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Action Research and Its History as an Adult Education Movement for Social Change

Michael Glassman[1], Gizem Erdem[1], and Mitchell Bartholomew[1]

Abstract

This article is an attempt to tell the story of action research as it has developed over the last half century. Action research has become an important part of a number of research programs, especially in the field of education. Action research is a powerful idea centering on humans' ability to break free from deleterious social habits through autonomous, democratic participation. Action research was originally conceived as an adult education program influenced by the work of Eduard Lindeman, Kurt Lewin, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget. A second branch of action research, participatory action research, emerged about 5 years later guided by the sociological work of William Foote Whyte. Participatory action research focused less on democratic processes and egalitarian decision making and more on understanding organizational problems through the eyes of the participants. Chris Argyris and Eric Trist both extended action research in new directions by merging new ideas.

Keywords

action research, adult education, social change

Action research (AR) is an interesting and often misunderstood perspective on the relationship between social action and research exploring transformative social change. Rather than approaching change as an individual endeavor, AR recognizes the importance of recognizing groups as a web or field of human interactions collectively working toward shared goals within a general community framework. An AR perspective posits that the best way to change goal-driven activity is by changing community

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interactional patterns, usually in the direction of more democratic decision-making processes, so that new possibilities and trajectories for collective action emerge. Changing entrenched human interaction patterns means changing the way community members think about their own roles and the roles of others in combined actions, demanding an adult-oriented education, or more specifically, a (re)education[1] process.

Members of a community engaged in goal-driven activities interact with each other based on patterns or habits learned over time. They follow rules and develop power relationships because they believe them to be the "correct" for the circumstance. They also tend to follow leaders and rule systems because they believe it necessary for the community/organization to survive. Leaders are technocrats who best understand the needs of the organizations and must be trusted to make the right decisions. AR attempts to break through historical strangleholds on proper roles to develop new action agendas based on processes of community and individual self-discovery. Autonomous adults are more likely to recognize the possibilities in change, and they are also most likely to affect social transformation.

In this article, we trace the arc of AR as it developed in the United States and to a lesser extent England after World War II and into the latter part of the 20th century. The first part of this article explores the original definition of AR as it emerged through the work of civic organizations intent on maintaining cohesive community orientations established during the war and the small band of researchers tasked to help them. We then outline the theoretical roots of AR as developed out of Lewin and Lippitt's work on exploring the impact of autocratic and democratic leadership in group behavior and the ways these ideas were applied to adult learning. This original AR initiative culminated in the establishment of the National Training Laboratory (NTL) and its attempts to codify practices and processes that might lead to progressive, organizational change. The article then examines the development of the alternative participatory action research (PAR) framework of William Foote Whyte, which despite shared theoretical roots has a different point of origination than AR. In some ways, it was Whyte's critique of NTL during its early formation that helped lead to some of the confusion and contention concerning the meaning of AR. The last part of the article looks at the contributions of Eric Trist and Chris Argyris, inspired early by Lewin but late arrivals to NTL, who brought important additions to the AR framework. We leave the most recent manifestations of PAR informed by the ideas of Paulo Freire and exemplified by the work of scholars such as Budd Hall (1992) for a future discussion.

The Beginnings of Action Research

The Origins of the Term Action Research *and Its Premises*

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946, 1951) is often credited as the driving force behind AR, but it is more accurate to think of it as an ensemble production with a number of social activists, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and researchers having direct and indirect influences. Soon after the war, Lewin started

working with the Commission on Community Interrelations (CCI) and was leading a group addressing prejudice and intergroup conflict. Marrow (1967) recounts that this "research consisted of what Lewin would regularly refer to as *action-research*." Consequently, the commission took as its maxim as "no research without action, no action without research" (p. 144).

It is more likely that the term *action research* emerged from CCI rather than Lewin. In fact, Marrow never actually says that Lewin coined the term *action research*, simply that he was regularly using it as part of a larger research team. All this is not to denigrate either the great contribution Lewin's ideas of field theory and gate keeping made to the field of social psychology, or the important contributions he made to the group developing AR. But concentrating solely on Lewin can make it too easy to reduce AR to an individual "accomplishment" or an "approach" and lose sight of its origins as a movement encompassing social activists, organizational/community leaders, and scholars—the type of combined community necessary for an AR initiative. The word "action" can misleadingly be interpreted as a modifier for the word "research," and research understood as the progeny and end point of academic work. This misunderstanding can contribute to *action research* being an amorphous term that describes all types of research endeavors as long as they concentrate on "action," suggesting that academics and/or researchers are primary in the approach. This can diminish the unique meaning and contributions of AR as a social movement not only in academia but also in organizations, communities, and even larger political systems.

AR is a form of social inquiry through which members of social groups interact with one another, engage in open dialogue about their intergroup relationships, and collectively participate in a learning process to create social change within their communities. To that aim, AR constitutes a series of principles and procedures, describing how events should be sequenced to instigate progress in human organization/community. Research serves as a lubricant for social action, keeping it from getting mired in accepted power dynamics and habitual thought about how things "should be."

First there is *social* problem, particularly an issue or an intergroup tension that has an inevitably destructive impact on the community at large. The conceptualization of the problem as "social" has clear ties with Lewin's (1943, 1951) field theory. The field (or *gestalt*, or *system*) is a rule-governed entity, a coherent whole with entrenched habits of power. These "habits" can lead to acceptance of ultimately destructive actions such as marginalization, scapegoating, prejudice, and tension between groups. The *action* in action research starts with challenging the habits and rules through the collective participation of all community members. Research sets the agenda for proactive social action—understanding the impact of habits and boundaries and how they restrict community goals—and recognizing that habits are changeable through enlightened leadership. At the research stage, AR provides an opportunity for open, nonhierarchical dialogue between members, engaging all equally in the process of change. Research is less objective record keeping of reified output than the art of seeing, observing, and tracking down various social interactions among group members.

Research involves collecting data on the *process* of change (i.e., how subgroups or scapegoats in the group emerge) rather than the outcome (failure vs. success of the groups). When focusing on the process of change, members of social groups and researchers are "learners" in the process, reeducating themselves and acquiring new perspectives on problem solving. AR assumes that given the opportunity humans have abilities for making productive, just decisions on their own fate as well the community (Kleiner, 1996).

Once a new action agenda is created, the social groups "implement" it as an educational process, creating a spiral of change that crosses specific contexts. When the newly developed action agenda meets (inevitable) resistance from the established field of interactions, new and sometimes unexpected forces in the community emerge to be reexamined.

$$\text{Social action} \rightarrow \text{Research} \rightarrow \text{Social action} \rightarrow$$

AR is a cyclical and continuous process in which community members and researchers are melded into a unified working group. AR does not necessarily help organizations/communities achieve their espoused goals, but it facilitates a process through which communities become more aware of how their own accepted structures and obstacles restrict possibilities of moving forward as a whole.

Where Does the Term Action Research *Come From?*

Usually it is not that important where an idea or a term originated. AR is one of the few cases where understanding the genesis of the concept and the term is beneficial to understanding the perspective. If AR is about making organizational actions primary in the change process, it is important to know that the concept did emerge from the actions of social organizations.

The first academic article to actually use the term *action research*, and lay out its core principles, was authored by Ronald Lippitt and Marian Radke (1946) and called for the urgent need for social sciences to "understand, examine and challenge the dynamics of prejudice among social groups" (p. 167). The authors acknowledge futile attempts to reduce prejudice; in a top-down process, the so-called educators or experts will inevitably be rejected by the targeted groups because of the tension, guilt, or anxiety they bring to the process. Instead, change occurs when "the process of re-education is a spontaneous, voluntary acceptance of new values and behavioral patterns" (p. 172).[2]

> A number of recent research projects have tried to take these factors into account in experimenting with a fact-finding procedure which will serve not only to discover prejudiced attitudes and behavior, but also to encourage changes in the conduct of the prejudiced individual or group. This research method has been called "action-research" in two recent statements by research organizations focusing on the study of conflict and misunderstanding between ethnic groups. (Lippitt & Radke 1946, p. 172)[3]

The Lippitt and Radke article offers some important insights that carry through to most modern variations of AR. The description of AR was based on eight previous studies; some of these research projects included authors who worked with Lewin in some way and others who did not. Many of the early studies were based on a social organization's attempts to diminish prejudice. The focus was on intergroup relationships and dynamics. The issues that AR was initially attempting to deal with were not obvious, well-defined problems but ingrained, interaction-based fault lines that threatened community unity, slowly eating away at the group's abilities to respond to both everyday and catastrophic problems. "The major assumption in action-research is that individuals and groups can be guided to participate in a research role in discovering the facts about their own prejudices" (Lippitt & Radke, 1946, p. 172).

Lippitt and Radke clearly lay out what they see as nine key principles for AR. The enduring importance of these principles is reflected in the fact that many of them were revoiced by McTaggert (1991) almost half a century later in an article on *Principles of Participatory Action Research*.[4] Perhaps the most important of the principles was the first, "*a group needs* to discover some facts exist or is created" (Lippitt & Radke, 1946, p. 172, italics added); the second, "*the group, or representatives of it* share in the deciding of "what do we need to know?" (p. 173, italics added); and the eighth, "sometimes *more is needed than a change in the values or social perception of the group*" (p. 175, italics added). Almost all AR that has followed incorporates at least these three basic principles, which are in many ways the glue that binds action researchers together.

The better known introduction of AR was in an early issue of *The Journal of Social Issues* (Lippitt was general editor at the time). This issue was devoted to introducing AR to a larger audience and contained Lewin's (1946) often-cited article "Action Research and Minority Problems." What may be most telling about this special issue is its structure: social organizations presented problems and then researchers commented on how an AR approach might work toward progressive change. Lewin's famous article was a response to a series of issues in intergroup relationships raised in the previous article by Frank Baldau, an administrator for the Community Relations Board of Cleveland. Baldau (1946) discussed how the end of World War II led to dissolution in national unity in the United States. Hard lines were quickly reforming in intergroup relations—made more painful by memories of intergroup prejudices in Nazi Germany. Baldau wondered how to stop the quick spread of rumors, the desires of parents to control what their children learned so that it reflected their own narrow perspectives, the beginnings of gentrification, and the encroachment of new populations into traditional neighborhoods. It is in response to these problems that Lewin (1946) offers his fact finding cycle of planning, action, and analysis.

The problem/response articles were followed by a series of articles on "how to" implement AR interventions. An article by Lippitt focuses on how to set up the relationship/collaboration between the social action organization and research process. Lippitt saw specific analysis as secondary to processes of engagement and change. The optimum scenario for an AR approach is collaboration between trained researchers and a social action organization that recognizes the need for change,[5] followed by trainings that will redefine the community context.

The Core Underpinnings of Action Research

Action research, as originally envisioned and developed, is essentially a social-/education-based intervention for a community dealing with difficult, entrenched problems. However, the ways in which action researchers have attempted to implement the approach in specific settings brings together a number of theoretical models that promote a democratic vision of human interaction. When Lippitt (1986) was describing the underpinnings of the NTL, he suggested a problem-solving process that

> assumes reciprocity of influence, with an emphasis on listening, seeking, and using feedback from each other as peers and member-leader relations. *Mary Follett, Edward Lindeman, John Dewey, and Kurt Lewin* all subscribed to this basic assumption about the meaning of interpersonal democracy. The National Training Laboratory (NTL) was founded on these tenets. (Lippitt, 1986, p. 155)

A Series of Fortuitous Events

Lippitt and Lewin. AR, like many complex ideas, emerged through a series of small and large events and coincidences. Lippitt began working with Lewin at the Iowa Child Research Center soon after returning from a year in Geneva studying with Piaget. Lippitt's initial work with Lewin was a foreshadowing of AR. The line of research started with differentiation between authoritarian and democratic intragroup structures and quickly expanded into series of sociological and social-psychological studies (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938; Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Lippitt, 1939). The ideas behind the research relied heavily on discussions with progressive educators (Gardner, 1946) but also seemed deeply influenced by Piaget's work on the heteronomy and autonomy distinction (Piaget, 1932).

The preliminary study (Lewin & Lippitt, 1938; Lippitt, 1939, 1946) was Lippitt's master's thesis project with Lewin, an experiment on social group atmospheres. Lippitt created two separate social clubs for 10-year-old children and observed interactions between members of the two groups for 3 months. The same adult leader led one group in an "authoritarian" manner and the other group using "democratic" leadership strategies. The results of the study were striking; as the meetings progressed, authoritarian club members became more competitive and began to relate to the group leader in either a submissive or a demanding manner. Authoritarian group members also became hostile to their own products. Democratic club members were spontaneous, collaborative, and friendly to one another and much more concerned with and protective of their products. The differences created by autocratic leadership and democratic leadership in group interactions became in many ways the central platform in the development of AR at NTL and beyond.

Lippitt and Bradford. Just as important as Lippitt's relationship with Lewin was his relationship with Leland Bradford. It was Bradford who established adult education as an integral aspect of AR (Lewin was more interested in group dynamics). Bradford's early

work was in adult education, with ties to the Settlement House movement in Chicago, and seemed heavily influenced by pioneering adult educator Eduard Lindeman and his idea that adult education should focus on autonomous/democratic decision making that eventually leads to transformational, progressive change. Lippitt and Bradford were soon joined by Kenneth Benne, who was close to Dewey when he was at Columbia (Feinberg, 1993). Perhaps the tie between Lindeman and Bradford, and eventually Lippitt and Benne, is best summed up in the following Lindeman quote describing adult education as

> a cooperative venture in non-authoritarian, informal learning, the chief purpose of which is to discover the meaning of experience; a quest of the mind which digs down to the roots of the preconceptions which formulate our conduct; a technique of learning for adults which makes education coterminous with life, and hence elevates learning itself to the level of an experiment. (Lindeman, 1925, p. 3, as cited in Brookfield, 1984, p. 187)

Lippitt's (and Lewin's) research on group dynamics merged with Bradford's ideas on the possibilities of changing the quality of life through adult education programs, and Benne's Deweyan notions of democratic education at the NTL. The best way to move groups from autocratic decision making to democratic problem solving could be accomplished through a direct leadership training process—at least at the adult level. Following Bradford, and especially Benne, trainings would serve the same function as democratic classrooms, teaching leaders to foster equality in problem-solving situations and readily step down from leadership roles as the specific problem demands. Each of the early AR originators brought a piece critical to the whole: Lewin contributed the ideas of field theory and gate keeping, Lippitt the relationship between autocratic and democratic decision making, Bradford adult education as a transformative process, and Benne the processes of democratic education as applied to adult training. It is difficult to imagine AR could have evolved as it did without all four together.

The Connecticut Council on Interrelations (CCI): The First Action Research Intervention

The NTL would become the testing ground for AR, but the seeds for this new type of process-oriented adult education were sown in the CCI intervention, a cornerstone in the history of AR. CCI was the first attempt to shift active communities toward more democratic decision making through leadership training, serving as the primary example for Lewin's well-cited article and was most probably the model for Lippitt and Radke.

CCI took a lead in fighting community prejudice but was disturbed by their lack of progress. The executive director, Frank Simpson, sought assistance from Lewin, at the time founding director of Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT. CCI was looking for an intervention that would change people's attitudes by providing insight into their values and prejudices (Marrow, 1967). Lippitt, who had just come to MIT to

work in Lewin's group, took the lead in designing and implementing a new type of 2-week training program, basing much of the approach on his conversations with Bradford and Benne concerning transformative educational processes (Bradford, 1967). Central to the intervention was leadership training groups as a means for operationalizing abstract ideas of adult (re)education at the community level.

One of the most important aspects of AR emerged during the CCI experiment, almost by accident (Bradford, 1967). CCI recruited community leaders and the training took place on what Lewin termed an *island*, away from everyday habits and patterns of action. The training itself looked to develop a democratic ideology (concentrating on moving the group from authoritarian to autonomous decision making) through role playing scenarios, but the training team and the community leaders maintained separate roles as researchers and subjects. The training team gathered in the evening to discuss collected observational data. This changed when some community leaders came by the "research" meeting and asked if they could sit in on the data analysis process. Lewin immediately agreed and invited them in. During a discussion on findings, one of the community leaders disagreed with the researchers' interpretation of the group process and confronted the staff, facilitating an open discussion about the findings. Stimulated by the new ideas these discussions brought to the fore, Lewin insisted on inviting the participants to future "feedback sessions," making them an integral part of the data analysis process. It was an immediate, pragmatically oriented decision that broke down traditional barriers between researchers and participants and changed the *meaning* of research, transforming it into a "creative activity" owned by the entire intervention community. Lewin's approach was unorthodox, especially considering his strong scientific inclinations (Argyris, 1997) because it let the dependent variable interact with the independent variable. The approach fundamentally changed the role of the community leaders: once "subjects" of interventions, they now became "co-owners" of the process of change.

Energized by the CCI intervention, the team decided to repeat the workshop the following year. They developed a general protocol for a program on group dynamics and invited leaders from government, industry, and civic organizations. These workshops led to the founding of the National Training Laboratory in Group Development in Bethel. Lewin died soon after the CCI intervention and the establishment of NTL, but others continued developing the process. They created three central documents defining training or T groups and AR to that point (Bradford, 1967): (a) a document that outlined phases of change and the ways in which an individual might function as a change agent, (b) a document that dealt with the development of the group itself, and (c) a document that served as a statement of democratic ideology that would serve as safeguard and guidelines for all group development.

William Foote Whyte and the Second Line of Action Research

A second line of AR emerged during roughly the same period as NTL, but based far more in sociology and industrial/organizational psychology than adult education,

including the mapping of interactions within group systems (Homans, 1947) and the Pragmatism of the University of Chicago sociology department epitomized by the work of George Mead. At their most basic level, Mead's ideas explore the way humans interact with each other based on how they recognize others and themselves as created and accepted community symbols (Mead, 1934).

Whyte received his PhD at the University of Chicago in the sociology department. His first major work *Street Corner* (Whyte, 1943) mapped the social organization of an Italian slum on the east side of Boston. The organization is based on specific inter-action patterns of the various actors/community members, an idea Whyte took from George Homans (Whyte, 1994). Whyte mapped the complex interrelationships and the way regular interactions lead to specific types of action agendas/trajectories. He expanded the concept of mapping interaction patterns by hypothesizing that by chang-ing an organization's patterns you could create more positive action trajectories. It was important in studying a small group to understand the role each individual plays in the organizational structure and how it was maintained or changed through interactions. Whyte suggests his interpretation of "action research" emerged during his participant observer study of the Bennetts, a small street gang.

Whyte did his research as a Harvard University fellow in the 1930s but did not actu-ally write up the observational gang study until his dissertation for the sociology department at the University of Chicago. The theoretical focus of the department was a good fit and offered an important framework for Whyte's work. Whyte began to see small group interactions as being affected by the way members understood and responded to each other based in often preexisting symbolic identities (e.g., leader, originator, follower, or recalcitrant). These symbols were many times (pre)determined outside of the small group context but had a very large impact on within group dynam-ics. Individuals with specific titles (e.g., manager) or socially derived standing (e.g., Harvard professor) engendered specific types of social interactions that were difficult to overcome in small group contexts.

One of Whyte's more famous and important early studies was a mapping of interac-tions in restaurants (Whyte, 1949). The mapping suggested that inefficiencies were based on larger social symbol systems in which male workers (e.g., expediters, cooks, bartenders) had difficulty recognizing female workers (e.g., waitresses) as originators of activities. Whyte suggests there is little that can be done about these more macro–symbol-based relationships (Whyte, 1994), and the best approach for changing the trajectory of actions is to change specific interaction patterns within the existing sym-bolic context.

Whyte Comes to NTL

In 1950, Whyte was one of a number of academics asked to analyze the processes of the NTL. We suggest that Whyte's analysis was rife with misunderstandings about what those who were most responsible for designing the trainings at NTL were trying to accomplish. Unfortunately, these misunderstandings have become common and influenced the ways in which AR has been defined since.

What is apparent from Whyte's assessment (recounted in his autobiographical *Participant Observer*, 1994) was that he focused on the ways the trainings attempted to manipulate interaction patterns and power relationships, but with only limited knowledge of the trainings' original intent or their theoretical background, particularly the ideas of Dewey, Lindeman, and Piaget. True to his theoretical and research underpinnings, Whyte believed it was important to locate a leader, understand why the leader held the position he or she did, and map the interactions that determined action trajectories from that point forward. Leadership interactions can be subtly manipulated, but they cannot be changed on a wholesale basis in response to problems. He believed that the trainings strayed from Lewin's original work on group dynamics and the inherent risks this presented.

> The risks arose because of the ideological distortions imposed on the research findings of the original studies of group dynamics conducted by Kurt Lewin and his associates. Those experiments demonstrated that involving people in group discussion was more effective in changing their behavior than lecturing them on the desirability of a particular line of actions. There was no question as to who the leader was. He or she was the individual who called the group together and explained the topic to be discussed. (Whyte, 1994, p. 182)

The NTL trainings were, in many ways, originally designed to (re)educate adults in participatory democratic processes. A primary goal of the trainings is to help community members move away from static leadership models and habits. Whyte was not enamored with this type of "leaderless" community.

> Casting aside the *cultish* belief in the leaderless group and the rotation of leadership, academicians and consultants now try to determine those styles of leadership and group processes that most effectively enhance a group's effectiveness. (Whyte, 1994, p. 184, italics added)

From Lewin to Organizational Change and Back Again: Trist and Argyris

Eric Trist and Chris Argyris were influenced by Lewin very early in their academic careers (Trist as a graduate student, Argyris as an undergraduate). Both Trist and Argyris became involved with research initiatives that were initially separate from Lewin's research group, but eventually found their way back to NTL and AR, their ideas having important impacts on both

Eric Trist and the Sociotechnological Approach

Trist read Lewin as a graduate student in England and met him through his advisor when Lewin stopped in England on his way to the United States. Trist only gave

Lewin a short tour, but the two were able to have a discussion of Lewin's early ideas on typography (Trist,1993).[6] Trist went on to become one of the founding members of the Tavistock Institute after the war, with his connection to Lewin being an important part of his professional development (Neumann, 1995). Work done at the Tavistock Institute was wide ranging with important ties to psychotherapy, in particular the work of Melanie Klein (Trist & Murray, 1990). Soon after the war, Trist was invited by a new member of his research team, and former coal miner, to visit a unique mine in Haighmoor. While most coal mining was tightly controlled and highly specified, historical accident had allowed the Haighmoor miners greater local autonomy in their tasks. Trist found the Haighmoor workers to be more satisfied, more productive, and more innovative in their work.

Trist wrote a report on Haighmoor and asked mining authorities permission to expand his research—focusing on Lewin's processes of learning through experimentation—and he received permission (Kleiner, 1996). The mining authorities quickly reneged on their agreement (presumably after reading Trist's report). Trist was learning an important lesson, one that reflects Lewin's field theory and became critical for AR, especially as it developed at NTL. An AR approach leads to a redistribution of the decision-making process. Any change in organizational structure is going to necessarily have to deal with power dynamics and the ways in which participants understand and process their very human relationships with each other.

Trist's work on power dynamics is different from Whyte's because he wanted to break down preexisting symbol systems that channeled communications rather than work around them. Trist was particularly well suited to confront the human behavior/emotion side of the equation because of Tavistock's psychotherapeutic orientation. When Trist came to the United States, he presumably brought these ideas with him both as a trainer at NTL and as a proponent of using AR to foster organizational change; there needs to be some type of individual, therapeutic component that allows both those used to having power in decision making and those not used to having power to change their perspectives on what it means to work together toward a goal.

Argyris and AR as Rigorous Science

Chris Argyris began his academic career as Whyte's advisee, but began his intellectual journey on meeting Lewin as an undergraduate at Clark University (Ramage & Shipp, 2009, Woodell, 2003).[7] Argryis was able to combine some of the small group practices and recognition of participant perceptions of Whyte with more general notions of organizational justice, and moving from autocratic to democratic decision-making processes.

Around the same time Lewin began the social research center at MIT and Trist was building the Tavistock Institute, Argyris became part of Whyte's first major project at Cornell; observing and taking notes of supervisors at member-centered conferences for a local business (Argyris, 1992). Argyris mapped the relationships/interactions that emerged through these meetings and how they led to specific action trajectories.

Where Whyte's work with the Bennetts was dependent on observations and interviews, this new methodology attempted to both streamline the process of understanding interactions based on symbol-oriented relationships through a training group intervention and focus on organizational change leading to democratic decision making processes.

Argyris later did a fellowship at NTL, returning to his Lewin roots. As his ideas evolved, Argyris began to build a third perspective combining some of the central tenets of Lewin's (1947) gatekeeper work, AR as it was initially conceived by the founders of NTL (Lewin, Lippitt, Bradford, and Benne) and Whyte's ideas of networked groups. Possibly his most important contribution to AR began to emerge as he struggled with a problem that many a theorist and empirical scientist attempting to understand the relationship between autocratic, hierarchical community actions and democratic, horizontal actions have encountered (Kang & Glassman, 2010). What people say about how they will act in a provocative situation is oftentimes very different from how they actually act under pressure. The leadership groups trained at NTL would initially change their discourse about decision making, their beliefs about what they thought they would do, and even some of their actual superficial decision making, but as soon as a crisis hit leaders and the community, actual decision making reverted to old habits—even after "successful" training (Kleiner, 1996).

Argyris, Schon, and the Logic of Science

It was during the period Argyris was attempting to understand the reversion to habit in community decision making that he started working with one of his primary collaborators, Donald Schön (Kleiner, 1996). One of the reasons Schön was so important for both Argyris and the evolution of AR is his focus was on educational philosophy, in particular Dewey's (1938) logic. We suggest two interrelated reasons Schön's input was critical, especially at the specific juncture he started working with Argyris. First, by integrating Schön's work into organizational training, what he came to redefine as organizational learning, Argyris was recreating the dynamic that helped form NTL and AR in the first place (it is important to remember the influence of Bradford and Benne). This dynamic may have led to an important differentiation between (vital) action and habit, which we believe is critical to Argyris's understanding why T-Group trainings rarely survive crises. Second, and perhaps more important, Schön's understanding of Deweyan logic matched Argyris's (and Lewin's) ideas of rigorous science, offering an avenue for measurement of change.

AR attempts to do two things simultaneously: create a more vibrant community capable of nonhierarchical, dynamic, democratic decision-making processes and create a change-based intervention that leads to more efficient, satisfying, and especially lasting problem-solving capabilities. The former is in many ways more of an art whereas the latter is better off treated as a science. Lewin wanted to keep the two in balance, although he was willing to put off the science aspect of AR for the near future (Neumann, 1995). At the same time there was a constant battle in Lewin's working

group between Lippitt, who wanted to concentrate on the development of decision-making processes through leadership training, and Festinger, who believed AR must be more scientifically oriented to be taken seriously as a social science (Deutsch, 1992). Argyris's commitment to Lewin's vision of a balance between art and science in human research (Deutsch, 1992) infused with Schön's knowledge of Deweyan logic culminated in the development of an evolving action research/science framework.

Dewey's (1938) Pragmatic logic[8] rests on a five-part problem-solving process with emphasis on the first and the last steps. The first, and in many ways the most important step, is locating the problem. Understanding exactly what the problem is can be complex and oftentimes very different from initial suppositions. However, it is only possible to explore the problem you are capable of recognizing at the moment—very similar to Lewin's research through the experimentation approach. The process of problem solving begins with the understanding that once the logical progression is complete the solution may not match the problem. The fifth step of the logical progression is testing the solution against what you were attempting to accomplish. If the problem persists you need to reconfigure the problem based on what has been learned (i.e., start over again).

Argyris and Schon (1974) came to refer to the ongoing problem-solving process suggested by pragmatic logic as double loop learning and attempted to redefine AR in ways that combine Lippitt and Festinger. They equate rigorous research with productive research. Where the NTL T-groups had moved in the direction of attempting to change organizations through changing individual orientations toward decision making, Argyris attempted to also measure observed change in the organization as a direct result of the training intervention. To do this, Argyris and Schon developed the concept of theories in action within any organization. There are two subcategories—theories as espoused and theories-in-use. One of the focuses of the intervention is documenting how theories-in-use have changed. The logic behind expectations of how the intervention will work (e.g., the assumption that organizationally democratic decision making leads to better outcomes than autocratic decision making) is completely separate from the pragmatic logic testing whether the training intervention has been successful (e.g., do the new actions-in-use actually solve the problem?). Thus, AR follows the famous Lewin pattern of identification of an organizational problem, an attempt to solve it through intervention, followed by a recalibration of the problem, but adds a separate logical test as to whether the intervention has solved the problem by changing actual theories-in-use—adding in the scientific component that Lewin's group struggled with. The action science process takes place in the context of the universal theory developed by Lewin and Lippitt that democratic organizations are more productive, maintains the idea that the actions of the organization serve as the starting point for any research/intervention, but also carefully documents the types of changes that are "produced" through attempts "to reeducate the autocratic leaders to act more democratically" (Argyris, 1997, p. 817). What the addition of Dewey's Pragmatic logic offers, captured in the concept of the double loop learning, is that failure to establish change through a confirmed theory is not the result of a disconfirmed theory but recognition of the wrong problem.

Conclusion

From a distance, action research as developed by Lippitt et al. and at the NTL (including Trist's influence), the participatory action research perspective developed by Whyte, and the action science approach developed by Argyris are similar. They are all based in small group dynamics, they all start with problems of the organization and then work toward research in developing an action design, and they also focus on community members as the primary agents of change. All three perspectives are also, at their core, adult education programs, even though Lewin and Argyris do not really identify themselves as adult educators (Watkins & Wilson, 2001). But there are some important differences as well. The AR approach culminating in the early NTL training focused on the education of adult communities as an emancipating process (Mezirow, 1990). The idea that postemancipation will lead to more cohesive, sustainable communities/organizations is taken as a given.

PAR, descending from Whyte's work, is much more concerned with the structure of the organization in context, and the ways in which community members can change their action trajectories by changing their interaction patterns. Change occurs within the context of the organization as it already exists in the world.

Argyris in many ways combines important aspects of AR and PAR, as well as the emancipation and scientific branches of Lewin's theory, by suggesting an action science approach with two complimentary logics. The initial logic and framework for the intervention is theory driven and universal (Argyris, 1997). But determination about whether the intervention is solving problems for the organization is based on local theories-of-action.

There is an important variation of AR we did not touch on in this article—the type of AR that is geared toward third world and marginalized populations. The work of Paolo Freire (1970), although never explicitly referred to as a researcher, has many of the same roots as AR. A major difference, however, is that Freire's perspective and some of the participatory action research more geared toward disenfranchised populations does not assume semicohesive organizations and/or collectives looking to improve quality of life of its members. Oppressed individuals must learn to escape hegemonic organizations and create their own democratic communities: the difference between first world action research and third world action research.

This article is an attempt at storytelling—a mapping of the journey of AR as an adult education movement for social change. It cuts across disciplines from education to early studies in social psychology, from business management to sociology. This story has shown that AR offers a variety of approaches to adult education—there is no one particular "action research," but there are shared principles. AR was interested in learning to use groups to support creativity. The belief is that once the group is created with the norm of valuing differences, a group atmosphere will develop in which people strive to meet new potentials (Freedman, 1984). Similarly, the creativity of action researchers and the diversity of their approaches can contribute greatly to the advancement of social sciences, making social sciences what they potentially are.

Notes

1. We understand the negative connotation of reeducation that has emerged over the past half century. However, this term was commonly used during the early years of action research (although not necessarily by Lewin) and is probably one of the most apt descriptions of the process/perspective. Change occurs by offering new problem-solving processes to adults who have already been educated in the habits of the community.
2. This article, the first to use the term *action research*, explicitly equates it with the idea of reeducation of adults.
3. Commission on Community Interrelations and the Institute for Ethnic Affairs.
4. McTaggart does not reference the Lippitt–Radke article or refer to it in any way. This we believe reflects the idea that action research has been very organic in both its emergence and development. The history is important because it helps maintain the priorities of the perspective, but it is counterproductive to trace its origins back to any single individual.
5. All communities should be open to action research because progress is a constant. Lippitt was, however, suggesting that for change to come to a community it must recognize the value of change.
6. There was a second meeting at a seminar in the United States but it did not seem to be as important to Trist's intellectual development.
7. Even though Whyte was Argyris's dissertation advisor, he points to Lewin as his strongest influence (Woodell, 2003).
8. Although *pragmatism* is the usual term used, we choose to call this *pragmatic logic* rather than pragmatism because we want to convey the idea that this is a logic based on core principles of pragmatism rather than a logic that is somehow internal to the philosophy of pragmatism.

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