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EMANCIPATION OR WORKABILITY?
Critical versus pragmatic scientific orientation in action research

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Abstract
In this article a distinction between a pragmatic and a critical orientation of action research is made. These orientations can be considered, implicitly or explicitly, to be the main alternatives in AR today. What are the assumptions behind, and practical implications for, AR projects with different orientations? A number of themes are introduced where a tension between the two are identified and illustrated in the form of a dialogue and friendly quarrel between proponents from each side. It is argued that the two orientations suit different research contexts and cannot easily be combined. The pragmatic orientation is well suited for contexts where concerted and immediate action is needed, whereas the critical is preferable where transformative action needs to be preceded by critical thinking and reflection. In the former, power to act is a desired outcome, and in the latter, unequal and invisible power relations need to be unveiled before they can be transformed. The responsibility of the researcher, as well as the form of knowledge developed, differs between the two orientations.

KEY WORDS
- Critical orientation
- Pragmatic orientation
- Emancipation
- Workability
- Pragmatism
- Dialogue
- Critical theory
**Introduction**

The origin of action research (AR) in the research of Kurt Lewin was formed in the womb of positivism, but was implicitly related to Deweyan pragmatism. With the revival of AR in the 1970s, critically oriented researchers recognized the potential of AR as an alternative practice to positivism, where the researchers should become engaged in the emancipation of underprivileged groups by helping them, through reflection, unveil dominant ideologies and coercive structures. From a third world context, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire should be recognized as a great influence towards a critical tradition. Jürgen Habermas’ communication oriented works and Foucault’s works on power/knowledge has provided an impetus to this orientation. During the 1980s, and particularly the 1990s, the original, although rather implicit, pragmatic points of departure have been recovered and successively clarified. It is most clearly recognized in the higher status given to the knowledge of practitioners and embedded in workable praxis and local theory, as well as in the focus on experiential and interactive learning.

We consider critical and pragmatic scientific orientations implicitly or explicitly to be the main alternatives in AR today. But what are the assumptions behind, and practical implications for, AR projects that have a different orientation? Does it matter which orientation is chosen? Can they be combined, and if so, how? The article compares the two orientations both on the level of the theory and practice of science, as well as its relation to the improvement of human conditions. E.g. on the level of theory it is noticeable that while pragmatically oriented researchers want to fuse theory and practice, and see practice and doing as of greater importance, critically orientated researchers want to emphasize the role of theory as a guidance for emancipation, and focus on the importance of reflection in this process. Both regard the aspects of action as relevant for scientific inquiry, but emphasize
their different facets. As to how a pragmatic versus a critical orientation is understood is not, in this article, specifically related to different schools of AR but is colored by the research experience the two authors represented. In the field of AR, often the distinction is either on an operational level or emanates from a specific philosophical orientation. Our purpose is to address the questions above by introducing a conversation between two researchers, allowing different philosophical orientations to meet.

P: Hi, how is your project going?

C: Quite well at the moment. I have participated in a number of development meetings in the project. It focuses on plurality in entrepreneurial activity with the aim of stimulating entrepreneurship in the region. I have feedback reflections on the discussion and the kind of perspectives and understanding that are represented, as well as not represented. These are based on my experiences from the meetings, discussions and interviews with participants, and on theoretical perspectives from research. These stimulated a discussion concerning the ideologies and assumptions on which the project, as well as different supportive measures of entrepreneurship in the region, is built, and whether they are helpful or exclusive to groups like women, different ethnic groups and young people. What about your project?

P: We have just run a dialogue conference where four companies participated in a deep slice project group with people from different parts and levels of each company. It was arranged in cooperation with the companies as a device for participatory planning and the organizing of innovation, particularly as a basis for the generation of concrete projects. From my perspective as part of the conference staff, there seemed to be energy
in most of the discussions which produced a substantial number of ideas. My experience and discussions with other participants indicated that it served to clarify visions, combine interests, and mobilize a broad range of experience and ideas. The interaction, exchange and sharing of experience and ideas was pervasive, people got to know each other, and initiatives and social bonds emerged, as a basis for the legitimization of collaborative innovation efforts. But as usual, what happens after the conference in terms of discussions, authorizations of projects and innovation activities will be the final judge of its workability.

The conversation above, between P and C, represents the two authors of this article. One of us can be described as a pragmatically oriented researcher (P) and the other as critically oriented (C). P’s research has related to working life issues with the democratic dialogue as a cornerstone, particularly with projects focusing on innovation. C has worked for many years as a consultant but his research work on consulting and development projects has a critical and reflective character, where action and reflection are separated.

Below, we will give an introduction to AR as a tradition, followed by our view of how a pragmatic and a critical tradition can be characterised. We identify a number of themes where we see a tension between the two traditions, and illustrate these tensions by a dialogue and friendly quarrel between P and C. Although fictive, this dialogue has its roots in our different research experiences and the different traditions into which we recognise ourselves as having been socialised. In the remaining parts of the paper we discuss some dilemmas in AR and make our conclusions.
Action research as a tradition

AR as a concept and a research practice represents the challenge of combining research and development for their mutual benefit, through direct interaction involving the different practitioners and people concerned. This challenge has, during its history of more than half a century, attracted people from quite different points of departure. For most of its history it has been a peripheral, usually dissenting, voice in the academic community and institutions with its positivist and Humboldtian leaning. Today, these different pockets of people searching for opportunities for doing more relevant research, “research to help practitioners” as Lewin (1946) says, and in the process often also achieving particular qualities of research and scientific knowledge that other approaches to research in academia are unable to attain, have developed and formed a rich mosaic of praxis with global reach (Reason& Bradbury, 2001).

Although AR emerged in a period when positivism was dominant, and has also influenced some streams of its development, the roots of AR are commonly associated with pragmatism as a tradition within philosophy. For Peirce, truth is associated with meaning, and both meaning and truth are accomplished through experimentation, that is, through action and consensus (Kyrö, 1995:41). For Dewey, the interaction process is crucial. It is through interaction that knowledge is created and tested through its consequences. Thus knowledge, including reflective knowledge, is inseparably associated with instrumentality and workability, in practice. Its validity is assessed in “its use in making possible the institution of interactions which yield results in control of actual experiences of observed objects” (Dewey, 1929: 129). Through stabilizing experience, knowledge that secures consequences and valued ends can be developed.
The point of the concept for Lewin was to achieve a closer interaction between social research and praxis, with which natural science and engineering had been so successful. First of all, it was a search for relevance in research, for “rational social management” or “social engineering” (Lewin, 1946), but Lewin’s “change experiments” were also a way of creating opportunities for doing research and experiments in the field. As a Jew and intellectual refugee from Nazi Germany, the value of democracy was also important to him, and one impetus of AR is also to do research to support the democratic process (Marrow, 1969).

But as the ideologies of the expanding science and academia in the 1950s on the whole demanded distance from praxis and a passive spectator role, the idea of AR was, when pragmatic ideas lost their cultural force, seen more as an anomaly. From the end of the 1960s, AR again caught the imagination of researchers searching for relevance and commitment to people and human problems. With the revival of AR in the 1970s, critically oriented researchers recognized the potential of AR as an alternative practice to positivism, where the researchers should engage themselves in the emancipation of underprivileged groups by helping them, through reflection, unveil dominant ideologies and coercive structures (Löchen, 1970, Sandberg, 1976, Fals Borda, 1979). This was the origin of emancipatory AR orientations, often associated with PAR (participatory AR) or PR (participatory research), which was coined at the end of the 1970s (Fals Borda, 2001). An important impetus here is practitioners participating in research or doing research themselves. The emphasis is on human values and far-reaching transformation, on unveiling suppressing power structures and, through reflective efforts, developing a consciousness of the group’s situation and finding ways to struggle against and liberate from these powers.
In other strands of the reviving AR practice in the 1960s, like the sociotechnical school, Scandinavian working life development, and other work and organizational development in Europe and the US, the focus is more on a collaborative mode in line with Kurt Lewin’s work. These strands are more pragmatic in different senses, philosophically in their emphasis on practice and practical knowledge and its development, where adaptation to the situation and incremental change based on the experiential learning of participants is emphasized. This pragmatic type of orientation has become the dominant one in Scandinavia. E.g. democratic dialogue is often emphasized, but its realization is adjusted to the practical requirement of getting participatory change processes started and maintained.

The parallel development of what Brown and Tandon (1983) called the north versus south tradition (see also Hanson, 2003:60) can be connected to the two different orientations in AR. The north tradition represents the Lewinian classical approach, which according to Brown and Tandon is characterized by consensus and conflict avoidance, and works hand in hand with existing structures of dominance in society. The south tradition is focused upon the emancipation of underprivileged groups, and carries with it a strong ideological base in opposition to existing structures of society. This tradition has been labelled ‘participatory research’ and is associated, among others, with Paulo Freire (1970). Although there are a number of points of connection, Lewin and the north tradition represent to a greater extent a pragmatic orientation. Freire and the south tradition represent a predominantly critical orientation. We view the works of Foucault, and especially Falzon’s (1998) interpretation of Foucault and social dialogue, as being close to Freire’s ideas of dialogue. The difference is that while Freire was somewhat more explicit in relation to a specific ideology, Foucault’s works places the emphasis on the complex of problems with any practical solution, something
that at the same time makes reflection on praxis and “conscientização” (Freire, 1970) even more important.

It has been argued that the term ‘AR’ is now used in so many different contexts with different approaches, methods and traditions that it has lost its original meaning (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:xxiv). A reason for this would be that different traditions are so separate that they do not benefit from one another. Our purpose is not to give an overview of different orientations of contemporary AR. Rather, the purpose we have is to confront two philosophical orientations, as they appear through our coloured glasses, with one another to find out how they relate and if/how they can be combined. We believe that despite the heterogeneity of this field of research there is a potential value in conversation between different orientations, as the field is, at the same time, united by a common interest in participative and change oriented initiatives.

**Pragmatic versus critical orientation of action research**

For our purpose, the distinction between the north and south tradition provides a point of departure from which to distinguish between a pragmatic versus a critical orientation of AR. In this section of the paper we will conceptualise these two orientations and relate them to one another.

We associate the pragmatic orientation with a focus on praxis and practical knowledge development, cooperation between all concerned parties, and the need for finding and constructing a common ground between them as a platform for action. In Scandinavia, where
the pragmatic orientation is strong, AR often focuses on broad, open and democratically oriented dialogue among all concerned, with researchers as partners in this dialogue with a particular focus on the development organization, network exchange and furthering of good dialogue, e.g. through arranging dialogue conferences (Gustavsen, 1992, concerning pragmatic AR see also Greenwood and Levin, 1998). The purpose of the typical dialogue conference is to learn from one another through dialogue as an impetus for creative exchange and project development. The conference starts with the visions of the participants, continues with interactions between them and ends up with project and action ideas and plans. Such a process is dependent on the attainment of a reasonable degree of consensus. The criterion of a good action plan is that it has an instrumental value, that it is workable and suitable to initiate a process of change. The dialogue conference is typically administrated and initiated by the researcher. The conference as such can be seen as a tool in the process, where the researcher acts as a professional or expert process manager. This means the researcher is closely involved in the development process and acts together here with the practitioners, but leaves the content of the discussion and development process to the participants.

The type of dialogue we connect with a pragmatic orientation in this type of approach is focused on the broad participation of all concerned, exchange of experience and ideas, and further collaboration among the people involved. There is a connection in this type of research to Habermas’ discursive theory of democracy, where citizens discuss, argue and deliberate publically, as well as to the idea of communication free from domination allowing a rational and cooperative search for truth, where the procedures should further open and free communication.
By contrast, a critical orientation gives more room for dissension. We will use an EU-project within the EQUAL-initiative, aimed at supporting entrepreneurship and new ventures thereby changing structures in the public and private support system, to illustrate this.

The researcher is part of the project, which means that he/she participates in the activities as an observer and initiator of, for example, focus group interviews to stimulate reflection upon the process in the project. Thus, the researcher contributes to a process of reflection based upon pictures, metaphors and concepts which provides tools for making sense of the development process. In this case the researcher is in no respect responsible for the guidance of the process. It is up to the project members whether they take notice or not. This means that the researcher’s role is mainly to reflect upon the meaning of the activities, something that encourages an abductive research process\(^1\), where the actions of the practitioners are coupled to relevant theory and where relevant theory guides the researcher in looking more closely at specific acts within the project. This kind of role creates a certain distance to the practitioners, although it is combined with close attention to specific acts and attention to practitioners as individuals.

The role of a critically oriented researcher allows for more attention to be paid to dissension rather than to consensus. The Habermasian dialogue, including “the vision of human beings as ideally exercising collective, conscious, rational control over social processes, as making their history with ‘will and consciousness’” (Falzon 1998:80), is less appropriate here, as it carries with it a risk of silencing dissenting voices\(^2\). The researcher’s role, based upon a Freirian-like pedagogy, makes it possible to pay attention and listen to both overt disagreement as well as trying to trace covert disagreement through an interpretation of (speech) actions. Following Foucault, order and unity can be interpreted as signs of
dominance and suppressed conflicts. Ambiguity can be embraced instead of rejected. Turning traditional assumptions upside down is stimulating, and something that encourages creativity and the development of theory. The purpose of this kind of research is directed more towards emancipation. The research papers that are made available to the practitioners can play a role in their reflection upon what is going on, in paying attention to hidden agendas and realising different alternatives of action.

The type of dialogue we associate with the critical orientation is thus more in line with the thinking of Freire and Foucault than Habermas. Often the Frankfurt school of critical theory, and particularly its leading proponent Jürgen Habermas, has frequently been a theoretical reference point in a critical orientation to action-research (Kemmis, 2001, Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). We believe it is fruitful to recognize Foucault as a development in the critical orientation. Such a Foucauldian dialogue ‘can be promoted through the adoption of an ethical attitude of openness towards the other, an attitude which in its reflective form is the critical attitude towards oneself which acknowledges the historicity and finitude of one’s own point of view, which recognises that one’s point of view has itself emerged historically out of a long process of dialogue with the other’ (Falzon 1998:95). The EQUAL initiative as such can be seen as the outcome of such a critical reflective attitude towards administrative structures.

Our view of a pragmatic versus critical orientation in AR is summarized in figure 1.
Figure 1. Comparison between a pragmatic and a critical orientation to AR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Pragmatic orientation</th>
<th>Critical orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Improvement in workability of human praxis</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action focus</td>
<td>Experimental, Cooperation</td>
<td>Resistance, liberation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to power</td>
<td>Power as ability to do, collaborative relation, practical agreement is striven for</td>
<td>Dominant interests, coercive, conflict is acknowledged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of researcher/related knowledge</td>
<td>Closeness, practical knowledge</td>
<td>Distance, episteme, reflective knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research focus</td>
<td>Action, dialogue</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development focus</td>
<td>Experiential learning, learning by doing</td>
<td>Consciousness raising, reflexivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of dialogue</td>
<td>Cooperative, experience based, action oriented</td>
<td>Promote openness to the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Fragmentation, compartmentalization</td>
<td>Asymmetrical power relations, invisible structures that are restricting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We will take each issue in figure 1 as a theme for dialogue and friendly quarrel between P and C in the following section of the article. This dialogue will serve our purpose to further investigate the differences and similarities between the two orientations as condensed in figure 1.
The reason for the dialogue form is that we find it the most appropriate form of textual construction. It is difficult to write a unified text that does not build in preconceptions from either of the orientations. It is also difficult to find a neutral perspective over and above the orientations. We have, for example, had discussions concerning Habermas; is he one of “us”, one of “them”, a danger to both, or a possible reconciliation point? In a dialogue we can give the two orientations their own voice and vocabulary to a greater extent. Still, we could have incorporated a greater number of voices as the orientations are in themselves quite plural. And there is no rule against eclectically mixing the two orientations as a “critical-pragmatic” orientation. Furthermore, in arranging the dialogue we are unavoidably conditioned by our own preconceptions as Gadamer says, the short description of the orientations above may indicate the character of our “prejudices”. With this background we give the forum to C and P.

**Dialogue and friendly quarrel**

*Emancipation versus workability*

P: Why is AR a good idea to you? Why do you take part in actions and efforts to improve and transform situations and conditions? Why not stick to a more passive role and to academia alone?

C: As action researchers there are two main rationales as I see it. The basic one is to contribute to the emancipation of people from restrictions and dominations of particular interests and powers. The aim here is transformative action in order to attain a freer and more
conscious subject. The second basic rationale from the point of view of research is to develop and test critical assumptions of transformative potentials and capabilities indicated by critical theoretical work, by reflective or ideological critical analysis of particular historical situations, or through the dialogue and action of those I collaborate with and who are engaged in resistance and struggle for liberation. I see it as important that the people themselves are also involved in research, so it is research both for and by the people themselves. My role as a researcher is to facilitate this process on the basis of equality, where the important task is to contribute to the reflexivity of the struggle and transformative efforts, a transformation built upon conscious subjects. As a researcher I can hereby contribute to language creation as new concepts can make clear what transformation is expected to lead to.

P: From my pragmatic orientation it is a matter of reconstructing problematic situations into resolved ones through action oriented inquiry, in order to improve the workability of human praxis. People discover, appropriate and develop the world and their knowledge and values through their actions. The point of departure is the practical knowledge and forms of learning of concerned people. Values and ideals, as well as knowledge, are an integrated and necessary part of praxis, and the basis for the development of freer and more humane experience, more intelligent praxis and more democratic organization. From this point of departure, it is important that the people concerned have the opportunity to participate in change processes in order to make use of their practical knowledge and develop it through experimentation and, in dialogue with others, exchange and share experience and ideas, e.g. through the practice of dialogue conferences. Through this participation they not only develop knowledge but also improve their praxis, as these are two sides of the same coin. My role as researcher is to support this practical knowledge formation which at the same time involves praxis development. An important element is to support the development of arenas for democratic
dialogue in order to further interaction and collaboration, and broaden the mass of experience
and ideas on which to draw, and generally to further the organizing of innovation and the
building of a development organization so that those concerned are able to participate.

P: I think we both see the point of AR as “research to help practitioners” as Kurt Lewin says.
It is not only personally rewarding, a contribution to the third task of academia, to collaborate
with its environment and contribute to its development, it is also a contribution to human
improvement. Through AR it is possible for us as academic researchers to be relevant and
directly useful to people and organizations. What is the important task for us, what can we
contribute with? What can we gain from it?

C: The focus in critically oriented AR is on critique and condition for reflexivity of people as
a precondition for and part of transformative action. The focus is on developing reflective
knowledge among participants. We cannot bring enlightenment to people: “In a process of
enlightenment, there can only be participants” as Habermas (1974: 40) says.

What do I get out of it in terms of academically important learning and knowledge accounts?
First of all, it provides very rich, experiential resources, local knowledge, well suited for
reflection. Critical theory and ideology critique can become more grounded, more aware of
micro processes of domination, and less abstract. And conceptualization, assumptions as well
as approaches to reflection, can be developed and refined. In addition, the empirical work as
such, when reflected through theory, could serve me, as well as different groups, with the
conditions for reflexivity and transformative action.
P: I am focusing on the development of practical knowledge through dialogue and experimentation. The full range of personal knowledge of yourself and other people is involved. A basic task is mobilizing practical knowledge and knowledge development in and through action, both one’s own and other participants. It is made through cycles of experiential learning of action, experience, reflection and conceptualization, or inquiry processes to transform and improve on the situations that participants find themselves in. It also involves a “publican3” role of furthering dialogue among concerned parties, and in the process mobilizing and developing social intelligence, sometimes acting as a mediator between different points of view and interests. Furthermore, to act as a resource for people and partners in innovation processes providing input from research. From the point of view of research, it creates the opportunity to have access to a broader range of knowledge, knowledge development and quality enhancing processes. Personal knowledge, experience and understanding are developed. The workability of certain practices, ideas, forms of work and assumptions can be tested, varied in different contexts, validated and refined.

C: If you are the “publican”, I am the decoupled “intellectual” who gives an independent perspective that eventually has the capacity to de-establish established truths. More than that, hopefully my critical reflection upon praxis together with others can open up new ways of thinking. The “intellectual” deals more with the changing of minds than with the changing of actions.

Cooperation versus resistance

P: I focus on cooperation and an experimental orientation to action. Cooperation because it is often needed to accomplish certain change actions (e.g. changing the organization of work or
of innovation), because we are part of organized contexts. Most change projects require and
are greatly eased by a collaborative relation among concerned parties, where the parties are
also, in different forms, participating in the project. It is also to broaden the range of
experience and ideas available to bring to bear on the issues, something to which an
experimental orientation to action contributes.

C: A main point of AR in my conception of it is supporting people’s struggles to free
themselves from obstacles and unnecessary coercions and restrictions. Finding ways to resist
these dehumanizing forces, or forces that restrict human potential, are crucial, where the goal
is to overcome those forces in the struggle. Real change inevitably involves resistance to
dominant structures. Change acquired through collective experimentation might reinforce
dominant structures rather than changing them.

*Agreement versus conflict*

P: I see power closely linked to the performance of action and practice. Power is the ability to
do, to accomplish valued ends. Often this type of power requires collaboration and agreement.
Then power as “power with” rather than “power over”, as Mary Parker Follett says, is striven
for and has the potential to release most people’s abilities. Power confers the ability to reach
practical agreements and coordinated understanding among concerned parties, as a common
ground and platform for action is important.

C: Your view, it seems to me, does not sufficiently recognize tensions and conflicts between
interested parties, and the fact that some interests are dominant. To acknowledge such
tensions and conflicts through reflective and self-reflective efforts is crucial, as well as giving
a voice to unrecognized groups and interests. This is the basis for transformative action in the form of resistance and struggle. Conflict reveals power structures and, therefore, conflicts can serve to make efforts and choices more conscious.

**Closeness versus distance**

P: As pragmatists take practical, living, often partly tacit knowledge and experience possessed by oneself and other participants as a point of departure, closeness and participation are important and the way to attaining a degree of objectivity. More distant, spectator kind of research cannot fully access this type of knowledge and its development.

C: For critically oriented researchers there is a need for distance in order to be independent with regard to the situation, the action context, and oneself, and avoid being co-opted by it. The aim is to reach reflective knowledge, knowledge that reveals elements of the context one is part of, its forces, how it has evolved historically as well as one’s own role in it.

**Action versus reflection**

P: I think critically oriented researchers are frequently hesitant towards taking part in what you call transformative action, particularly in the interactive and cooperative way of AR. You do not seem to really want to participate in and take responsibility for action. How can you then call yourself an action researcher?
C: It is particularly the contribution to reflection and reflexivity of those involved in, or those who can potentially be engaged in, transformative action that I focus on. Consciousness raising, dialogue and furthering free, symmetrical communication is important. The kind of action I perform is rather the step before, after, or reflective spaces during transformative action where people reflect on their situation. Self-reflection is necessary if action should be able to be transformative. The work of Paolo Freire and his “conscientização” approach is a good example of this, something that is the basis of a strong tradition of popular education in the south tradition. A cooperative search for truth, as Habermas says, is striven for, where maybe “reflector” is a good name for the role. As is emphasized in PAR, it is important that the participants do the reflection and research by themselves.

P: So you will stay away from the “real” action, just contributing to reflection on the level of discourse, you will not act?

C: I do not see myself as taking the responsibility for transformative action. That is not the appropriate role for me as a critical researcher. That is something that people have to take responsibility for themselves. Critically oriented researchers have been trying out different answers to this issue of connection to transformative action. Freireian “conscientização” as collaborative reflections on the situation that people find themselves in also involves a measure of taking sides with oppressed groups. So did Foucault.

C: You pragmatists seem to me to be too occupied with action and practice. As I see it, reflexivity is crucial for transformative action.
P: You critics seem to start with the assumption that people are fooled by “the system”, by dominant interests, or are generally snared by unrecognized restrictions that they think are inevitable. And therefore there is a need for emancipatory AR, and action researchers, to contribute to their liberation. We pragmatists start, instead, from the actual situation that people find themselves in and the resources they have. The focus is on mobilizing and developing practical, useful knowledge and local theories of practitioners or people concerned so that they are better able to solve their problems and transcend the situation by themselves. Here, learning by doing and dialogical interaction and exchange is fundamental.

C: How do you relate to established powers and dominant interests, as an action researcher, in your pragmatic approach? From my point of view, this is a crucial issue, and perhaps the crucial issue, in AR.

P: From a pragmatic perspective, action is important, trying out new things in practice and seeing what happens, in order to generate and learn from experience in the search for possible improvements of praxis. Here, a measure of collaboration, also with people in power, is often necessary to achieve something. Furthermore, in democratic and fairly egalitarian societies, it is natural to use the established democratic measures of involving concerned parties to deal with issues. But a pragmatic orientation does not have to rely on collaboration with all groups. The struggle and resistance of particular groups can also be done through experimental action, in order to find workable improvements of praxis.

P: You seem to be suspicious of pragmatic orientations?

C: To be pragmatic is to adapt and adjust to the situation, its requirements and demands.
I see the necessity of what Alvesson (2003) calls critical or reflexive pragmatism. Reflection cannot go on forever, but must stop because of limits of time and other resources; there is of course also a need for decision and useful action.

P: I am glad that you are open to a pragmatic orientation. Other critical researchers like Habermas and Apel have also been influenced by it. But Alvesson I am afraid continues the common misunderstanding of pragmatism that is so frequent among critically oriented researchers. That is to totally miss the epistemological role of action, that action leads to knowledge through reflection, and also to a fundamental degree its practical, innovative role. The point is that action and practice involve necessary elements of reflection and research, and do not only limit it.

C: Still, there are limits and restrictions to critique and reflexivity in the course of action. Although there is “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983), it is in most cases rather limited in terms of the type of reflexivity. Certainly people in action need to make themselves aware of the situation as a matter of self-regulation, but do not call that reflection. There is a need to take a step back and distance yourself from the action context, with freedom from pressures to act. Through such reflective efforts the people can broaden their perspective, reflect back on themselves and their role and relation to the situation and context, problematize what is taken for granted in the action and open up new perspectives on the situation.

P: We pragmatists are happy to start from the situated awareness that we and our partners in development actually have. Reflection must be related to action, practice and situations, not abstracted as a sphere of contemplation over and above it. Reflection is itself an action and practice as well as an inherent element in any workable practice. Of course reflection, like any
activity, requires resources of different types, not the least time and physical, as well as social, space for performing it. The important material for reflection is experience as well as ideas. Your own resources are of course very important, but through connection with others the fund is enormously enlarged. So interaction and communication with other people becomes central. That is a reason why network exchange is often an important element in AR, pragmatically understood. As Dewey says: "Enlightenment comes from the give and take, from the exchange of experiences and ideas" Dewey (1946: 36).

C: An important role of reflection as I see it is to try to destabilize the dominant views, not to contribute to their propagation. You seem to be somewhat cautious, or at least not very explicit, concerning the important role of critique and reflexivity in AR efforts.

P: Creative, experimental and dialogical action in order to reconstruct problematic situations is central. In this action, criticism, and self-criticism, is the way to release creativity in the construction of alternative possibilities. Providing alternatives gives critique a practical basis. Furthermore, critique of dominant interests and destabilizing possibilities for common ground can hamper interaction and constructive action.

C: The risk of “hyper-critique” (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 182) has to be taken into account, as does the importance of usefulness for solving problems. Critically oriented action researchers have not followed the critical theorist efforts of bringing enlightenment to people through ideology critique. That tends to be too elitist.

C: The risk of your so-called “pragmatic” approach is that you will be co-opted by dominant interests and unable to recognize subjugating powers. You will just help to propagate the
existing systems of power, and may even help to strengthen it! Your approach seems to me a way of adjusting people to the existing situation, not to transform it. No real change will come of such an approach, if not, the AR effort at least tries to destabilize established views, gives voice to unacknowledged groups and interests, or points to some alternative perspective however vague and utopian.

P: Such a view seriously underestimates the practical knowledge of people, the intelligence inherent in praxis and the creative aspects of action in response to situations. Such a misunderstanding of pragmatism is quite common in everyday understanding as well as in its reception by critical researchers (e.g. as Joas, 1993, 1996 points out). Critical researchers tend to postulate a narrow understanding of people, of their conditions and situations of subjugation or restriction which the researcher should help to enlighten people about through their critical theory or efforts. Consensus and dissension are, instead, best seen as dynamic aspects of the processes itself that have to be mediated and combined.

C: I think it is true that ideology critiques have been to some extent elitist and too certain of their own truths. But critically oriented action researchers should not see their role as performing ideology critique from the point of view of critical theory in order to enlighten people to their “true” situation. Instead, we should, rather, follow Freire in “conscientização”, in furthering dialogue among oppressed groups or people sharing the same concerns about particular social issues and problems. In this way, critically oriented researchers take seriously the reflective capacity of people, with an emphasis on the people concerned participating in research as well as performing the action by themselves.

*Development: Experiential learning versus reflexivity*
P: Experience is the basis of development. Through dialogue it is possible to considerably expand the available mass of experience, and through exchange and interaction share experience and ideas. To develop this mass of experience in order to improve the workability of praxis, there is a need for experiential learning, involving action, experience, reflection and conceptualization in dynamic loops.

C: The core element in achieving development is reflection and reflexivity. Without a better understanding of the situation, the force forming it, your transformative actions will be narrow, blind and risk propagating the established forces.

*Action orientation versus promoting openness to the other*

C: A real dialogue is the one where the aim is not to convince the other of what action he or she should take. Instead, dialogue is characterised by listening to the other with an attitude of potentially being changed through the encounter with the other. The key to real change is inside me, I can unlock my own attitude and open myself to receiving from the other but I cannot force the other to change. This only evokes resistance.

P: I do not deny the crucial role of openness and listening to the other, as well as changing oneself – which is itself a test of action as part of social inquiry. But, in my understanding, it is only one phase, albeit a crucial one, in the collaborative process. The point is not to force others to change, but through democratic dialogue to develop mutual understanding and come to an agreement among involved parties on action in order to test and develop the workability of human praxis. Thus, both inquiry and change require conjoint activity where the parties
involved can interweave their different contributions, as well as the experience generated through transformative action. That’s social intelligence in operation!

Situation: Fragmentation versus domination

P: The type of situations that pragmatic orientations regard as problematic have the qualities of fragmentation and compartmentalization. When people do not interact, experience is narrowed and not mutually beneficial, publics of concerned people are not formed, social intelligence is not mobilized and developed, democracy is limited, and the development of freer and more humane experience and praxis is restricted. Here is a challenge for an action researcher!

C: I see it, rather, in asymmetrical power relations, invisible structures that are restricting people. Here is a great need for emancipation through reflection and transformative action.

Conclusions and reflections

We will now leave the friendly quarrel between P and C and sum up what we can learn from it. We think some aspects of a pragmatic and critical orientation have been clarified through a dynamic dialogue between the two. Both have their potentialities. E.g. the potentialities of the pragmatic orientation are where concerted action is needed, where techne/knowledge/local theory is required (practical knowledge), and where power needs to be built in a situation of fragmentation and compartmentalization. The potentialities of the critical orientation are where reflection is crucial, where the development of theory/episteme or reflective knowledge is preferred, where the situation is characterized by unequal power relations or invisible
structures that hamper thinking and action. Mutual criticism of each other’s positions reveals weaknesses that indicate complementarities; limits reflection in a pragmatic orientation and the difficulty of achieving change if conflict and dissension is focused on as in a critical orientation.

This means that to some extent the two orientations are suited for different (research) contexts. But is it really possible to use the two as complementary approaches in one and the same research context? The dialogue shows us that P and C never fully can agree with each other. Thus, there is reason to question whether a pragmatic and a critical orientation can be combined. We think in praxis one of the two tends to take the upper hand.

The two orientations we have outlined in this paper have the character of ideal types. It can be argued that these extremes have very limited space, at least within the research community. A consequent application of the critical orientation easily leads to a traditional research role, where the researcher is no longer participating in the process. And a consequent application of the pragmatic orientation easily leads to problems of legitimising the output as research at all.

The quarrel between P and C points to the need to consider some critical choices in AR (see figure 2). The first choice has to do with balancing the interplay between action practice and research practice. From a pragmatic orientation, integration helps to merge theory and practice in the development of an improved workability of human praxis. The dynamic interaction between research and action both leads to the use, testing and development of theory and the improvement of practice. It is manifested in Kurt Lewin’s often cited sayings that “nothing is so useful as good theory”, and “if you want to understand something, try to change it”. The choice, instead of separation, is based on the value of autonomy of the two
types of practices, and the need to avoid one practice taking the upper hand and even co-opting the other. The autonomy of reflective research serves to give space for repressed voices to be expressed and alternative perspectives to be developed.

The autonomy of the action practice maintains authority in the hands of the people concerned themselves, in line with the motto that Kant saw in Enlightenment – “Sapere aude!” – “Dare to be wise!”. From a critical perspective, the researcher is easily co-opted by the practitioners in AR. The distance that is necessary to those who are studied is hard to attain. It is difficult to be ‘unfaithful’ to those studied. On the other hand, the practitioner is easily co-opted by the researcher, through taking an expert role perceived as possessing superior knowledge. This is a reason for a critical orientation, for the researcher keeping a low profile and emphasizing participation by practitioners in research. As Herr and Anderson (2005) point out, a continuum of positions are available in action research. Our discussion can contribute to making whatever is the chosen position a matter of explicit reflection in specific research.

Figure 2 Critical choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Pragmatic orientation</th>
<th>Critical orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action/research practice</td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Separation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core activity</td>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for action</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form of knowledge to be</td>
<td>Experiential, practical and conceptual tools</td>
<td>Reflexive (re-descriptions new interpretations), silenced knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A second choice is what type of core activity the action research should try to further or build. First of all, dialogue is emphasized by both orientations but for somewhat different reasons. Besides dialogue, the answer of the pragmatists is experimental activity both in practice and in conceptualization, and through it a creative orientation to situations. Experimentation helps to both develop new knowledge and improve practice.

A critical orientation, instead, focuses on reflective activity in order to both articulate, develop and validate knowledge, and support the emancipation of minds. Without it, action cannot become truly transformative but risks, instead, being reduced to the propagation of existing conditions.

Thirdly, what responsibility should the action researcher take on? As van Beinum (1996) says, it is a balancing act between the sins of omission and the sins of commission – doing too much or doing too little. The integration of research and practice in line with a pragmatic orientation goes hand in hand with the researcher assuming responsibility for action. This does not eliminate the risk of the researcher making him/herself illegitimate by taking on too much responsibility. Another view is that the researcher should not be responsible for change and action. At least in a democracy a researcher lacks the mandate for this responsibility. Our view of a critical orientation is that it encourages limited responsibility for action. However, in practice we think that a critically orientated action researcher is often tempted to become too influential. It is also problematic to act on behalf of ‘the other’ – it easily becomes a form of pacifying paternalism or even a co-opting elitism. Furthermore, it is doubtful if theory in the form of reflective knowledge can decide between different courses of action in particular situations.
A guiding principle could be that through dialogue among concerned parties, the roles and responsibility of the action researcher, as well as of others, is democratically authorized. Through this authorization, the researcher can make suitable contributions (e.g. help to arrange a dialogue conference, give practical advice, give a critical or just another perspective) appropriate to his competence and standing. But this is easier said than done and often ends up in something that could be described more as negotiation than dialogue.

The fourth choice concerns the form of knowledge that is to be developed and used. Knowledge and knowing can be of many different kinds and can serve many different interests (Habermas 1971). From a pragmatic orientation, experience and tools of how to better deal with problematic situations and achieve valued human ends is important. Also, the ultimate validation of theories is connected here to their utility in this respect. Reflective knowledge, instead, focuses on re-descriptions, re-interpretations and articulating silenced voices, where an important aspect of validation is whether people recognize themselves in the interpretations and unveil the workings of dominant ideologies and discourses.
References


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Methodological textbooks often explain induction and deduction as two opposite explanatory paths. Either the researcher goes from empirical data to generalisation and theory or uses theory to explain empirical evidence. Abduction comes in between. In case studies this means that a single case is interpreted from a hypothetical general pattern as a possible explanation for the outcome in a single case. From that, new empirical evidence is sought. Thus the researcher goes back and forth between the empirical phenomenon and the emerging theory (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000).

This reading of Habermas is contested by many in the AR field who would take the opposite position. Here we quote one of the blind reviewers of this article: “I think on the contrary, that his view of communicative action and public discourse explicitly invites explorations of differences of perspective”. We will not extend into a debate about how to understand Habermas correctly, as one of us tends to agree with the reviewer while the other is somewhat more inclined to agree with Falzon’s reading of Habermas.

The use of the concept “publican” is an effort at conceptual recovery and reform by one of the authors in order to label a missing agency in participatory democratic theory, and linking the role of the action researcher to this agency. In its ancient meaning, publicans were builder and keeper of public houses. Here it is understood as builder and keeper of public spaces and places where situated “publics” can be housed. The point is that open, democratic dialogue among concerned, although ideally occurring naturally, is in most cases something that has to be nurtured and supported. We believe that most, not to say all, action researchers have an acute experience of limited or lack of dialogue causing restriction and deterioration of the development and research processes. Furthering democratic dialogue, that is, shouldering a publican role, can be argued to be a core dimension of an action research role, both in its epistemological and developmental functions (Lindhult, 2005).