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Action Research

Action research (AR) is an umbrella term for a variety of different approaches, even opposing epistemologies, which nevertheless have or might have some minimal common pattern of proceedings and philosophy. In what follows, we try to explain this pattern as well as the contradictions and varieties of approaches. Before we turn to these questions let us see how relevant AR is for social work (SW) science and practice.

Action research: the central research mode in social work

AR can be regarded as the central mode of research in SW; it is a model of research, which in an ideal/typical way, comprises the functions and procedures of social work research .

SW or *boethics* (Mesec 1990; from gr. *boētheia*, help) is the coming together of a practical profession and a scientific discipline which researches the approaches and methods of the profession and their contexts; it is a profession and a science at the same time. The science of SW (*boethics* or *boethology*) involves a critical theoretical reflection of professional practice, its conditions, contexts and effects. As such, it belongs to the large family of sciences of handling (Oppl, Tomaschek) comprising, among others, sciences of education, administration, organisation, nursing, legal science, (social) medicine and other socio-technological or action sciences (Argyris). Social work science is not an applied science, as is often misunderstood, since this concept implies a one-way flow of knowledge from basic sciences to the applied ones, which are conceived as 'translating devices' operating through 'developmental research'. It is not an applied science since it has established its own circuit of information flow from social work practice to social work theory and back to practice, as well as a circuit from basic sciences to SW science and back. Thus, it has its own theory and contribution to the basic sciences, and it is therefore connected to the basic sciences, but does not involve their simple transmission.

Within the framework of such a science, AR ideally fulfills the requirements for a research approach that should be practically and scientifically relevant at the same

time. It is a form of research whose results are instructing the immediate practice within a specific context (in situ) and are simultaneously included in the body of theoretical knowledge of the profession as generalisable and/or transferable knowledge.

The origins and development of AR

Four periods in the development of AR can be roughly distinguished: (1) the pre-Lewinian period; (2) the Lewinian period; (3) the post-Lewinian period; and (3) the present-day period.

1. *The pre-Lewinian period.* Since Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), a German professor of psychology from Berlin who was born in Mogilno in today's Poland and emigrated to the US in 1933 to escape the fate of so many of his Jewish compatriots, it has been recognised that 'action research' as a method and as a term was invented by him and elaborated by his students and colleagues. But with the development and ramification of the approach, along with its adoption by different professions, researchers and professionals started to search for predecessors within their own respective disciplines. This search was successful since it was not particularly difficult to find a scholar, professional, reformer, activist, or even philosopher who had advocated some aspect of subsequent AR, however conceptually remote: 'application of scientific method to education' (in Science and Education Movement; McKernan 1991:8), group participation in a community development initiative (Moreno; Gstettner, Altricher, cited by McTaggert 1992:2), the application of an inductive scientific method of problem-solving (Dewey; McKernan 1991:8) are some of the components mentioned. Even the term 'action research' had been used before (for details, see: McKernan 1991, cited by Masters 2000:1–2; Kemmis et al. 1982; Hart and Bond 1995). But it seems that before Kurt Lewin nobody had conceptualised AR as a distinct form of inquiry and embodied it in such a comprehensive conceptual framework.

2. *The Lewinian period.* Thus it is generally accepted that Kurt Lewin is the author of both the approach and of the term 'action research' (Kemmis and McTaggert 1988, Zuber-Skerrit 1992, Hart and Bond 1995). From 1935 Lewin worked at the University of Iowa as a professor of child psychology. During this time, he

was invited to work as a consultant in the Harwood factory in Virginia, where he planned a field experiment about the effect of worker participation on productivity. Later he became involved in various applied projects linked to the war effort, e.g. changing food consumption habits away from those foods in short supply. He pursued his interest in group dynamics at the Research Centre for Group Dynamics at MIT (founded in 1944), and studied the overcoming of religious and racial prejudice for the American Jewish Congress in New York – the Commission of Community Interrelations. In the framework of this project the idea of 'training groups' (T-groups) emerged and activities started to establish the National Training Laboratories (NTL) for training in group dynamics and leadership skills. Lewin died before this plan was realised (Marrow 1969, 1977).

It is impossible here to give due attention to Lewin's original and important ideas. We can only mention some of his main concepts connected to action research. Lewin's theoretical framework was his 'field theory'. To understand human behaviour, the whole subjective psychological field or 'lifespace' has to be viewed; various 'forces' influencing the behaviour and their interaction, producing 'quasi-stationary equilibrium' have to be uncovered. Thinking on the social position of Jews, he came to the conclusion that groups come into existence because of the 'common fate' of their members. In a group, powerful 'dynamics' develops if its members are 'interdependent' in achieving group goals. Interdependence of members means that the group is 'a dynamic whole', the whole being dependent on its parts and vice versa. The beliefs and behaviour of members can only be changed simultaneously with a change in group norms. Against the background of the rise of both the dictatorial regime in Germany and the Second World War, viewed as a conflict between dictatorship and democracy, research about the influence of different 'styles of leadership' on group members' behaviour was conducted (together with R. Lippitt). The insights of this experiment resulted, among others, in a training programme in leadership and 'group dynamics' where the participants, including staff, could treat each other as peers; the behaviour of group members was observed and fed back to them ('feedback'). In one of these seminars (in Connecticut 1946), a discussion about differences in interpretation of the data developed where participants were allowed to join the staff session and participate actively on an equal basis ('participation'). The whole process was viewed as learning, whereby new beliefs and habits have to be acquired through the process of the 'unfreezing-changing-refreezing' of group norms of believing and behaving.

In his paper Action Research and Minority Problems (1946) Lewin used the term 'action research' and defined it as follows:

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin 1946; 1948: 202–3).

In this definition the specific difference of AR lies in its object (social action) and not in its method as the comparative research is not a specific method of action research. Thus, Lewin did not formally define AR as a specific new method, only as a strategy of research. But in his and his collaborators' research the specificities of AR as an approach have been implied: the practical usefulness of findings in a specific action; including research in an action, which means monitoring the action; inquiring into the action and using the findings as specific feedback to the participants ('specific feedback'); the interweaving of planning-action-research in iterative cycles ('the spiral of AR'); an intimate connection between action, research and training ('the triangle of AR'); above all, the participation of members as objects of (self-) research in planning, conducting and interpreting research ('participation'). We will elaborate on these characteristics below.

An empirical testing of members' assumptions as the basis for action, as well as an evaluation of the effects of an action through the participation of the members as a group – i.e. a critical reflection of members' beliefs and actions – and using the findings in practical decision-making in the specific situation of an ongoing action, comprise basic characteristics of AR in the Lewinian tradition.

3. *The post-Lewinian period*. In the initial period after Lewin, AR split into four streams according to Rappoport (1970): the line at the Tavistock Institute in Great Britain with its stress on the socio-technical level of social change; the line at the Centre for Group Dynamics at the MIT stressing processes within individuals and small groups; the line of operations research (the Tavistock Institute in GB; Ackoff and Churchman in the USA); and the line of applied anthropology using action research for studying cultural change (Human Organisation Review). At the end of the 1960s AR basically took three different directions: training, activism and epistemological search.

a) *Training*. The first direction moved away from scientific research into training and consultation. The method of group-dynamic and leadership skills training which had been established with NTL seemed for some time to prevail as a remnant of Lewinian AR. AR had ceased to produce scientific findings about 'solving social problems' through solving the problems of real life in situ. The impression is that quite a body of publications had been created about training groups (T-groups), but not as much about trainees solving social problems in their home environments in the AR-way. AR was regarded by many professionals neither as a vehicle for solving social problems nor for discovering new transferable knowledge, but predominantly as a pedagogical instrument for teaching group work and leadership skills. The essence of the teaching method was discovering dynamic patterns of the functioning of the group as a whole and of its individual members through their own experience ('to their costs'), i.e. by re-discovering generally known patterns in a specific situation, thus creating knowledge new to the participants, but not usually new to science (e.g. social psychology) in general. An analogy of the method is primary school children rediscovering Newton's laws. It is our belief that, despite the reproach of its unsatisfactory scientific rigour, AR still has enormous potential as a way of organising scientific production and should not be reduced to pedagogical means.

b) *Activism*. The second direction led to activism (this development coincided with student revolutions in the 1960s and subsequent social movements), to endeavours for emancipation, human rights and other causes seeking the radical restructuring of society and redistribution of wealth. The basis of the trend was the application of Marxian overturning metaphysics with its concepts of alienation and emancipation from oppression as exemplified in the work of a group of German social scientists (Haag et al. 1970). According to them, AR had been experiencing a revival of interest ('renaissance' Moser, 1975: 41) as a paradigmatic form of non-alienated research opposed to alienated 'traditional social research'. As such, it is the ideal form of research supporting the ongoing emancipatory social action. Similar aim and theoretical background appear in Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (1972), which is regarded by some authors as a form of action research (Flaker 1982). Without citing any data in support of his thesis, Stringer stated that the equalisation of AR with radical political activism led to a decline in support for AR (Stringer 1999: 9). We tend to believe this as it is a fact that science within a radical movement – even if science is called upon as the grounding and orienting force (as in 'scientific socialism') – becomes *ancilla politicae* and turns into apologetic ideology. History has provided the lesson that socialist and communist claims for a just society led to a worse kind of oppression than

the radically criticised one with social science being one of the victims. To a lesser extent, the problem of the relationship between science and (political) action exists generally so we will return to this question.

With regard to social engineering, Adam's statement applies well:

> There is not only the danger of submitting (science) to the interests of politics, but also the danger of the instrumentalisation of people (Adam 1987: 82, transl. B. M.).

With regard to radical activism we should turn the statement around. In any case, the relationship has two sides:

> But neither the objectivist-neutral nor the humanist-populist 'attitude' is in place ... The first is too limited and can end in the instrumentalisation of people ('objects') easily; the second leads into a forceful 'subjectivisation' of objects and forceful 'emancipation' repeatedly. Searching for an adequate 'attitude' is a difficult task (Adam 1987: 82, transl. B. M.).

There is nothing wrong with social activism or with socially responsible and engaged science as long as the researcher is autonomous and aware of their responsibilities to science.

c) *Search for epistemological foundations of AR*. Developments in the late 1970s and 1980s are characterised by efforts to explicate the epistemological foundations and possibilities of AR. At the same time, the scientific potential of AR, besides its pedagogical and social action functions, was stressed again. This development took at least three main paths: AR as the Critical Social Science, the New Paradigm Research and the Action Science.

ca) *AR as the Critical Social Science*. At the beginning of the 1970s several authors began to conceptualise AR not only as a new method of social research but equated it with the new paradigm of critical social science as opposed to the traditional positivist social science. Traditional social science was criticised as being positivist, applying research methods of natural sciences inappropriate for studying human affairs and humiliating people to the providers of data i.e. to the epistemological status of physical objects. Contrary to this, within the framework of AR a space for the expression of subjectivity and for the participation of the 'objects' of research opened up enabling an interpretative search for the mean-

ing of the actions of participants and for a critique of the existing social world in the search for emancipation from oppression of all kinds (Haag 1970). AR was proclaimed the 'Critical Theory of Social Sciences' (somewhat reluctantly: Moser 1975: 9) combining interpretative, hermeneutic social science and the critical social theory of neo-Marxian Frankfurt school, Habermas above all. In positivist empirical analytic science, an experiment is the basic instance of determining truth, whereas in critical science the democratic discourse as a systematic confrontation of arguments aiming at consensual validation plays this function.

cb) *The New Paradigm Research*. The definition of AR as a non-positivist method was common.

> "Susman and Everet have been influential in the trend to define action research as a non-positivist form of social research'... (they argue) that the differences between positivist science and action research are extensive... (Hart and Bond 1995: 22; Susman and Evered 1978).

So was the notion of the affinity of AR with qualitative methodology. AR appeared to be a good alternative to the positivist research. This notion overlooked the fact that the alternative of the positivist social science, i.e. the interpretative, hermeneutic social (better: 'humanistic') science, has existed paralelly with positivism. Dilthey's Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften was published in 1883, and Durkheims Les règles de la méthode sociologique in 1895. In 1981 a group of English authors edited a book with the title "Human Inquiry: a sourcebook of new paradigm research" (Reason and Rowan 1981) in which they presented the 'emerging paradigm of co-operative experiential inquiry'. They defined the inquiry as:

> 'a way of doing research in which all those involved contribute both to the creative thinking that goes into the enterprise – deciding on what is to looked at, the methods of the inquiry, and making sense of what is found out – and also contribute to the action which is the subject of the research. Thus in its fullest form the distinction between researcher and subject disappears, and all who participate are both co-researchers and co-subjects. Co-operative inquiry is therefore also a form of education, personal development, and social action' (Reason 1988:1).

According to Reason (1988), a co-operative inquiry includes several kinds of research (participatory research, collaborative inquiry and action science). It has developed

partly from Heron's (1971, 1981) experiential inquiry as a form of psychological inquiry. The approach is eclectic in the sense that it is open to all the streams of 'post-positivist', qualitative and critical thinking.

cc) *The 'Action Science'*. For social work science probably the most promising branch deriving from Lewin's AR and from independent research is 'action science' (Argyris, Putnam, Smith 1985). Action science is precisely what we had in mind when thinking about social work science as the 'science of handling' (translating literally the term 'Handlungswissenschaft' as used by Oppl and Tomaschek). Action science is, in our interpretation, a continuation of genuine Lewinian action research, modernised in three main aspects: (1) the role of AR as a method of scientific research has been restored; (2) the critique of positivist empirical science and developments in post-positivist epistemology are considered; and (3) important new discoveries regarding the introduction of social change have been added.

Action science has been defined as follows:

> 'Action science is an inquiry into how human beings design and implement action in relation to one another. Hence it is a science of practice, whether the professional practice of administrators, educators, and psychotherapists or the everyday practice of people as members of families and organizations. Action science calls for basic research and theory building that are intimately related to social intervention. Clients are participants in a process of public reflection that attempts both to comprehend the concrete details of particular cases and to discover and test propositions of a general theory.

> ... key features of action science: (1) empirically disconfirmable propositions that are organized into a theory; (2) knowledge that human beings can implement in an action context; and (3) alternatives to the status quo that both illuminate what exists and Inform fundamental change, in light of values freely chosen by social actors' (Argyris et al. 1985: 5).

4. *The present-day period*. Today many conceptually more or less different schools of AR exist with much overlapping. Our perception of the groupings is very vague, but we will nevertheless try to name some of the 'brands'. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) is an approach combining socio-technical systems thinking regarding organisational behaviour and participation in decision-making by low-ranking people in organisations and communities. It has been used in effecting

social change and grass-roots development connected to the use of new technologies, often in the Third World (Whyte 1991). We have mentioned some of the characteristics of the New Paradigm Research (Reason 1988) . Even if it seems that originally its focus had been on experiential inquiry and psychotherapy (e.g. phenomenological psychodrama; storytelling with a methodological purpose), today it includes very diverse subjects of study. Action Science (Argyris) continues to develop, while Community-based Action Research (Stringer) is a welcome application of AR to community action groups and community development. Many other paths exist, e.g. Developmental Action Inquiry (Torbert; see Chandler, and Torbert 2003), Action Learning (Revans 1980), Reflective Practitioner Research (Schon 1991), etc.

The conceptual hierarchy of AR: A three-dimensional model

From the descriptions above, an implicit notion of what AR might constitute has emerged, so have the erroneous notions about AR. We have to give a more precise definition especially because there has been much conceptual vagueness and logical unclearness. Let us clear up the conceptual hierarchy of AR first.

As early as in 1953 Ackoff (cf. Tos 1988) described the research process as a succession of problem-solving and communication acts between four different roles: the consumer of the research, the researcher, the observer and the observed (subject). Conceived as roles, these posts can be occupied in very different ways. We can look at these ways as points on a continuum of distance between roles. On one extreme we can have posts occupied by institutions or organisations or individuals in their contexts. Imagine the following situation: a political party commissions a public opinion poll from a private polling agency; the agency hires student interviewers from a university; they conduct interviews in the homes of individuals constituting the sample. Between every single adjacent pair of roles there is a large physical, social and psychological distance, the distance being even bigger between not-adjacent pairs. We can be fairly sure that the probability of misunderstandings and other mistakes in representation grows with the distance of every kind. On the other end of the continuum there is the possible situation of one person being the consumer of the research, the researcher, the observer and the subject simultaneously, e. g. the psychologist Ebbinghaus doing experiments involving memorising different kinds of more or less structured materials – on himself. For sure, here, in the condition of

no outward distance different kinds of methodological problems appear, which we cannot go into here. We can imagine AR as being somewhere in the middle of the range. A social service agency fulfilling its new mandate seeks ways of co-ordinating the efforts of a network of social providers in a local community. It wants to have research about the functioning of the network. As the commissioner and the first user of the findings it establishes an action research group, consisting of representatives of the service, professionals from the service, and representatives of non-governmental providers, users of the local network, and professional researcher or counsellor. Together in weekly meetings they plan the research, organise it logistically and, in the sense of the division of labour, collect data, interpret data and propose the measures to be taken. Obviously, in the conditions of spatial, temporal, social and psychological (emotional) proximity the communication between the different roles can be much better. In the atmosphere of mutual trust, the uncovering of misunderstandings and dissolving of defensive attitudes is easier, immediate feedback is possible, corrections of procedures easier etc.

Then, AR is a *special kind of organising and conducting research undertaking as a whole*, a special way of conducting a research project; it is neither a method used within such an undertaking (e. g. a discussion or interview) nor a scientific (epistemological) orientation within which AR procedure can be applied. We can divide methodology by the increasing abstractness into three levels: epistemological orientation, research strategy/organization, methods/techniques. Doing this, the logical hierarchy becomes clear: epistemology > research strategy > method/technique ('>' signifies 'more than' = 'higher logical level' = 'more abstract' or inclusive). The logical level of AR is grosso modo similar to, for instance, the logical level of ethnography or experimentation. They are all about strategy and organization of research, about the whole arrangement of the relationships of roles appearing in a research project. Ethnography is a special kind of organising or conducting a research enterprise as a whole, e.g. a researcher living among the natives. The same applies to experimentation, e.g. a researcher manipulating the conditions affecting the subjects and providing for observation and measurement.

A three-dimensional model of AR seems to describe the situation most adequately:

1st dimension: The kind of science: BASIC SCIENCE vs. ACTION SCIENCE. AR is part of SW science, which is an action science.

2nd dimension: Epistemology: POSITIVIST vs. INTERPRETIVIST. AR can use both kinds of epistemology, but interpretivist is more inclusive.

3rd dimension: Organisation of the research cycle: DISPERSION OF ROLES vs. CONCENTRATION OF ROLES in a group. For AR concentration of roles in a group is characteristic.

Thus, AR is a mode of research of action science of SW (not of a basic science); It is open to all epistemologies, but the interpretivist or qualitative orientation seems to be more inclusive and adequate. Regarding the organization of the research cycle, for AR concentration of roles of actor-researcher-observer-observed is characteristic (not dispersion of roles).

Picture 1

A three-dimensional model of the position of action research within the conceptual space of scientific approaches
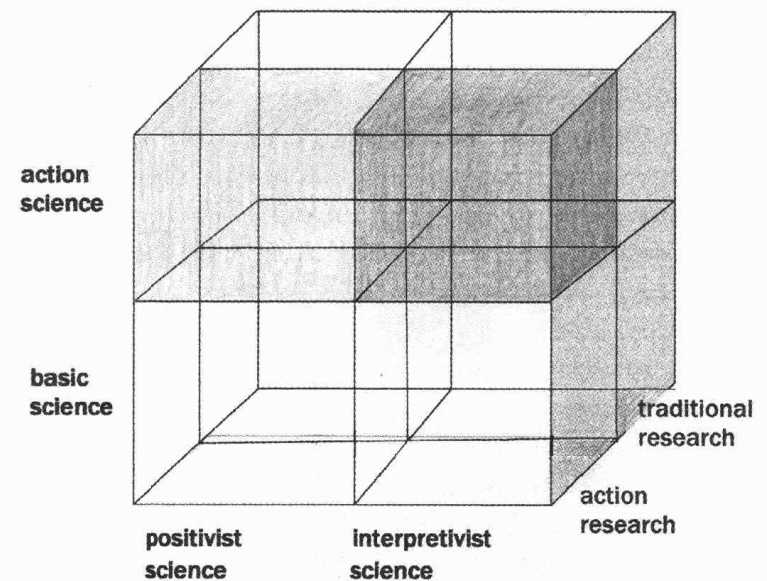
On the other hand, looking from the action side (as important as the research side), it is useful to look upon AR as a functional relationship between professional researcher and the user(s). A functional relationship means an intentional relationship, a relationship with an aim, in our case with the aim of resolving the practical

problem-situation of an agent. The user-institution or user-group (the consumer of the research) is in a practical problem-situation which it decides to solve by acquiring new knowledge, i.e. through research. The situation is analogous to the situation of a client deciding to seek help from a professional counselor. The consumer of the research hopes to find the solution to the problems through the research conducted with the help of a professional researcher. The research method is not determined in advance; the problem can be solved through library research, by opinion polling, by a needs-survey, or by AR. Only the expectation of the user that they will solve their problem by acquiring new empirical knowledge is determined in advance. If the nature of the problem-situation demands, i.e. if a substantive change of practice is involved, the research has to be organised in a special way, i.e. as AR. AR is the changing of practice assisted by researcher(s), and researching, controlled by the user(s) of the research.

What is action research?

Now we are nearer to a definition of AR. Before stating our own, we will give some definitions from different sources. Cunningham (1976: 216) defined:

'Action research has the following defining characteristics:

1. It is undertaken by organization members, assisted by outside consultants – the Action research Group.

2. It stresses member participation in both research and action.

3. It stresses the group dynamics and social forces that enhance or inhibit group action.

4. It is a process for changing behavior which emphasizes planning, execution, and evaluation.'

In summarising Lewin's concept of AR in five points, Argyris added the following to the above definition:

'1. Action research involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system. …

3. The intended change typically involves re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and acting that are presently well established in individuals and groups. The intended change is typically at the level of norms and values expressed in

action. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis and fact finding and on free choice to engage in new kinds of action.

4. Action research challenges the status quo from a perspective of democratic values. …

5. Action research is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed, nor is the relation to practice to be lost' (Argyris et al. 1985).

Carr and Kemmis stated:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

Thus, we can propose the following definition of AR as an approach of social work:

Action research as an approach of social work science and social work practice (boethics) is a method of support and assistance to professionals and laymen in resolving problems of professional handling and social action through acquiring new empirical knowledge. At the same time, it is a way of organising research of practical handling, lay or professional, to contribute to resolving the problems of practice and to the theoretical knowledge of social work action science.

AR achieves these goals mainly through:

- the immediate presence of the participants in an on-going action where it takes place (in situ)
- the forming of an AR group, constituted by the participants in the action or the representatives of the main roles, and researcher(s) or counsellor(s)
- the participation of members of the AR group in action and research
- peer-like relationships and democratic leadership of the AR-group, leading to the development of mutual trust and collaboration
- proceeding through iterative cycles of planning-action-observing-reflecting
- the interplay of the three constituent productive processes of learning, inquiry and action
- gathering of empirical data through multiple research techniques

- the expression of the subjective views of the participants or participating parties
- analysing and interpreting data about handling or action and feeding it back to the planning process and to the action science.

What AR is not?

We will limit ourselves to four relationships: AR does not apply to every study of human action; AR is not action science; AR is not interpretative (qualitative) research nor critical social science; AR is neither consultation nor therapy.

1. From our definition of AR it follows that not all research of human action is AR. Thus, Lewin's explicit definition of AR as a comparative study of the effects of social action and of the conditions which lead to social action does not satisfy the conditions of our definition. Experimental research of the effectiveness of alternative methods of treatment, common in social work evaluation studies, is not AR if not included as a method in the broader context of the iterative spiral reflective procedures of a participative AR group. Self-reflective research ('first-person research', 'second-person research' – Torbert 2003), in spite of the fact that it includes the spiral of planning-action-observing-reflecting, is not AR if not part of the reflective process in an AR group. Otherwise, many psychotherapeutic, counselling and supervisory procedures would apply for AR.

2. AR is not action science; it is one of its approaches.

a) Both examples above illustrate an important but usually overlooked notion. Every science (especially action science) as a social undertaking in a scientific community is a reflective, spiral and participative process of seeking knowledge to add to the theoretical knowledge and/or to improve on social or professional action; except that this process is temporally and spatially extended and indirect in most instances. The participants in the reflection process are spatially dispersed; the process of observation, analysis, interpretation, reporting, reviewing, reacting and planning is mediated by means of professional publishing, and interrupted by external social agencies; the participation is mostly not face-to-face. The knowledge accumulation takes years. The application of the knowledge so gained is uncertain.

b AR takes place in a specific situation. It supports a concrete action or a change in situ, where it takes place, whereas action science collects and analyses experiences from many specific situations within the whole scientific community of the

particular science to come to general and transferable patterns (e.g. models I and II of theory-in-use; Argyris 1985). Purely logically action science is the superior concept to AR, is its genus proximum. Besides AR, it uses other approaches and methods, e.g. experiments, ethnography, documentary research, surveys etc., and has to look at the whole field of the profession, establishing interconnections between subfields. AR does contribute to the stock of knowledge of AS, but so do other methods. To a certain degree the boundary between AS and AR is extendable: a project of AR can include more and more problems, different methods, even different settings, becoming ever more encompassing. But somehow we can always see that it is but one project, not the whole science of social work.

3. AR is not an epistemology. It follows from the above propositions that AR cannot be a new or an old paradigm, as it is not a paradigm (in the Kuhnian sense of scientific orientation or epistemology) at all. AR is not to be equated with interpretative or qualitative research, with critical social science, and not to be set in opposition to 'traditional' research. The organisation of a scientific 'enterprise' within a scientific community, the logistics of science business, meetings, conferences, journals, seminars etc. are not an epistemology. AR is a way of organising the scientific enterprise and a way of organising for social change (i.e. putting together an AR group, assuring the participation of actors in democratic discussion etc.). The way of organising can have implications for the epistemology (i.e. it can enable or impede an epistemology), but it is not an epistemology itself. Since its very beginnings and through all its history AR has been open to all epistemologies. It began as experimental (i.e. positivist) AR, continued through 'critical science' and 'action science' (both with a strong objectivist flavour) to become a space for today's phenomenological hermeneutics. AR is very suitable framework for the application of qualitative approach (see Chandler and Torbert 2003), but it is not a qualitative method itself. It is clear that the equation also does not hold on the other side: qualitative research can be organised in other ways besides AR, e.g. as ethnography, as a study of biographies, narratives, not necessarily within an AR group at all.

4. AR is not consultation, therapy or training. More precisely, it might include all of these, but it is not only this. It has to be research, published research. In the historical part of our paper we have seen that in the period following the death of Kurt Lewin, AR turned into 'T-group' or 'sensitivity training', a kind of self-research and group-research for the immediate use of the trainees, but without

any broader scientific aim. If consultation or training is the only final aim of the procedure, it should be said so: it is action consultation, action learning but not action research.

5. We hesitate to add the fifth 'is not', namely AR for 'private', 'internal' use only. An individual social worker, a pair of them or a group can undertake a self-reflection of their practical working, using it for the betterment of their professional work. Thus, there has been the application of their findings to the immediate practical situation, only they have not published the research report and contributed to the broader context. Better something than nothing.

The functions of action research

The primary aim of AR is to support social work activities through developing knowledge of practitioners', their lay helpers and users in a specific situation to be better able to solve the social and developmental problems of individuals, groups, communities and organisations. A secondary aim is development of generalisable and transferable scientific knowledge of the social work action science, i.e. knowledge about social work methods and approaches, their contexts, the conditions of their application and their effects.

1. **Supporting social work activities and the development of groups, organisations and communities**. Through its reflection of handling in a specific context and acquiring of new data and insights AR helps practitioners and/or lay helpers and users to give up unproductive patterns of handling, to better understand the whole situation and to adopt more reasonable and more effective ways of handling. This broadening of minds helps in solving the specific problem(s) they are working on, whether individual problem cases or problems in the development of groups (e.g. self-help groups), organisations (e.g. reorganisation) and communities (e.g. citizen initiatives, community development). AR should help in the implementation of an innovation, in improving practice; in overcoming defences and resistance to change; in the transfer of knowledge into practice; in orienting and directing practical activities; in learning and training new methods and approaches; in improving the organisational climate and co-operation.

2. **Developing scientific knowledge of the social work action science**. The second function of AR is to contribute to the science of social work. This function is secondary to supporting action only in the sense that it is a specific local

problem which determines the decision to solve it with the support of AR, and not a social work science problem of researchers. The researcher goes where the practical problem is, to help in resolving it. They do not seek practitioners to get data from them for solving a social work science problem. Practice not theory defines the problem. (This is not an argument for the 'new paradigm' as since antiquity the problems of 'traditional' science have stemmed from two sources-theory and practice.) In all other respects, the developing of 'theoretical' knowledge is equally important to the supporting of social action in AR. In the situation of AR the researcher comes into intimate contact with the 'real-life' of professionals, lay people and users. If their defensive attitude dissolves and trust builds, the validity of the data increases. AR should enable: the discovery of practical problems and needs; the discovery of solutions to practical problems; the discovery of new and better ways of handling; improving the relevance and validity of findings; and contributing to the 'broader view' of a practical endeavour.

Hence, AR supports practitioners in resolving the problems of individuals, social groups and communities, e.g. apathy, anomy, disintegration; resistance to change, innovations and development; a lack of ability, incompetence; deprivation, segregation, other forms of social injustice etc. On the other side, AR resolves the problems of social work science, e.g. practical irrelevancy, poor validity, low objectivity, reductionism and simplification.

The pre-conditions of the AR-relationship

By the term 'AR-relationship' we understand the relationship between roles or parties present or represented in an AR group, i.e. between the 'researcher' (as the representative of scientific commitment) and 'the actor' (as the representative of the action commitment).

There are at least two complications of this simple division.

1. The first is the fact that the roles can be occupied by a single person, by two people or by several people or groups. In the case of a single person reflecting on his or her actions in the way of an 'AR spiral' and publishing the description of the process, we have a single-person research or 'self-research'. It might be a legitimate form of AR even if the condition of the immediate presence of a group

giving feedback is not present, and the whole process of feedback and reflection is delayed. Self-reflection is but an emergency exit since we hold as true that 'two are necessary to see one'. In two-person research the conditions of immediate reflection or feedback and of continuing monitoring are fulfilled. Again the condition of publishing the description of the process has to be fulfilled, to thus enable discussion within the scientific community.

2. The second complication is the fact that the researcher-role can be allocated within a group of actors or researcher coming from the outside the group. In the second instance, the professional researcher comes, e.g. into a social agency or voluntary organisation, to participate in an AR group of practitioners and/or users as actors. Here two characteristics are important: the expertness of the researcher in methodology and his 'view from the outside'. Both can improve the process of reflection. If a group of professionals or users starts the AR process itself, then it has to allocate the role of the researcher(s) to some of its members. Undoubtedly, in such an instance there are methodological, social and ethical problems involved. In this case a kind of amateur research and theorising develops which could be of interest as a 'local- or ethno-science'. More important is that the actor-researcher can experience a serious role conflict in trying to reflect on the ideology of the group or the agency if it is even at all possible. So, we regard the light-hearted tales that everybody everywhere can do AR as being quite naïve regarding either the cruel reality of social services' politicing or the ideologically-biased enchantments of social action groups. The key-component of AR is the research-theoretical reflection of practical action, i.e. throwing light on an action from a different or broader frame of reference than the framework of the actor. This is the reason we regard it as so important to remember that science and practice are two different businesses that have to retain their commitments and the productive tension of opposites.

The AR relationship is established in the following conditions:

1. The precondition of the AR relationship is the existence of socially-defined, distinctive roles of the scientist-researcher or professional counsellor on one side, and of the practitioner, lay person or user-actor on the other. Each side is autonomous, committed to their mission in society, to their ethics, and finally responsible either for the practical results of the investigation or for the scientific results. The researcher has to report to the wider scientific community and contribute to the transferable knowledge of social work science. The practitioner has to fulfil their duties as a

member of a social service or other organisation or group. It does not mean, that during the AR project the roles and tasks cannot exchange, and that both parties cannot participate in practical as well as research decisions. There has been some dispute around this principle and much disregarding of it, but it is crucial. The very advantage of AR arises from the difference and tension between the two parties expressed in real time in a group; mutual learning can take place only if this difference exists. We broaden our knowledge by accepting the existence and by understanding the view and position of the other not by subjecting our views to it. The 'common truth' which eventually comes out of AR as a compromise between both parties with minimal common agreement is less important than the acceptance of the existence of differences and understanding of the views of the others. The essence of 'reflecting' is to see myself in the mirror the other holds. Two are necessary to see one. Thus, it is naïve to hold that in AR the distinction between researchers and practitioners disappears; it should not. This can happen in individual moments, such as a technique ('take my chair') and as an overall improvement of the understanding of the other's role, but not as a basic commitment. If this principle is not respected, one party is subjected to the other; either researchers adopt the ideology of the practitioners or users or the practitioners submit to the 'wise counsel' of researchers without proving their effects. In cases of initial misunderstandings and 'indecent proposals' (e.g. for a researcher to support the position of an action group at any price; or for practitioners to adopt measures against their convictions), the AR relationship will not be concluded or will dissolve.

2. The actor (practitioner, group, institution) has to be ready to take the responsibility for practical action. If at the moment he is still not ready, there have to be prospects that he will activate himself and take the responsibility voluntarily. The condition is not satisfied if the activity is imposed on the actor (e.g. forced on re-organisation), if the actor remains passive or opposes any proposition of change without proving it. In short, the actor has to show some will to pursue a goal, to seek solutions to the problems, to learn and to experiment with the proposed changes. AR is not a manipulation, nor a way to put through decisions reached outside the group. It is not a way to import 'democracy' or whatever seems valuable to the researcher without the learned consent of the actor. It follows that AR is not a form of researchers' own activism but researchers' support of the actor's action as long as there is agreement on the basic goals and procedures between the actors and the researchers.

3. The actor has to be ready to accept the presence of the researcher in the action;

the carrying out of research procedures (in principle, as the specific procedures have to be negotiated); the right and duty of his own participation in research procedures; the right of the researcher to participate in decision-making in the AR-group, concerning the practical action measures to be taken; and the researcher's final competence for research reporting. The researcher has to accept the right and duty of his participation in practical decision-making; the actor's right to participate in research procedures; the actor's final competence for taking practical measures. AR is a mutual, two-way participation with separated final responsibilities.

The final negotiated propositions for practice are made available to the actor, but he is not obliged to follow them since he is not responsible to the researcher nor to the AR group, but to his superiors, agency, constituency or public. The final negotiated research findings and interpretation can be published as a group paper. At the end of the project and after publication of the findings, the researcher is free to continue his thinking and writing without any obligation regarding what was negotiated. The working agreement holds to the end of the project if not otherwise stated. In a sense, the AR situation is not 'real' despite the fact that AR was 'invented' to be more real than an experiment. Both forms are temporary and limited projects; they are a 'play of discovery'. After they end, no one is obliged to do what they propose, even if during their duration one had been trying new forms of behaviour; they are at free disposal.

4. Before starting the AR group the actor and the researcher make the AR contract. The contract contains the agreement of both parties regarding the abovementioned preconditions and, if necessary, other relevant conditions pertaining to the specific situation.

The principles of AR

1. *Simultaneity of three processes: learning, training, practical handling and research.* AR has three aims: to learn, to do practical work (solving practical work problems), to research and reflect on these processes. The three processes are intertwined but they still have to be distinguished. If the circumstances permit, the three processes must be temporally ordered in the sense of the 'AR spiral' so that meetings of the AR group are devoted to training, to action or work, and to research and reflection successively and iteratively. Of course, it is pos-

sible to stress one of the components more than the others if the situation requires.

2. *The relationships between members of the AR group and the group dynamic processes are crucial.* The direct and intimate relationship between the actor and the researcher or, more generally, an adequate group process is as vital for practical action as for the research. The essence of the relationship or process is the dissolving of defensive behaviour through two-way peer communication in an atmosphere of trust. At the research level, this leads to the minimisation of concealment, socially desired and calculable utterances and other biased and defensive communications. The ability to see and give consideration to multiple perspectives opens. All of this results in the improved validity or trustworthiness of data. At the level of social change and action, the resistance to learning and change is reduced, and the readiness for learning and initiative for change increases. The democratic procedure within the project group is a value in itself and the necessary condition of all proceedings, but it is not enough; there has to be the group-dynamic leadership skill. Politics cannot substitute psychology.

3. *The ecological (naturalistic) operation in an everyday (natural) environment with the minimal possible interfering-respecting of the culture of the community.* AR takes place in environments where people live and work, i.e. in local communities, voluntary organisations, social services etc. Outside researchers or counsellors begin to co-operate on the basis of the invitation of actors, with their consent and on the premises of the action agreement. In their activities they respect the culture of the community or organisation and support only those changes agreed upon by members of the organisation. AR is not compatible with a more or less arbitrary intervention from the outside or from above into an organisation with the aim to change it or reorganise it against the will of its members, however well-intentioned it is.

4. *AR is proactive (activating).* The principle of respecting the culture of the organisation does not exclude proactive activity or activation of the members of the organisation. If the organisation or community is apathetic, anomic, unconnected and passive, the researchers and counsellors may strive to activate and connect it to the level on which the organisation itself is capable of articulating its problems and taking over responsibility for decision-making. The outside researchers and counsellors support the process of self-organisation, but they do not impose their plans or values.

5. *The principle of mutual benefit.* AR proceeds in such a way that both parties ben-

efit from it. The actors get help and support in solving their practical problems, in learning and training; the researchers obtain valid data and new discoveries. AR is not compatible with the one-sided use of actors and their activity as a source of data or as 'experimental mice' of reform-endeavours. On the other hand, it is incompatible with researchers' use to cover for the actor's decisions.

Not every individual item above will apply to all possible situations of AR. The reflective monitoring of individual behaviour change has also been classified as AR by some authors (see Krims 1989). Some authors regard the 'AR-spiral' as the basic characteristic of AR, and other characteristics or principles as being less important. The 'action inquiry' approach (Torbert) with its 'first-person, second-person and third-person research' stresses the dimension of the subject of the reflection. Both approaches do not stress the importance of group processes for valid knowing and committed doing.

AR as research

AR includes three work or productive processes: research or inquiry and a reflection of practical handling; practical decision-making and acting; and learning and training as gaining new values, knowledge and skills. Here we only describe some of the characteristics of the research process since the topics of group-learning and group decision-making have been elaborated elsewhere (for action-learning see Revans; for practical decision-making see Argyris 1985).

If we were to persist consequently in our position, to the point of dissatisfying readers' expectations, we would have to abandon our discussion of methods of research altogether. Namely, we have already stated that AR is not a method but a way of organising the research process so as to bring the different participants in a practical research project closer together. It is a framework to be filled by whatever methods one pleases. Nevertheless, there are some characteristics pertaining to the method which we want to repeat and some methods which are more suitable for the AR procedure and aims.

Research within the AR framework has the following characteristics:

a) At the epistemological level.

– *Openness to different epistemologies*. AR in social work is an approach within social work action science, besides the other approaches or research designs being used within this science. It contributes to knowledge for practice. In all other respects it is open to different epistemological positions as it has always been through its entire history. Also, this characteristic implies methodological pluralism regarding the use of different qualitative and quantitative methods of gathering and analysing data.

– *Two-loop information flow*. Information gained through research flow, first, directly to inform decision-making and planning of the next action step. Second, the report on the project as a whole or on the important sequences or problems has to be published and thus becomes part of the broader discussion in the scientific community of social work science.

– *The general goal of the inquiry can be formulated in terms of Argyris' Action science*: to discover implicit theories of actors (theories-in-use) and their models of adapting to change and uncertainty with the aim to promote a good relationship of first to second order change.

– *Cognitive advantages of the AR situation are as follows*: the possibility of close monitoring of an action process not only registering a state at a certain point of time, mostly in the past; the possibility to register and confront different experiences and frames of reference of different role-holders; the motivation of actors in a practical problem-situation to participate in research and reflection is higher than in an ordinary situation; the immediateness of experiencing in real time allows a special closeness to the data; the possibility of practically testing the knowledge propositions immediately; the possibility of researching actions in a 'natural' context; the possibility to uncover the rules and norms of handling, espoused theories and theories-in-use and to confront them in real-life conditions.

b) At the level of methods the following methods are particularly suitable:

– *Sequential analysis*. As the whole process of AR develops as a spiral of repeating sequences, with observation and reflection being part of every sequence, the sequential analysis of data is implied. As far as the acquisition of knowledge of the other is concerned, the concept of the hermeneutical circle applies.

– *Case study*. The analytical description of an AR project as a whole from beginning to end is a case study – a historical reconstruction of a social action or change. Simultaneously, it is research about research, as the final report includes an analysis of component research-practice loops.

– *Methods of qualitative analysis*. For the analysis of the transcripts of group minutes, discussions, interviews and other material, grounded theory techniques or other approaches of coding, and sequential methods of discourse analysis, narrative analysis etc. can be used.

– *Triangulation*. Within the framework of an AR project in every analytical sequence the viewpoints of every party should be expressed, confronted and analysed.

c) Techniques

The whole array of qualitative techniques (but not excluding quantitative ones) can be used, above all the following:

– *The research journal*. The systematic and orderly writing of a research journal is a basic 'technique'. Besides recording events as precisely as possible, notes of group discussions have to be taken (with the help of audio and video devices). Individual members can write their personal diaries and make them or their parts of them available to the group or researchers later.

– *Research 'memos'*. Besides a journal, researcher(s) can write 'memos' on coding, conceptualisation, lay theories and interpretations, elements of the grounded theory etc. and collect them in a file for use in the sequence analyses and final report.

– *Critical events technique* (Flanagan 1954). Critical events are events which can influence the further action or interaction, the reaching of the group's goals, and events which members indicate as being problematic or difficult to handle. Such events have to be described, discussed in terms of their similarities and differences, then coded or classified for further conceptualisation.

– *The constant comparison technique of Glaser and Strauss* (1976). Basically, this is a coding procedure within the framework of grounded theory research. The descriptions of individual events or cases are first trial-classified and then pair-compared, adding new categories if necessary to reach 'theoretical saturation'.

– *Role playing*. Role playing, dramatisation, simulation-games and other group-work techniques can be applied as well as many other qualitative techniques.

Quantitative techniques can also be applied, depending on the situation. All these techniques are not specific to AR.

Types of AR

Hart and Bond (1995) presented an original typology of AR, which could offer a good starting point for further typological efforts. The very existence of several types of AR differing, among others, by the epistemological and methodological characteristics is an argument against the position that AR is 'a paradigm' or an 'epistemology of social sciences'. It is a framework for very different epistemological orientations. The main dimension of Hart and Bond's classification 'consensus vs. conflict model of society' implies a fundamental epistemological schism of 'positivist vs. critical epistemology' rather than a 'new paradigm'. Here we will not summarise Hart and Bond's typology, but will use their categories to produce our own summary description or comment of some types.

The first type, *Experimental AR* (according to Hart and Bond), corresponds to Lewin's original undertaking, but its significance is not only historical. In evaluation research, for instance, the experimental model is often preferred – if not as a feasible research design then as the ideal model against which the validity of concrete comparative projects can be assessed. It will not be against the spirit of AR to conduct such an experimental or comparative project within the framework of AR project: to design an experiment and to interpret its findings in an AR group.

The second type, *Organisational AR*, corresponds to a very common type of situation in AR. The aim of AR in organisational settings is often to support a re-organisation or the solving of structural conflicts and tensions between different hierarchical or functional levels (departments) or positions in an organisation. An important difference with other kinds of AR is that with problems of this kind the AR group consists of participants from several levels of the organisation working on the problems of their interrelationships (competencies, conflicts, work-flow problems etc.) often helped by an outside researcher or counsellor. A recent experience of the present author is a research project about the reorganisation of a system of organisations of the disabled, which although initially not meant as an AR project, gradually developed into a multilevel participative project (Kolaric et al. 2003). The research discovered important differences in power, assets and privileges between the organisations, as well as differences in the concepts of organising and future development and stimulated a gradual change in the organisation of the whole system. Another example is a project whose aim was to establish a catalogue of tasks of social services in a region by testing it on instances of real-time casework. Several groups of professionals from different levels, including social workers, man-

agers, faculty members and volunteer 'testers' participated in the discussion through a year of formulating the catalogue (Flaker 2004). A third example is a project of deinstitutionalisation of an institution for long-term psychiatric patients and people with learning disabilities. Through the participation of personnel at different levels, users and student volunteers over several years, the transition to an open institution was accomplished (Flaker 2004).

The aim of the third type, *Professionalising AR*, is to solve the problems of the professional handling of social workers (and other professionals in the field). In this case, the AR group consists of participants from the same profession (e.g. social workers) working on a common problem or task with the methodological help of a researcher or a counsellor. Examples here are projects for establishing methodical responses to the situation and common problems of fostering care, in adoption, post-penal care, social work with refugees etc. This type of AR is similar to the established forms of professional support and supervision which serve to improve the practice, the main difference being the research side of the enterprise. In AR the process of group 'supervision' has to be described and reported to the wider professional community.

The fourth type, *Empowering AR*, includes various user groups, with various aims, mostly self-help groups and community action groups (often combining both aspects, mutual help and social political goals). To justify the title of 'action research group', such a group has to install the research function in both its aspects, informing action and scientific community, a possible problem for this type of group.

We are prone to add a fifth type here, i.e. *Community AR*. It unites the aspects of Organisational AR and Empowering AR.

Action research is an option for those social workers and agencies who would like to act and simultaneously research what they are doing; to research for their sake and for the sake of the professional community of social work action science.

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Abstract

Aktionsforschung (Action Research – AR) ist der Überbegriff für eine Vielzahl verschiedener Ansätze, teilweise sich sogar konträr gegenüberstehender Epistemologien, die nichtsdestotrotz minimale gemeinsame Muster der Vorgehensweisen und der Philosophien aufweisen. AR kann als die bedeutendste Forschungsmethode in der Sozialarbeit bezeichnet werden, es ist ein Modell, das auf idealtypische Art und Weise die Funktionen und Verfahren der Sozialarbeitsforschung in sich vereint. Innerhalb des Bezugssystems der Sozialarbeitswissenschaft als eine der Handlungswissenschaften erfüllt AR idealtypisch die Anforderungen eines Forschungsansatzes, der gleichzeitig praktisch und wissenschaftlich relevant ist. Seit ihrer Entwicklung durch Kurt Lewin, als die „vergleichende Forschung auf dem Gebiet der Bedingungen und Konsequenzen verschiedener Formen sozialer Handlungen, und die Forschung, die zur sozialen Handlung führt", hat AR verschiedende problematische Konzeptualisierungen und Anwendungen durchgemacht.

Viel Verwirrung in der Konzeptualisierung von AR wurde durch das Fehlen der entsprechenden Positionierung in der konzeptuellen Hierarchie der Methoden hervorgerufen. Jeder Forschungsprozess beinhaltet vier Rollen: den Kunden oder Nutzer der Forschung, den Forscher, den Beobachter und den Beobachteten. In der „normalen" oder „traditionellen" Forschung sind diese Rollen räumlich, zeitlich, sozial und psychologisch voneinander getrennt, diese Distanz voneinander ist die Hauptquelle von Missverständnissen, Fehlern, geringem Wahrheitsgehalt und Irrelevanz des Forschungsergebnisses. In der AR werden alle vier Rollen gleichzeitig an einen Tisch gebracht: Dadurch können Missverständnisse aufgelöst und Fehler aufgedeckt und korrigiert werden, die Relevanz wird überprüft und die Gültigkeit

vergrößert, die Verantwortlichkeit für die Forschung und die Handlung wird gemeinsam übernommen (bleibt jedoch autonom) und das Engagement wächst.

Daher ist AR eine spezielle Art, Forschung als ein Vorhaben zu organisieren, das alle vier Rollen in sich vereint. Als solches kann es weder der Ebene der Epistemologien, noch der Ebene der Methoden und Techniken zugeordnet werden, sondern es gehört zur Zwischenebene der Forschungsorganisation, wie z.B. auch die Ethnologie oder das Experiment.

Ein dreidimensionales Modell der AR beschreibt den Platz der AR in der konzeptuellen Hierarchie am anschaulichsten. Die Dimensionen sind: die Art der Wissenschaft: Grundlagenforschung oder Aktions-Wissenschaft, die Epistomologie: positivistisch oder interpretivistisch, die Organisation des Forschungszyklus: die Verteilung der Rollen oder die Konzentration der Rollen in einer Gruppe. Demnach ist AR eine Forschungsart der Sozialarbeits-Handlungswissenschaft (und nicht der Grundlagenforschung), sie steht offen für alle Epistemologien, aber die interpretivistische oder qualitative Ausprägung erscheint passender und einbindender, in Bezug auf die Organisation des Forschungszyklus ist für AR die Konzentration auf die Rollen des Akteurs/Forschers/Beobachters/Beobachteten typisch (und nicht die Verteilung dieser Rollen).

Es macht Sinn, AR als funktionale Beziehung zwischen einem professionellen Forscher und den Benutzern/dem Benutzer zu betrachten. Unter einer funktionalen Beziehung versteht man eine vorsätzliche Beziehung, eine Beziehung, die auf ein Ziel ausgerichtet ist, in unserem Fall das Ziel, die Lösung für die praktische Problemsituation eines Auftraggebers zu finden. Die Situation entspricht der Situation eines Klienten, der beschließt, sich Hilfe in einer Beratungseinrichtung zu holen. Der Konsument der Forschung hofft, die Lösung für die Probleme durch die durchgeführte Forschung mit Hilfe eines professionellen Forschers zu finden. AR ist die Veränderung der Praxis mit Unterstützung des Forschers/der Forscher, gesteuert vom Kunden/von den Kunden dieser Forschung.

AR erreicht diese Ziele in erster Linie durch: die unmittelbare Präsenz der TeilnehmerInnen in einer andauernden Handlung dort, wo sie stattfindet (*in situ*), durch die Bildung einer AR-Gruppe, zusammengesetzt aus den TeilnehmerInnen an der Handlung oder den VertreterInnen der Hauptrollen, den ForscherInnen oder BeraterInnen, durch die Teilnahme der Mitglieder der AR-Gruppen an der Handlung und in der Forschung, durch unhierarchische Beziehungen und demokratische Führungspositionen in einer AR-Gruppe, die zur Entwicklung von gegenseitigem Vertrauen und zur Zusammenarbeit führen, durch die Vorgangsweise von sich wiederholenden Zy-

klen von Planung/Handlung/-Beobachtung/Reflexion, durch das Zusammenspiel der drei konstituierenden produktiven Prozesse des Lernens, des Nachforschens und des Handelns, durch das Sammeln empirischer Daten mit Hilfe einer Vielzahl von Forschungstechniken, durch den Ausdruck subjektiver Ansichten der TeilnehmerInnen oder der teilnehmenden Parteien, durch die Analyse und Interpretation der Daten über die Handhabung oder die Handlung und das Zurückleiten dieser Informationen zu dem Planungsprozess und zu der Aktions-Wissenschaft.

Bogdan Lešnik

The Art of Description

Introduction

The status of description is not very high in the classification of scientific research methods. It has no place in "hard" quantitative methodology, and it is mainly considered an auxiliary technique in qualitative research. There is a strange contradiction between this rather low status of description in scientific methodology and its evident domination over our knowledge of the other. Most things we have not experienced are only familiar to us through their descriptions, and our sense of knowledge is grounded in our belief that they are at least to some extent, or in a manner of speaking, accurate. It would be very difficult to imagine history and anthropoloy without description; a good description is often the best they can offer. Indeed, everything we *know*, whether from experience or from any other source, we must also be able to *describe*.

However, there is no intrinsic relation between "description" and "truth". What is described may be a witness' account, but also hearsay, rumour or gossip, not to mention stereotype and myth; much of what we take as "facts" derives from these latter kinds of narrative. Besides, description is of course indispensable for the works of fiction. Yet, we should not deny even such narratives all reference to reality, if what we mean by "reality" are the structures that govern our lives, and their material effects. Gossip, stereotypes, myths, fiction, etc. have a share in these structures, and it is not a marginal share. On the contrary, ethnography and literary theory (especially in conjunction with psychoanalysis) have shown that they have an integrative, unifying force. So how do we treat descriptive narratives of such different origins? One way is analysing their motives, the conditions of their emergence, their compositions, and most of all their uses – which is to say that we treat them equally.

Uses and applications

Science uses description in two general ways. One is as material for research. Depending on the nature of that material and the aims of research, we take description