Review:

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Ernest T. Stringer (2007). Action Research (Third Edition). London: Sage Publications, 279pp (pb), ISBN: 978-1-4129-5223-1, $46.95

Abstract: STRINGER's book on action research provides an accessible introduction to conducting participatory inquiries for social change. This general overview of the theoretical foundations of action research and methodological challenges is enriched by practical examples, insights, and exercises that are based on the author's substantial experience as a researcher and practitioner. Students and teachers will find this a valuable resource for teaching and training. However, STRINGER's positive outlook on humanity and communities and his non-confrontational style of action research ignores some of the "darker" sides of power, knowledge, and the difficulties of achieving sustainable social change. The final chapter and substantial appendices have a strong focus on traditional report writing; more alternative case studies on how to communicate action research may have been useful to balance his more conventional project-management approach. Overall, this is a very good introductory volume that can spark ideas, discussions, and (self-) reflection on how to better link theory and practice.

Table of Contents

1. Is Good Action Research Impossible?—Some Thoughts from A Lunchtime Discussion

Reviewing Ernest STRINGER's introduction to *Action Research* provided an interesting opportunity for me for critical (self-) reflection on how research is "actually" conducted. I am a researcher and doctoral student in a large development studies institute in the United Kingdom, and issues about the ethics and practicalities of "doing (action) research" apply fully to the nature of work colleagues and I are carrying out. Academic writing is part of the "core business," of course, but working closely with a broad range of international development organizations in conceptualizing, advising, and evaluating development interventions as well as "influencing" policy-makers offers insights into a broad spectrum of "action research" that is currently employed in the development "industry." Engaging with STRINGER's book highlighted some of the challenges,

constraints, and opportunities to "really" engage with action research. But what do I mean by "really"? Casual discussions over a cup of coffee revealed some of the discussants' attitudes towards action research and also towards a detailed "how-to" book: "I don't really need a book to tell me how to do my action research," a senior colleague remarked, and he continued his explanations.

> "It may be interesting for some students without prior field research experience before they go off to do their research, but I think that I have developed some kind of 'sixth sense' over the years of how to conduct research." [1]

Another colleague nodded approvingly when I described the outline of the book to her, and she added:

> "I would really like to do more comprehensive action research, but in most cases it is simply not possible—tight and often ridiculous time-frames, the nature of project funding, and an almost religious zeal to identify 'outputs' and 'products' in the form of a 20-page consultant report with a short summary and 'policy recommendations' and, rarely discussed, though, a kind of 'research fatigue' of the 'informants' and 'local experts.'" [2]

And a third colleague added on a different occasion:

> "Action research is like other 'motherhood-and-apple-pie' concepts: It sounds great and most colleagues will tell you that there should be more of it and they usually hugely enjoy doing it, but the implementation often remains at the level of lip-service. Probably the best action researchers are those who stay away from publishing their research and do meaningful interventions with a community instead." [3]

2. A Journey into Humanistic Inquiry

I am sure that I could find more voices that would raise some criticism as to why they do not really need a book on action research. And an additional question is why you, readers of *FQS* with a fascinating range of action research knowledge, should continue reading through this comparatively lengthy book review. Well, one simple answer is that STRINGER's book deserves our attention because it provides not just a simple "introduction" to the topic, but offers a more comprehensive view of the challenges of engaging people in action research and constantly demands our attention—whether we are research rookies or seasoned veterans of any kind of research "industry" that claims and aims to provide meaningful and sustainable social interventions. Or, to use STRINGER's words from the foreword: "I hope [...] *all* research that might properly be called *human* inquiry would exhibit three characteristics: decentralization, deregulation, and cooperativeness in execution" (p. xi, emphasis in original). And what STRINGER does in the following 200 pages (plus appendices) is to find a very good balance between the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological challenges and some of the practical solutions that follow from them. This balance between unleashing complexity (or complexities) of the subject and offering practical guidance (especially in the final "Reflection and Practice" part of every chapter) is a considerable achievement. In

so far this third edition becomes a "living example" of good action research writing and the learning processes from many years of experience, teaching, and engagement with "real-life" situations, and, most importantly, real people. Even a seemingly simple elaboration on the importance of "celebrating" the "end" (which is often difficult to define) of an action research project becomes a vivid example of how STRINGER combines practical advice with deeper insights and an optimistic view that cherishes humanity:

> "Celebrations should reflect the principles of action research as participants get to mingle, talk, and eat and drink together. Music and/or dance will assist the air of celebration, if the context allows it. Formal, sit-down dinners are usually not a good way of celebrating because they anchor people to table, inhibit interaction, and usually are costly. [...] Celebration is a time when all participants can congregate to acknowledge their collective achievement and say, in one form or another, 'Look what we have accomplished together.'" (pp.164-165) [4]

However, STRINGER does not elaborate on the "darker" sides of (action) research, e.g., rituals of appraisal or reporting of "success," something that is now increasingly being addressed by development anthropologists such as David MOSSE (2005), or the limits of participatory research in mainstream development thinking that Samuel HICKEY and Giles MOHAN (2004) explore. This may be one of the few short comings of his book. It is also very different from Peter REASON and Hilary BRADBURY's recently updated (2008) handbook on action research that elaborates on the subject in more than 700 pages, but uses a broad range of authors who contribute a chapter each on a certain topic, case study, or methodological challenge. But STRINGER certainly has a more modest approach in introducing the topic with a book that you can easily put in your bag and read "on the go" or in class. So let us now turn to a more structured review of the contents before I share a few more critical comments. [5]

The main body of the book (about 200 pages) consists of nine chapters and a preface. This gives you an idea about the length of each chapter, and the twenty or so pages of each chapter are an almost ideal length to be used for teaching purposes, especially as core reading for an academic class or as training material for a variety of purposes. Also, each chapter is divided into about ten sub-sections which makes it easy to get an idea about the topic just by browsing through the table of contents. The nine chapters form three major parts: the foundations of qualitative and action research, the actual research process, and possibilities to ensure sustainability after a specific piece of research has been concluded. Additionally, there are two substantial appendices with examples of formal reports and Internet resources on which I will also comment at the end of the review. [6]

3. Laying Out the Foundations of Action Research

"Action research, however, is based on the proposition that generalized solutions may not fit particular contexts or groups of people and that the purpose of the inquiry is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local solution" (p.5). With this statement, STRINGER makes it clear right from the beginning that he is aiming at having "inquiry for use" (p.12), i.e., to expect that something in a community of interest is actually happening. Action research has to be "community-based." One of his first longer case studies refers to school and curriculum development in a remote (Aboriginal) area of Australia and he introduces the story with the following sentence: "The ability of ordinary people to engage in complex organizational work usually deemed the province of professionals has been demonstrated many times" (p.12). We are only on pages 12/13 and STRINGER begins to outline a participatory program that challenges traditional views on "power," knowledge, and authority, and emphasizes the importance of listening to often marginalized groups and go beyond the traditional "labeling" of people as "aboriginal" or "poor." For many of the *FQS* readers or my colleagues quoted above this may seem all too obvious, but this short introduction could easily be included in reading lists for newcomers—be they students, civil servants, or a community group. This short and concise introduction is rounded off with a brief overview of additional literature (pp.15-16) for those who want to go into more depth regarding the foundations of action research. [7]

The next chapter on theory and principles is even closer to my area of working and writing as a development studies researcher. Maybe this is one of the reasons why I am also a little bit less enthusiastic and recognize a few shortcomings of STRINGER's approach. The chapter highlights a set of important conceptual foundations, e.g., about the cultural attitudes, the role of the researcher, and working principles (relationships, communication, participation, and inclusion). This is all very well, but even if we grant this chapter its overview/introductory character, it does reduce the complexity around social dynamics and research. "Relationships," for example, are not just a good working principle, they are a cornerstone of any successful "intervention"—and they require time, probably the most precious resource in an action research project. Rosalind EYBEN's work (2006) is one example of how the management of relationships is relevant on all levels of policy and practice in the multi-faceted field of development. [8]

For instance, I attended a seminar a few weeks ago where a "veteran" of community-based research from Canada explained how he finally received funding for a center on community-based research after being a professor for close to thirty years. And the center spent the first year of its work "with not much else than building relationships with communities." This need for time to build relationships is a pervasive element of action research and also the most difficult one, because most research, practice, and projects do not have the time to invest into relationships. [9]

And there is also a very positive undertone to these working principles in the book: For example, "maintain harmony" and "avoid conflicts, where possible" (p.28) are probably good pieces of advice for "beginners." However, I wonder whether this reflects the true nature of power relationships, and the anger and frustration that are often inside a community and need to be aired in some ways to go beyond romanticized views of a "community" that wants to cooperate for a "greater good." My experiences from international development make me much more cautious about the role of powerful relationships, the dark sides of "participation" (e.g., manipulation through an experienced facilitator, sometimes called "facipulation") and non-participation as a powerful way of showing "engagement" in a project. Many communities that we will encounter already feel over-researched or that they have wasted time with "participation" for too long. SPRINGER elaborates briefly on this point in the following chapter when he outlines "the ethics of action research" (pp.54-56) and clearly states that people have a right to "refuse to participate" (p.55), but at the same time he does not mention those who do *not* participate as part of the community (p.53). Depending on time, seasonality, gender, etc., the quest for the "missing participants" can be as important as working with those who volunteer to participate. [10]

The chapter on "planning the research" is actually a good opportunity to comment on the "Reflection and Practice" section (p.62) that rounds off every chapter: The exercises build carefully on one another and the guiding questions of a small "cultural" study he introduces at the end (immerse yourself into a place/space and note what you observe, feel, etc.) show the dichotomy of simplicity "versus" complexity, because the reflections do not require complicated knowledge or skills, but rather an attentive willingness to engage with a community. Many development practitioners find organized "immersions" into a "poor village" one of the most powerful experiences in their career even if they rationally "know" what such a community is supposed to look like or what problems they are facing. This shows the positive side of community-based research which can often foster relationships simply by the researcher's willingness to reach out and experience a community as a part of a "humanistic" endeavor that links attitudes, research, and practice to a holistic concept of sustainable living. [11]

4. "Look," "Think," "Act"—The Central Chapters of The Book

The next three chapters ("Look," "Think," and "Act") are the core of STRINGER's book. Each spans close to thirty pages and outlines the methods of and possibilities to conduct an action research project. In reality, there will probably be several iterations of "look, think, act" rather than a clear sequential order as the book suggests. At the end of the "Act" chapter (p.142), STRINGER could have emphasized more strongly that social life is more complicated than an (action research) project cycle and that relationships management does not simply "end" even if "the end point of the process should be the resolution of the problems with which we started" (ibid.), but the chapters are a very good introduction and can easily be used as teaching material and to engage with participants in exactly these discussions and reflections. [12]

Chapter 4 (Look: Building the Picture) outlines (traditional) research methods to "look" at social life and gain insights into a community. Interviews, focus groups, participant observation, surveys…a broad variety of tools is introduced and briefly examined for the purpose of employing them for an action research project. This is really just a short overview that almost everyone who has ever engaged with social science research will recognize, and does not offer any particular insights into the relation between the methods and action research as a distinct form of research. STRINGER literally spends seven lines on "working ethnographically" (p.84) which he presents as one of three alternative approaches, and the third "alternative," a community profile, does not have any visualization of the process or possible outcomes. If I think of the latest work in participatory development research (cf. CHAMBERS, 2008), this chapter merely scratches the surface of action-research-related tools for inquiry. [13]

The next chapter (Think: Interpreting and Analyzing) continues in this spirit. STRINGER builds on DENZIN's work which is quite well-known and which he uses to outline different ways of interpreting data and to undertake research to "produce meaningful descriptions and interpretations of social processes" (p.96). And even though this slightly dry outline of the analysis process is supplemented with a practical story about encountering anger from Aboriginals because STRINGER tried to impose pre-fabricated categories of racism on them (p.97), the chapter remains within the "comfort zone" of most social scientist researchers. When he writes about "Presentations and Performances" (pp.120f.), the few bullet points on "Drama," "Role Play," "Song," or "Poetry" look forlorn when the opposite should be the case at the end of a chapter that is supposed to encourage those who undertake research with communities to do something exciting and meaningful! [14]

The last chapter on the actual research process (Chapter 6, Act: Planning and Implementing Sustainable Solutions) is also the most interesting. In particular, the "Implementing" part takes the reader further than just learning about the "implementation" of a piece of research that has been conducted in the previous two chapters. "Supporting," "Modeling," and "Linking" (pp.134-139) give a good idea of how complex an implementation process should be, if meaningful and sustainable change in a community is the overall goal. The work is not finished, but difficult processes that involve people, human behavior, and organizational structures need to be carefully nurtured. As STRINGER notes in one of the practical examples: "I recently taught a successful graduate course called Community-Based Ethnography. […] One student noted [during the feedback], 'The instructor not only teaches about community-based research; he does it' " (p.138). This is certainly more difficult than it sounds. Maybe I am a bit too critical, but using Gandhi's quote regarding being the change that you wish to see in others (p.137) is a bit of a turn-off and probably not the most challenging or stimulating piece of advice you want to share here, because the quote seems to be over-used in e-mail signatures rather than offering short, memorable wisdom, but this should not distract from a very important chapter. [15]

5. The Challenge of "Formal Reports"

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with "strategic planning for sustainable change and development" and "formal reports," respectively. I can understand the rationale behind them, maybe even the necessity to engage with "operational statements" (p.151) and "financial planning" (pp.155-157) or the outline of formal research reports (pp.169-188), but I find these less than inspiring and quite conventional. The "rational" academic researcher in me "knows" that these are important elements and the presentation of a project and the formal conclusion with a report are required elements of any project management. But there could have been space for more radical alternatives: ways of communicating, creative writing, and/or (self-) reflective inquiry of the researcher. As interesting and concise as the final chapter, "Understanding Action Research," is in presenting some theoretical aspects of legitimacy of qualitative research or of "power, control and subordination" (pp.194-203), it seems to remain an academic endeavor, rather than a passionate "living thing" that community-based research should be. Fun, joy, pleasure, feelings, anger...I would have liked to participate in a vibrant "fiesta" at the end rather than in a slightly dull university seminar where "'scripts' for policies, plans, procedures, and behaviour" (pp.208-210) are discussed. The last paragraph of the text is entitled "in the company of friends" (pp.213-214), and I find this a bit too reconciliatory. Even in a social science research environment (and in the "real" world, of course) action research has still many doubters and "friends" who smile in your face before they finally stab you in the back with a, say, quantitative analysis or evaluation. Maybe "community-based action research might [...] be defined as 'the search for understanding in the company of friends' " (p.214), but this seems a more aspirational than an "objective" description of the state of the art of action research. But the book does not end here. There is a thirty-page annex with examples of formal reports (again, it would have been nice to also include some less conventional items, e.g., photos, pictures, poems, stories) and a second annex with ten pages of Internet resources. They provide further information on different topics (from Education to disabilities and youth), but I have not checked whether they are still operational and really good portals to the issues. [16]

6. "Yes, We Can!"—An Invitation to Critically Engage With Action Research

So how does STRINGER's book relate to the comments of my colleagues that I used to introduce the review? No single book can fully address the disjunctures that arise between even the best intentioned and implemented action research project and the "reality" of many organizations and sectors that very often do not (or cannot) engage in the practices of action- and community-oriented research. [17]

But the bigger picture of the critical humanistic inquiry should not be tarnished by these minor caveats. Interestingly, STRINGER quotes himself from "a small biography for an action research association" to share some overall impressions of being an engaged researcher/practitioner:

"I have been gratified by the deeply purposeful work in which people have engaged, delighted in the very practical, immediate outcomes they achieve, and heartened by the sense of empowerment that comes to them in the process. It is the energy and enthusiasm that results from these participatory processes that continues to inspire me" (p. xvii). [18]

Maybe it is part of STRINGER's "mission" and accomplishment with his book to leave people a little bit excited, motivated, and curious about action-research—a bit of a "Yes, we can!" mood rather than following a more purely academic "Yes, but ..." approach. I enjoyed reading the book and STRINGER would probably agree that engaging with perceived shortcomings is also an important part of the learning journey that comes with an action-oriented project in the real world! [19]

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