

ACTION-RESEARCH IN CO-OPERATIVE ENTERPRISES:
THEORY AND PRACTICE*

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ABSTRACT

Action-research, the integration of research with practical intervention, is contrasted with 'neutral' research, in which intervention is consciously avoided. It is argued that there is no fundamental difference in the knowledge that can be obtained by these two strategies, although presentation of research as 'neutral' may lead to less outside influence on researchers. Action-research, however, gives easier access to organizations for research and greater social relevance, although there are strong pressures on researchers to adopt a management orientation. In the area of self-management, action-research is more consistent with goals of participation and workers' control. Research on workers' co-operatives undertaken by the author and members of the Open University Co-operatives Research Unit is interpreted in the light of the preceding discussion and the problems of action-research examined — in particular difficulties of communication, effective participation and conflicts of interest within workers' co-operatives.

INTRODUCTION

Research into workers' participation and self-management is a growing field, and parallels a wider social concern with these issues. Many of those involved in this area of research feel that their work can, and should, influence and promote developments in the direction of increased participation. Yet much of the research into this area has been broadly similar to the established methods of social science research, which I shall call 'neutral' research. This paradigm of research separates the research activity itself from any practical intervention in

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society. Whilst practitioners of 'neutral' research believe their work will, or should, influence social developments — hopefully in a way with which they agree — they see this as an objective that should not be confused with the research itself.

This separation of research and intervention has been justified by many social theorists, including ones who themselves are, or were, involved in social and political action. One prominent and influential advocate of such a position was Max Weber. He argued¹ that although values would affect the choice of research area, research itself should be directed towards the "establishment of empirical facts (including the 'value-oriented' conduct of the empirical individual whom he is investigating)" and kept separate from "his own practical evaluations" and value-judgements. Weber believed that facts could be separated from values, and that only the former should be the concern of researchers.

Weber emphasized this in an empirical study of industrial workers which he co-ordinated between 1909 and 1911. He stressed that the issue of research "... is exclusively a matter of the unbiased, objective statement of facts and the ascertainment of causes in industrial conditions and the individual character of the workers. The whole problem is ... socio-politically speaking, a totally *neutral* one by its very nature".²

In contrast, action-research seeks to integrate research activity with practical intervention. Such intervention involves the researcher and his or her client in "joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework".³ Such an approach does not fit in with the 'neutral' research paradigm and hence may not be readily compatible with existing research institutions. For, as Cherns has argued, "The validation of scientific knowledge and the evaluation of scientific research are comfortably accommodated so long as they reflect paradigmatic science. Action-research, however, does not fit the prevailing scientific paradigm; it does not come under the rubric of "normal science". For these same reasons the University is an uncomfortable base for action-research".⁴

CRITICISMS OF ACTION-RESEARCH

From the point of view of 'neutral' researchers, 'action-research' is to be avoided for several reasons. First, intervention will necessarily interfere with observation of the situation being studied, and that this leads to an undesirable loss of 'objectivity'. Second, it involves the researcher in the making of practical value-laden decisions, which is seen as undesirable and raises additional questions of responsibility for the researcher, both to those being studied and others. Third, by obscuring the distinction believed to exist between facts and values, it endangers the relative autonomy of research institutes and universities, thereby politicizing these organizations and threatening academic freedom.

¹ Weber (1949)

² Quoted in Eldridge (1971)

³ Rapoport (1970)

⁴ Cherns (1975)

Though not all those practising 'neutral' research would support all three arguments, they are representative of the types of objection raised in discussions of action-research. Below, both these arguments and the assumptions underlying them are questioned and rejected as misplaced or incorrect. Although action-research does lead to many problems — some of which are discussed below⁵ — these do not imply that it is an invalid or worthless activity for researchers. This involves many questions of the philosophy of social science which are impossible to discuss fully here, so the discussion is necessarily of an outline nature. I shall also restrict myself to social science fieldwork within organizations, although many of the arguments are of wider validity.

The separation of research activity from intervention is often seen as a necessary part of controlling variation in the situation being studied. The researcher's intervention will make an understanding of the causal laws behind, say, the attitudes and behaviour of a workforce apparently more difficult if not impossible. Yet such a view matches only some interpretations of the nature of scientific research. As Susman and Evered⁶ point out, action-research can be seen to be as 'scientific' as 'neutral' research in non-positivist frameworks such as hermeneutics and one must see social scientific research as linked to different "human interests" in knowledge. Habermas,⁷ for example, sees three aspects of social science: *nomological*, (interpretation of causal relations, linked to interests in prediction and control), *hermeneutic* (interpretation of meaningful action, with an interest in practical understanding) and *critical* (increasing knowledge of oneself, with an interest in emancipation). Thus, it can by no means be taken for granted that intervention and observation will interfere. Rather the extent to which intervention promote or retard research depend on one's interests in the generation of knowledge. In particular, an interest in the process of, and potential for, change is likely to make action-research more attractive to the researcher.

Further, claims to a privileged position for the 'neutral' observer's accounts and perceptions compared with those of an action-researcher cannot be sustained. Both will involve interaction between researcher and researched unless one adopts a position of trying to be invisible to those being studied. If one is seeking to understand a situation, it is essential to find out and interpret the meanings people attribute to their actions and to those of others. The researcher is engaged in the same form of practical activity as those being studied whilst attempting to put this within a particular frame of reference, i.e., social science. As Giddens argues, "... every competent social actor is himself (and herself — ML) a social theorist who, as a matter of routine, makes interpretations of his own conduct and of the intentions, reasons and motives of others ..."⁸ Though the researcher may use a different frame of reference from those involved in the situation, there is no way in which the

⁵ See also Rapoport (1970) whose "three dilemmas" are in the areas of ethics, goals and the source of initiatives.

⁶ Susman & Evered (1978)

⁷ Habermas (1972), (1974)

⁸ Giddens (1976)

'neutral' researcher can claim a privileged position compared with the action-researcher.

To understand the actions of others, it is necessary to have some shared knowledge between researcher and researched and "immersion" of the researcher in the situation of the researched. Philosophers of science like Popper and Kuhn have shown the impossibility of making observations independent of the theory within which they are interpreted. Though shared knowledge between researcher and 'researched' may be irrelevant to the natural sciences, it is essential to the social sciences. As Elias has argued, "For while one need not know, in order to understand the structure of molecules, what it feels like to be one of its atoms, in order to understand the functioning of human groups one need to know, as it were, from inside how human beings experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know this without active participation and involvement".⁹ Thus, detachment from the situation of the researched is not a desirable end in itself; although, of course the degree of involvement or detachment is open to debate in the light of the interest in the subject area of the research — or more generally in the context of the human interests in the knowledge to be generated. Hence, in any practical research situation one cannot draw a rigid distinction between 'neutral' and action-research in terms of involvement and consequent loss of 'objectivity'. Equally, one cannot suggest *a priori* that the findings of one or the other have a greater claim to validity.

Such an argument can be extended to cover the second criticism of action-research outlined above: the necessity of value-laden practical decisions and the ethical problems raised. If research requires involvement in some form, then no social science research can avoid such practical decisions and ethical problems. Although this may be the case, critics are right to point out some of the particular dangers of action-research such as over-involvement and the conflict between practical and research objectives. But 'neutral' research also faces problems relating to its shortcomings in areas such as increasing the self-understanding of members of an organization.¹⁰

On the other hand, the third criticism may be more accurate, but not for the reasons suggested. If research is *seen* as, and presented as, a neutral search for facts, then it is easier for universities and research institutes to claim that they should be relatively independent of outside interests such as the state and business organizations. In fact, the research need not be 'neutral' at all for it to be *seen* as neutral by others. However, universities are under increasing pressure to make their teaching and research more relevant to the needs of the state and business, who can exert considerable influence by financial and other means. Even if research is seen as neutral, the areas with which it is concerned are likely to be increasingly limited by such developments. As many authors have pointed out, "academic freedom" is limited and cannot be separated from issues of power within the wider society.¹¹

⁹ Elias (1956)

¹⁰ See the discussion in Susman and Evered (1978) on the problems with what they call "positivist science".

¹¹ Weber (1949), Amblaster (1974).

THE RATIONALE OF ACTION-RESEARCH IN CO-OPERATIVES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

I have argued that action-research can be just as valid an activity as 'neutral' research and that there is no fundamental division between the two types of research activity in social science fieldwork within organizations. Due to the nature of the social sciences, there are significant parallels between research activity and the actions of people in daily life. Why then should one consider doing action-research; and is it relevant to co-operative enterprises and organizations with goals of self-management?

To answer this question, I shall consider three main areas — "access", "social relevance" and "participation". In each of these I shall look at the rationale of action-research, both for the majority of practitioners who have adopted a management-orientated approach, and for its application to the general area of self-management.

(a) Access

Research in organizations may be undertaken without the permission of those being studied, and perhaps without their knowledge. But such research is likely to be limited in scope as there is no access to information not already public or to private interactions between the people involved — unless the researcher becomes a "spy", a role which many researchers would reject for ethical reasons, or it is the researcher's own organization and daily life that is the object of investigation. These limitations mean that much research requires the granting of access that would not normally be granted in everyday life.

For those concerned, the granting of access to researchers involves using time to deal with them, which is not normally paid for; possible loss of business and personal confidentiality; loss of privacy by individuals and groups in the organization; potential anxiety and conflict within the organization; possible constraints on the freedom of action of those being researched due to the needs of the research methodology, e.g., 'forbidding' people to learn from the research before it is complete; and the possible publication of uncomplimentary or politically-explosive reports. As a result, access for 'neutral' research is often difficult to obtain or confined to areas of peripheral interest to those in positions of power within the organization, unless one of them feels that their position would be enhanced by the research. This aspect of action-research in organizations has been stressed by members of the Tavistock Institute, which undertook pioneering action-research on socio-technical systems and work organization.¹² One member has argued: "This method of research solves the problem of access that dogs empirical sociological study of contemporary society".¹³ However, there are strong pressures towards a management orientation in the research if one does

¹² Trist et al (1963), Rice and Miller (1967), for example.

¹³ Sofer (1961).

not hold this already.¹⁴ If one accepts a unitary ideology of management,¹⁵ this pressure is not a particular problem. For example, Sofer argues that one is probably "morally bound" to put "the organization" first as one's "... contract is with it, and because the interests and welfare of more people are involved".¹⁶ Those using a pluralistic frame of reference may wish to follow some middle course between different groups, but cannot avoid the power relationships within the organization. As a result, they may face the possibility of effectively agreeing with top management or having their access for research ended. Those with a conflict frame of reference may face the same choice, or make a tactical compromise if that is possible. Whatever the frame of reference of the researchers, there are strong pressures to conform with and accept the perspective of management, i.e., those in positions of power within a hierarchical organization. This may affect the way the researchers themselves work for, as Cherns¹⁷ has argued, within hierarchical organizations (the "utilizing system") there are strong pressures on the researchers (the "research generating system") to operate in more hierarchical ways than they would choose themselves.

If we now focus on co-operative enterprises, we could expect similar reasons to those outlined above for not granting access to 'neutral' researchers. In Britain this is accentuated when one realizes that there are tens of workers' co-operatives and a similar number of researchers and students interested in doing research on these enterprises. It is possible that offers of action-research may tip the balance between the granting of access and its refusal, although many other factors — from personal contacts to the co-operative's economic position — are relevant. Our experience would indicate that the possibility of practical help is sometimes effective in gaining access and seldom, if ever, a disadvantage. In part, this reflects the lack of other relevant sources of advice and information for co-operatives.

Some may argue that research in co-operatives, where the workforce owns and in some ultimate way controls the enterprise, will avoid many of the problems outlined above in the case of hierarchical organizations. Our experience would indicate that this is not the case. This will be discussed in more detail below, but briefly one may say that the existence of mechanisms of formal democracy does not necessarily lead to self-management or eliminate the basis of conflict within the organization. Ownership does not necessarily lead to control, as theorists of the modern capitalist firm have argued with respect to shareholders, and as theorists of enterprises in 'socialist' societies have argued with respect to the people as a whole. Though co-operatives are owned by the workforce, this cannot be taken to imply that they are self-managed by the workers and have broken with hierarchical forms of organization.¹⁸ There may well still be a clear management hierarchy, but with some

¹⁴ See Thomas and Lockett (1979) for an analysis of this in systems action-research methodologies in organizations.

¹⁵ Fox (1966).

¹⁶ Sofer (1961).

¹⁷ Cherns (1972).

¹⁸ Lockett (1980, forthcoming).

accountability to the workforce as a whole. The management may actually be stronger in a co-operative as it can legitimate its position more easily when it can claim to be representing the interests of all members of the co-operative, all of whom share in any profits. Management orientation may still be a problem to researchers — and will persist to the extent to which the co-operative reproduces the hierarchical forms of organization of the wider society. On the other hand, those in management positions may be aware of these contradictions and see action-research by outsiders as a contribution to the resolution of such problems.

b) Social relevance

Another reason for advocating action-research is that it can be of greater social relevance than 'neutral' research. Organizations granting easier access to action-researchers believe that this is the case. The government funding of action-research like the Job Satisfaction Research Programme, of which our project formed a part, indicates that this form of research is seen to be relevant to perceived social problems in industry. From the researchers' point of view, action-research may be seen as a way to bridge the divide between universities and the wider society.

Action-research is better able to cope with certain problems, especially those of change within organizations. As well as faster feedback of information to researchers who have influenced the changes, there are significant potential benefits in an interaction between the more general and theoretical knowledge of the researcher and the perhaps more limited but concrete knowledge of those within the organization. This interaction may mean that when changes are being made, the criteria for success or failure may well be redefined as a result of the project and thus cannot be assumed to be fixed.¹⁹ Part of the action-research may be to "... help society explore more meaningfully what they wish their norms and criteria to be", according to Argyris.²⁰

In profit-orientated organizations, the relevance of action-research is usually seen in economic terms. With externally-funded research, it is in their interests to make use of action-researchers, especially in situations where 'normal' research methods do not resolve perceived problems. Similarly, co-operatives may wish to use action-research, especially as resources are seldom directed towards the development of self-management in capitalist society. Yet this situation places conflicting demands upon the researcher: to what degree should she or he direct attention to action in cases where this implies a reduction in research effort or effectiveness? Problems persist even when a general balance has been established between research interests and action, in particular the assumption of responsibility for changes within the organization. One such problem is role conflict on the part of the researcher in trying to satisfy both those within the client organization and other academics

¹⁹ Martin (1977).

²⁰ Argyris (1970).

within research institutions, as well as the competing ideas of validation through reference to the client and to a scientific community.

Cherns has argued that this difficulty of accommodating action-research within universities is due both to conflict between it and established patterns of research, and to the difficulty of fitting action-research into university timetables and work organization. But, he argues, "...if it is to be learned as a scientific craft and not as a box of magic tricks, its transmission must be subject to the rigorous requirements of academic scrutiny".²¹ Whilst the necessity of universities as validating institutions for knowledge is open to dispute, such a belief is widely held by practitioners of action-research, as well as those of 'neutral' research — hence increasing the likelihood of the role conflict arises from the conflicting demands on the action-researcher. Yet, on the other hand, action-research may enable researchers to gain a degree of credibility with those being studied which the 'neutral' researcher would find hard to establish.

(c) Participation

So far we have concentrated on aspects of action-research which are, in general, equally valid within both hierarchical and more self-managed organizations. Action-research has another aspect which should make it especially attractive in co-operative and similar organizations: that of participation. This may not be wholly irrelevant to hierarchical organizations, but is, in general, limited to those at similar levels in the hierarchy. Sofer argues that when considering his research in three organizations "...it would be legitimate to regard much of what was done... as a sort of training experience for administrators, based on sociological and psychological expertise" resulting in an increased "confidence that colleagues could agree on a common set of organizational objectives".²²

'Neutral' research, however, is based on a very different set of social relationships.²³ It assumes a rigid separation of researcher and researched. The former defines the scope of the investigation and its goals, although the researched may set constraints. The researched are expected to identify with and adapt to the goals of the researcher. She or he defines the behaviour expected of the researched, 'teaches' it and then attempts to monitor it in a standardized and systematic way. The parallels between this "rigorous research" and hierarchical forms of management and work organization are striking. In a questionnaire study, for example, the methods used by the researcher are very similar to Taylorism and 'scientific management'. In a situation where research is being directed towards the contradictions and failures of such methods of management and division of labour, the use of such research met-

²¹ Cherns (1972).

²² Sofer (1961) See also Herbst and Getz (1975) for an experiment involving lower level employees.

²³ Argyris (1970), from which the quotes in the following discussion are also taken.

hods is ironic. Such "rigorous research", argues Argyris, stresses "(1) clearly defined objectives; (2) rationality; (3) simplification and specialization; and (4) the direction of control". It may also withhold the true objectives from the researched. So it is not surprising that the researched react in ways similar to workers subject to scientific management practices: physical withdrawal resulting in absenteeism and tomover, psychological withdrawal, over and covert hostility towards the researcher, emphasis on monetary rewards and even "unionization of subjects".

Such forms of research stand directly opposed to the principles of participation and self-management. Their use should be suspect in organizations such as co-operatives. If the enterprise is to be democratized there is a strong case for a rethink of many research methods in the social sciences. From our discussion above, there is a *prima facie* case for action-research and other methods avoiding the rigid separation of researcher and researched characteristic of "rigorous research". As well as resolving some of the ethical problems involved, action-research may also be able to avoid some of the unintended consequences of "rigorous research".

OUR EXPERIENCE: AN INTERPRETATION

I have suggested that as well as more general advantages of access and social relevance, action-research has a particular rationale in the area of participation and self-management. I would not argue that it is the only useful form of research in self-management, for there are many cases where it could be agreed that the role of the researcher should not be related to organizational change and similar interests in generating knowledge and action. But the form of research in a self-managed enterprise should be *agreed* rather than imposed or assumed to be necessarily 'neutral' if valid data is to be generated.

Similarly, it would be mistaken to expect that the adoption of an action-research method of working necessarily solves many of the problems faced by researchers. If anything, it creates further problems which researchers are not used to tackling. Some of these were encountered in our research projects at the Open University.²⁴ It was initially intended to be an investigation into "the impact of worker ownership and participation on job satisfaction and related employee attitudes", rather than an action-research project. It has included work in various workers' co-operatives in Britain including four which are discussed in this article: one with around 180 members in light-to-medium engineering (Co-operative A),²⁵ one with around 40 members in the retail jewellery business (Co-operative B),²⁶ and one with about 15 members in

²⁴ The research was originally funded by the Department of Employment's Work Research Unit, as part of its 'Job Satisfaction Research Programme', and subsequently by the Open University and Commonwork Trust.

²⁵ Paton & Lockett (1979).

²⁶ Lockett & Paton (1981).

the leather and clothing industry (Co-operative C).²⁷ The first two were previously privately-owned and were 'handed over' to the workforce as going concerns; the third was set up following redundancies in a shoe firm. Work was also undertaken in a fourth organization (Co-operative D), a pallet recycling co-operative with around 10 workers in which there had been substantial involvement from the planning stage onwards. This co-operative was funded by the 'Job Creation Programme' and hoped to become viable economically before this funding for wages and training ended. In terms of formal control, the intention was that there would be a gradual transfer to the workforce as non-working founder members dropped out. However, for economic and other reasons, the initial goals were not achieved and the co-operative was closed down after just over a year's operations. The following is an outline of some of the problems and possibilities of action-research and represents an interpretation of some aspects of our work rather than a complete description.

On the question of access, proposals for action-research do appear to be of more interest to co-operatives for the reasons outlined above, and in some cases have been initiated by the co-operatives themselves. However, it is difficult to assess exactly how interest is increased. Given the small number of co-operatives in the U.K., this is impossible to analyze, as many other factors will affect a decision on whether to allow access to researchers. In our work, we tried to approach the "Community", or equivalent body comprising all working members of the co-operative. This was for two reasons: first, we felt that decisions on access should be taken by all concerned or their representatives, and secondly, we wished to make findings or recommendations available to everyone within the enterprise. In general, we have adhered to these principles.

Even if these principles are put into practice, many difficulties arise. "Community Meetings" or the equivalent mechanisms of formal democracy within a co-operative are not necessarily very participative. Our research has shown that they may be largely a means for management to put information across to the workforce, obtain consent for policies already decided upon in the case of major issues, and discuss more openly non-controversial and peripheral matters. In Co-operative B there were four directors, approximately 10 per cent of the workforce, yet in Community Meetings they made around half of the statements or interventions in discussion, including nearly all those presenting information or suggesting new policies. Though younger and less-experienced members of the co-operative were free and encouraged to participate, they felt intimidated and did not enter into the discussion even when they held strong views. When votes were taken, it was often a question of management's policy or no policy — even when redundancies were concerned as in Co-operative B — as it was difficult for these members to express their dissatisfaction or misgivings and present alternatives. In small groups, however, there was a much greater participation by these members, even when the general composition of the group was similar

²⁷ Lockett (1978a).

to that of the larger meeting. On the other hand, it should be noted that the level of participation of members was higher than that of members of Co-operative A.

This problem can be overcome to some degree by the creation of smaller 'working groups' or 'action groups' comprising people from all levels within the co-operative. In Co-operative B these groups have dealt with questions like pay differentials and wage increases as well as changes in the legal structure of the co-operative. In Co-operative D, this method of working was suggested and accepted by the co-operative. All workers were members of at least one working group. These groups covered finance, production, grievances, staff conditions and training. However, high labour turnover impeded learning and restricted their operations. Another method is that of meetings of lower level staff independent of management — just as management meets independently of such staff. In some co-operatives, this may be seen to be creating an "us" and "them" situation leading to conflict, which is seen as undesirable in a co-operative, particularly by many managers.

Such a view is an expression of a unitary ideology of management within a co-operative. Though some founders and members of co-operatives would see capitalist enterprises within a conflict or pluralist frame of reference, they often seek to re-establish the basis for a unitary ideology. This is particularly true of structural conflict between workers and managers. Conflict within the organization and the acceptance of separate organization by different groups is seen as pathological, and the success of the enterprise is sometimes measured in terms of the degree to which open conflict is avoided.²⁸

An alternative perspective is that these conflicts are related to the division of labour within the enterprise and in the wider society as well as to the class structure and system of ownership — which are, of course, related to the division of labour. Co-operative or state ownership may be a necessary condition for the removal of this structural conflict, but changes in formal ownership need not significantly alter the social relationships between 'managers' and 'managed'. From this perspective, it is impossible to avoid structural conflict, whether open or latent, without radical changes in work organization and division of labour.²⁹

Given that most co-operatives have not radically broken from the forms of division of labour in capitalist enterprises, it is impossible for them to have removed the basis of conflicts between interest groups within the enterprise, although their forms of expression may change. In Co-operative A, for example, where such a unitary ideology was strongly held by management, the workers' representatives attempted to pursue their interests by persuading management that 'morale' could be boosted and conflict avoided by changes in policy. At the same time, managers attempted to find out what policies would be acceptable to

²⁸ One can draw parallels here between co-operatives and enterprises in socialist societies. Where state ownership ('ownership by the whole people') is seen as a way of eliminating the structural conflict inherent in capitalist industry, conflict will also be perceived as pathological.

²⁹ Lockett (1975), (1978b). In this context the work of Bettelheim, eg., (1974), (1976), is relevant.

the representatives before any meeting. Expression of conflict could be avoided as both sides did not wish to upset the consensus — and felt that they could achieve at least as good an outcome as in a situation of negotiated settlement in an atmosphere of greater conflict of collective bargaining. But, in fact, the workers themselves often (incorrectly) saw their representatives as ineffective as no conflict was expressed. There was a feeling amongst some that the representatives could have obtained more if they had pursued a tougher line, but it is not clear that this could be the case in the longer term without a change in the power relationships within the organization.

Part of our work has been concerned with attempting to show members of co-operatives that conflict is inevitable between different groups within the enterprise — whether between older and younger workers, men and women, or more fundamentally between 'managers' and 'managed'. One way of judging progress towards self-management might be the degree to which the last form of conflict had been eliminated — though, of course, it would be difficult to measure. However, in trying to illuminate conflicts so that they can be continuously tackled rather than accumulating or leading to individual action, such as labour turnover, we stand open to charges of "creating conflict".

Our position and analysis also pose many questions of values and responsibility. The "Community" or other body to whom we relate will often contain conflicts of interest, for example, over material benefits, control of the organization and ideology. Within such bodies, as I have argued, those not in managerial or similar positions will find it difficult to express their opinions effectively and formulate alternatives to strategies proposed by management or by the researchers if they feel dissatisfied with those being presented. This involves the nature of communication between researchers and members of the co-operative.

The traditional channel of communication between researchers and organizations is the written report, combined, perhaps, with verbal presentation to managers. In management-orientated action-research, such techniques may well be appropriate. But if genuine participation at all levels is the researchers' objective, such a technique is far less appropriate. For example, in Co-operative A, we made available to all members a report to the Community. The report attempted to get across the idea that member could choose, within constraints, the direction in which the organization could develop. This was done by presenting three not altogether serious scenarios for the future, with varying degrees of participation and self-management. Despite our attempts to make it readable (including the involvement of our typist) and the inclusion of cartoons and illustrations, it was read largely by managers and others very active in the Community bodies.

So, written reports, especially those of any length and complexity, are read largely by managers and those already actively involved in the co-operative. Yet as a channel of communication they have advantages over other forms as they are relatively 'permanent' in space and time, i.e., the researchers do not have to be at the same place at the same time as the readers. Verbal presentation, despite having these drawbacks, allows a far higher degree of interaction between researchers and research-

ers which may significantly increase mutual understanding. Other methods we have used are less formal. For example, we have used 'exercises' in some of our work in Co-operative B. In this enterprise, the action-research was directed towards the clarification of the objectives which members wished the co-operative to pursue. This area was chosen as a result of general feelings that being a co-operative should "mean something", whilst members were unsure of what this should be. We stressed that the "meaning" of being a co-operative was something which could be chosen by members within market, technical and other constraints. In the 'exercises', small groups in a Community Meeting were given a scenario and asked to make choices between different policies. This was backed up by short documents and verbal presentations.

Another method developed for potential use in co-operatives is that of simulation gaming. For example, one simulation has been designed in which co-operative members play roles of people within enterprises with different organizational structures — from firms with a low degree of division of labour and hierarchy to others where there are strongly separated managers and workers. Such methods are well-known in management training but have not been widely applied with respect to workers' participation in and understanding of the business enterprise.

Whatever methods are used, there are always problems of the determination of the objectives and scope of action-research within the organization. A desire on the part of the researchers to set up a process for joint formulation of objectives may be hampered by deference to the assumed competence of the researchers who, however competent, need adequate feedback from those being researched for maximum effectiveness. One means of achieving this is a 'liaison group' or 'project committee'. This comprises representatives of all those affected by the action-research and perhaps also includes outside interests like trade unions. In this small group it is easier for those in non-managerial positions to affect the course of the research and the way the researchers operate. However, such a group may not function effectively and may collapse if the researchers are sufficiently trusted not to upset people in the co-operative, unless involvement in such a group is seen by members to be more important than other pressing demands on their time.³⁰ Our experience of such groups is limited, although we are convinced — at least in theory — of their usefulness. For example, in Co-operative B, such a group was established at the second attempt.

All the time in such action-research activity there is a danger that the researchers will become more and more involved in the processes of organizational and other changes to the extent that evaluation and analysis are neglected or relegated to second place. One may accept this, but it does raise serious questions of validation. In Co-operative C, this question of possible over-involvement was very real. After an initial period of analysis of the way the co-operative worked and the reasons for

³⁰ Hence, lack of success in setting up such groups may be an expression of a state of affairs more complex than alienation from an action-research project — a combination of feelings that the researchers should 'get on with their job' and a lack of recognition of the necessity of "joint collaboration" in the action-research.

its economic failures, it was decided that the previously envisaged piecemeal strategy of trying to teach managerial skills could not succeed. An application to the government's "Job Creation Programme" was suggested to obtain the finance for a new co-operative for wages, training, and the subsequent generation of capital, which our analysis indicated was necessary. As the researchers were the only people available who could produce an application within a reasonable time, it was felt worthwhile to do so as —

1. It appeared to be the one way in which jobs might be saved and even created;
2. It would give practical experience of the problems faced by co-operatives, and
3. If successful, would provide an excellent situation for action-research into the early stages of the development of a co-operative.

On the other hand, it meant a concentration on practical rather than research activity, and to some degree built up a relationship of dependence by the co-operative on the researcher. This commitment always appeared to be about to end far sooner than was the case, thereby perpetuating and deepening the dependence relationship. This was accentuated by problems of distance between the co-operative, on the one hand, and the researchers and the government agency responsible for the application.

CONCLUSION

Action-research, therefore, does not avoid conflicts within co-operatives, or between the goals of the researcher and those of a co-operative's membership. This latter form of conflict may become particularly acute if the researcher wishes to make generalizations about co-operatives or other issues, whereas the co-operative wants organizational changes benefiting some or all of its members.

If we consider again the three aspects of social science put forward by Habermas, we can see particular difficulties in the nomological aspect — the explanation of causal relationships — due to the involvement of the researcher in a participative research project. The researcher may wish to adopt similar strategies in different co-operatives, yet this may conflict with the demands of effective participation. It is questionable whether 'neutral' research can tackle this issue better, as it may demand that the organization curtails its freedom of action in certain spheres during the research project. However, the presentation of all or part of the research activity as 'neutral' may help the researchers achieve their goals. On the other hand, we can argue that the hermeneutic (understanding of social action) and critical (increasing self-knowledge and freedom) aspects of social science may benefit significantly from the acceptance of constraints on the researcher using a participative method.

But, despite the consistency of action-research with the ideals of participation and self-management, it may not develop as fast as one

might wish. There are constraints upon researchers, e.g. allocation of research funds; conflicts with dominant methods of social science research; political questions of experiments in self-management in capitalist societies; and the background, training and social interests of researchers, e.g. their credibility amongst colleagues engaged in 'neutral' research. Also there may be real political and other disagreements between researchers' and co-operative members' definitions of organizational problems which make "joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" difficult to achieve. However, the development of more appropriate and participative methods of research than those in use at present in the social sciences should be a priority, particularly for those concerned with promoting participation and self-management.

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AKCIONA ISTRAŽIVANJA U ZADRUŽNIM PREDUZECIMA: TEORIJA I PRAKSA

Martin LOCKETT

Re z i m e

Iako mnogi istraživači u oblasti samoupravljanja žele da unaprede njegov razvoj, nedovoljna se pažnja posvećuje upotrebljivim istraživačkim metodima. Obično se usvaja ideal »neutralnog« istraživanja koje odvaja istraživanje od preuzimanja određenih mera za ostvarenje društvenih promena. Nasuprot tome, tzv. akciono istraživanje teži kombinaciji istraživačke aktivnosti i intervencije u okvirima o kojima se slože istraživači, a koji su određeni prirodom istraživanja. Autor tvrdi da na osnovu filozofskih i drugih merila, akciono istraživanje nije manje valjan metod nego »neutralno« istraživanje, uprkos kritici ovakvog pristupa koja se sastoji u tvrdnji da se u ovakvim istraživanjima navodno gubi »objektivnost«.

U oblasti istraživanja organizacija, akciono istraživanje imaju prednost u tri glavna domena, iako u ovim domenima mogu iskrsnuti i specifične teškoće vezane za primenu okakvog metoda:

(a) U domenu ostvarenja boljeg uvida u predmet istraživanja. »Dostupnost« je veća i u hijerarhijskim organizacijama i u kooperativama. Problem se ovde sastoji u izbegavanju usvajanja menadžerske orijentacije.

(b) Moguće je povećati učešće (participaciju) članova organizacije u samom istraživanju kao i u ostvarenju realnih promena, što je od izuzetnog značaja za kooperativna preduzeća. Na taj način izbegavaju se neke željene posledice »rigoroznog« istraživanja koje po svom shvatanju odnosa istraživača i »istraživanog« podseća na tzv. naučno upravljanje (»scientific management« Taylora).

Postoje, dakle, jaki, teorijski čvrsto zasnovani razlozi za upotrebu akcionih istraživanja u zadružnim preduzećima, pod uslovom da je moguće ostvariti sporazum između kooperative i istraživača. Postoje svakako praktični problemi u primeni ovog metoda, kao što to pokazuje druga polovina ovog članka u kojoj se raspravljaju rezultati istraživanja koje je u četiri britanske kooperative preduzela Jedinica za istraživanje kooperativa londonskog Otvorenog univerziteta.

Problemi »dostupnosti« u ovom konkretnom slučaju bili su znatno smanjeni i Jedinici su kooperative pružile pomoć naročito u oblasti organizacionih pitanja. Manje uspeha je bilo u oblasti participativnog istraživanja, budući da stvarnost moći i uticaja unutar kooperative obično ne odgovara demokratskom idealu. Naročito oni na upravljačkim mestima su više u stanju da u formalnim demokratskim postupcima, kao što su, npr., otvoreni zborovi, dobiju saglasnost za one mere koje većina članstva ne bi možda podržala. Ovo se često javlja u kontekstu »unilarističke« ideologije upravljačke strukture koja samo izražavanje konflikta smatra patološkim, čak i u slučajevima kada su konflikti unutar kooperative neizbežni. Akciono istraživanje obuhvatilo je različite metode pogodne za rešavanje ovog problema uključujući i male diskusione grupe koje su u ovakvim slučajevima mnogo bolje nego veliki zborovi; zatim usmena izlaganja, grupne vežbe i simulacione tehnike, kao i pisane izveštaje za čije čitanje su pokazali interes samo menadžeri i aktivisti; pokušalo se i sa sticanjem priznanja persistentnosti konflikata unutar kooperative i isticanjem potrebe za mehanizmom koji bi ove konflikte razrešavao na trajnoj i kontinualnoj osnovi.

Autor zaključuje da je akciono istraživanje korisno kako za teoriju tako i za praksu kooperativa, iako se suočava sa mnogim problemima uključujući tu konflikte unutar kooperativa; u nekim slučajevima zavisnost od istraživača; institucionalna ograničenja koja postavlja društvo u širem smislu; kao i potencijalni konflikt između ciljeva i definicija problema kako ih vide istraživači, s jedne, i članovi kooperativa, s druge strane.