

Commentary

Action Research, Emancipation and Design Thinking

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ABSTRACT

This article evaluates the notion and practice of action research, as defined by contributors to the recent special issue ‘Action Research and Emancipation’ in this journal. The author argues that, although action research implicitly has a design orientation, it largely draws on the humanities and sciences as its main role models. As a result, action researchers nowadays do not see themselves as design professionals. Idealized design methods serve to illustrate how design research can help realize the emancipatory intentions of action researchers. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: action research; emancipation; design research; ideal solution; pragmatic experimentation

INTRODUCTION

The relevance gap between academia and practice appears to be a persistent problem for the social sciences. In response to the need for more relevant and actionable knowledge, action research methods have increasingly become prominent in the social sciences (De Zeeuw, 2003). Contributors to the recent special issue on ‘Action Research and Emancipation’ in this journal (Boog, Keune, & Tromp, 2003) emphasize the emancipatory intention of action research. For example Boog (2003) argues that action research, from the very beginning, had emancipatory intentions: ‘Action research is designed to improve the researched subjects’ capacities to solve problems, develop skills (including

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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' (Boog, 2003, p. 426). In practice, however, action researchers tend to emphasize interpretation of existing situations, rather than the design and creation of actual change; this is also evident from the empirical contributions to the special issue (e.g. Bostock & Freeman, 2003; Roose & De Bie, 2003; Valkenburg, 2003).

THREE MODES OF ENGAGING IN RESEARCH

There are three archetypical modes of engaging in research: science, humanities and design (Banathy, 1996; Romme, 2003). Science tries to understand social phenomena, on the basis of consensual objectivity, by uncovering general patterns and forces that explain these phenomena. The main role model here is the natural sciences (e.g. physics) and other disciplines that have adopted the science approach (e.g. economics). As such, science draws on a representational view of knowledge.

Scholars adopting the humanities mode intend to portray, understand and critically reflect on the human experience of actors inside social practices. Their role models are diverse disciplines such as aesthetics, ethics, hermeneutics, history, cultural studies, literature studies, and philosophy. The predominant notion of knowledge (development) is a constructivist and narrative one: all knowledge arises from what actors think and say about the world (Romme, 2003).

The design mode, finally, focuses on producing systems that do not yet exist—either by changing existing social practices and situations into desired ones or by creating new practices from scratch. The main role model here is the design and engineering disciplines (e.g. architecture, aeronautical engineering, computer science). Design draws on a pragmatic view of knowledge, that is, knowledge is developed in the service of action, and is normative and synthetic in nature (Romme, 2003).

Evidently, the science mode continues to dominate in the social sciences, with the humanities mode as it emerging antithesis and critical opponent. Most disciplines within the social sciences have therefore, in the past few decades, been pre-occupied with the epistemological debate between the science and humanities mode. This debate appears to have turned the attention away from the important issue of research objectives and our commitments as scholars (Wicks & Freeman, 1998).

As a result, design thinking is largely absent in the social sciences. Design research in the social sciences, if any, has thus been moving to other sites in society (e.g. consultancy and governmental agencies). This strongly differs from the situation in the natural sciences and technology, where the partnership between the sciences and design disciplines has been the main force behind the development of numerous modern technologies (Banathy, 1996).

The current state-of-the-art of action research largely draws on the humanities to try to make research more relevant and tailored to local interests and contexts. At the same time, action researchers have been greatly concerned with methods to improve the scientific rigour and validity of their research (Eden & Huxham, 1996). As a result, a pragmatic design orientation focusing on creative and disciplined inquiry into new systems and practices has moved to the background. By comparison, in some other disciplines—for example, architecture, education and computer science—the design mode is much more widely developed, accepted, and applied (e.g. Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Kelly, 2003; Warfield, 1990).

EMANCIPATION REQUIRES DESIGN THINKING

Design research is characterized by idealized design, systematic review and a focus on design propositions and rules (e.g. Banathy, 1996; Romme, 2003; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). In this commentary, focus will be on what idealized design methods can contribute to the realization of emancipatory goals.

Idealized design helps 'strip away' non-essential aspects of the problem situation. It opens the door to the creative emergence of larger purposes and expanded thinking. Idealized design also leads to an increase in considering possible solutions, and guides long-term development and evolution (Banathy, 1996; Nadler & Hibino, 1990). If an ideal target can be identified and agreed upon, this solution puts a time frame on the system to be developed, guides near-term solutions, and infuses them with larger purposes. Nadler and Hibino (1990, p. 140) argue that 'even if the ideal long-term solution cannot be implemented immediately, certain elements are usable today'.

Engaging in idealized design is linked to processes and values such as participation, aesthetic values, consensus, commitment, creativity and feasibility (Ackoff, 1999; Nadler, 1981). Ackoff (1999, p. 88) argues that the idealized design of an organization is about 'what an organization's stakeholders want the organization to be *right now*, assuming that it could be whatever they wanted, subject to only a few relatively unrestrictive constraints (. . .)'. The latter constraints include that (a) the design must be technologically feasible, that is, it must not incorporate any technology that is not currently available; this tends to prevent the design process from becoming science fiction; (b) the design must be operationally viable, that is, capable of surviving in what could be its environment if it came into existence now; and (c) the designed system must be capable of being improved continuously from within and without (Ackoff, 1999).

EXAMPLE OF IDEALIZED DESIGN

An example of scholarly work that draws on both action research and design thinking is the development of circular organizing (e.g. Endenburg, 1998; Romme, 1999). Idealized design here involves adding a so-called circular structure to the existing (usually) hierarchical structure in any organization (Romme, 1999). This target system involves a number of design rules, defining how decisions should be made, how different decision-making units are to be linked, and so forth. This system serves to drive a process of experimentation in which pilot circles are set up, trained and linked to other (new) circles.

Idealized design is used in the early stages of the design process to define the problems and challenges the organization is facing (Romme, 2003). For example, in a first session with the executive team of a large catering services firm the imperatives for and direction of organizational change were explored. The executives initially defined these imperatives in terms of low commitment to and involvement of employees and middle management in service quality programmes. The consultant then introduced the circular system as an ideal target solution, and invited the executives to frame and understand the problems they faced in terms of this target system. The executives subsequently reframed the existing situation in their organization in terms of a lack of sustained opportunities for participation as well as their own mistrust in delegating authority to local managers. In this respect, they perceived their initial problem definition, in retrospect, as incomplete and superficial. The executive team subsequently started a long-term effort to develop a tailor-made solution,

drawing on the design rules that constitute circular organizing as an ideal target system, to decentralize decision-making to the people closest to the customer and at the lowest level possible in view of the decision issue (Romme, 2003).

IMPLICATIONS

The example in the previous section illustrates how idealized design can serve emancipatory aspirations in the area of participative management and organizational learning. Important in idealized design is the pragmatic, future-oriented focus on finding solutions. In this respect, many action research projects tend to focus on analysing and understanding the existing situation, which in itself would not lead to any changes in the direction of a novel situation or practice. Thus, it is unusual for action research to deliver fundamentally new theories or practices, because 'the research is and remains situated in the social context of the problem (complex) under research, which remains intact as the object of research' (Coenen & Khonraad, 2003, p. 441).

Boog's review shows that design thinking is to some extent implicit in the historical roots of action research—for example in Lewin's experimental work and Touraine's sociological intervention methodology (see Boog, 2003). Because action research over time was increasingly modelled after the humanities and (to a lesser extent) the sciences, design thinking and methods moved to the background. This development is the result of a variety of contingencies and historical events described by Boog (2003). In this respect, idealized design methods can help restore and reinforce the pragmatic design orientation that is implicit in the current state of the art of action research. In particular, for participants in emancipatory projects idealized design can serve to create collective narratives for the world as they want it to be, while reducing the tendency towards science fiction.

Moreover, idealized design methods developed for entire organizations can help to counter or prevent the 'boomerang effect' that Keune has observed (see Boog, 2003, p. 435). This boomerang effect refers to people in power that react repressively to empowerment and emancipation projects. This dilemma between domination and self-determination is an explicit parameter in several design methods (e.g. Ackoff, 1999; Romme, 1999). This is not to suggest that by acknowledging this parameter the boomerang effect becomes irrelevant. Rather, my point is that any attempt to prevent or reduce this effect has to start by designing a new power configuration aspired by those initially without power as well as those in power.

CONCLUSION

In this short commentary, it has been argued that action research largely draws on the humanities and sciences as its main role models. As a result, action researchers nowadays do not see themselves as design professionals, although design thinking is very much implicit in the historical roots of action research. One particular method in the design disciplines, idealized design, served to illustrate how design research can help realize the emancipatory intentions of action researchers.

There is no type of research that can claim a monopoly on wisdom. Rather, in an increasingly diverse and complex social world, action and design research are complementary tools. Together, they stand a better chance to accomplish sustainable transformation and emancipation in social settings.

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