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# Researching Organizational Practice Through Action Research: Case Studies and Design Choices

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*This article contributes to an understanding of action research as a phenomenological methodological paradigm for carrying out research into management and organizations. Two case studies of action research are presented. Three areas of choice—overtness, visibility, and riskiness—that emerge out of the cases and that are significant issues in designing action research projects are discussed. Highlighting and explicating these provides a basis for greater rigor and reflexivity in action research.*

**Keywords:** *action research; qualitative research methods; emergent theory; practive-oriented theory*

The broad aim of this article is to make a contribution to a growing understanding of the qualitative methodology for researching organizations that is known as action research. It builds on previous work involving one of the current authors in which 15 characteristics seen to be indicative of (although by no means the whole story of) good

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quality action research were highlighted (Eden & Huxham, 1996a, 1996b). The particular purposes of this article are twofold. First, it aims to address concerns raised by many readers of that article who have sought exemplars of action research. To this end, two case studies of action research carried out by the authors are presented. Second, it discusses three areas of choice that emerge out of the cases and that are significant issues in designing action research projects. The two main sections of the article are therefore devoted to these two thrusts. First, however, to set the context for these, a brief summary of this form of action research and the rationale for raising the three particular design choices will be given.

## Action Research for Researching Organizations

The origins of action research are often attributed to Lewin (1946), who argued that research for social practice should be concerned with "the study of general laws . . . and the diagnosis of specific situations" (p. 36). Since the 1940s, the term *action research*, along with similar terms, such as *action science* (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), *action inquiry* (Torbert, 1976), and *action learning* (Mwaluko & Ryan, 2000; Revans, 1982), has been used to describe many processes involving intervention in organizations that have the dual purpose of bringing about practical transformation and of advancing knowledge. As will be seen below, they vary in a number of ways, particularly in the relative emphasis that is placed on the practical transformation vis-à-vis the advancement of more general knowledge.

The variety of action research referred to in this article is, in terms of its primary raison d'être, firmly placed at the latter end of the spectrum, because this is to develop generic theoretical understanding of the aspect of management or organizations that is being researched that could inform other contexts. The intervention in an organization by the researcher—for example, in the role of consultant or facilitator—is, for the researcher, a means to the research ends. Conceptualization of the experiences forms the theoretical output. However, the derivation of the theory relies on the principle that the intervention is of genuine importance to the practitioners involved, and so, in this sense, it also lies at the former end of the spectrum.

This kind of action research therefore embraces Checkland and Holwell's (1998) concept of recoverability of the research for application to other areas. It differs from many other forms of action research in which the dominant purpose of the research is the development of an individual, an organization or a network of organizations (see, e.g., Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Elden & Chisholm, 1993a; Putnam, 1999; Raelin, 1997; Reason & Bradbury, 2000; Stringer, 1996; Whitehead, 1994). Thus, the output is not intended to be "context bound" in the way suggested by Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 75), and research outcomes are presented in language that is not situation specific. This is similar to Yin's (1994) argument for the output of research from single case studies to become a theoretical vehicle for the examination of other cases. Of particular relevance in the context of one of the examples to be discussed here is Eden and Huxham's (1996a) requirement that

> if the generality is to be expressed through the design of tools, techniques, models and method . . . the basis for their design . . . must be related to the theories which inform the design and which, in turn, are supported or developed through action research. (p. 531)

There are a number of other ways in which this form of action research is distinguishable from others. First, it does not in itself imply a particular ideological perspective but accepts the management ideologies of those being researched. The concerns to do with empowerment, participation, or learning emphasized, for example, by Elden and Chisholm (1993b), Krim (1988), and Whyte (1991) are therefore not regarded as important unless they happen to be connected with the research or action agendas. Second, the approach does not imply inherently that the practitioners in the researched organization should be concerned with—or even conscious of—the research aspect of the intervention. Thus, the participatory, cooperative, or democratic inquiry approaches that are emphasised by, for example, Bryden-Miller, (1997), Greenwood and Levin (1988), Heron (1996), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), Peters and Robinson (1984), Reason and Bradbury (2000), Rowan (1981), Stringer (1996), and Whyte (1991), in which researcher and practitioner work together to design the research, can happen but are not essential. Third, the sharp distinction between action research as defined by the researcher—in which the researcher initiates the intervention for research purposes and then involves the client in it—and action research as defined by the clinician—in which the intervention is based on client needs and the researcher's involvement is solely to support these (Schein, 1995, p. 19)—is not seen as relevant. In this approach, the two purposes run in parallel: The research ends are the researcher's reason for getting involved, but the intervention itself is driven by the client's needs and usually initiated by the client (see also Rapoport, 1970).

Early conceptions of action research (Coch & French, 1948; Lewin, 1946) and some more recent expositions (Alderfer, 1993) emphasize hypothesis testing and field experiments in the research design. The approach described here, however, has more similarity to ethnographic and other forms of research that derive their theoretical insights from naturally occurring data in the form of the expressed experiences, views, action-centered dilemmas, actual actions of participants, and events in the life of the practitioners rather than through interviews or questionnaires, (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Tetlock, 2000; Thomas, 1993). As with Ethnography, it is concerned with the "disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events" (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5).

Action research of this type is not a panacea for research in organizations and would be inappropriate for many research agendas. It does, however, offer particular opportunities for theory development that other methods do not. In particular, intervention settings can provide rich data about what people do and say—and what theories are used and usable—when faced with a genuine need to take action. They therefore have the potential to provide the kind of new and unexpected insights that Whetton (1989) has argued lead to important theoretical developments. For this reason, the development of emergent theory (Eisenhart, 1989), grounded not only in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but also in action, is stressed. Each intervention provides an opportunity for the researcher to revisit theory in order to design the intervention and develop it further as a result (Deising, 1972). Action research is thus also uniquely placed in its potential for developing theory that will be of relevance to practice. Almost inevitably, theory development can be expected to be incremental, with each intervention adding new slants or insights to the preexisting theory.

In the remainder of this article, the term *action research* is taken to refer to the variety delineated in this section.

## Challenges of Researching Through Action Research: Emerging Research Design Choices

The distinguishing feature of action research, when compared to other forms of organizational research, is the tight coupling of research and action and the deliberate involvement of the researcher in changes to the situation being researched. Clearly, this poses some particular challenges for theory building that do not arise in the same way in more traditional research approaches that aspire to collect data and draw theory without influencing the situation being studied. Many of the validity criteria of positivist social science are inappropriate (Susman & Evered, 1978), but the earlier work (Eden & Huxham, 1996a, 1996b) argued that there are standards of rigor that are applicable to this interventionist form of research. For example, deliberate and systematic data collection is essential, whether it be data such as flip chart notes made at a meeting that would be collected anyway as part of the intervention or data collected in parallel to the intervention but for research purposes only. A reflexive approach to the interpretation of the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Holland, 1999; Smith & Malina, 1999) is also appropriate to understanding how research outcomes can be justified as representative of the situation in which they were generated and have claims to generality. In particular, the specific intervention role played by the researcher will affect what data is available for collection, and the history, context, and politics of the intervention will be important to interpretation of that data.

In the later sections of this article, some aspects of these challenges are explored. The focus is on some aspects of choice in research design that relate to the way in which the needs of the research agenda can affect the action intervention and the way in which this, in turn, reflects back on the interpretation of the research results. All three relate to the requirements for data collection and the interpretation of that data in order to build theory.

The article is centered predominantly on a single case of an action research intervention. The design choice issues arose emergently from the case, in hindsight, when we attempted to understand the meaning and validity of the data collected. The second case study—which differed significantly in both its action agenda and its research agenda—was drawn in as we found a need to clarify the emerging issues through comparison with other action research situations. A brief description of this case is included here so that it may similarly help clarify our articulation of the issues.

Space precludes us from including discussion of all the methodological issues raised by this sense-making process, and we have selected three interrelated areas of design choice to focus on here. These are concerned with

- the degree to which the research agenda is raised overtly with the practitioners involved,
- the visibility to the practitioners of the research methods used, and
- the ambitiousness or risk level of the action intervention in terms of its likelihood of being favorably received by the practitioners.

By highlighting and explicating these choice areas here, we aim to improve the possibility for greater rigor and reflexivity in the design of action research interventions.

The two case studies are described in the next section. These are followed by a discussion of the three design choices and their significance for this form of action research.

## Action Research in Practice: Two Case Studies

Because the focus of this article is methodological, we have aimed to describe the cases from this perspective, emphasizing intervention and research considerations, particularly as they relate to issues of rigor and reflexivity and to the three design choices. The outputs of the research have been well documented elsewhere (see citations later in this section for details), and it is not the intention to describe this in a thorough way here. We do, however, refer to it where it helps to clarify the methodological considerations. For this reason, a brief introduction to the research content will be given next.

Both cases relate to our program of research in the management of interorganizational collaboration, which has now spanned more than 12 years. The aim of this research is to gain a theoretical understanding that could inform the practical management of collaboration. Most of this has been carried out within the action research methodology, and the developing theory has been built out of long- and short-term intervention work in various capacities—facilitation, sounding board, awareness raising, and so on—with members of a wide variety of organizations. A key thrust of this program has been to explore why collaboration so often seems to produce disappointing output in practice and what this means for the way in which practitioners involved in collaborations might act in order to increase their effectiveness.

A central aspect of the developing theory is the identification of key areas of concern that cause anxiety or reward to practitioners involved in collaboration. These form a broad guiding framework, and a large part of the research agenda is the development of deep theory to help understanding of what underlies each of these "key areas" (Huxham, 2003a). Recent developments in this theory relating to collaborative goals, structures, leadership, trust, and power can be found in Eden and Huxham (2001), Huxham and Beech (2002), Huxham and Vangen (2000a, 2000b), and Vangen and Huxham (2003, in press). Many "points of tension" (Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Beech, 2003), in which apparently rational but counterbalancing arguments lead to opposing conclusions about how best to act, have been identified.

### The Transferring Insight to Practice (TIP)
### Project—Part 1: The Overall Project

At the time when this story begins, we had been researching in the area of interorganizational collaboration for about 6 years and had already developed a deep theoretical understanding of the issues underlying some of the key areas. Our developing substantive theory of collaboration practice argued that it was an exceedingly complex activity in which there could be no easy rules of best practice (see, e.g., Huxham, 1992, 1993; Huxham, 1996; Huxham & Vangen, 1996). Among the action research relationships that informed the research was a long-standing relationship with the two senior managers of the Poverty Alliance (PA), a collaborative alliance with a membership of approximately 100 public and nonprofit organizations in the west of Scotland, each concerned in some way with poverty alleviation. Previous interventions had involved discussion meetings, in-depth interviewing (at their request), facilitation of working groups, involvement with them in training/awareness raising events, and so on. We had learned a lot from each other and—viewed with hindsight—had reached a point of deep mutual trust and respect.

This particular project started when it became clear that all four of us were very keen to turn our learning—in our case, our developing theory of the complexity of collaboration practice—into something that would be of immediate practical use to practitioners involved in collaborations. A particularly ambitious aspect of the task we set ourselves, given the complexity and "no easy answers" aspect of the theory, was that the "something" should be self-standing so that its implementation on the ground would not require our "expert" presence. This was later to have a major impact on both the success of parts of the action intervention and on the research output achieved.

We jointly conceived of a stream of work that became known to us as the TIP Project. Our understanding of the managers' motivation for involvement was that it partly derived from a wish to develop tools for direct use in PA activities and partly from a sense that a part of their role as alliance managers with extensive experience in managing and working in collaborative settings should be to disseminate their understanding of effective collaboration to a wider audience. Our aim as researchers was to complement our substantive theory on collaboration with processual theory on how to use the substantive theory in practice. In line with Eden and Huxham's (1996a, 1996b) requirement for method development, this theory would then drive the development of actual methods for "TIPing." At the early stages, we were concerned to persuade our PA colleagues that we should not prejudge the nature of the methods and that we might not necessarily be aiming for a "tool box." We also envisaged that an important by-product of the process would be emerging developments of the substantive theory.

It was argued earlier that involvement of the practitioners in the research outcome is not essential to this form of action research. However, in this case, the managers' action agenda and our research agenda were sufficiently close to allow this to be the case. The research question that we were addressing can be summarized as follows:

> How can methods be created that will allow the complexity of our theoretical and practical understandings of the practice of collaboration to be transferred to and used productively by others involved in collaborations without us being present?

The managers participated centrally in the discussion of the research issues. The process took the form of a series of workshops involving the four of us in which ideas, based on theory and experience, were tossed around. Following each workshop, we produced a detailed set of notes that formed one of the main data sets for the research. These were reviewed and further discussed and developed in the subsequent workshop. Because discussion in the workshops was focussed around the research agenda, all issues raised were relevant for recording. We regarded issues that related directly to principles for the design of methods as particularly important and spent considerable time in hard-fought (because of our different perspectives) but constructive battles over these. The challenges inherent in these battles ensured the reflexivity of the process. This process is represented by the "inputs" box and the central cycle of Figure 1.

Some of the later workshops focused on designing TIP events for practitioners who were mostly not PA members. In Figure 1, these are represented in the "developing and testing box." Some of these centered on processes intended to raise the practitioners' awareness about the reasons for the difficulties inherent in collaboration and so were effectively mini-action research projects at a meta level to the main project. Others were investigative, designed explicitly to help the four of us gain understanding in a particular substantive area that our discussions suggested would be important for TIP
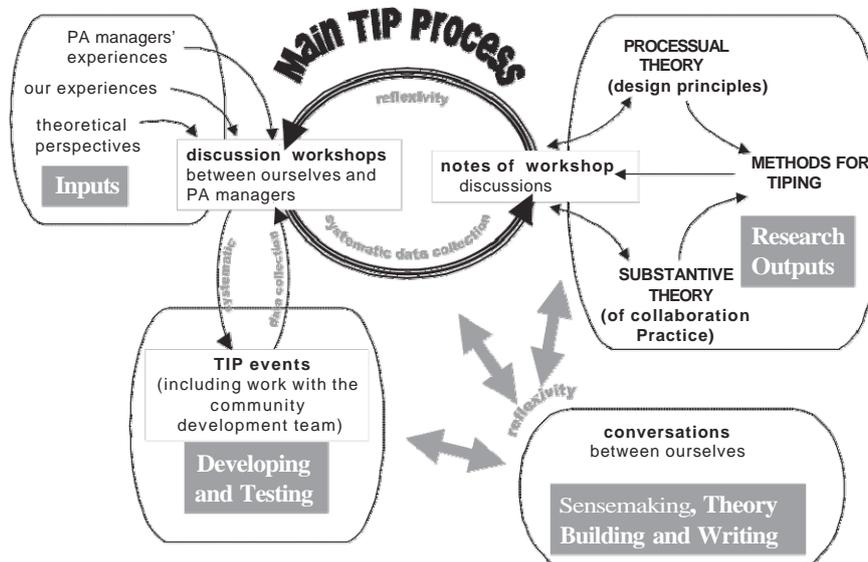
Figure 1:    The Action Research Process for the Transferring Insight to Practice (TIP) Project
Note. PA = Poverty Alliance.

processes to focus on. Strictly, these were not adhering to action research principles, because they were gathering the participants' experiences for our use rather than theirs. Evaluation responses from both types of event, however, suggested that the participants viewed aspects of them to be worthwhile experiences. These events were fully recorded, in the main, through public collection of views on flip chart during the sessions and through evaluation forms. Where possible, we also made personal notes about the events, which included participant quotations, our impressions of their reactions to the material, and our dilemmas in trying to make the sessions work in practice. Together, these records and notes formed the data set from the TIP events.

Sensemaking of the data from TIP events would take place at a subsequent workshop of the four of us in which the focus would be on extracting what the data told us about the effectiveness of the processes used or the experiences gathered. In between the events and the workshops, however, the two of us would often have many sensemaking conversations, which in turn would feed into the workshops. These are indicated by the box at the bottom right of Figure 1.

No time scale for this project was set at the start, but as things turned out, we continued to work in this way for 3 years. Slowly and in keeping with the incremental and emergent approach outlined in the introduction, a detailed set of interlinked design principles for transferring theoretical insight about collaboration to practice emerged. These related to (a) the variation among participants typically involved in collaboration and hence among potential users of the TIP; (b) the nature of the collaboration theory and, in particular, to ways of conveying its complexity that would be meaningful to users; and (c) the nature of the envisaged use in practice (see Vangen, 1998, for details of these; an earlier version of these can be found in Vangen & Huxham, 1998a). We

view this as the embodiment of the processual theory about collaboration. As expected, aspects of the substantive theory were also developed as a by-product. Together, the processual theory and the existing and new substantive theory informed the development of methods for the TIP. The three elements are indicated in the "research outputs" box of Figure 1. Toward the end of the project, we spent much time in the sensemaking, theory building, and "writing" box of Figure 1, debating, reflexively, the nature of the knowledge claims that could justifiably be made from the data.

Some methods for the TIP were created, although this aspect of the output was less developed than we had hoped. To explain how this happened and why it is significant for our later discussion of design choices, it is necessary to elaborate on one particular set of TIP events in some detail.

### The TIP Project—Part 2: Work With the Community Development Team

About 14 months into the project, the PA received a major externally funded resource for a seven-member team of community development workers whose role would be to "equip and support community activists to combat poverty locally." One of the team's given objectives was "to promote and provide training for local groups on effective collaboration with local authorities, health boards, enterprise companies and the private sector." The PA managers regarded it as essential that this team should receive appropriate support for this aspect of its task and suggested that the TIP Project should direct its attention to the development needs (in respect of supporting collaboration) of this (yet to be appointed) team. From a research perspective, this appeared to provide an excellent opportunity to develop and trial processes that would be tested at the point of action by both the PA managers (in terms of their willingness to use the processes with their staff) and the team members (in terms of their reaction to, and use of, the processes).

Together with the PA managers, we conceived of a broad plan for TIP events for this phase of the TIP Project. It was envisaged that the work with the team would begin with a series of awareness-raising events in which the aim would be to try out processes designed to support team members toward gaining a substantive understanding of collaboration practice. Tool development and evaluation work would follow these. By the time the team members had been recruited and had settled in, the events had been broadly planned. Five sessions were envisaged that aimed to provide a means by which the team members could explore in depth the various areas that the substantive theory of collaboration had identified as key areas of concern to practitioners. The tasks or exercises designed into these sessions had to embody the design principles; we saw the sessions as one way of enacting the principles. The first session, for example, aimed to unearth the key areas of concern through two exercises designed to guide participants through an exploration of their own experiences of collaboration. Subsequent sessions were conceived of as exploring in greater depth specific areas identified by the first session. It was always at the back of our minds that we were trying to design approaches that could, in other contexts, be useful without our presence. In this respect, one design issue with which we struggled significantly was how to take account of and convey the complexity inherent in our susbtantive theory of collaboration practice. If present, we could take the role of expert, revealing aspects of the theory through conversation, as and when it would be relevant to do so; the design problem

was how to simulate such a process without the expert present. Thus, in some respects we were aiming ultimately to design processes that could act rather like an expert system in that they would reveal aspects of the complex theoretical picture of collaboration practice as and when users are ready to take it on board.

To ensure that we had carefully recorded data for later analysis, the sessions would be video recorded. Notes made publicly during the sessions by or with the participants, for example, on a flip chart, would also be retained as a record of what took place. Each session would be followed up with evaluation forms designed to capture participants' views on the value of the session and the effectiveness of the transfer of the substantive theory. With hindsight, it seems as though we were implicitly regarding the PA managers as a bridge between us and the team. Because they appeared happy with taking an open approach to the research with the team, we felt comfortable with these data-recording mechanisms, even though we recognized that they would be highly intrusive.

The sessions took place over 4 months, with an additional evaluation session taking place 3 months later. In sharp contrast to other aspects of the TIP Project, these sessions with the team of community development workers were, from an action perspective, problematic. The team appeared to react very negatively to the sessions, and most participants claimed to have learned nothing from the experience. Our own informal judgment about their learning about collaboration was more positive, but it was clear to us that they had not found the experience rewarding. From evaluation feedback (including the final evaluation session) and many conversations with team members, with our PA manager colleagues and between ourselves, we have been able to piece together the following picture of some of the problems:

- Although participants appeared generally positive at the end of the first session, the evaluation feedback received 3 weeks later was, from most respondents, extremely negative, as was almost all subsequent feedback. This was despite the PA managers and us having reacted to the feedback and, in consultation with team members, redesigned each subsequent event.
- At each session, some team members arrived late, and others arranged to leave early so that the sessions, which were already tight for time, were cut short and the exercises compromised.
- Exercises that had received—and continued to receive—positive feedback in other settings were negatively received. The team members felt that these did not sufficiently acknowledge their backgrounds and expertise.
- The team members seemed unable to relate to forms of presentation of theoretical material that other practitioners had regarded, and continue to regard, as extremely enlightening.
- Team members claimed that they had not been briefed that the PA regarded promoting collaboration in the community as an important part of their role. They claimed not to be working with collaborations and were unable to see any value in time spent discussing collaboration. One PA manager expressed extreme surprise at these claims. Both felt that considerable time had been spent on this during the team's induction and also in the run up to and during the period when the sessions were running. We, ourselves, were also directly involved in a briefing session with the team leader prior to the first session, in which the role of the team in fostering collaboration had been central to the discussion.
- Similarly, despite presession briefings with the team leader and despite immense care taken at the beginning of the first session to explain the nature and value of the research, participants indicated that they felt unbriefed about the research and like "guinea pigs." The video recording, done overtly but as unobtrusively as possible, added to this unease.
- Issues about the role of the team within the PA and with their relationship to senior PA staff were referred to both by our PA colleagues and team members after the end of the

project, and they have suggested that these may have been much more significant in gen-
erating the negative attitude than anything done within the sessions. Because these are in-
ternal, sensitive political matters, we were not apprised of the details, but it seems that
general consciousness of these only emerged toward the final stages of our interventions
with the team, although they may have been festering under the surface throughout. Con-
versations with the managers about 18 months after this article was first drafted revealed
extra evidence that these internal issues were significant.

Despite these very serious problems, some team members expressed an interest in
working with us on future research projects concerned with collaboration practice. Im-
portantly, our relationship with the two PA managers remains very strong; one of them
regularly, publicly admits to having been extremely skeptical about academic research
in the early days of our relationship but is now convinced of its value. Both they and we
achieved significant personal development through the relationship. The project was
put on hold, but only due to lack of funding, and remained a live interest for all four of
us for a considerable time until other priorities took over.

From an action perspective, the project as a whole may be regarded as reasonably
successful, although the episodes with the community development team were dis-
tressing and unsatisfactory for all concerned. From a research perspective, the negative
action results from these episodes led to particular problems in interpreting the data
and hence in drawing theoretical conclusions. Given that the results were sometimes in
contradiction with data gathered in other situations (such as when methods that
appeared to have been effective elsewhere received a negative evaluation in this situa-
tion) and always in contradiction with the carefully developed design principles, it did
not seem reasonable to interpret them straightforwardly at face value. Indeed, any
combination of a number of factors might have been problematic and could have led to
the response of the team. For example, any aspect of any one of the design principles
(i.e., of the processual theory); any aspect of the substantive theory; the specific
embodiment of both of these in the methods used; the way we carried out the research;
aspects of the particular situation, such as the organizational politics or any one of a
myriad of other aspects of the intervention process that had not been formally consid-
ered in the research might have been contributors. Most of the process of unraveling
these issues took place through conversations among us interspersed with occasional
workshop and other dialogue with the PA managers. Thus, the sensemaking, theory
building, and writing box of Figure 1 dominated the action research process at this
stage, as we worked toward writing up the research output. It was at this point that the
"design choices" emerged.

Although a more positive action outcome would have led to greater progress, the
project has delivered significant results. We have not been able to make definitive
statements about the success of the TIP design, but the negative experiences have led to
refinements of the processual theory embodied in the design principles. For example,
we have increased our understanding of the relationship between team members' per-
ceived needs concerning collaboration support and managers' (i.e., the organizational)
need for them to be supported.

## The Regeneration Group

As was mentioned earlier, this second case is included here as a comparison to the
TIP Project. In terms of the first aim of this article, which is to provide exemplars of

action research in practice, it indicates a rather different approach from that of the TIP Project. In terms of the second aim, to discuss three areas of choice in designing action research, it serves to clarify the issues raised initially by the TIP Project approach.

Although briefer than most, many aspects of this action research intervention with the regeneration group were typical of others that have informed the overall research program. The intervention itself involved just one of the authors. For ease of telling the story, we shall refer to the author concerned using "I" and "me." The case description has been annonymized.

The invitation to participate in a meeting of a collaborative group was made by the manager of a partnership that had convened the group. The group consisted of senior members (chairmen/chairwomen, chief executives, directors) of prominent organizations who were working together on an issue related to regeneration in their region. The manager confided that the invitation to me had arisen because he had been inspired to convene the group 6 months earlier after seeing an article written by me. He regarded himself and his partnership staff colleagues as facilitators of the group whose role was to nurture and administrate the group rather than to be members of it. He felt that the group had reached a stage where members needed to address explicitly their collaborative processes. He asked me to make a brief presentation and facilitate discussion on this topic, with a view to the group going on to redesign its constitution, purpose, and working arrangements for the future.

As suggested in the introductory paragraphs to this article, invitations of this type provide opportunities to test informally the developing substantive theory on the type of user that it is intended to influence. They also have potential to throw up new insights. Often we enter such situations with a particular research agenda in mind, metaphorically wearing particular sets of theoretical "spectacles" governed by the particular research agenda that we are working on (Huxham, 2003b). The spectacles inform the kinds of data that we take particular care to record. In this case, however, we had no particular research agenda in mind beyond the general aim that applies to all our action research interventions of testing current theory and capturing new insights.

The research aspects of the intervention were much less overt to the group members than in the TIP Project. I made only a brief reference to the possible use of the intervention as a source of research data at an opportune moment during the process of arranging the session. From a research point of view, the objective was much less ambitious than in the TIP Project and in designing the intervention, almost the only consideration was to design an event that would be as effective in supporting the group as I could make it. Almost all the material used had been well tried and tested in similar settings, with only minor adjustments to customize it for the current group and to include newly developed aspects of the substantive theory. No formal data collection methods were introduced. Notes were made where possible during the meeting, but this could only occur during rare moments when I was not directly involved in what was taking place in the room. Additional notes were made shortly after the event. As it happened, one of the partnership staff made detailed notes of other participants' contributions during the meeting for her own use and readily agreed to pass these on.

Despite these apparent limitations in the formality of the data collection, some rich insights were gained during this single session. Because the intervention did not relate to a particular research agenda, the data were not immediately included in a theory-building activity. However, it has, in combination with data from other interventions, been revisited at later dates and has led to important incremental developments of the

substantive theory. For example, the case study in Vangen and Huxham (1998b), which illustrates the fragility of trust building in collaboration, derives from this intervention.

Informal feedback, both immediately after this event and subsequently, suggested that the practitioners involved had perceived good value from it, but no formal evaluation took place. The possibility of a longer term contact with this group was raised by the partnership manager but did not materialize.

## Research Design Choices

The two cases above have indicated in some depth alternative ways in which interventions in organizations may be used as part of a research design. In this section, we turn to the second aim of the article, that of exploring some research design choices.

The two cases are very different. Most obviously, the TIP Project ran for 3 years and produced significant research output in its own right. The intervention with the regeneration group lasted only half a day plus set-up and close-down telephone conversations and its research output only has value when combined with that from other interventions. Three other differences, however, emerged from our sense making, theory building, and writing conversations in the TIP Project as more important (though related) considerations for interpretation of research results. These were overtness of the research aspect of the intervention, visibility of the data collection, and risk level associated with the action intervention. As mentioned earlier, these all relate to the way in which the needs of the research agenda can affect the action intervention and the way in which this, in turn, reflects back on the interpretation of the research results.

### Overtness of the Research Aspect of the Intervention

We argued earlier that the validity of action research as a research method relies in part on the notion that the intervention must be on a matter of genuine concern to the practitioners involved. The interaction with the practitioners is thus primarily concerned with the action aspects. The researcher might be seen (and labeled) as, for example, consultant, facilitator, advisor, or expert. The practitioners would be expected to view their relationship with the researcher in terms of what the latter can provide by way of support. The degree to which they may also be aware of the researchers' agenda as a researcher is largely a matter for design choice. As with ethnography, the choice of overt or covert research has important methodological significance (Gill & Johnson, 1997). The two cases described above represent near opposite ends of a spectrum on this dimension.

The work on the TIP Project was unusual for us in the degree to which our research agenda for the intervention was highlighted to the practitioners involved. In the main TIP project, in which our relationship with the PA managers was strong and they were fully participating research colleagues, this was a totally natural way of working. It was, however, significantly not so in the developing and testing events with the community development team. One of the PA managers was present at all of the events involving the team and initiated all the pre-event briefings. She explicitly made the point, at the opening of the first event, that team members were participating in a research project that was of importance to the PA.

By contrast, in the context of the work with the regeneration group, no explicit references to research were made throughout the intervention beyond the brief reference made during the process of arranging the session. So far as I am aware, the partnership staff never discussed this issue directly with group members, although the latter were well aware that I am an academic and write articles on collaboration; they even referred to me as "famous." Virtually all discussion, both during the group meeting and with partnership staff before and after the event, was very focused on the needs and circumstances of the group.

The issue of overtness is, in most research methodologies, concerned with deception as to the research existence or its intent and access issues (Bryman, 2001; Christians, 2000). Although these may also be issues in action research, there is also a consideration that is specific to action research. This is the degree to which the research aspect of an intervention is brought to the attention of the practitioners. If the practitioners involved are "on board," as was the case with the PA managers, overtness in reference to the research dimension of an intervention can be helpful because it allows the researcher the possibility of addressing more ambitious research agendas (see section on risk Level, below). Even when not operating in the participatory research mode that characterized our relationship with the PA managers, it may be possible to negotiate an overt research aspect to an intervention. However, our work with the community development team—who made frequent references to themselves as "guinea pigs"—illustrates clearly the potential for overtness to cause alienation. At one point, it looked as though their disaffection might lead to the PA managers agreeing with them to abandon the series of workshops already scheduled. This would have led to us having to abandon the research agenda all together, at least in the context of this work.

Even if the alienation does not cause abandonment of the project, as with any example of the Hawthorne effect (Gill & Johnson, 1997), it makes the validity of the research data—at least as it relates to the original research agenda—questionable. It is notable that in the case of the work with the community development team, we spent an enormous amount of time discussing, both with the PA managers and among ourselves, how to interpret the data collected. This included much time spent in unraveling the degree to which the negative reaction from the team was genuinely a reaction to the event material and how much a reaction to being researched. In the less obvious research style used at the regeneration group meeting, this issue simply did not apply. With action research, it is possible to choose to be significantly less intrusive on practitioners than with most other research approaches because the researcher has a legitimate reason for being involved that is independent of the immediate research aims but does not necessitate denial of the research.

## Visibility of the Data Collection

Closely related to the overtness of the research is the issue of visibility. Some authors write about observational data as though the researcher's challenge was merely to find a way of taking good notes (e.g., Silverman, 1993). Rapoport (1970) noted that finding the time and resource to collect data rigorously can be problematic in action research. Our own experiences, as illustrated by the two case studies, indicate some serious dilemmas to be addressed in the collection of data.

In the case of the community development team, the sense that they were being researched was reinforced by our use of very visible and detailed data collection meth-

ods. The use of video recording (which was done as unobtrusively as possible, but always openly) and evaluation questionnaires, which PA managers strongly encouraged the team members to return, were particularly intrusive. In addition, the questionnaires contained questions specifically intended to evaluate the design principles, and this may have further highlighted the research aspects of the project. By contrast, there was no obvious data collection at the meeting of the regeneration group.

If visible data collection can be managed without the practitioners involved feeling inhibited, threatened, or alienated, there are obvious advantages. It is then possible to plan the type of data to be collected in advance and to ensure that this is collected. In addition, a great deal of detail can be recorded and it is "independent of perspective" (Flick, 2002, p. 167). This, in turn, means that the interpretation of the data can be checked and rechecked during the subsequent analysis process, and it is possible to subject it to independent interpretation from those outside the immediate research team. For example, the use of video as both a detailed and a relatively unstructured method of recording data is particularly valuable in allowing review of the data many times for possible different interpretations. It is also possible to review the data at future dates in the context of entirely different research agendas.

Sometimes it is possible to collect quite detailed data as part of the action purpose of the intervention. For example, tape recordings may be used to check agreements made at an important meeting or workshop. However, unless visible data collection can be justified in this way, it will necessarily interfere, at least to some degree, with the action agenda and, in most instances, participant reactivity (Gottdiener, 1979), leading to "aggravated data" will result. This leaves the researcher struggling to interpret what is aggravation and what may be the research output that is potentially transferable to other situations.

At face value, the ad hoc approach to data collection exemplified by the regeneration group intervention is much less powerful than the explicit data collection that the visible approach allows. When the only means of collecting data is through notes made by the interventionist during and after the intervention, detail has to be forfeited, and the data are filtered once and for all by whatever theoretical spectacles are worn at the time, because these will influence not only what is captured but the way it is captured. There can be no opportunity to recapture the data with fresh eyes at a later date, except by memory (which is always of dubious validity and never detailed because of its "distance" from the source) (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000).

The great frustration that we experience with this form of data collection is the sense of missed opportunity. The dilemma that it poses is between the need to write down observations at the time they occur and not to appear out of it, with one's head down writing notes rather than paying attention to and being a part of what is going on in the room. Frequently, a really good point does not get recorded because it would be inopportune to do so. Even when one of us has no direct action role in an event at a particular time, it may not be possible to take comprehensive notes without being regarded by practitioners as offensive. This is not so much an issue of blowing a cover as in covert ethnography (Ditton, 1977) but more to do with intruding on the action intervention. In addition, the essential requirement of assimilating on the spot such intangibles as nonverbals and links from statements made at one time to those made at quite a different time or to documentary sources, to inform both the action dimension of the intervention and the meaning of what is taking place for research purposes, provides distraction from note taking. Wherever possible, we make supplementary notes

immediately after the event in line with Flick's (2002) suggestion, but we are often left with a sense that something that seemed really important at the time has not been captured. In practice, this sense of omission is frequently magnified because our action research interventions are often squeezed between other aspects of our jobs, and there is a "distancing" delay before notes are written.

Data collected in this way are thus necessarily sparse in the sense that much that could have been collected is missed. Nevertheless, what is collected is always rich in the sense that it is less likely to be aggravated and frequently indicates complex and serious confusions and dilemmas faced by the practitioners involved. Because the data are necessarily filtered in terms of theoretical issues currently uppermost in the mind of the researcher, it often makes immediate enhancements to theory.

## Risk Level Associated With the Action Intervention

Linked to both of the above issues is the riskiness of the action intervention. The main TIP process was extremely unrisky, being rooted in a history of trusting relationships. However, the developing and testing work with the community development team was fairly extreme in the degree to which we experimented on the team with new TIP methods. We deliberately designed the TIP events as advanced enactments of the processual theory (i.e., of the design principles). Although some of the exercises had been used extensively elsewhere, many were entirely new and others adapted. Our research concern with the ultimate development of processes, which could act like an "expert system" (i.e., without our presence) led to us devising ways for the team to explore the substantive theory of collaboration practice that were significantly different from sessions we would have designed if our only concern had been to address awareness raising for this team alone. In some cases, we felt, prior to a session with the team, distinctly uneasy about whether the methods would work. However, we felt that we would only learn whether this was the case and gain insight into how to improve the methods by trying them out. In other words, we allowed the research agenda to outweigh the immediate action agenda, insofar as our relationship to the team was concerned. Thus, even if none of the factors discussed in previous sections actually contributed to this, there was a high risk that the intervention would be unsuccessful from the action perspective. It is important to note that our perception—which was, with hindsight, misplaced—that the PA managers would act as a bridge appeared at the time to lower the risk.

The community development team episodes contrast strongly with the regeneration group intervention in which the only design consideration was to ensure, so far as was possible, that the group members would gain and perceive value from the event. In the latter case, the action agenda totally dominated the research agenda. No experimentation was designed, and the event was designed around material that I was entirely comfortable with. Collection of data took second place to the needs of the action intervention and so was, to some degree, dependent on how things turned out on the day. Thus, although post hoc note making was planned, the provision of a very thorough set of notes of the discussion by the member of partnership staff was entirely serendipitous. The risk level associated with the action agenda was therefore quite low.

The design choice issue being highlighted here is not about absolute level of risk but risk relative to what is necessary. For example, if the researcher has no suitable intervention tools available, it may be necessary to experiment in order to make any inter-

vention at all. The important point is the extent to which the research agenda colors the design of and hence the degree of risk of failure in the action intervention.

Here, then, is another dilemma. Interventions that are risky from the perspective of ensuring success on the action dimension (in the sense that the practitioners see their value) have the potential, if the risk pays off, to generate major research outcomes. For example, if the experimental design used with the community development team had been shown to be successful, we would not only have had evidence to confirm or enhance the processual theory but would also have had significant tangible output in the form of methods for direct use by practitioners. However, if the practitioners are disenchanted with the intervention, it is likely that at best, incremental research outcomes will pertain. At worst, the project may have to be abandoned before any outcomes are generated. There is certainly an argument in favor of low-risk methods that keep practitioners on board and that may, ultimately, lead to greater research insights. However, the process will be slow, and in some cases, a risk may be necessary to try out an entirely new direction.

## Discussion

The three areas of design choice highlighted above can be summarized as follows:

Overtness: To what extent will the research aspects of the intervention be brought to the attention of the practitioners?

Visibility: To what extent will the research data collection methods be allowed to intrude upon the action intervention?

Riskiness: To what extent is the researcher prepared to take risks over the success of the action intervention for the sake of the research aims?

The particular choices are specific to action research, but in some respects, they pose similar dilemmas to other forms of organization research methods (Bryman, 2001; Gill & Johnson, 1997; McGrath, 1982). Namely, all are concerned with the intrusiveness of the researcher and the effect that this has on the behavior of the research subjects. At one level, the dilemmas faced in interpreting the data must be similar to those faced by the researchers of the classic studies of the Hawthorne plant in the 1920s and 1930s (Rothlisberger & Dickson, 1939). However, in the context of action research, they have additional significance because they affect the way in which the researcher is seen as an interventionist. As soon as the practitioners involved begin to view the researcher more as a researcher who is there to gather research data than as an interventionist who is there to support them in their work, the particular possibilities to gain rich insight that are the distinctive feature of action research disappear. The more the research becomes intrusive upon the action, the less real (in the sense of being representative of normal behavior that might occur if the interventionist were, e.g., seen as a consultant rather than as a researcher) the action is likely to be and the more difficult it becomes to interpret the outcomes. In the extreme, an alternative research approach might be argued to be more appropriate. The issue of how much the need to collect research data should be allowed to interfere with the action dimension of the intervention is thus as significant as the more familiar debates about the validity of the research data itself. It may also be argued that the ethical issues (Christians, 2000; de Laine, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994) (e.g., about how overt or visible to be in data collection) are

different—some might say heightened—when working with practitioners on a matter of genuine concern to them compared to those that arise when research is restricted to the interests of the researcher.

The issues raised may have relevance to other forms of action research raised in the introduction. Most, however, whether at the practical transformation or the advancing knowledge end of the spectrum, tend to conceptualize action research as a single process encompassing both elements but with one dominating. The particular significance of the issues to this form of action research arises because the action agenda and the research agenda are seen as separate. It derives from the combination of (a) the dominance of the research agenda and the requirement for development of generic theory in terms of primary raison d'être and (b) its parallel pursuits of the research agenda and the action agenda, each of which are both dependent on and independent of the other. It is the dependence of the research agenda on the genuineness of the action agenda and the independence of the action agenda from the interests of the research agenda that jointly create the potentially problematic dynamic between the effect of the research agenda on the action agenda and the reflection back from this onto the research agenda. It must not be forgotten, however, that it is this dependence and independence that provides the potential for Whetton's (1989) "new and unexpected insights" and rich theory development.

## Concluding Comments

Two aims were articulated at the start of this article. The first was to provide exemplars of how action research may be enacted as a methodology for organizational research. The two cases described here, although part of the same overall research program, demonstrate how action research can be used to tackle quite different types of research aim. In the first case, the ultimate aim was the development of methods informed—as specified by Eden and Huxham (1996a)—by theory that itself was to be developed through the action research. The reader who is interested to see an example of well-developed output from a similar type of action research is referred to Eden and Ackermann (1998), which represents the culmination of several decades of action research. The case study here represents one process through which the relationship between practitioners and researchers can be designed to support both action and research agendas. Other approaches are, of course, possible, and in particular, the process does not have to be "participatory" with the practitioners involved in the research design and output. The particular episodes involving the community development team serve to provide a cautionary tale that demonstrates that neither good action results nor easily interpretable research results necessarily ensue and that care needs to be taken in design of the overall process.

In the second case, the research aim associated with the intervention was to contribute to a developing substantive theory through providing an opportunity for testing current theory and developing new insight. Action research is particularly appropriate for developing theory that relates closely to practice and is concerned with the process of managing. Because it is derived emergently, it has the potential to be couched in terms that practitioners can readily relate to. The case provided here is brief, but a more detailed account of an action research case study of this type can be found in Huxham (2003b), with associated output in Huxham and Vangen (2000b).

The second aim of this article was to highlight some design choices in action research. In drawing to a conclusion, three observations will be made about these. First, we do not intend to suggest that the three choice areas highlighted by the TIP Project represent the only, or necessarily the most significant, dimensions of design choices in action research, but they are clearly important both to the action outcomes and to the research outcomes. Furthermore, they are areas of choice that, unless highlighted, would not always be obvious at the point of intervention. It is all too easy to become embroiled in an action research project without clearly thinking through the appropriate position for the project on these dimensions or what that means for the specific nature of the research and intervention designs.

Second, the two cases that we have used to illustrate the three areas of design choice were located toward opposite extremes of the scale on each dimension. It is, of course, possible to make design choices at intermediate points on the spectrum in each area. It may be misleading, however, to use the word *choice* in this context because the choice is not always entirely free. By its very nature, this kind of action research forces the researcher to react to opportunities for intervention when and however they arise. It is rarely possible to seek out ideal sites as is suggested for case study research (Eisenhart, 1989). Martin (1982) argued that all researchers lack full control over their research, but this feature of action research even further restricts the possibility of free research design. There is always a choice about how to respond to practitioners' requests for assistance, but judgement has to be made about what research design will be acceptable enough for the "client" to allow the intervention to proceed as far as the researcher needs or wishes it to. It is wise to make this judgement consciously. The personal style of the researcher as an interventionist is also important. Some will be more comfortable at one end of each scale than the other. It is clearly not sensible to make a choice of research design, however desirable, that requires an intervention form that cannot be comfortably carried out. This is a particular way in which "idiosyncrasy of person" (Kulka, 1982, p. 43) affects the research design choices of action research.

Third, if the particular demands of a research agenda mean that a project must be located at the more challenging ends of the three dimensions, it may be necessary to put a great deal of effort into establishing appropriate action research sites. However, it may also be worth considering whether creative alternative ways can be found to tackle the agenda or whether the agenda itself can be modified. In relation to the research aims of the TIP Project, for example, we are now investigating new ways to transfer theoretical insight about collaboration practice to practitioners, and these can be tackled through less ambitious and much less risky action research designs.

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