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- In a period of officially endorsed consumerism within social policy which stresses the role of “community participation”, “user-led” provision and “user involvement”, the potential for the collective expression of discontent has (unwittingly) been thrown open (Pilgrim et al, 1997).
- As a means for eliciting the “view from below” action research can be a powerful tool, but may result in unforeseen “action” with which agencies may feel uncomfortable.
- A failure to prepare the groundwork effectively may lead to the research grinding to a halt, a souring of inter-agency relations, and increased disillusionment in the community with which any future initiatives will have to overcome.

Undertaking Action Research: Negotiating the Road Ahead

Colin Todhunter

Interactive social science research may be regarded as a pragmatic, utilitarian, or user-oriented approach to research (Bee Tin, 1989) and incorporates a value-base that is committed to promoting change through research. It is democratic and participatory by nature and is in sharp contrast to the positivistic “top-down” approach which has been accused of “lifting decisions from the village square” and placing them with “experts or outside agencies” (Bryant, 2001). The practice goes by many names: community-based research, participatory research, collaborative research, and others, but rests on two main principles: democratization of the knowledge process, and social change (Stoeker, 1996).

Action research forms part of this genre, and is associated with attempts to bring about emancipation and social justice based on the desires and direct involvement of ordinary people (Fisher, 1994). Its roots may be traced to writers such as Marx, Engels, Gramsci and Freire (Selener, 1997), and has been used to promote the empowerment of disadvantaged and oppressed groups through the development of common knowledge and critical awareness which are suppressed by the dominant knowledge in a society (Finn, 1994; Freire, 1974). Action research is now used within a range of settings and has developed by drawing from pragmatic philosophy, critical thinking, and humanistic and transpersonal psychology, constructionist

theory, systems thinking and complexity theory (Reason and Bradbury, 2000).

An important element of action research is participation by “informants” who engage in “collective, self-reflective enquiry...in social situations in order improve the rationality and justice of their own social practices” (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5). A key feature is empowerment through participation (Tandon, 1981). This may, for example, involve the researcher identifying the user group, working in close collaboration with the users, and getting them involved in identifying their needs, setting up research questions, and using the research findings. The practice involves people reflecting on issues and processes during the research, participants as co-researchers, and entails an element of risk given that the process and outcomes are in a state of on-going change (Winter, 1989). It is transformed by emergent findings, which, in turn, impact upon the process itself, and subsequent outcomes (Bell et al, 1990). As the focus becomes redirected, outcomes may not be readily predicted and, for this reason alone, power holders may not be fully at ease with what they are not in control of: the “knowledge” it produces, the thinking it stimulates, or the action it promotes (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991).

Action research has now found its way into a diverse range of areas, including the experiential learning movement, community development, action learning, humanistic psychology, popular education, organization devel-

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opment, and feminist thinking. Each field has shaped and redefined “action research” according to its particular requirements. For example, interactive research has been closely associated with the environmental movement (Scott et al, 1999), democratic evaluation has links with education (Simons, 1987), and empowerment evaluation aims to “help others to help themselves” in areas that include substance abuse prevention, HIV/AIDS prevention, and adult probation (Fetterman et al, 1996).

Action research in practice: a case study in drugs prevention

When commissioning research, an organisation may perceive that subsequent outcomes will take place within specified parameters that will help to further its overall aims, including the need to develop or maintain working relations with other bodies (eg Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain, 1998). What they may not realise, however, is that action research has the potential to instigate certain forms of action which undermine the “collaborative” framework that they seek. Unlike more professionally-directed models of research, action research can be difficult to “manage” once underway.

In the area of drugs prevention, action research has been used in tandem with an approach that stresses the role of community development and community involvement (Duke et al, 1996). As a philosophy, “community drugs prevention” entails residents gaining access to a range of social, political and economic resources (Henderson, 1995). In this respect, drugs prevention is concerned with wider quality of life issues that residents define as important and will serve to reduce the demand for drug use. Action research has been used to mobilise communities in order to achieve these objectives (Henderson, 1996).

The research used as a case study for the purpose of this paper took place in a locality exhibiting the usual indices of long-term social and economic decline, including widescale drugs-related difficulties. Initially, the commissioning agency (administered by the Home Office) was committed to devis-

ing a community-led drugs prevention strategy. Its original intention was that through operationalising action research, community concerns about drug misuse would be elicited alongside residents’ perceptions of what “drugs prevention” should involve, and residents would be encouraged to get involved in setting up projects and lobbying policy makers for relevant change. The commissioning agency perceived that the local urban regeneration agency would be a key funder for any future projects that may result from the research.

Initially, in-depth individual and group interviews became central to the research process. Later, a series of small-scale public meetings occurred, and community newsletters were produced. At the meetings the earlier findings were fed back to residents who, in turn, commented on them and suggested future directions that the project should take. Residents’ participation took various forms. Apart from acting as “informants” during the interviews, they produced articles that appeared in the newsletters, were actively involved in developing and conducting interviews with other residents, initiated and developed an on-going community forum which discussed the issues emerging from the research, and began lobbying local agencies to take part in various working groups in order that their concerns may be addressed. Although the initial research agenda had been more or less professionally-led, as time progressed, residents were changing the agenda and were leading the process through their actions.

The research had stimulated community awareness around “drugs prevention” issues, had succeeded in producing an action plan for prevention, and a community forum had emerged comprising of local residents and representatives from local agencies. The regeneration agency (which had not become directly involved in the research process) became critical of the agency that had commissioned the research, the researcher, and the “biased” outlook of residents that was being put forward in the newsletters published by the forum, and through the emerging research findings published in a working paper which was widely distributed within

the locality. According to its view, the research was merely serving to stir-up and magnify unjustified hostility toward its role in the area. The consequence was that other key agencies in the area (and involved with the forum) became reluctant to continue to support the activities of the local residents for fear of producing tensions between themselves and the powerful regeneration agency. Consequently, as the forum lacked backing from certain key voluntary and statutory sector agencies, the regeneration agency felt justified in not providing funding for projects outlined in the action plan. Funding for the action research and for the researcher expired after a six month period and residents were either unable or unwilling to continue their activities through the forum.

Lessons to be learnt

In some ways the action research ignited a powder keg that had been waiting to go off. Simmering tensions between sections of the community and the regeneration agency had frequently boiled over during a long period of time prior to the research. The locality traditionally had a strong and vocal community sector, and was predominantly staunchly left-wing in political outlook. They possessed little faith in the overall aims and objectives of the regeneration agency from not long after its inception - perceiving it to be an imposition from central government whose outlook was regarded as having changed little from those of previous Conservative administrations. The action research became part of the local political process and arguably politicized those residents who were previously not very vocal within the area.

At the outset, the commissioning body expressed a commitment toward “community involvement” in drugs prevention, but it is doubtful whether it fully appreciated the potential implications of the action research. Based on a model used elsewhere, the agency perceived that the research would primarily involve a consultation exercise culminating in greater levels of community representation in existing and potential new projects. The agency perceived that the research would contribute toward an inte-

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grated approach for prevention, bringing organisations and residents together.

Residents expressed a strong commitment to the action research, given the emancipatory and participatory background of the paradigm, and viewed it as a welcome change from previous professionally controlled research that they had regarded as having been an end in itself: a mechanism for integrating residents and community groups into government and prevailing structures thereby giving programmes a degree of credibility and legitimacy, but not bringing about the changes for communities and residents that they desire (Todhunter, 2001). However, action research may appear to offer a potential for change, but just how much change may be expected given the wider interests of agencies and organisations that may be juxtaposed to proposed change?

Agencies may (unconsciously) seek to define residents' needs according to their specific remit, and attempt to set a research agenda accordingly - even though they may label it as "action" research. In the case outlined here, the commissioning body appeared to put into operation their own limited notion of "action research". However, through the research residents emphasised a desire for exerting more direct power in order to facilitate their identity and rights as citizens. They were calling for equal participation on the partnership board of the regeneration agency which they felt was slanted against the interests of local people in favour of statutory sector and business interests. In effect, they were challenging the prevailing power structures by questioning the legitimacy of key agencies. Subsequently, the agency that commissioned the research was not able to respond fully to the needs or views of residents once unpacked.

In the shorter term, action research may produce a "feel good" factor among participants - consciousness raising, "participation" and mobilisation may instill a self-belief in ordinary people's capacity to bring about change. In the longer term, real and radical change may indeed come about. To do this however, commitment to change must be

forthcoming among all local agencies and interest groups. Otherwise, action research may leave a bitter taste in the mouths of residents, whose expectations are raised, and subsequent programmes for change may have to cope with the damage done by previous projects that failed to deliver. Any good faith which may have been present among residents may have drained away leaving an embittered community that is hostile or cynical toward future programmes which come along.

In many respects the pitfalls that emerged in the case study presented here have been somewhat reminiscent of those surrounding the Community Development Projects of the 1970s. Workers in many of the projects came to reject the analysis and strategies of the original project proposals. They sought to organise and research around larger questions of inequality and deindustrialisation. Workers who entered the field in the late 1960s and early 1970s exhibited a readiness to take up oppositional positions (Baldock 1977). By 1974 the Home Office had largely given up on the projects and they were wound up in 1976.

Commissioning bodies need to be fully aware of the potential pitfalls of undertaking action research. They must understand what "action research" implies, and that it does not sit easily with conventional and easily manageable "consultation" exercises - thus making it a high risk strategy. By committing to a process of action research, agencies are legitimizing residents' voices and actions, and their participation in social policy. In some respects they will be embarking upon a programme that bucks a wider cultural and social trend encouraging "involvement" which seeks to guarantee consensus and integration rather than change (Bauman, 1987), and may find themselves in uncomfortable situations.

Action research is a tool that research commissioners must not take lightly, and not undertake impulsively. The groundwork has to be prepared thoroughly, given the potential impact.

Agencies must give due thought about imposing a standard model of action research applied elsewhere to a different area, as in

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the study outlined here. They have to decide how feasible action research and change may be, given wider trends and local political situations, and must also prepare the groundwork effectively prior to committing to the research, bringing on board key players who may find themselves bearing the brunt of residents' frustrations and providing them with a chance to negotiate the shifting research agenda in tandem with residents (Grinyer, 1999).

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