or philosopher, or scientist, or teacher, or political economist, but all of them.” (Robin McTaggart)

McTaggart and Kemmis both acknowledge the influence of the neo-Aristotelian perspectives put forward by the likes of Joseph Schwab (1969), which leads us to “see natural science as a process of enquiry rather than the recitation of a ‘rhetoric of conclusions’” (McTaggart) and which emphasises the distinction between practical reasoning from technical thinking. For a recent thorough exploration of the relevance of Aristotelian thought—and especially the concept of phronésis—to action research, see Eikeland (2006).

McTaggart states that his interest in action research was particularly stimulated by its transformative potential, and by the attention given to the question: How might we change things at the same time as studying them? He explains that while the sociological studies of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976), for example, affirmed his view that educational institutions reproduced disadvantage, these approaches to research did little to suggest how things might change, despite the daily efforts and successes of teachers and school leaders. In stark contrast, Paulo Freire
and the participatory research movement “provided fine and often courageous examples of transformative research and educational practices and theories”.

In a similar vein, Patricia Maguire explains that alongside the feminist ‘ah-ha’ moments described earlier, she was also significantly affected by ‘people and place’: specifically, her relationships with people at and through the Center for International Education (UMASS, Amherst) in the early 1980s, where she “came to understand the connections among empowering education, participatory processes, and knowledge creation in service to meaningful social change”. The following extract from Maguire’s account highlights the important role played by personal meetings, interactions and collegial relationships in the development of one’s own action research practice:

“CIE was well known for promoting Freirian, empowering, non-formal education in development projects. Many of us there grappled with how to make our research more congruent with the transformational possibilities of participatory non-formal education. A steady stream of visitors such as Paulo Freire, Myles Horton (Horton et al., 1990), and Ira Shor (1992), and faculty members David Kinsey (1978) and Peter Park (1993) introduced us to PAR. There I met Mary Brydon-Miller and continue to be influenced by her work on ethics in AR (see Brydon-Miller et al., in press) and linking participatory research and psychology. My AR work continues to be nourished by my collegial relationship with Mary. Through CIE I was introduced to the work of Peter Reason, Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon (xxxx), and later Davyyd Greenwood (xxxx) – particularly Davyyd’s work to link AR and democratic
processes. I’m inspired by Davyyd’s commitment to teach AR democratically.” (Patricia Maguire)

Likewise, Anisur Rahman clearly articulates the ways in which pedagogical concerns were brought into relief through his engagement with marginalised community groups; realisations which were affirmed and reinforced through a reading of Freire:

“My interaction in 1976-77 with the Bhoomi Sena movement in the state of Maharastra (India) by way of participatory study of the movement with three other South Asian scholars (de Silva et al., 1979) made me deeply aware of the need for work to promote intellectual self-capacity and self-assertion of the underprivileged people to guide their self-development. Through this interaction I zeroed in on two realizations: (1) self-reliant development was not possible with some one else’s thinking; and (2) the formidable status of formal knowledge with its associated power had created a sense of intellectual inferiority among the ordinary people making them surrender to or look up to the formally educated for guidance to promote their lives, and they needed help and stimulation from friendly and deeply sensitive quarters in the formally educated stream to recover their self-confidence in their own intellectual abilities. Reading Paulo Freire consolidated this new awareness in me.” (Anisur Rahman)

Knowing in the service of practice
Practical know-how, a ‘popular science of and for the people’, is identified as a key influence by many of our colleagues. This is understood as the diverse and effective forms of knowledge generation long-practiced by ordinary people, unencumbered by the intervention or so-called expertise of scientists and elites. This is closely related to the idea of an ‘extended’ epistemology which encompasses experiential and practical knowing. Significant credit for this perspective is given to Freire, and alongside him to Orlando Fals Borda (1988), Anisur Rahman (1993; see also Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991), Rajesh Tandon (1983), John Gaventa (1991) and Budd Hall (1978).

Tandon identifies the knowledge of ordinary people as a key influence in his work, one that he continues to lean on and build from:

“Indigenous knowledge based on life and living, linked to solving daily problems of survival, transmitted through various folk forms of music, theatre, dance, poetry, drama—oral and aesthetic traditions of knowledge production, documentation and communication; popular knowledge and wisdom, as revealed in ecological and healing traditions and sciences, now popularized by modern markets.” (Rajesh Tandon)

Meanwhile, Sonia Ospina explains that sociological theories giving primacy to social interaction, meaning-making, language, culture, everyday life and local knowledge served to clarify and refine her own commitment to linking inquiry to participation and action. In this context, she refers to the work of Max Weber (1958), George Herbert Mead (1934), Herbert Blumer (1998) and Peter Berger (1963), and speaks of these as tempered by recent post-modernist influences and, even more recently, by ‘feministas de la diferencia’ like Maria Milagros Rivera Garretas (1997).
The phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions propagated by Edmund Husserl (1989), Hans-Georg Gadamer (2000), Jürgen Habermas (1981), Paul Ricœur (1981) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004) are also often referred to by the contributors to this chapter. Marja-Liisa Swantz, for example, describes how an orientation towards phenomenology and hermeneutics helped her to develop a practical appreciation of the forms of knowing expressed in symbol and ritual amongst people:

“Paul Ricœur’s (1981) idea that symbol precedes language and rational thought and Susanne Langer’s (1979) human need for symbolization and differentiating discursive from presentational symbolism led me to the analysis of the symbols and rituals of the people I lived and worked with and whose way of life I struggled to understand. Anthropologists Victor Turner (1986) and Mary Douglas (2003) developed my ideas of symbolism further. This emphasis on presentational rather than rational symbolism was at the base of my belief that people who communicated with symbols had knowledge and understanding of life which could broaden the concept of development dominating people’s lives. I found support from writers such as Robert Ulin’s (2001) Understanding Cultures, Ernst Fischer’s (1969) Art Against Ideology, Thomas Fawcett’s (1971) The Symbolic Language of Religion, Don Ihde’s (1986) Consequences of Phenomenology and William Barrett’s (1990) Irrational Man, amongst others…In spite of the emphasis on presentational symbolism I understood that it had to lead also to rational understanding of one’s situation and that the way to it was through mutual communication (Swantz, 1970).” (Marja-Liisa Swantz)
The tradition of the human potential movement and the emphasis on individual consciousness as key leverage for systems change are identified as key influences by Hilary Bradbury and Yoland Wadsworth. Key insights are gleamed here from C. Wright Mills’s (1963) relationship between ‘private troubles and public issues’; Charles Hampden-Turner’s (1981) work, identified by Wadsworth as “a psychology of being – but also a methodology for becoming”; and Abraham Maslow (1968) and other humanistic or ‘third force’ psychologists. The humanistic perspective which advocates that persons have the capacity to direct their own lives in ways which are life-affirming and constructive for themselves and others in their social contexts is one which resonates with action researchers. Indeed, identifying and strengthening such potential could be seen as a key objective of action research practice, as suggested by Werner Fricke:

“The human desire and capacity for participation and self determination is often suppressed (e.g. by life long work under poor, monotonous, unqualified working conditions), but cannot be destroyed. We called the employees’ participative capacity ‘innovative qualifications’ (Fricke, 1983).” (Werner Fricke)

Friedman makes a related point when he refers to the subconscious as a storehouse of unutilised knowledge and a potent source of healing and learning, as described, for example, by psychiatrist and hypnotherapist Milton Erickson (1985). Friedman also makes particular reference to the work of Sigmund Freud (1961), Melanie Klein (1992), Kurt Lewin's (1958) ideas of ‘psychological-social space’, and Wilfred Bion’s
(1961) and Larry Hirschhorn’s (1988) perspectives on ‘social defences’. The psychoanalytic tradition is also identified as a key influence by Yoland Wadsworth. She refers specifically to Isobel Myers and Katherine Briggs’ (1987) application of Jungian psychology to self and human understanding and to Isabel Menzies Lyth’s (1988) work on social systems as a defence against anxiety. The influences delineated above speak of action researchers’ commitment to the development of self-awareness, moment-to-moment reflexivity, and to the ongoing examination of patterns of thought, behaviour and relating which may no longer be generative or helpful.

Creating the future: why our work is significant

It will perhaps come as no surprise to readers of this volume that a desire to contribute towards ‘a better future’ is evident in many of the accounts offered to us. Anisur Rahman, for instance, is clear about the motivation and vision underlying his interest and move into action research. For him, the worth of P(A)R is in its potential to contribute to people’s self-development and self-reliance:

“My departure from traditional research and development thinking was spurred by the War of Liberation of Bangladesh of 1971, when I was a Harvard-trained economist of thirty eight. The independence of Bangladesh with its officially declared socialist ideology inspired me and many others to think that the country could and would march forward with whatever resources it had, relying principally on the energy and creativity of its vast population however resource-poor the country was, without depending on
external charity and submitting its autonomy to foreign powers seeking to impose on other countries an ideology of pursuit of private greed and dividing the nation's people into an elite and non-elite class… I [became] convinced that initiatives for *people's self-reliant development* was the way for the nation to march forward with its head high…With this awareness I joined the ongoing intellectual movement to experiment with Participatory (Action) Research and to deepen its conceptual contours, as a movement to promote ‘people's self-development’, seeing P(A)R not as a research *method* but as an organic component of people's self-development.” (Anisur Rahman)

Davyyd Greenwood explains that it was through his involvement in an action research project that he began to more critically engage with the political and axiological dimensions of knowledge generation:

“The most important elements in my own development as an action researcher are a combination of academic and work experiences. I was ushered into action research by William Foote Whyte (1991), who took advantage of my long-time anthropological research in the Basque Country to involve me in a project on the industrial cooperatives of Mondragón. In the context of that collaboration… I gained a renewed sense of the potential value of the social sciences to creating liberating social arrangements, the power and value of democracy (even under difficult conditions), and the degree to which real social problems exceed the pathetically narrow confines that the academic social sciences with their Fordist models of organization want to impose on them.” (Davydd Greenwood)
Kurt Neilsen also emphasises the transformative, value-driven potential of action research practice. From Robert Jungk (1954) and Ernst Bloch (1995) he takes the perspective that social imagination, dreams and utopian ideals are living parts of culture, and that integrating social imagination with practical change “keeps alive hope” for the possibility of radical change. He quotes Robert Jungk’s conviction that “many futures are possible”. He refers also to the lessons learned from critical theory and psychoanalysis, including the suggestion that “we all need an open and uninstrumental arena to reach awareness and to increase social imagination”. It is in this context that Neilsen identifies the real worth and contribution of action research: “In action research we organise such arenas as social movement/social learning.”

The question of how best to organise appropriate and significant arenas for social learning is one that is close to Bjørn Gustavsen’s heart. Gustavsen’s work focuses on a key challenge facing the action research tradition, that relating to the question of scale. His account emphasises the evolutionary nature of action research practice, where experimentation and reflection on action gives rise to new challenges and considerations about quality and effectiveness, and about how we might best position and organise ourselves so as to create better futures:

“The problem was not action research or not, but how to improve on the specific action research tradition in which I found myself. Being strongly involved in efforts to create more democratic forms of work organisation, we faced, in my view, two major issues: One was to democratize our own efforts to encompass many workplaces rather than a few experimental sites, the other
was to further develop the notion of democracy to give more specific guidelines in a project where scale emerged as the important issue.

Against this background I found critical theory, as it stood after ‘the democratic turn’ – represented in particular by Jürgen Habermas (1981) – to be a promising point of departure. The orientation towards society, rather than ‘you and I’ or the small group, was consistent with a need to reach scale and the emphasis on communication was consistent with the core tool of action research. Its weakness was too much of a one-way traffic from theory to practice to fit the more open and explorative use of action characterising contemporary action research. This gave rise to a new challenge: How to change the relationship between theory and practice to provide more scope for action and experience in the development of a critical function in democratic society? To work out answers to this question has implied to embark on a process of action research and ‘social constructivism’ that has, by now, been going on for more than two decades. (Bjørn Gustavsen)

On ‘making the road while walking'

We conclude this chapter by drawing on those accounts which, in their own ways, consider how the integration of our life experiences and grounding perspectives help us action researchers to respond to the question of how we should live our lives. In other words, given the broad philosophical orientations described above, what would effective practice look like? Many of the accounts offered to us demonstrate that the
translation of philosophical, theoretical and political perspectives into practical knowing and/or active engagement is considered of utmost importance.

A significant number of our colleagues explain that they were particularly drawn to role models or teachers who evidenced integration of theory and practice in their own lives. In talking about the various figures that were influential to him, Bill Torbert identifies effectiveness, integrity and the search for wisdom as key qualities. These are arguably the kinds of qualities which become evident through one’s processes and acts of living in the world, and indeed, the influential figures he names are well-known for their activeness and for the practical contributions of their life’s work:

“Thinking about it now, I realize that the first figure to have a major influence on me—Bill Coffin (1999), the Yale minister whom I first heard preach once a year at Andover and then allied myself with closely at Yale—was characteristic of the sort of elder from whom I sought guidance over the next fifteen years. An early Peace Corps training camp director, a central figure in Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam political organizing, Coffin was at once an intellectual, a political actor, and a spiritual leader…Through Coffin, I met Paul Tillich (1980), Al Lowenstein (1962), and Martin Luther King (1967)…Without ever having verbalized this until now, I sought guidance from the sort of elder whom I imagined as visionary, charismatic, effective, committed to integrity, and a seeker of wisdom (not just knowledge).” (Bill Torbert)
Torbert continues to explain that he was drawn to his long-time mentor, Chris Argyris, for similar reasons:

“I first met Chris Argyris during my sophomore year at Yale (1963), reading most of his books and interviewing him (as I did Coffin)…on the relation between faculty members' scholarship and their day-to-day life values…Like Coffin, Argyris charismatically integrated theory and practice—in this case through his research, teaching, and consulting with major institutions such as IBM and the State Department.” (Bill Torbert)

Torbert expresses admiration not only for the application of theory in practice (through the embodiment of Platonic and Socratic inquiry, for example), he also shows appreciation for political action and activeness and for learning from peers in interaction with one another.

Bob Dick also identifies the successful integration of theory and practice, and also of various other dimensions, as a key quality of Chris Argyris’s—and also Don Schön’s—work:

“…I like the way they integrate the intrapersonal, the interpersonal and the systemic—theory and practice, diagnosis and intervention, and including a research methodology.” (Bob Dick)

Along similar lines, Mary Brydon-Miller claims to have been deeply influenced by the careful manner in which role models Paulo Freire and Myles Horton appeared to
embody their espoused ideals and beliefs in their everyday practice and being-in-the-world:

“Thanks to Peter Park, I had the opportunity while in graduate school to get to know both Freire and Horton, and I can remember being struck by how genuine both men were in their interactions with others, embodying in every moment the kind of respect and concern for others that was the central message of their written work.” (Mary Brydon-Miller)

The ability to learn from and in collaboration with peers and colleagues, as well as from teachers and role models, is evidenced in many of the accounts offered to us. For instance, the ‘people and experiences’ identified as especially important by Bob Dick include powerful role models from across his life-time, the earliest of which was his fifth and sixth grade teacher, Murray Hines, who “ran involving and democratic classes which were very different to those I had previously been used to”. He also gives due credit to Rhoda Felgate, the director of the amateur theatre where he was active for a time in his late 20s, and whom he suggests “had a greater influence than I think she realized”. In particular, she is one of the many persons whom Bob Dick identifies as having made space for him to learn on his own terms and through practical engagement and experimentation:

“She encouraged me to move beyond what I thought were my limits….When I did exceed my abilities and experienced failure she was there to help me pick myself up and learn from what happened.” (Bob Dick)
In addition to learning from teachers, Dick emphasizes learning from his collaborations with skilled colleagues, clients, and students. He refers in particular to the university classes which he was responsible for teaching, and which, for the most part, he chose to run in experiential and democratic ways.

“I learned as much from the class members as they learned from me. The tutors with whom I co-facilitated those classes were for the most part skilled practitioners and were also a source of learning”. (Bob Dick)

It is significant that Dick, like a number of the other respondents to our request, draws explicit attention to moments of deep learning and transformation:

“All important are the moments of desperation when my repertoire is inadequate and I have to create something on the spur of the moment. Many of the processes I now use were originally devised when I felt blocked.” (Bob Dick)

Indeed, appreciation of ‘Aha!’ moments, or key moments in which people come to a meaningful and creative integration of understandings is a key theme throughout the accounts. Robert Chambers, for instance, draws attention to the ways in which the puzzles and challenges which gripped him were grounded in, and became apparent through, life and field experiences. His response emphasises the possibilities for ongoing learning and transformation which emerge through engagement with others in field experiences:

“In this journey, aha! moments have been significant: in South India realising how selective perceptions can be mutually reinforcing in a research team; in
Ethiopia, learning that farmers could understand a histogram when they said ‘You have drawn what we said’; in India, discovering that local people could make brilliant maps, representing their realities and far more detailed than ‘ours’; being asked, when seeking to ‘hand over the stick’ to networks in the South, ‘who are you to say that you have a stick to hand over?’.” (Robert Chambers)

Indeed, a theme running through many of the responses is that it is through ongoing critically-engaged conversations with one another and with other scholars and practitioners that we can better understand both how we are moulded by, and how we also contribute to shaping, the field. The most meaningful relationships with mentors, colleagues, students, co-researchers are never straightforward: we learn both from the challenge of ‘friends willing to act as enemies’ (Torbert, 1976:169), those who know us well enough to keep interrupting degenerate patterns; and of ‘friends willing to act as friends’ (Marshall & Reason, 1993:122) who will continue to love us through all the crises living life as inquiry will throw at us.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have sought to balance acknowledgement and appreciation of various intellectual traditions and philosophical perspectives with an understanding that each action researcher is involved in developing his/her own understanding and practice in ongoing ways and in particular socio-historical contexts. What we have found in putting together this ‘bricolage’ of perspectives is that action researchers themselves could be understood to have been acting as ‘bricoleurs’ over time, and in a
very real sense, ‘making the road while walking’. Indeed, the active process of integrating and making sense of various influences and perspectives and of developing one’s own understanding seems to be central to many action researchers’ accounts. Most notably, responses to our request demonstrated both vigour and rigour: these qualities are apparent in the robust and well-developed sense of critical engagement with a range of philosophical and theoretical perspectives, and also in the conscious development of praxis through ongoing and active integration of life experiences, grounding perspectives and complex webs of influence. Individually and in community, we have critically engaged with a range of perspectives; have followed our interests, instincts and questions; have sought to make meaning from these; and have developed comprehensive understandings capable of informing our practice.

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