

Book Review

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Chevalier, Jacques M. and Buckles, Daniel J. (2013) *Participatory Action Research. Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry*. Routledge, Abingdon (UK) ISBN: 978-0-415-54032-2 469p.

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To my mind a book review is designed to mediate a conversation between spatially and temporally disparate actors: authors, past collaborators; case study participants, reviewer, journal editors, future readers and, possibly, those who will have their study mediated by a text, the role of a textbook. An ethical review, to my mind tries to acknowledge this systemic dynamic by the reviewer attempting to wear the shoes of the other actors as they read. However, as a mediated conversation – through words on the page – the voice of the reviewer through the traditions of understanding out of which they think and act are the most emotionally vivid. Try as one might, other voices run the risk of being muted. The key actors who first enter my imagination when reading this book are the authors; I readily experience the integrity of their collaboration(s), the ethicality of their concerns, and their desires to contribute, through researching with others through PAR (participatory action research), to socially relevant transformations that those involved would agree made things better. I am left with a sense that the book draws together much of the lifework's of the authors, who in turn are part of a vibrant, international practitioner community (see the preface, for example)..

There is much in the book that parallels my own researching career; it was good to re-meet past heroes: Kurt Lewin, Paolo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, Trist and Emery and the Tavistock Institute (UK) and to encounter interpretations of approaches that have been part of my own journey e.g. Rapid and Participatory Rural Appraisal; Participatory Learning and Action etc. . Also to learn more about French contributions to this research tradition. Let me thus start with a recommendation – anyone concerned with PAR, or AR wishing to appreciate the history, some of the main arguments and issues and to begin the process of developing their own capabilities in this field would do well to read, or have as a resource, this book. The book comprises an introductory section of 46 pages framing the book and exploring history and theory. This is followed by six sections called modules (1. Grounding and uncertainty; 2. Fact finding and listening; 3. Exploring problems; 4. Knowing the actors; 5. Assessing options; 6. Understanding systems) each with 2-4 chapters. A brief conclusion (7 pages) follows.

A preoccupation of the authors is with 'creating an action learning system' (Chapter 3) in which two 'tools' play a central role: ART, an orchestrated learning process that brings together Action, Research and Training and PIE, Planning, Inquiry, Evaluation. These concerns are placed within a much broader set of concerns about the current status, ethos and role of Higher Education and, thus with science (as elaborated in the introduction and conclusion). For example, 'academic institutions must rethink the nature of thinking and learning and the logic of the inquiry process' (p. 453). I highlight these now so that I can pose an inquiry question: what learning system do the

authors/publishers imagine in which this book might be an element? In the remainder of my review I pursue this inquiry in what I hope to be a critically-reflexive way.

The authors, both Canadians, have benefitted from the institutional support for their research, particularly through Foundations, the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Networks of NGOs. The book's preface almost overwhelms by the extent and complexity of the networking, relationship building and maintaining and institutional arrangements. The preface was for me an important and insightful window into the praxis (theory informed practical actions) of the authors as well as exemplifying what was needed to support their praxis. I was thus surprised to find almost absent from the substance of the book a lens of understanding that comes from taking an institutional view, as in say, institutional economics or social learning. In terms of my inquiry a key question might be: how might the users of this book seek to institutionalise the understandings and practices that it reports? Put another way how might 'designed flexible inquiries for a particular sector' become common and thus capable of evidencing 'innovative PAR combined with other methods' (p. xxi).

As someone who similarly entered this field concerned about participation and action research, what Russell and Ison 2000, describe as systemic action research, I have come to realise that participation is necessary but not sufficient and that 'doing action research with people' is only ethically defensible in conducive institutional settings and where the outcomes of such activity have some prospect of being institutionalised. Some attention is paid to ethics (pp. 171-74) but I would have liked to have had more insights from the authors' reflections on the evolution of their ethics-in-action.

To explicate their own practice the authors adopt earlier distinctions between *technê* and *epistêmê* which they interpret as technique and theory. They say (p.4) '*PAR practitioners typically stay clear of theories that are so lofty the ground disappears from sight or methods so complicated the results remain opaque to all but specialist eyes. On the other hand, engaged researchers have been careful not to overstate their humanist struggle against 'scientific management' to the point of renouncing the ideals of science. Caught midway between these two negative injunctions PAR has not yet reached its full potential*'. Three critical issues, they argue, arise from this historical tension- the need for: (i) more work and creativity to strengthen the theoretical foundations of PAR and chart a path of methodological innovation and authenticity; (ii) practitioners to pay more attention to the embeddedness of means in ends... 'creating a careful action learning process' (p.5); (iii) scaling up the inquiry process to address issues of complexity. As the book is replete with case study examples a reader can judge whether, and how, the authors themselves address these three challenges. Unfortunately the authors do not return to this meta-level of analysis in their concluding section.

To return to my inquiry question – I can well imagine the authors and others from their network creating rich learning experiences for learners in which they and the book are present. Potentially this could be possible in traditional face-to-face contexts or well-designed on-line environments. But what of a learning system in which only the book is present and actors with the lived experience of doing PAR within this tradition are not present? Despite the attempt by the authors to organise their book in a set of modules that might be studied, each with fairly simple sets of instructions to be followed systematically, it is in this latter learning context that I think the book is at its weakest. Why? Missing, from my perspective is the conceptualisation of a model of practice (I would prefer

praxis) from which the learner as would-be-designer or enactor of PAR could take responsibility for their own contextualised designing and enacting (e.g., see Ison 2008). There is too much of the systematic and not enough of the systemic, in my view; many of the diagrams, for example are systematic (involving step-by-step procedures) rather than systemic (e.g. see Open University 2006). I might add that the sections on 'systems' (module 6) are in my view quite dated in theoretical and methodological terms. An example of what is missing is that of fellow Canadian, David Waltner-Toews (2004).

Readers might also be struck by the absence of articulated concerns about framing choices – the agency we each have to frame situations of concern as an engagement process unfolds. In this regard the authors understand what is at stake with framing choices – central to much of their practice is the use of a heuristic which forces those engaging with it into an exercise in framing choice, (or classification?) of a situation as a blueprint, challenge, dream or wager. Another underplayed element is the shift in focus that underpins some conceptions of a social-ecological system. It could be argued that some understandings of this concept would re-situate the historical concerns of PAR (with participation, action (techne) and research (episteme)) to the social leaving, in praxis terms the relational, co-evolutionary dynamic of humans with the biosphere (the ecological) un-accounted for. The authors hold these broader concerns so perhaps this reframing might be a central aspect of ongoing PAR evolution and development?-

The imperative I found most compelling in the book was that 'theory and practice must be constructed as ongoing activities and conversations that remain distinct even as they interact and overlap' (p. 39-40). In this regard a critically informed reading of the book will reward those prepared to make the effort.

References

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