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Shining Light on the Dark Side of Action Research: Power, Relationality and Transformation

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ARJ editorial introduction vol. 20 issue 2

An important aim of the *Action Research Journal* is encouraging people to get involved in action research in order to promote transformative change across the globe. The journal subscribes to a relational manifesto in which “action researchers are called to contribute to conversations-for-change about ways of knowing, doing and being that invite us to develop shared learning platforms, alongside people with a stake in transforming structural forces that inhibit thriving” (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 9). An important strategy in this respect is to raise awareness of the ‘bright side’ of action research for transformations (ART): explain how it can be done, showcase what has been and can be achieved, and argue that it is a vital and urgent response to the world’s sustainability crises. ART has much to show for itself and needs to continue its efforts at spreading the word and inviting ever-more people in joining the conversation and connecting their experiences and achievements.

However, we also know that ART has a ‘dark side’. It is a complex and demanding process. It demands relational, conceptual and experimental skills not usually taught together in conventional educational programs. Many challenges are likely to emerge and there are no guarantees that it will achieve the desired impact. Transformative aspirations and change processes inevitably come with ambiguities, mistakes, frustrations, tensions, conflicts and disappointments. All action researchers struggle with feelings of failure and doubt about the value and impact of their work.

Shining light on the dark side

At this point, we believe it is helpful to illuminate our personal motivation for this theme with brief vignettes of our own experiences with the dark side of action research.

Koen: I conduct action research with social innovations: new ways of thinking, acting and organizing to address unmet societal needs and transform relationships and socio-political institutions. I have collaborated with several social innovations that, despite unprecedented impact, struggled to sustain themselves. Sometimes this generated

positive impacts and lasting personal friendships. In one case, however, the research process was abruptly terminated when the main catalyst stepped back from the social innovation and withdrew support for the research. Through a prolonged and uncomfortable exchange, we managed to eventually mend the relationship and re-establish consent. Nonetheless, my relationships with those involved were never quite the same and we could not re-establish our transformative trajectory. This experience generated significant anxiety, self-doubt and disappointment for me at the time, yet I also gained new insights into dealing with the relational and emergent ethical challenges of action research.

Victor: For me, the formative experience was action research I conducted in partnership with a Palestinian Arab NGO in Israel (Arieli et al., 2009). After two years, the partnership produced very little, so the partners decided to engage in joint reflection. We uncovered a pattern in which both sides had systematically failed to say what we meant or to really listen to each other, mostly to keep the relationship intact. We, professional researchers, were actually imposing participation on our partners and failed to discuss the power inequalities between the Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. I was shocked and embarrassed. I also learned that I am never immune to blindness and must be vigilantly critically reflective in order to avoid these mistakes. Furthermore, I became particularly appreciative of publications that take a more developmentally reflexive look at participation and the partnership building process.

By sharing these individual experiences, we intend to identify relational patterns not just for ourselves but potentially for all researchers in the field of ART. We believe that becoming more aware of the dark side better prepares action researchers for the challenges they are bound to encounter. Focusing only on the bright side of AR risks creating unrealistic expectations, leading to frustration, disappointment, and even cynicism. By taking a closer look at the dark side as well, we hope to point aspiring and practicing action researchers to the likely challenges. Indeed, we encourage learning more about uncovering and moving through these challenges from and with others.

The dark side of action research cannot simply be attributed to ill-conceived projects, unethical behaviour, or lack of self-reflexivity. In our attempts to resist, challenge, and alter cultural hegemony, we just cannot escape its acquiescing forces and relational power

dynamics (Glenzer, 2021). Honestly sharing experiences with its dark side may make action research less appealing to anyone initially drawn to its bright side. It may signal “identity costs” (Wagenaar, 2007, p. 323) for action researchers, that is, having to choose between promoting the value of their work, preserving their professional integrity, and advancing their careers. However, shielding people from the dark side is neither ethical nor likely to advance transformation. The ubiquitous yet relational nature of power and hegemony behoves us to engage in ongoing conversations and experiments addressing, for example, our understandings and expectations of ‘impact’ or ‘participation’. In fact, self-critical reflexivity is part of the relational manifesto of ART (Bradbury et al., 2019) and is one of the quality choice-points we use when developing articles for publication in this journal (Friedman et al., 2018).

From its inception, *ARJ* has foregrounded the fundamental struggle in the action research literature with striking a balance between highlighting the bright side of action research while honestly engaging its dark side (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). An inspiring example early in the journal’s life comes from Ospina et al. (2004), who identified ‘paradoxes of participation’ generated by tensions around authority, trust, cohesion, and power in a co-research group involving community leaders and academic action researchers. On their part, Arieli et al. (2009) then showed how action researchers may unintentionally impose participation on partners while ignoring power differences stemming from structural factors. These critical reflections echo Cooke and Kothari’s (2001) stark warning that participation might turn into tyranny by inducing people to assume roles and responsibilities they are not in a position to take on or will actually disadvantage them. Indeed, Bartels and Wittmayer (2014, 2018) find that, while a certain degree of mutual instrumentalization is common to action research and is usually benign and productive, it can become a slippery slope ending up in co-optation and power abuse.

Overview of this issue: reflecting on power, relationality and transformation

The six articles in this themed issue all carry on *ARJ*’s tradition of honest and critically reflective reporting on the dark side of action research, including dilemmas of participation, power inequalities, and complex relational dynamics. In putting together this themed issue, we looked for accepted, but not yet published, articles that shed light on the dark side. The dark side is not necessarily the central theme of each article, but the authors all found themselves ‘between a rock and a hard place’ in trying to advance transformative change.

More to the point, these articles remind us that we cannot pretend that our laudable intentions and values as action researchers free us from hegemony and undesirable power differences. Many of the authors struggled with the deep-seated question of how to prevent reinforcing the very structural inequalities and powers that they were seeking to transform. Simon Newitt and Nigel Patrick Thomas, for example, attempted to address the marginalization and exclusion experienced by youngsters in a disadvantaged neighborhood in the UK through participatory action research. However, they realized that, by attaching certain expectations to the youngsters' participation and stipend, they unconsciously imposed the very 'White' values and assumptions (e.g. punctuality, writing down preparations for interviews, needing to create an 'output') that excluded 'Black' youngsters and were resisted by them. Likewise, in their feminist PAR to prevent intimate partner violence in Canada, Liza Lorenzetti and Christine Walshof became aware that their prioritizing gender oppression above other, cultural and disability related forms of violence was a reflection of their positionality as white feminists. They reflect that “[d]ue to our privileged positionalities, the interplay of power and domination in the research is likely beyond our ability to recognize” and acknowledged the “fundamental assumptions that we ... continued to hold despite having intellectualized them as fallacies” (p. 17).

Other authors in this themed issue encountered the dark side of action research in deeply embedded institutional demands that put them at odds with the needs and wishes of their co-researchers in the field. Clair Scrine and her co-authors applied PAR to counter the alarming health disparities of Aboriginal children and the ongoing colonial treatment of their people in the Perth metropolitan area of Western Australia. The academic action researchers were strongly committed to collaborating with Aboriginal Elders in a genuinely reciprocal and respectful way that shifted “decision-making power and authority from the research staff to the Elders (and through them, the broader Aboriginal community) and an acceptance that a failure to do so risks continuing a history of exploitive research and distrustful relationships” (p. 5). However, the budget, timelines, and conditions of their grant funding, and the associated need to make decisions and move ahead, often made it difficult to uphold their relational, collaborative and participatory principles. Furthermore, they had to conduct their project in a way that was respectful of the Aboriginal Elders' cynicism that “the project centres on issues that have been a persistent and pervasive feature of their life for decades” (p. 11) and does not continue this deep-seated pattern of disempowerment and inequality.

Authors were acutely aware that their research might put co-researchers at risk: incarceration of sex workers (Stewart), involuntary dismissal of patients (Larsen et al.), financial repercussions of taking away the small yet significant stipend on youngsters struggling to get by (Newitt and Thomas). Out of a deeply felt commitment to equal and respectful collaboration, Terah Stewart adapted her action research to what was appropriate and feasible for co-researcher college student sex workers in the USA so as to address the stigmatization and criminalization they face. Doing so implied facing up to the fundamental challenge of governmental probation and parole rules, along with stigma and risk, prohibiting college student sex workers from associating with others who share criminalized or stigmatized realities. Similarly, Tone Larsen et al., who co-produced co-operative inquiry with patients, staff and leaders in a specialised mental health and substance abuse service, found themselves in the midst of an emerging conflict about the involuntary discharge of patients that challenged the ideals of co-production they were seeking to advance. They highlight the vital ‘backstage’ work they did to create conditions for dialogue in this challenging setting.

Finally, two of the articles in this themed issue explicitly address the tension between what actually happens in the action research process and what gets reported. On the one hand, Newitt and Thomas note that “too much of what is personally uncomfortable and challenging to our identities as researchers is often tidied out of the final presentation” (p. 4). On the other hand, Patricia Canto-Farachala and Miren Larrea address the question of how to communicate outcomes and impacts to wider audiences in a way that brings them into a broader transformative process. They point out that, all too often, there is an incongruence between the relational and transformative principles that drive action research and the limited, linear and detached way its findings are communicated. Furthermore, Canto-Farachala and Larrea remind us that breaking the moulds that inhibit us from thriving “is not just about changing something ‘out there’, but also about both changing ourselves and our mental models, and our relationships between the out there and the in here” (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 8).

The articles in this themed issue show that we neither need to submit to nor sidestep the dark side. By shining light on it, we can find more effective ways of dealing with these deep-seated challenges. As Newitt and Thomas reflect, “the collaborative social researcher cannot hope to engineer another reality where knowledge and power relations will be fixed and can be planned for” (p. 13)—we need to commit to “a radical re-positioning of research, and not ... a re-positioning of my coparticipants” (p. 12). In presenting Power-Conscious

Collaborative Research, Stewart identifies six powerful imperatives to follow before, during and after the study for ensuring action research is always done in the right spirit (see pp. 8-15). Lorenzetti and Walsh share a rich overview of approaches to foster “inter-relational reflexivity” and shared leadership (p. 9), while Larsen et al. offer a helpful set of recommendations for creating communicative spaces nurturing reciprocity and mutual learning (p. 15). Finally, Canto-Farachala and Larrea provide innovative guidance for creating virtual communities of practice and turning action researchers into active facilitators of the reading experience and learning process (pp. 13-15). However, as Scrine et al. point out, applying these approaches involves a constant investment in building trust and continual reworking of plans in response to the views, desires and culture of the co-researchers.

Concluding thoughts

This themed issue builds on and extends *ARJ*'s rich tradition of reporting on the dark side of action research. Action researchers need to be conscious of power and hegemony at all times and continue to prioritize mutual understanding and trust while creating conditions “for disenfranchised groups to understand and exercise the power they already possess ... and for dominant groups to grasp the power they need to distribute, and do it (Glenzer, 2021, p. 609). As demonstrated by the articles in this issue, relationality and critical reflexivity are our guiding principles for staying true to participatory intentions and transformative ambitions (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018).

We invite you to read each article on the authors' own terms and, at the same time, reflect on how their engagement with the dark side enables us to learn from our experience so as to improve the practice of ART. We also invite to you, our readers, to keep shining light on the dark side of action research as a crucial path to learning how to advance transformation. In this precarious world of multiple sustainability crises and complex dilemmas, research that looks at both the bright side and the dark side needs doing.

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