

The Emancipatory Character of Action Research, its History and the Present State of the Art

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ABSTRACT

Right from the start, action research was intended to be emancipatory research, and it still is. This article will underpin this by outlining its history and the present state of the art. Though a variety of action research approaches have developed along divergent theoretical pathways, it will be stressed that these approaches share the most important characteristics of action research and are basically different applications of different action theories. They are all supported by a participatory worldview and are meant to be a double-sided process of research, self research and education directed at individual empowerment and collective empowerment and/or emancipation. Since the relationship between the researcher and the subjects being researched is crucial for the success of action research as an emancipatory or empowering activity, this article will maintain that the most important task of action researchers is to develop refined heuristics concerning this communication. The article will end by making some recommendations for the improvement of action research as an emancipatory practice. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: emancipatory action research; action theory; emancipation; empowerment; participatory worldview; relationship between researchers and researched subjects

INTRODUCTION

The historical development of action research reveals that it had emancipatory intentions from the very beginning, and that this basis has become increasingly sophisticated with the refinement of action research into different approaches. Action research is designed to improve the researched subjects' capacities to solve problems, develop skills (including professional skills), increase their chances of self-determination, and to have more influence on the functioning and decision-making processes of organizations and institutions from the context in which they act. Emancipation implies that the generated results of action research are two-sided. On the one hand are the specific improved action competencies of the researched subjects in the local situation in the specific research project. On the other hand are the general enhanced action competencies in other comparable problematic situations in the future, sometimes even in broader contexts. In addition, every action

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research project also aims to enhance the theory and methodology of action research as a distinct social science approach, as well as the professional skills of action researchers.

In the last few decades, emancipation has come to be equated with empowerment. Although they initially represented different perspectives, both emancipation and empowerment are closely connected to what is called a participatory worldview. This implies that all people must be equal participants in society, which means that they must have equal opportunities for schooling and jobs, have the opportunity to share in all goods and services in society and participate in decision-making, both public and private. However, success in the sense of realizing emancipation and empowerment cannot be guaranteed by the wide range of action research theories available for designing a practice-orientated research project. Since the main characteristic is the communicative interaction between researchers and the researched subjects, action researchers have to be experienced in handling this relationship as a minimum success factor, over and above their skills as adequate social researchers.

In order to outline the state of the art of action research as an explicitly emancipatory research approach the following steps will be taken. First, the content of the concepts of emancipation and empowerment and the notion of participatory democracy, which is closely connected to these concepts will be outlined. Second, the history of action research, keeping close to the concepts of emancipation, empowerment and participatory democracy and modalities and submodalities such as self-actualization and self-determination will be briefly sketched. Third, the different fully grown approaches of action research that we know today will be described. In the last paragraph, in which the focus is on the relationship between the researcher and researched subjects, some recommendations to improve the practice of action research will be made.

EMANCIPATION, EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

To emancipate means to free oneself from restraint, control or the power of someone else, especially to free oneself from any kind of slavery. Emancipation was the main goal of large social, political and religious groups during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They struggled for equal rights and social justice, and made efforts to create more power, including political power, for the poor, cultural and ethnic minorities, religious groups, women, and homosexuals. Emancipation was the main political preoccupation of critical theory and critical action research¹. Although one could be emancipated as

¹The approaches within the stream of critical action research are based on critical social theory, which I see as broader than the Frankfurter Schule of Adorno and Horkheimer and others. Many scientists in even more disciplines were inspired by Marx and Engels's critique of capitalism. Habermas is a social philosopher/sociologist and the most important theoretician of the so-called second generation Frankfurter Schule. Critical action research was developed within critical sociology (e.g. Habermas, Offe, and Negt), critical psychology (e.g. Holzkamp) and critical pedagogy (Freire). Apart from emancipation, critical action research approaches share the following three theoretical and methodological preoccupations. First, these approaches are characterized by a subject-subject relationship between researchers and the researched subjects. Second, they contain a critique of the state and state apparatus and other cultural institutions representing the dominating ideology of the ruling classes, based on the critique of capitalist economy. Third, they were influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation approach. Moreover, they thematized an important distinction between 'the situation that we have now' (Sein) which is repressive, etc., and the transformation thereof into a new (utopian) future which is characterized by social justice and where all men are equals, etc. (Sollen). This theme is emancipation, and is connected to the search for a 'subject' which came into being with Enlightenment. This implies a critical hermeneutic action theory which has as its central theme the possibility of the 'free' human meaningful action of a subject against the determining forces of nature and society in which this action is necessarily situated.

an individual, the concept applied to the collective. Critical theory, and the majority of Marxist approaches in the social sciences, criticized the all-embracing structural power of the dominant classes in the economical, political and cultural (or so-called ideological) systems and subsystems in society. Their purpose was to get the dispossessed into power; the dominated labour classes were to become the historical subject of a new fully democratized classless society. Thus critical reflection on the power structures of the dominating classes, for example family and community life, work, and urban politics, was the core activity of critical action research. This was done through adult educational work such as community education, community development and communal action, literacy projects and also through socialist feminist group work. Thus, emancipation was not only freeing oneself from domination but also transforming society and achieving a more equal distribution of power and control within society. Its purpose was to achieve freedom from the power exercised by the dominant groups and classes, and to obtain the power to be free to exert influence and give direction to one's own life. It is easy to see that emancipation is a worldview concept, closely connected to the aforementioned participatory worldview. Nowadays however, the more recent concept of empowerment is often used.

The concept of empowerment has a somewhat different history. At first it was used by radical feminist groups. These groups of women used a form of group work that combined methods developed by Lewin and Moreno (two of the founding fathers of action research, see next paragraph) and within humanistic psychology and radical psychoanalysis (Vermeulen & Boog, 1994). As in Lewin's group work method, the emphasis of these groups was on direct or participative democracy. Group members worked on personal growth and personal empowerment, within the safe boundaries of the group. Thus, at first, empowerment was a more 'individual' concept. Empowerment was connected to raising self-consciousness, learning to stand up for yourself (self-advocacy) and self-actualization. However, in the last few decades empowerment has also been used in the sense of collective and group empowerment. Jacobs (2002, p. 248) writes: 'The basic assumption in an empowerment approach is that people cannot fully realise their potential in life if they have no control over the (internal and external) factors that determine their lives'.

Empowerment enriched the concept of emancipation with notions about personal being and competencies, and motivational elements. Paradigmatic for this enrichment are the themes which the faction of radical feminists added to those of the socialist feminists. Although at first there was tension between both factions, soon most women in the feminist movement saw the necessity of combining the socialists' goal of the structural transformation of society with the radical feminists' notions of personal growth and personal strength. In practice this meant the combination of reflection in political consciousness-raising groups with getting to know yourself.

The concepts of emancipation and empowerment are closely connected with the concept of participatory democracy. The values of equal rights, social justice, and solidarity with the socially deprived can only be realized within a community that is organized along the principles of participatory democracy. Participatory here means communication and participation in decision-making. Participatory democracy is not only seen as a goal inherent to emancipation or empowerment, but must also be experienced in the practice of action research: in the relationship between researcher and researched subjects. Thus learning by reflection and self-research in small 'direct democratic' groups where the participants are regarded as equals, though nevertheless recognized as different—unique—human beings, became one of the core activities in action research.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action research in the West started with Aristotelian thinking (Toulmin, 2000), but the distinct social research approach started in the US prior to World War II. This American current of action research had two sources: the tradition of philosophical pragmatism and, somewhat later, the work of the European gestalt-psychologist Lewin and the radical psychoanalyst Moreno.

The first research practice that can be labelled as action research was based on the philosophical pragmatism of Dewey. It was Collier, of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who initiated community education projects in the Indian reserves in the US (Noffke, 1997). Philosophical pragmatism, especially the works of the philosopher of education Dewey and his close friend the philosopher and social psychologist Mead, was the first grand theory to provide a firm foundation for action research. It aimed to improve people's social and democratic participation in society and to establish social equality and social justice. Mead and Dewey's theories were what I will call genuine action theories, as opposed to behavioural theories. Central to these theories were the notions of human development through 'transaction' (Dewey) and interaction-communication (Mead). In behavioural theories human beings are seen only as reacting units, black boxes, or similar to the doves and dogs of Skinner's 'operant conditioning'. Philosophical pragmatism generated a base for the development of professional practices such as social casework, community education and community organization, directed at facilitating people to learn to stand up for themselves, to participate in civil society, and in this way to decrease structural social injustice. Later, just after World War II, it also generated strategies of 'social action' as developed by Alinsky for the civil rights movement (Dubost, 2001). These became popular in the community action committees and the self-organizations in neighbourhoods in Europe and Great Britain at the end of the 1960s.

About a decade later, the 'Gestalt-psychologist' Lewin started an action research practice. Lewin had fled from Nazi Germany and from 1934 he worked in the US. In Germany, Lewin was a member of the Socialist Party and his scientific work was directed at the emancipation of minorities. 'His particular concerns appear to have been the combating of anti-Semitism, the democratisation of society, and the need to improve the position of women. Along with other students he organised and taught an adult education program for working class women and men' (Smith, 2001, p. 1). In the US, he had contact with Dewey and worked for some time together with Moreno, a psychiatrist from Vienna. Lewin coined the term action research, which he understood to be 'a comparative research on the conditions and effects or various forms of social action, and research leading to social action' (Lewin, 1948, p. 202–203, as quoted in Smith, 2001, p. 9). In Lewin's work, all the important elements of action research can be found. He developed a dynamic field theory and started experiments in the field. Furthermore, he developed an approach called dynamic group work. This group work (with the so-called T-group model) was meant to facilitate learning by group members (Smith, 2001). In these groups, participants worked on democratic leadership. To this end, Lewin changed the role of the researcher from distanced outsider to involved participant (Greenwood & Levin, 1998) and used a multi-method approach based on social psychological 'concepts that were more sociological than psychological' (Fachbereich Sozialpädagogik an der Pädagogischen Hochschule Berlin, 1972). Greenwood and Levin (1998) mention two other elements in Lewin's approach. First, Lewin (and Moreno's) work started from an open system view, and second, Lewin was the inventor of the cyclical model of social change as a three-stage

process: 'dismantling former structures (unfreezing), changing the structures (changing), and finally locking them back into a permanent structure (freezing)' (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 17). Ever since, group work to facilitate social change and adult learning following this cyclical development has been central to the methodology of all kinds of action research.

Before he started the neo-positivistic movement of sociometrics, Moreno worked with a combination of the living sociogram, psychodrama and sociodrama (Boog, 1989; Moreno, 1951). He combined group work with an interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis which was less verbal and more non-verbal. Instead of the interaction between psychoanalyst and analysand, he used group work in which the role of the analyst was non-authoritative. Creativity and spontaneity were considered to be more important concepts than Freud's unconscious impulses. As in Lewin's group work, the researcher participated in the group, but Moreno went further and explicitly invited the researched subjects to become co-researchers.

The British Tavistock Institute picked up on Lewin's work where it was used, for instance, for group psychotherapies and team building as well as for professional work in industrial relations (sociotechnics). Its goals were personal empowerment and team building in social situations or (democratic) participation so that an organization could grow into what later would be called a 'learning organization'.

With the democratic movements of 1968, action research received a new impulse. Critical theories delivered new starting points for action research approaches with explicit emancipatory intentions. Approaches such as participatory action research, emancipatory action research and critical action research were developed. The most important impulse came from the theory of Habermas (Habermas & Luhmann, 1971, pp. 101–141; Moser, 1975). Habermas was the key scientist of the second generation of the Frankfurter Schule. Like all theorists of this school, his work reflected explicit emancipatory preoccupations. Later on, in the 1980s, his action theory in particular (Habermas, 1981)² was taken as a basis for action research approaches. In addition, critical psychology (Holzkamp, 1983) and especially critical pedagogy and adult education (Freire, 1970, 1998) played important roles as basic impulses for action research approaches. Action research at this time was also influenced by the critical approach as advocated by radical feminism.

During the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s, action research disappeared in Germany and became scarce in many other Western countries. This was partly due to the fact that action research was seen as the research of Marxist militants (Coenen, 1987; Moser, 1975). However, it revived in England and other English-speaking countries, especially Australia and New Zealand, around 1985.

In this period, Touraine developed his action theory, called actionalism, which he and his team in Paris combined with an action research model known as sociological intervention (Touraine, 1978). This was a group work method in the tradition of Lewin and Moreno. This sociological intervention methodology was extensively used in research on new social movements (Boog, 1989; Dubost, 2001). In these interventions, militants of social movements were stimulated to reflect on their collective identity as part of the 'historicity' (the dynamic social world) they lived in. This reflection was to result in a clear collective narrative, a project for the social world as they wanted it to be. Touraine called this project a cultural orientation, which referred to this particular movement's ideal and holistic view on the economic, cultural and political institutional framework of

²Though this was first outlined in an essay in 1971 (Habermas & Luhmann, 1971).

society. The underlying idea was that once they were able to formulate such a project they would also be able to formulate action strategies. Empowerment in this approach meant being able to formulate this project, to appropriate it as your own collective identity and to know how to translate it into action strategies.

A special place is taken by action research as developmental work in so-called developing countries. In particular, the experiences and perceptions from Africa, Asia and Latin America played an inspiring role in the theory and practice of action research in Western European countries. As early as the 1950s, a great deal of interest arose in the views of Mahatma Gandhi in India. This concerned not only his views on non-violent action, but also his ideas about community development. Community development became an important part of the strategies of the UN for developmental processes. Other influences on action research included the ideas of Mao Zedong in China (Huizer, 1993). The experiments with Ujamaa in Tanzania, Africa, and with *kibbutzim* in Israel also caught the attention. Initiatives in Latin America were influential, for instance the many initiatives in the areas of *desarrollo comunal*, *acción comunal*, *educación fundamental*, and *participación popular*. Orlando Fals Borda's study: *Acción comunal en una vereda Colombiana* (1961) became well known, just as the *Centro Regional de Educación Fundamental* (CREFAL) of the Union Panamericana and UNESCO, established in the Mexican city of Patzcuaro. However, the greatest influence has to be attributed to the experiences and perceptions of Paolo Freire. Freire developed an (adult) literacy approach that focussed on learning to read and write about the concrete everyday life and social contexts of the learners. This activated them to reflect on their social situation (conscientization), and thus enable them to become empowered. His ideas influenced participatory and educational action research all over the world (Keune & Boog, 2000).

FOUR RECENT ACTION RESEARCH APPROACHES

In the last two decades, action research has revived, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Elsewhere, social scientists have generally followed this interest in action research slowly. Action research has profited from the enormous upheaval in qualitative research. According to Todhunter (2001), this has been caused by the growing popularity of the so-called interactive research methodologies. Just as in action research, this is a kind of research in which the interaction between researchers and researched subjects is explicitly used for the processes of data gathering and data analysis. Researchers and researched subjects interact. In this interaction there is a subject–subject relationship between researchers and researched subjects. However, the researcher usually owns the 'data' and controls the interpretation of it as well as the way it is used to answer the research question. The intended effects of the research are owned and controlled by the commissioners and researchers and are not an issue in the interaction between researchers and researched subjects. The research is, for instance, meant to improve an organization or to reach an agreement on issues of public policy.

Nowadays, action research is a fully fledged, respected social research practice. All elements and preoccupations of the aforementioned approaches can be synthesized into four broad approaches: pragmatic action research, co-operative inquiry, 'critical' action research, and action research within the tradition of systems thinking. Though these approaches differ, they share many theoretical and methodological assumptions and even take each other's theoretical and methodological elements into account as co-grounding.

Action research practices are increasingly converging, caused by the developments and positive experiences with communicative methodologies such as, for example, group work and the cycle of experiential learning. Therefore, I will briefly characterize the approaches and pay some attention to their convergence.

Pragmatic action research is based on the philosophical-pragmatic works of Dewey and Mead (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). It has two central parameters: 'knowledge generation through action and experimentation, and the role of participatory democracy', according to Levin and Greenwood (2001, p. 104). They 'argue for knowledge construction processes that involve both researchers and local stakeholders in the same learning-action process, thereby fulfilling both a participative democratic ideal and achieving knowledge generation through learning from action.'

The English scientists Reason, Rowan and Heron (Heron, 1996; Reason & Rowan, 1981) developed an action research approach which has become known as co-operative inquiry. It places strong emphasis on personal growth, self-actualization, and inquiry into personal strengths. It owes much to the works of Lewin and Moreno and the work of the Tavistock Institute, but also to the diversity of methods and techniques that were used in the radical feminist therapy groups, such as encounter, art therapy, gestalt therapy, and transactional analysis. Their underlying worldview is participatory, and integrates elements from holistic-spiritualistic alternative cultures (Heron, 1996; Reason, 2002). The philosophical pragmatism of Dewey has also influenced co-operative inquiry.

Critical action research is a family of models, grounded by critical hermeneutics and often by neo-Marxist theories in sociology (Habermas, Negt), psychology (Holzkamp) and education (Freire). It has different adjectives applied to it: participatory, emancipatory and exemplary. Strong practices of critical and participatory action research can be found, for instance, in Australia and New Zealand (Hoogwerf, 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996), and Austria (Boog, 2002). Exemplary action research is a specific mode developed by Coenen (1987) and his group in the Netherlands. Besides the critical sociological, psychological and pedagogical inspirations, this approach is strongly influenced by philosophical pragmatism (Mead's interactionism) and Giddens's structuration theory.

Finally, there is action research that is grounded in systems thinking. Systems thinking views action as embedded in unpredictable complex systems which are in a continual process of self-creation and re-creation. In action research, it challenges people to reflect on the place and function of what you do or do not do as part of a dynamic whole. This reflection can provide more insight into the potentialities and possibilities to act otherwise, and in this way can enhance human emancipation (Flood, 2001).

Despite their differences, these action research approaches share six important characteristics:

- (1) The cycles of research, experiential learning and action.
- (2) A common goal-orientedness and 'ethics': emancipation, individual and social empowerment and participatory democracy.
- (3) A general action theoretical approach. Following Nijk (1978, 1984), the theoretical and methodological stance in action theory is inherently critical and grounded in an emancipatory worldview. Active experiential learning is fundamental to the notion of the human being as the active creator of his or her world.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, Giddens (1976, 1984), Habermas (1981), and Touraine (1965, 1978) developed general action theories which

transcended the existing disciplinary division, as did Dewey and Lewin in their time. In particular, the dualism of psychology and sociology was transcended into a dynamic synthesis. Both disciplines gained knowledge about two sides of one and the same coin: social action. Thus they criticized and went beyond the existing conventional approaches in the social sciences, which were still based on the methodologies of seventeenth-century natural sciences (Giddens, 1976; Smith, 1998; Toulmin, 2001). Moreover, these action theories went beyond the dualisms that were usually applied in the explanation and understanding (epistemology) of action. Rationalism and historicism, individualism and collectivism, structure and action, inside and outside, and subject and object were not opposed but taken into account side by side. Different founding theories were also synthesized. For instance, despite their differences, Habermas's communication theory and Giddens's structuration theory synthesized elements of hermeneutics, philosophical pragmatism, language philosophy, open systems theory, communication theory and structuralism. Such action theories are essential for the foundation of action research projects, as well as for the enhancement of action research as a special kind of fundamental scientific social research. It provides rationality for researchers for the (ex-post) reconstruction of concrete research projects. For researchers and their scientific community it is important to work on the sophistication of this role of action theory. Action is 'intentional action' (Weber) and transaction (Dewey), which means that it is embedded in a social context, an intersubjective social cultural space. Action is learned in the transactional processes of socialization. Human beings' lives consist of socio-cultural performances that are controlled by the possibilities permitted by the social system they are part of. However, what they do or do not feel and think is basically unpredictable. Human beings have the capacity to learn and to develop new action strategies based on new insights. Right from the start of their lives, they are pressed to learn and to socialize, which also develops their capacity to learn, which in turn empowers them to do 'otherwise' or 'make a difference'. They can reflect, but only in interaction and depending on the social system they live in. In action research processes, researchers and researched subjects try to get a grip on the action processes of the researched subjects and develop new action scripts through co-operative reflection. These new action scripts are tried out in practice on a small scale, evaluated, and then adjusted or rejected. Furthermore, action and reflection are seen to reinforce each other, which results in a cyclical or narrative development of individual lives or life projects. Action is reflexively monitored continuously (Giddens, 1984). Reflection must not be disconnected from action; otherwise one runs the risk of estrangement, utopianism, dogmatism, scientism or fundamentalism.

- (4) Another important point in which all four action research approaches converge is that the underlying action theories imply that (new) knowledge in social research is basically gained through a process of mutual understanding, a so-called double hermeneutic process. Researchers interpret an already interpreted world; researched subjects comment on that interpretation, and so on. In the process of mutual understanding, the research partners try to get to know and trust each other as equals in self-knowledge about their other-ness (Ricoeur, 1992). This dialogically acquired self-knowledge is a necessary condition for, primarily, the researched subjects to learn their possibilities for self-determination. The researchers also learn to improve their capacities as action researchers to facilitate the personal or other growth of the researched subjects.

- (5) This subject–subject relationship has implications for the criterion of the validity of the new action scripts gained, based on (new) self-knowledge (empowerment, emancipation). Validation is achieved by the procedures of ‘communicative or dialogical validity’ (Smaling, 2000). It also implies that the research process must be able to function as a catalyst for structural change. This is validated by ‘catalytic validity’. ‘Catalytic validity represents the degree in which the research process reorients, focuses and energises the participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it, a process Freire (1972) called conscientisation’ (Bernard, 2000, p. 183).
- (6) All research approaches share a co-generative research assessment procedure. Researcher, researched subjects and other involved actors reconstruct the research process and weigh the possible effects (including both intended and unintended outcomes). This assessment has to occur at the individual and at the collective level. At the individual level, this assessment consists of learner reports about the growth of the capacity for self-determination in the domain on which the research focuses, but also in other domains of one’s life. At the collective level the assessment focuses on the question of whether the researched subjects and other actors involved obtain more transforming power and influence on the processes of decision-making in organizations and institutions (political empowerment and emancipation).

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE PRACTICE OF ACTION RESEARCH

A theoretical basis is no guarantee of a positive end result for any particular action research. Which criteria does a model of action research have to fulfil if it is to realize its emancipatory content and effects?

To start with, researchers have to implement the heuristics of an action research approach with a sincere emancipatory intention. If there is no explicit emancipatory or empowering vision guiding the project from the outset, it will prove difficult to realize any emancipatory effects, or even worse, the research might turn out to be non-emancipatory or result in the de-emancipation of the researched subjects.

A further requirement is that the research project has to be a mutually supported learning process for both the researcher and the researched. The last few decades have shown a remarkable comeback and revival of all kinds of qualitative research approaches, especially action oriented or ‘interactive’ qualitative research. According to Todhunter (2001), action research holds a special place. It is interactive research where emancipation, empowerment and democratization form the criteria for the demarcation between action research and other research designs.

However, whether a project will succeed or not is highly dependent on the core process of action research: the interaction between researchers and the researched subjects that forms the basis for the quality of the produced knowledge. At the same time, this interaction represents an experimental microcosm of the problematic social situation of the researched subjects, which was the initial reason for setting up an action research project. Since the professional skills of the researcher to handle this situation form the basis for a good action research project, it is important to formulate some recommendations for researchers. These recommendations stem from the specific foundation of action research in action theory and meet the test of its criteria: empowerment, emancipation and democratization.

First of all, researchers should be able to formulate and set up the action research in accordance with its basic assumptions. They must know the ins and outs of sophisticated action theories and how to use a broad range of communicative methods and techniques, learning methods and techniques, and research methods and techniques.

Moreover, the researcher should have an overview of the chances that the research will be successful. An analysis of the specific situation of the researched subjects is necessary, including the history, power structure, and network of actors, public policies and laws. This may be done in a pilot study, which could also be a way of getting to know the researched subjects better. At this stage it is important that the researchers start to interest the researched group, or at least some of its individual members, in the first global design of the research: they have to create a basis of support. They might start a so-called group of critical friends, a small group selected from the researched subjects, which will stay close to the researcher, especially at the beginning.

Initially, an action research design cannot be anything but rather sketchy. As soon as possible the researched subjects must be engaged in their role as co-researchers. In that role, they must be able to co-control the research process and participate in the decisions about the following steps. This has to be communicated clearly to possible commissioners of the project.

It is also important to organize good communication lines with the other actors who play a role in the research situation. The empowerment of the primary researched subjects depends to a large degree on whether the stakeholders allow them to be empowered. In his experiences in Latin America and the Netherlands, Keune (1993) found that people in power reacted very repressively, even before the researched subjects started to develop the slightest idea of self-determination. He describes the situation where the stakeholders surrounding the primary researched subjects have a disempowering influence as the 'boomerang-effect'.

Basically, the relationship between researcher and researched subjects is a dialogue, but frequently the research entails a multilogue in which others besides the primary subject are involved. Therefore, in some cases it might be wise for researchers to first try to empower other stakeholders, because in this way they can pave the path for the empowerment of the primary researched subject. For instance, a research project might start with the development of a participatory professional practice as a first step (a necessary though not *per se* sufficient condition) towards empowering their clients.

Although the research partners are equals, they are different because their expertise lies in different domains and aspects. The researched subject is an expert in the matters of his or her everyday life. The researcher is an expert and the one responsible for proposing the application of certain methods and techniques. The researcher must be an expert in (adult) education processes. The researcher must be explicit and open about his or her social ethics. Many researchers use the concept of 'facilitator' to capture all the practical, methodological, theoretical, analytical, pedagogical, agogical and teaching skills of the researcher. Greenwood and Levin (1998) are more modest and describe the role of the researcher as a 'friendly outsider'. But it is clear that action researchers need a larger range of skills than just those of a social researcher.

Researchers need enough self-knowledge to be able to know how to delegate research tasks to others (researched subjects, critical friends, other researchers). This delegation might also have the function of enhancing the process of trustworthy communication, the learning processes of the researched subjects and/or the empowering effects of the research process. Therefore, it is important that researchers have the patience and the insights of a good teacher.

TO CONCLUDE

Researchers and researched subjects have access to a growing number of methods and techniques. Action research nowadays is sophisticated on the level of practices and applications in concrete projects as well on the level of their theoretical and methodological foundations. The sophistication of action research is a result of the growth and diversification of approaches. This has been caused by a growth in projects, both as regards numbers of projects and the scope of the projects in different domains, and the increasing reflection and communication that goes along with this, resulting in numerous publications.

In this article it has been argued that in the history of action research, the concepts of emancipation, empowerment and participatory democracy have always played a significant role, at least theoretically. However, these concepts are difficult to assess within the limited time-spatial happenings of a concrete action research project. In the history of action research, social scientists have worked on the sophistication of the content of these concepts. They were skilled in fundamental theoretical and methodological matters and, at the same time, were skilled practitioners and researchers. A considerable part of this refinement developed out of their experiences as learners in research projects. Epistemologically this sophistication occurred through action theoretical perspectives, which see the transactions between researcher and researched subjects as a microcosm of macro-social processes. Concepts like individual empowerment, self-actualization, raising self-consciousness, learning to stand up for yourself and self-advocacy can be used as goals for a broad range of learning, communication and research techniques on the transactional level of researcher and researched subjects. In this way flesh is put onto the bones of emancipation and social participation.

Action research is social research connected to an educational intervention. From the start, the scientists who developed it shared a utopia. They wanted a social science that enhanced the capacities of the researched subjects to become self-determining people who defines themselves as being free, as individuals who have self-knowledge, who know how to manage difficult situations and how to get access to resources to support their efforts (Mithaug, 1996). They wanted a social science that helped to create active citizenship. But action research projects can only be assessed discursively in their emancipatory effects during and after the research. Action research establishes participatory ethics in the hearts and minds of all participants, which is a starting point for democratized societies. To be an adequate action researcher the social scientist must:

- juggle action theories and methodology;
- be explicit in his ethical stance;
- know numerous methods and techniques to facilitate experiential learning, in order to raise the self-consciousness and self-knowledge of the subjects involved in the research project;
- have gained experience in the application of methods to assess different empowering effects during and after the research process.

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