

Critical Action Research Today

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Introduction

I first spoke at an action research conference in 1980 – 38years ago. During those years action research has evolved into a full grown international movement sustained by a large number of action research networks and the publication of numerous books, manuals and guides explaining what action research is, what it is for and how it should be conducted. Also, during these years, action research has been employed in a variety of disciplines and professions – for example education, social work, management nursing and medicine. But this growth of action research has not been accompanied by any unified understanding of its purpose or aims. Here are some of the different aims of action research that can be found in the literature. The aim of action research is:

- To improve practice
- To change practice
- To transform practice
- To make practice more *effective*
- To make practice more *reflective*
- To make practical knowledge more *explicit*
- To make practical knowledge more *objective*
- To translate theory in practice
- To uncover the theories implicit in practice.
- To test ideas in action

So the term action research is now used to describe forms of research which adopt different rationales and practices. Each of these versions of action research has its own particular strengths and weaknesses and there is an ongoing dialogue between their various adherents in which issues of common concern are debated and discussed. My first aim today is show how one kind of action research – ‘critical action research’ - differs from other forms of action research. The theoretical rationale for critical action research was developed over 30 years ago (Carr and Kemmis,1986) and, with hindsight, it is now obvious that it was constructed of the basis of assumptions that, at the time, were regarded as unproblematic but which in today’s changed circumstances, can be seen

to be in need revision. So my second aim is to try and identify some of the weaknesses and limitations of this rationale and some of the critical questions to which this give rise. Finally I will suggest how, in confronting these questions, a more adequate theoretical rationale may be developed that can sustain critical action research in the future. So for the remainder of my presentation, I will confine myself to the following three tasks.

1. Briefly outline the rationale for 'critical action research'
2. Show how the major cultural changes and intellectual developments of the past 30 years have exposed some of the inadequacies and limitations of this rationale.
3. Provide a revised version of 'critical action research' which takes account of these cultural changes and intellectual developments and so provides a vision of critical action research in which questions arising from these inadequacies and limitations have been addressed.

What is Critical Action Research?

As its name suggests, critical action research seeks to integrate two very different social scientific traditions: the action research tradition that emerged in the USA in the 1940s and the Critical Theory tradition that originated in the 1920s in the work of that community of social and philosophical theorists usually referred to as 'the Frankfurt School'.

What we now call the action research has its origins in the work of the American social psychologist Kurt Lewin who first used the term to describe a research method that would allow the findings of basic social scientific research to be tested by practitioners in the context of their own practices. (Lewin, 1946; Adelman, 1993). He portrayed this method as a self-reflective spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of 'planning', 'action', 'observation' and 'reflection' – a method which still remains a defining feature of the diverse approaches to action research that have subsequently been developed.

In America in the 1950s action research went into rapid decline. (Sanford, 1970). But in Britain in the 1970s Lewin's action research method was given a new lease of life with the emergence of what was to become known as 'Classroom Action Research'. (Elliott and Adelman, 1973; Stenhouse, 1975; Elliot 1991.) In classroom action research the purpose of the action research method was not to test the practical utility of social scientific theories but to enable teachers to expose the 'personal' or 'practical' theories implicit in their own understanding of their classroom

practice. By doing this they would be able to change their teaching so that their practical theories could be more successfully enacted and realised in practice.

At the time, there was considerable support for the Classroom Action Research Movement and it was widely regarded it as an exciting response to the legitimate aspirations of teaching to become a more autonomous profession. Also, with the failure of conventional forms of educational research to have any significant practical impact, the view that educational research should be the sole preserve of academic experts was losing credibility and the suggestion that teachers should conduct research on their own classroom practices seemed to offer a credible alternative.

However, at the same time there were some concerns that Classroom Action Research lacked a coherent theoretical rationale and therefore conveyed an image of itself as little more than a research method. One of the consequences of this was that classroom action research tended to portray 'classroom practice' as something that existed in a historical and social vacuum and did little to help teachers to recognise the extent to which their self- understanding of their practice – their 'personal theory' - was itself the product of antecedent social and historical conditions of which they may be ignorant but which were operating to distort their practice. For many, the clear implication of this was that Classroom Action Research needed to incorporate a social theory which recognised that classroom practice was a historically formed and culturally embedded social practice and hence always vulnerable to ideological distortion. The social theory that met this need was the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (Jay,1973).

For the critical theorists one of the most disturbing features of 20th century was the spread of 'scientism' – the belief that the patterns of reasoning endemic to the natural sciences could be uncritically adopted by the social sciences as well. As a consequence social science had been transformed into a value free methodical form of inquiry. For critical theorists this posed a serious threat to the Enlightenment vision of the rationally autonomous individuals who, by rationally and critically reflecting on their own actions and understandings could, emancipate themselves from the dictates of habit, dogma and tradition. In these circumstances the fundamental task of critical theory was to develop and defend a form of social science which could rehabilitate the role of human reason in social life. This task was undertaken by Jurgen Habermas' development of the idea of a 'critical social science'.

In his seminal text 'Knowledge and Human interests' (1972) Habermas argued that the natural sciences produce just one kind of knowledge and that there are other forms of science each producing different kinds of knowledge and each serving different 'human interests'. He further

contended that there are three such 'knowledge constitutive interests' each giving rise to a different form of science: a 'technical interest' in controlling the world of nature which is constitutive of the empirical sciences and which produce explanatory knowledge of the natural world; a 'practical' interest in understanding the cultural traditions which shape the social world which give rise to those 'historical' – hermeneutic' sciences which produce interpretive knowledge of social life. Finally, there is an 'emancipatory interest' which derives from a fundamental human desire to be free from those ideological distortions and material conditions which impede the freedom of individuals to determine their purposes and actions on the basis of their own rational reflections. This emancipatory interest gives rise to the idea of a critical social science that produces 'emancipatory knowledge' – a form of reflectively acquired self – knowledge which enables individuals to become more self – consciously aware of the historical and ideological roots of their self- understanding and thereby empowers them to think and act in a more rational way.

Just as classroom action research lacked an adequate theoretical rationale so Habermas' theoretical rationale a critical social science fails to offer any practical suggestions about how it is to be concretely enacted in practice. So, in effect, critical action research was the result of an attempt to provide action research with the kind of theoretical rationale it so obviously lacked and to provide a critical social science with the kind of research method that could give it practical expression. In this sense, each can be seen as overcoming limitations of the other. The result was a version of action research has the following main features.

Key Features of Critical Action Research

Employs the Action Research Method. Like most other forms of action research it adopts a version of Lewin's method and, as such, involves actors following a spiral of self-reflective cycles of 'planning' 'acting' observing' 'reflecting'

Aims to Change Action Unlike other forms of action research critical action research does not aim to interpret, explain or improve practice. Rather it aims to transform both practice and the practitioner by transforming the ways in which they understand themselves their practices and the social situation in which these practices are conducted. Critical action research therefore encapsulates Marx's famous dictum that "philosophers have only interpreted the word....the point is to change it.

Is Participatory in the sense that it is not a form of research that that can be undertaken by one group of individuals (researchers') on another (subjects.) It involves participants themselves 'researching' their own practices, their knowledge and understanding of their practice and how this knowledge may be constraining their action.

Interprets 'Action' as 'Praxis' that is as the kind of informed committed action which by reflecting on its character and consequences transforms the actions and the ideas and understandings that inform it. Thus it is

A Reflexive Mode of Inquiry in which neither 'theory' or 'practice' is pre-eminent but where each is seen as mutually constitutive parts of a unified whole. It thus involves

Dialectical thinking, that is in a critical and reflective way of reasoning which focuses on revealing and transcending the contradictions that emerge from existing dualisms and oppositions (for example dualisms like 'knowing' and 'doing', 'action' and 'research' 'theory, and 'practice') '

Is Critical in the sense that it seeks to enable practitioners to become more critical of how their practices are socially and historically formed and, culturally embedded social practices and hence always vulnerable to ideological distortion.

Is Emancipatory in that it seeks to free people from the irrational social structures and ideological constraints that limit their opportunities to be rationally autonomous self-determining subjects. It thus promotes the kind of self – knowledge that can emancipate people from their irrational beliefs and distorted understandings by making them more transparent and more open to critical analysis and reflection.

Critical Action Research Today: Some Critical Issues

Over the last 40 years, critical action research has enjoyed some success. But one of the consequences of this success is that critical action research has unconsciously accommodated itself to the criteria of 'research' embedded in the prevailing academic culture of universities. One consequence of this has been to weaken its critical thrust. Another is that it has created an image of the action research facilitator as someone with a sophisticated knowledge of action research theory and method and a professional expertise in how it should be conducted and understood.

So although the aim of critical action research was to offer a radical alternative to the research paradigms dominant in social research, as it became embedded in the teaching and research programmes of universities, it was inevitable that some of the preconceptions inherent in conventional forms of academic research would continue to survive – for example, preconceptions about the nature of theory, about what constitutes valid research knowledge and about the need for a research methodology justifying this theory and knowledge. Indeed, it has sometimes seemed that in its understandable desire to gain academic legitimacy within the social science community, critical action research has allowed itself to be portrayed as just one more research method which can be readily accepted and accommodated within the broad requirement of conventional social research

What critical action research also failed to anticipate was the extent to which the ideology of scientism would spread to all aspects of contemporary culture and hence become the form of rationality that was not just dominant in the social sciences but would become embedded in the discourse, organisation and practices of all aspects of modern social life. Within a culture dominated by the ideology of scientism the kind of questions that critical action research seeks to address – questions for example about whether the practices of contemporary schooling are really educational practices - are denied rational legitimacy and become increasingly difficult to ask.

Just as the contemporary condition of critical action research can only be understood by reference to the historical and cultural conditions in which it evolved, so it also has to be recognised that it was itself a product of history, unconsciously accepting some of the dominant assumptions of the times in which it was first formulated. What in particular, was accepted and endorsed was an allegiance to the Enlightenment values of emancipation, enlightenment and autonomy which were to become defining feature of modern thought. But with the rise of that cultural configuration known as ‘postmodernism’ the Enlightenment meta- narrative is now deemed to have outlived its usefulness and theorising and research that seeks to give expression to the Enlightenment’s emancipatory aspirations are dismissed as obsolete. It is the belief in this ‘Enlightenment meta-narrative,’ - with its unbridled faith in the transformative power of universal human reason and its commitment to the values of emancipation, empowerment and rational autonomy - that underwrote critical action research and that postmodernism now regards as utopian and naive.

Let me now summarise what seem to be some of the critical issues facing critical action research today. They are issues arising from

- **The institutionalisation of critical action research** (for example, the way in which the assimilation of critical action research into the dominant academic culture and practices of universities has affected how notions such as ‘research’ and ‘action research facilitator’ have been understood.
- **The pervasive spread of scientism** (for example, the ways in which critical action research may itself have become vulnerable to this ideology «)
- **The desire to be a legitimate form of social science** (for example by retaining commitment to the need for a ‘research method’)
- **The challenge of postmodernism** (for example, by undermining the credibility of the emancipatory aspirations of critical action research)

Clearly these issues cannot be resolved simply by making a few cosmetic changes to our existing understanding of critical action research. Nor is it simply a matter of identifying and correcting some of the assumptions underpinning the theoretical rationale on which it was originally erected. Rather what is needed is an open debate about the present state and future prospects of critical action research in which some old certainties would have to be abandoned and some new questions would need to be addressed. These include:

- Is there an action research method?
- In critical action research, how is the concept of *praxis* to be understood?
- What is the role of the ‘facilitator’?
- In what sense is critical action research ‘participatory’ research?
- Can critical action research avoid the all-pervading influence of scientism?

Fortunately, some of the intellectual resources that will help us to answer this question are provided by the work of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his Book *Reason in the Age of Science* (1981) he, like the critical theorists, recognises the spread of scientism as the dominant feature of the culture of modernity and how, as a result, “we now live in a society of experts” - a society in which practical reason has been rendered obsolete and the ability of ordinary individuals to rationally determine how their practical activities ought to be conducted has been eroded. Thus he writes

In a scientific culture such as ours the fields of techné are much more expanded. The crucial change is that practical wisdom can no longer be promoted by personal contact and the mutual exchange of views. Consequently the concept of praxis is now an awful deformation of what practice really is ... The debate of the last century degrades practical reason to technical control. (Gadamer, 1980, p 107)

For Gadamer, as for Habermas, one of the major consequences of this deformation of praxis is that it has led to the emergence of a collection of value-free social sciences exclusively reserved for

those who possess the necessary methodological sophistication and technical expertise. In these circumstances, Gadamer, like Habermas, argues that there is an urgent need to develop a form of social science which gives full recognition to the role of practical reason in the formation of human purposes and social ends. Gadamer's response to this need is to reassert the value and validity of the Aristotelian science of practical philosophy in a way that would make it appropriate for the modern world.

What is the science of practical philosophy? The simplest way to answer this question may be to first say what it is not. It is not a theoretical science yielding theoretical knowledge. Nor is it an 'applied science' that provides technical knowledge about the most effective means to achieve some pre-determined ends. Rather it is the science of praxis: the science that produces the kind of reflectively acquired self-knowledge that allows practitioners to identify and eliminate the inadequacies and limitations of their historically bequeathed understanding of their practice. It is thus the science that enables practitioners to reflectively expose and critically revise the historically bequeathed assumptions inherent in their practice and so enables them to reconstruct their understanding of their practice and how it is to be more appropriately pursued.

How is practical philosophy conducted? It is conducted by practitioners participating in a genuine dialogue in which they allow their present understanding of their practice to be brought into critical confrontation with the different ways it has been understood in the past. For example, in the past corporal punishment by teachers was once seen as a justified practice, but, in the light of widespread dialogue and critical self-reflection within the teaching profession and society at large, it now plays no part in the professional practice of teaching. By participating in such self-reflective dialogue practitioners become historically conscious of the assumptions inherent in their inherited mode of understanding their practice and thus become more self-consciously aware of the limitations and inadequacies of this understanding in meeting the practical needs of the present. Thus, the outcome of practical philosophy is not an 'objective' understanding of a practical situation, but a mutually agreed shared understanding in which it is acknowledged that the only way to transcend and correct the limitations of our present understanding of our practice is correct the limitations of the understanding we have inherited from the past.

My brief description of the Aristotelian science of practical philosophy leaves a lot to be desired. But it should be sufficient to reveal how it is nothing other than a pre-modern version of 20th century action research. Like action research, it takes practice as its unique object domain. Like action research, it is a form of reflective enquiry undertaken by practitioners in order to improve

their own practices. And, like action research, it accepts that the knowledge that informs and guides practice is contextualised practical knowledge that cannot be separated from the concrete practical situation in which it is embedded.

But, although action research represents a twentieth century embodiment of practical philosophy, it differs from it in several crucial respects. For example action research starts from an understanding of what research is, and allows this to shape how the concept of 'action' is to be interpreted and understood. Practical philosophy, however, starts from an understanding of what practice is' and what kind of knowledge contributes to its rational development. It does not therefore produce research knowledge 'on' or 'about' practice but the kind of kind of reflectively acquired self – knowledge that would reveal to practitioners the inherited beliefs and unquestioned assumptions informing their understanding of their practice and, by so doing, enable them to reconstruct their practice in a rational way.

Another distinctive feature of practical philosophy is that it is the science of praxis –that form of human practice that transforms and is itself reflexively transformed by the theory that informs it. Moreover, it recognises that praxis is always historically formed and hence can only be reformed by its practitioners making the historical nature of their collective self-understanding of their practice explicit and reflectively reconstructing their practice by exposing the particular historical and cultural circumstances in which it has its roots. Also, unlike modern action research, it does not employ a research method but instead is conducted by practitioners engaging in the kind of dialogue in which it is recognised that history is the domain in which our understanding of praxis is constituted and cultivated and that the power of history is something that the action research method can never eliminate or transcend.

So the obvious attraction of practical philosophy is that it offers a pre – modern model of modern action research. But precisely because it is a pre- modern mode of inquiry, it is uninformed by the Enlightenment project of modernity to which critical action is committed. One consequence of this is that, while practical philosophy may allow practitioners to uncover the historical nature of the self-understanding implicit in their practice, it does not consider how or why these self-understandings may themselves be systematically distorted by external causal factors of which they are ignorant but which impede them in the rational pursuit of their aims and goals. Nor does it offer individuals a means of liberating individuals from the causal efficacy of these distorted understandings. To put the same point another way, although practical philosophy offers a model for a form of action research that proceeds through dialogue rather than on the basis of a research

method, it is insufficient as a model for critical action research because it is based on an Aristotelian interpretation of praxis and thus lacks the any commitment to the notion of critique that is a defining feature of its modern Marxist interpretation. In other words, what it lacks is a conception of praxis as collective social action informed by a self-conscious awareness of the social conditions and ideological constraints that distort individuals' understanding of their practice and how, through their own actions, these constraints can be overcome.

One way of confronting these deficiencies of practical philosophy as a model for critical action research would be to take account of Habermas' efforts to extend and refine his idea of a critical social science by developing a 'Theory of Communicative Action' - a theory which seeks to show how the aim of rational autonomy served by the emancipatory aspirations of a critical social science is itself presupposed by, and embedded in everyday dialogue and communication. (Habermas, 1984, 1987). In seeking to justify this claim, Habermas argues that, inherent in the very act of participating in dialogue and discussion - what he calls 'communicative action' - participants implicitly commit themselves to achieving a shared understanding of their situation and a mutually agreed rational consensus about how they should act so that this practical issue should be resolved. For Habermas such a consensus is only rational in so far as those participating in the discussion do so on equal terms, are free of any external pressures or any form of manipulation or control.

What social and cultural conditions does participating in this kind of rational discussion presuppose and require? In his book *Between Facts and Norms*, (1996) Habermas answers this question by arguing for a modern revival of the 'public sphere': a realm of social life that emerged in the 18th century and occupied a position located between the sphere occupied by private individuals - the private sphere - and the sphere occupied by the apparatus and regulatory institutions of the state. What a vibrant public sphere provided was a discursive space where individuals can come together to exchange ideas and opinions, to identify and freely discuss social problems of mutual interest and to formulate a consensual agreement about how they should be resolved. It thus offered a 'public space' which allowed all have the same chance to put forward ideas, interpretations and arguments, where there were no barriers to free and open communication and in which all participated on equal terms. Habermas argues that, with the rise of nineteenth century liberal individualism, the interests and concerns of individuals become increasingly privatized and depoliticized and active participation in the public sphere became obsolete. It was this demise of the public sphere that prepared the ground for the emergence of those modern forms of social

scientific research in which the active participation of the public was deemed to be neither necessary nor desirable and, for Habermas, its modern revival is an important pre-condition for the kind of communicative action he advocates. Thus, for Habermas 'communicative action' and the 'public sphere' are mutually dependent. Without a revival of a vibrant public sphere the opportunities for people to engage in 'communicative action' are severely limited but without people participating in 'communicative action' the revival of the public sphere is unlikely to occur.

Let me now summarise my argument. First, I have identified some of the critical issues now facing critical action research and some of the important questions to which these issues give rise. Second, I have suggested that these questions can only be adequately addressed by examining some of the assumptions on which our understanding of critical action research has been erected. Next, I tried to show how one of the way of exposing the weaknesses in these assumptions is to bring our modern understanding of critical action research into critical confrontation with the pre-modern science of 'practical philosophy'. But because it is a pre-modern mode of inquiry that has its origins in a culture very different from our own, I have also suggested that any claim that practical philosophy offers a viable alternative to the action research method can only be sustained if it is reconstructed in ways which confront the culture of scientism which is endemic to the modern times in which we now live. Finally, I have argued that the most appropriate way to do this is by drawing on Habermas' analysis of communicative action and the kind of public sphere that it presupposes and requires.

Once critical action research is reinterpreted in this way, some important insights begin to emerge. For example it becomes clear that the action research facilitator should not be understood as a neutral agent offering expert guidance but rather as someone whose chief task is to nurture the kind of public sphere in which people can engage in communicative action. What also becomes clear is that what makes critical action research 'research' is not that it uses a distinctive research 'method' but that it fosters the kind of communicative space in which practitioners may critically and reflectively reconstruct their praxis. And what makes critical action research 'participatory' is not just that it requires a group of researchers to work collaboratively but in the sense that it requires actively participating in the kind of communicative action that Habermas describes.

What should also become more readily apparent is that critical action research is itself a historically formed social practice that, as it passes from one historical context to another, has to be reinterpreted and reconstructed so that it can continue to offer practical and realistic ways of interpreting and realising its emancipatory aspirations and ideals. In this sense, critical action

research is best understood not as a theory or a research method but as a ‘meta – practice’ -the social practice we engage in when we are confronted with the need to transform our social practices. So understood, critical action research, no less than the social practices it seeks to transform, can only respond to critical issues it now faces by its practitioners participating in communicative action aimed at achieving mutual understanding and an unforced rational consensus about how their existing understanding of the theory, method and conduct of critical action research are to be critically reconstructed and revised. In this sense, issues about critical action research are also and always issues for critical action research and can only be addressed by its practitioners themselves doing critical action research on their own praxis.

Let me conclude my making two brief observations. The first is simply to acknowledge that the revised version of critical action research I have described has much in common with the kind of participatory research associated with the work of Paulo Freire. (Freire,1970a, 1970b) Freire’s participatory research has its roots in the liberation theology of Latin America and emerged in the context of adult literacy and community education. But his concepts of praxis, dialogue and conscientization make his pedagogical theory not unlike the kind of critical action research I have tried to describe.

My second observation is to note that a distinctive feature of this vision of critical action research is that it relies on nothing more than the natural ability of ordinary individuals to participate in dialogue, communication and rational argument. In this respect it has a lot in common with the pedagogical practice we are engaged in today: ‘the seminar’ In the medieval university the seminar provided the discursive space for argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on the asking and answering questions. Like critical action research, it aimed to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out underlying ideas and assumptions. And like critical action research, it provides the kind of public sphere that communicative action requires. So the outcome of my contribution to this seminar has not been to resolve the critical issues that critical action research now faces but simply to suggest a starting point from which the seminar can begin.

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