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ARTICLE

## Condescending ethics and action research

Extended review article

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### ABSTRACT

The article outlines ethical aspects of action research at two different levels: philosophical and 'applied'. It also emphasizes ethical aspects of practitioner research and conventional social research tacitly implied in the relations between researchers and researched presupposed by the two approaches. Conventional research ethics is insufficient for grasping these aspects, since it is constituted within the relations assumed by conventional research. Conventional research ethics is also claimed to be a 'condescending ethics' unfit for action research because of its practice of 'othering' human beings as research subjects. This article interprets many ethical dilemmas experienced by action researchers as 'othering-effects', only to be overcome through the establishment of peer communities of inquiry among combined 'practitioners-researchers-researched'. It uses a book on ethics and action research as a starting point for reflections about the very real challenges of creating peer communities of inquiry doing action/practitioner research.

### KEY WORDS

- action research and philosophical ethics
- communities of inquiry
- condescending
- ethics
- going native
- insider research
- othering
- othering-effects
- practitioner research
- practitioners-researchers-researched
- research ethics

In this article, I will do two things. I will primarily reflect on some issues raised by the contributors to *Ethical issues in practitioner research* (Zeni, 2001) and then I will try to say a little bit about philosophical ethics and action research. Although mostly focused on the contributions in the book, the articles in this issue of *Action Research* will also serve as a backdrop for my reflections. I'll start with a few words on philosophical ethics.

Philosophical ethics has primarily been concerned – for more than 2000 years – with the principles and aims that should guide us in our relations to others, if any, and with how to reason practically about what to do. What should we pursue, protect, and care for above all, how and why? Should it be the personal integrity and inviolability of individuals; the accumulation of happiness for the largest number of people; private self-interest; strict reciprocal equality and justice (an eye for an eye, etc.); love and forgiveness; the growth in insight, independence, and autonomy for each individual or each community; the preservation of the community and its traditional ways of life; the responsibility for short- and long-term consequences of our actions; the unlimited freedom of each individual; democracy; care; or something else? Maybe all of them, or sometimes one and at other times another (but according to what criteria)? Or maybe we can do fine, and even better – considering all the historical failures of well-intentioned ‘do-gooders’ – without any such overarching aims and principles? In any case, are the aims and principles compatible, or in conflict with each other? In case of conflict, which ones should overrule the others? Almost all of the aims mentioned contain ambiguous and controversial concepts, and part of the philosophical ethics project is to discuss and clarify the meaning of concepts like happiness, justice, love, autonomy, democracy, community, responsibility, and freedom. What constitutes happiness, justice, equality, freedom, and the rest, and how is it possible for human beings to live up to such ideals? I will not pursue these questions here, but I will try to raise a few broader philosophical and methodological aspects of some of the ethical challenges described in Zeni's anthology on ethics and practitioner research, and in the contributions to this special issue. I will not try to elaborate on solutions by anything beyond suggestions and indices.

A first question to ask might be how this project of philosophical ethics, or practical philosophy, relates to action research? Many action researchers seem to take some of the aims mentioned – for example, democracy, justice, and others – for granted, without bothering to discuss their meaning. Whatever else one may say about that, it is not particularly philosophical. Few philosophers would endorse the way non-philosophers often talk about ‘having a philosophy’ that favours ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, ‘justice’, or whatever. Philosophers don't *have* philosophies. They think. Apart from this, once we have started our projects, the ethical questions that concern action research often seem to operate on a smaller scale, such as: who is to be involved; how and why; who makes decisions and how; whose interpretations are to prevail and why; how do we write about and

publish on people involved; who owns the ideas developed; etc. Questions like these are definitely all very important to ask openly and continuously in any project. The consequences of letting such questions pass unattended may be – intended or not – the spontaneous, habitual emergence of subtle power structures on a micro-level, not clearly visible in the beginning, but accumulating and ‘petrifying’ over time into larger unwanted patterns. History is full of devils hiding and thriving in the details.

But there are larger ethical issues more immediately involved in action research as well. Certain ethical aspects, obligations and consequences are inherently implied in the basic structures and relationships of the techniques of both action research and mainstream social research, which are implicitly chosen by choosing one approach and not the other. The ways of doing things of the different research approaches are hardly just ‘neutral instruments’, as believers in science have claimed. They carry normative content. One important such aspect concerns the questions of who is included in the community of inquiry and interpretation, and what/who are the subjects of study. This may not sound like a very controversial question to already convinced action researchers, although I think the practical ramifications often remain unclear. It is also important to pay attention to this in a general discussion about action research and ethics, since there are many ‘mainstreamers’ out there, and variants of action research as well, that tend to tone down these aspects, and interpret themselves as ‘applied’ mainstream research. As I see it, however, action research may be understood as basically constituted in the 1940s by breaking out of the ‘othering-business’ – studying ‘the others’ – of mainstream, experimental social research, by expanding the community of inquiry and interpretation to include the subjects studied (Benne, Bradford, Gibb, & Lippitt, 1975; French & Bell, 1990; Lippitt, 1949). I think the (potential) implications of this practical ‘break out’ are more radical than is often realized. Instead of a segregated ‘we’ (‘them’) of researchers studying ‘them’ (‘us’), an expanded ‘we’ start to study ourselves: What are *we* doing to ourselves and to each other, how and why? I will try to elicit some of the ramifications from ethical challenges presented by some action researchers below.

There is hardly an affluence of extant literature on action research and ethics. One of the few recent books addressing the subject is *Ethical issues in practitioner research*, edited by Jane Zeni. In her foreword to the volume, Susan Lytle makes it clear that ‘practitioner research/inquiry’ is used synonymously with ‘teacher research’ and ‘action research’ to designate ‘insider investigations’, or even more pregnant; ‘indigenous inquiries’ (Lytle, 2001, p. ix), language also used by Zeni herself. This notion of ‘insider investigations’ is, of course, one among several definitions of action research in circulation. But, in my opinion, it focuses appropriately exactly where it should, at the element of action research most central, and simultaneously most controversial when compared with mainstream social research. As indicated, there are many different variants of action

research, with different starting points, and with different emphases on kinds and degrees of ‘collaboration’/‘participation’ by ‘insiders’, ‘practitioners’, etc. To many, action research is essentially the collaboration between ‘practitioners’ and academic researchers as partners or facilitators. To others, it consists of indigenous inquiries, expanding through the spreading of higher education and of tasks requiring high competence and independent, personal inquiry. But they all gravitate towards, and measure themselves according to, standards for how people, as insiders, can and should investigate their own realities and practices. In some ways, Barazangi’s article (97–116) in this issue could be read as a story about her own transformation, ‘gravitating’ from being a ‘collaborative’ action researcher to becoming an insider investigator. Since action research presumes to be research, an important question is whether these insider standards are ultimately the same as, or different from, research standards set by conventional ‘outsider research’. No doubt, many entering either camp feel tensions on a phenomenological level in this relationship, referred, for example, by Marian M. Mohr in her Chapter 1 in the book. And action research, as practised, is often simultaneously pulled in opposite directions, both towards standards set by externally based, academic research, and towards internal indigenous standards, creating ethical dilemmas. But action research can hardly let go of the indigenous standards without losing its soul and become mainstream research.

What appears here, on entering the research arena, is of course one of the big general issues in social research, that is, the question of whether social researchers of any kind can ‘go native’, or ‘be natives’, and what kind of distance from immediate engagement – if any – is required for securing ‘validity’, ‘objectivity’, ‘truth’, ‘impartiality’, etc. Do we, as natives, need extraneous, disengaged observers, or could we somehow achieve sufficient reflective distance by ourselves? Ethical questions could be asked about this as well, of course: Would it be ethical to call what is done ‘research’ at all if validity, truth, objectivity, universality, and impartiality are lacking and explicit considerations of these qualities abandoned, and if findings are not reported to the external community of researchers? It is, of course, well known that the conventional answer is that researchers must *not* ‘go native’, since it is presupposed that the validity concerns required for research are not primary among native concerns, and are also hard to combine with being engaged and active. But is that necessarily so? Did action research ‘go native’ when it broke out from the mainstream othering-business? When external anthropologists encounter research subjects – natives – doing indigenous practitioner/action research in their own culture, communities, and organizations – as they probably already have many times (and will again if they go to the School District of Clayton, Missouri, for example, reported collectively in Chapter 5 of Zeni’s collection) – the questions, paradoxes, and dilemmas will be accentuated, if not simply absorbed and dissolved as yet another difference, into the ‘equi-valent’, multi-perspective mood currently prevalent in social research.

Although some of the challenges of this nature are mentioned in the book, it does not really raise the issue. Practitioner/action research as insider research assumes that the insider position is legitimate, usually without discussing the possible objections that could be put forward from within mainstream traditions based on an outsider position. Instead, the book 'attempts to create a dialogue about ethics among educators studying their own practice in school and university roles' (Zeni, 2001, p. xiii). Although I believe there are some real challenges which are attempted but not really solved through the demands of mainstream research for externality, the focus is fine for a book of this kind, since, as it says, 'ethics has become an explosive issue in scholarly communities that emphasize practitioner research' (p. xvii). In this book, 'a diverse set of practitioners' invited by the editor (p. xix), 'address the ethical issues they have encountered in doing research' (p. xviii). They all tell us, in very interesting and personal ways, about the processes of starting to do both action research and conventional research in work places, several in their own; about the challenges and difficulties encountered; and about how they were personally changed by finding their way out of dilemmas. The contributors all relate to educational institutions. But the book is, quite consciously, divided into parts according to the position of the research, and *how* the research done is related to the institutions being researched. Hence, Part One is written by school-based practitioner researchers, Part Two by university-based researchers, while Part Three is written by people from both camps, collaborating. Zeni also provides insightful summaries and reflections after each section of the book.

It soon becomes clear that the ethical dilemmas experienced depend very much on from what position the research is done. Teachers doing research in their everyday practice among colleagues and students, like Marian Mohr in Chapter 1, Leslie Minarik in Chapter 2, and Linda Hajj in Chapter 4, experience different challenges than supervisors like Wanda C. Clay in Chapter 3, having teachers as clients, and encountering challenges and paradoxes somewhat similar to those reported by Judah and Richardson in this issue, concerning the introduction of action research mandated 'from above' as a compulsory part of administrative policy reforms, that is, backed, or imposed, by power. The issue of 'mandated' action research in graduate programmes returns as an ethical dilemma with Sally B. Ebest in Chapter 7. External researchers see their ethical responsibilities and challenges differently from both of these, as when Sharon S. Lee in Chapter 6 starts out by following the established ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity, and non-intervention, but soon finds herself frustrated by doing 'inaction research' (Lee, 2001, p. 66) towards the studied school principal's use of corporal punishment. In fact, her chapter reads as a personal account of how she transformed into an action researcher from starting out as an extraneous researcher studying the others as subjects. Marilyn M. Cohn and Suzanne Kirkpatrick also discuss the differences of perspectives within a school-university

partnership in Chapter 12. Making the positioned nature of the researchers and their points of view explicit makes it easier to understand one of the subjects discussed by others, such as Boser and Brydon-Miller/Greenwood in this special issue; that is, why mainstream research ethics, often administered by institutional review boards (IRBs), do not 'fit' action research projects very well. The relationship of action research and IRBs is picked up again by Zeni in her epilogue to the whole book, where she also presents some questions for review and reflection after having tried to set up an alternative ethics code for action research, but abandoned it.

The basic perspective forming the ethical considerations of mainstream social research, experimental or observational, springs from presuppositions about 'the others' as research subjects (e.g. guinea-pigs), treated as external objects with certain properties and behaviours to be mapped and explained, and not fully informed or participating in the research. The ethical question here is: How should *they* be treated, since they cannot, and shall never be, fully included in our research community? As Owen van den Berg points out in his Chapter 8, 'the protection of research subjects' (p. 83) is regarded as axiomatic in research ethics. But, with all due respect, this is still a *condescending* attitude following almost logically from its own point of view, that is, position, and implied in its research techniques, be they observation, experimentation, interviews, or surveys. As van den Berg also says, 'the discourse regarding the protection of subjects takes place between the researchers, not between researchers and their subjects' (p. 84). The question of how to relate to creatures, or individuals, or things which are not part of our community, and not able or worthy to be or become members of our community, permeates mainstream research ethics, as well as the ethics of various professional groups. But, could it possibly be different? Yes or no this presupposition changes dramatically with indigenous, practitioner, action research. The ethical question becomes transformed from 'how should *we* relate to *them*?' to 'how should we relate to each other?' The question is no longer 'how should we as researchers relate to the others who are not researchers?', but, 'how should we as members of specific communities, and as inquirers-researchers, relate to each other?' Of course, *we* should always try to be nice to *them*, and treat *them* respectfully, whoever *they* are. Apparently, *we* can even have a dialogue with *them*. But all of this is quite possible without any suspension of the distinction between 'us' and 'them', without stepping out of predetermined roles, the main barrier to becoming learners in a reflective community, according to Barazangi (97–116). It is possible to be nice, respectful, and condescending at the same time. But the point is that no '*we*' should ever treat each other in a condescending way, as if some of us weren't members or potential members of our community at all. 'They' are the ones always excluded from what 'we' see as defining 'us', whatever that is. So, the decisive question seems to be, who are '*we*'?

Both practitioner research and organizational learning presuppose that it is possible to create such ‘wes’ as peer communities of inquiry among ordinary practitioners in any work site or profession, and even in relation to clients, sharing the responsibility for knowledge generation, learning, and improvement. But there are many challenges in creating such communities, not the least of which are differences of competence and experiential background. Jane Zeni and her co-authors, Myrtho Prophete, with Nancy Cason and Minnie Phillips, also point out that ‘cultural invisibility – our student’s and our own – is a key ethical problem in doing action research’ (2001, p. 114), and emphasize the necessity for anyone engaging in any kind of research to become visible in this sense, that is, showing what they bring along to an encounter as ‘instruments of perception’. Such challenges are not possible to overcome merely through inclusive declarations, or good moral intentions, about equality, collegiality, or mutual respect, or by letting every voice count equally. On the contrary, in a certain sense, self-righteously pretending to be without prejudices is the worst prejudice, and only reinforces the cultural invisibility.

To me, it is interesting to think of many of the ethical dilemmas and challenges reported by the authors in Zeni’s collection as ‘transitional challenges’, emerging when both the theoretical and practical presuppositions of conventional, ‘outsider’-research have been abandoned or transcended, but before theoretical presuppositions and practical preconditions of a collegial community of inquiry has been fully realized. So, many ethical dilemmas experienced could be considered as ‘othering-effects’, remaining as long as the transformation has not yet been completed. Questions of whether and how informed consent and anonymity can be guaranteed may be seen as a ‘function of othering’. Such ‘othering-effects’ also seem to be *carried over* by the role and the tasks of insider researchers when they do their personal research projects as individuals in environments which haven’t yet been prepared, or haven’t organized themselves collectively to facilitate learning and inquiry, and haven’t taken any collective responsibility for this as *their* research. Challenges of this kind are dealt with extensively in Coghlan and Brannick’s book *Doing action research in your own organization* (2004). Several of the contributions in Zeni’s collection also deal with the difficult relations between one lonely practitioner-researcher starting to do his or her thing, and ‘the rest’ of the community, seen most explicitly in the chapters by Minarik (pp. 13–23) and Hajj (pp. 35–44). Although they write about how they themselves have been transformed personally by starting to do action research, both seem to realize that the lonely practitioner-researcher cannot last in a non-conducive environment. The involvement of their colleagues, the surrounding management systems, and the community’s institutions is required in order to achieve lasting results. But the challenges in creating a peer community of inquiry are real, as Bill Torbert’s (1976) book *Creating a community of inquiry* illustrates, and as Barazangi also illustrates in her article in this issue. They cannot



be overcome by decrees or declarations and neither can peer communities of inquiry be imposed by power and technique on communities from above as an administrative reform. Colleagues have to understand and be convinced in order to feel a genuine need for transformation and become motivated.

Hajj accentuates the challenge by her intriguing question: 'Does teacher research, when not a school effort, actually interfere with collaboration and teamwork' (Hajj, 2001, p. 37) by disrupting habitually established ways of doing things? Her question echoes Aristotle's description 2350 years ago, of the tensions between 'good people' and 'bad constitutions', and vice versa. Good (inquiring and learning) people create problems in bad constitutions (stifling, or not providing the preconditions for, inquiry and learning), while bad (non-learning) people create problems in good constitutions (providing preconditions for learning). No matter how good and necessary, however, many people are not ready for the kind of open sharing, searching and critical examination required by communities of inquiry and learning. Openness exposes. For many this is threatening. For some this is based on legitimate concerns regarding privacy or vulnerability; for others these may be the less legitimate concerns of protecting vested interests of power and privilege. In encountering her reluctant collegial and managerial surroundings, Minarik, in Chapter 2, chooses to withdraw to her classroom with her teacher research, using 'BOHICA-tactics'<sup>1</sup> bordering on 'civil disobedience', towards changing and recurring administrative reforms, and concentrating on what her professional conscience tells her is in the interest of her students. As an ambulant supervisor, promoting progressive, action research reforms on behalf of 'the system', Wanda Clay seems to end her Chapter 3 by accepting that there will be 'casualties of reform' (p. 33), and that the resistance and opposition she experiences is mainly 'because the majority of the staff have a "method" that is obsolete in practice outside their classroom/world' (p. 34). The challenges of action researchers here clearly approximate the common challenges of social reformers and revolutionaries at all times: By what means can we achieve change and promote our goals, without self-destruction, destroying the realization of our goals through the application of our means, through our own practice? Should we accept, in the name of freedom and democracy, all kinds of obsolete, oppressive and reactionary local and individual practices? And what happens if we don't? Power is tempting!

The biggest challenge may be, of course, that such transitional periods – where, hopefully, relationships gradually transform into learning relationships – will almost certainly last for some time, and may never be completely overcome. Among other things, the socialization and introduction of new people into communities contribute to making transitions permanent. In many ways, our communities will stay imperfect forever, in spite of all our efforts. But this does not imply that learning communities of inquiry can be abandoned, nor that lone practitioner-researchers in non-learning environments can be recommended and

perpetuated without posing the challenge of developing given communities of practice into communities of inquiry. Establishing more or less temporary/permanent communities of inquiry apart from, across and outside, any specific communities of practice, as some action researchers do, also seems to be a semi-solution, producing some of the paradoxes reported by Barazangi in this issue of bringing individual, separate and external case studies into the group to reflect on as second-hand experience.

But I think making the conceptual distinction between communities of practice and communities of inquiry is important, although without making separate, real communities out of them. The practice of inquiry is different from, but common to, the various substantial practices of communities that are inquired into and presumably improved by the inquiry. Even maintenance of established practices requires some inquiry. Although communities of inquiry will also remain imperfect, the transitions will probably be longer and more painful, and may create even bigger problems, if the challenge of developing whole collectives into communities of inquiry is not posed explicitly and early on. By distinguishing the practice and community of inquiry from the concrete practices of how, for example, individual teachers teach in their classrooms, or more generally from how specific groups of workers solve their tasks, and how work is organized, it becomes possible to introduce and establish communities of inquiry while being more relaxed – less ‘ideological’ – about specific ways of organizing and doing things, and let an open inquiry and collaborative experimentation reveal what works and what doesn’t. Hence, when the common and uniting element of community is inquiry and learning, rather than specific ways of doing anything concrete – predetermined by tradition, habit, ideology, or decree – ‘community’ can become non-repressive and cultivate diversity. Establishing community around real intellectual ‘commons’ may also be easier than trying to establish ‘communities’ based on clothes, hair styles, food, musical styles, or similar things considered to be ‘adiáphora’ by the Stoics and Immanuel Kant, that is, differences that do/should not make any difference ethically or politically. Institutionalized communities of inquiry can organize and give form to development: permanent maintenance; transitions; transformations; and improvements within communities of practice. The writer-collective from Clayton, Missouri in Chapter 5 seems to have moved a long way towards tackling the challenge of how to make inquiry increasingly integral to ‘the way we do things around here’ (p. 52), creating a culture of inquiry in their school district.

Are ‘othering-effects’ possible to eliminate completely? Hardly completely, since we all are ‘others’ to each other. But there are still many different degrees of ‘othering’, or exclusion-inclusion. The whole spectre of possible relations between researchers and researched is quite interestingly presented by Sharon S. Lee in Chapter 6, who started as an extraneous researcher studying the others as subjects. Subject, informant, participant, collaborator, are the ‘official’ possibili-

ties for ‘non-researchers’ in her text, gradually becoming more involved in the research process, but where the crucial distinction between ‘we-the-researchers’ and ‘they-the-non-researchers’ is retained for all of them. But after presenting this list she continues more casually, mentioning how some collaborators become colleagues, friends, and co-researchers, crossing the line and entering the ‘we-the-researchers’. And finally she takes the step over the great divide – ‘resolving the researcher/researched dilemma’ (p. 71) as she herself expresses it – by making all involved into combined ‘practitioners-researchers-researched’ in studying their own practices. In relation to the introductory question about ‘who is included in the community of inquiry and interpretation, and what/who are the subjects of study’, the community of inquirers and interpreters has now, with Sharon Lee, quite radically become all-inclusive, in principle, and simultaneously it coincides with the subjects of research. Although just about impossible to realize completely, I think Lee here points out an unavoidable standard for action research to relate and refer to. Although this bridging of the great divide may seem like an introvert implosion, I think this standard is ultimately unavoidable even for mainstream research. For what is studied by such communities of inquiry among the fused ‘practitioners-researchers-researched’ is not just private and personal. It is rather what assumptions, presuppositions and prejudices each one brings to an encounter, that is, the historically, culturally, and experientially formed personal *habitus* – ways of doing things – each one inscribed and cast in institutional and practical categories.

I have tried to elicit two connected and very important challenges from the contributions in this book: 1) how to develop/establish action research communities of inquiry, assuming they are necessary for the continued success of practitioner research; and 2) how to tackle differences of competence, cultural and personal background, positioned perspective, etc. within them, assuming this is necessary in order to establish and maintain them. Personally I think much relevant material can be gleaned from the apprentice model of learning and the community of masters and apprentices, provided their specific learning oriented elements are separated from the social roles of authority and subordination predetermined by tradition. But that is a different story (Eikeland, in press). My own struggle has for many years been to develop communities of inquiry within existing communities of practice (work life organizations), establishing the community of inquiry as a dialogical ‘back stage’ forum, or development organization, while the community of practice is the ‘on stage’ arena, or work organization. Action research and organizational learning happen in the alternation between them. Mainstream research does not participate, but stays ‘off stage’ as audience and spectators. Although many issues could have been more thoroughly discussed in Zeni’s collection, the reflections around experienced dilemmas shared with the reader are very valuable. Zeni refrains from presenting any form of ethical code for action/practitioner research for fear of constructing another

Procrustean bed. The book chooses to present challenges and dilemmas instead, which is all the better. As a philosopher with an Aristotelian bent, I could personally have wished for concepts like *phronêsis* (prudence, practical wisdom) to be introduced to the discussion. But Zeni's collection is wonderfully thought provoking, and an excellent companion to this issue on action research and ethics. I strongly recommend it. And if this article has been half as thought provoking, I'm satisfied.

## Note

- 1 BOHICA – 'Bend-Over-Here-It-Comes-Again', a 'slogan' from the late 1980s used to describe a prevalent attitude towards recurrent waves of managerial reform initiatives.

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