

Toward a Reframing of Action Research for Human Resource and Organization Development: Moving Beyond Problem Solving and Toward Dialogue

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Abstract

We propose a framework for viewing action research (AR) by considering the level of criticality and the emphasis on methodological process. Specifically, we propose conventional AR, critical AR, and dialogic AR as three broad categories for considering AR. This framework is explored through discussing the philosophical foundations upon which these approaches rest and providing examples of AR studies and conceptual writings in the organizational change and development literature. This literature appears to be dominated by perspectives and discourses close to the conventional AR paradigm, which does not actively acknowledge value stances. A central point of the article is that dialogic AR, informed by pragmatic philosophy and philosophical hermeneutics, represents an emerging, promising perspective. Dialogic AR's primary concern is to create understanding and mutual learning in and through dialogue while also leading to practical solutions. Practical implications of dialogic AR are also considered, in particular the conditions that need to be present for critical dialogue to flourish and the organizational realities that prevent such dialogue.

Keywords: Action research, dialogue, philosophical hermeneutics, organization development

Introduction

With continuously changing economic, political, and social environments, human resource and organization development (HROD) professionals often need to rethink methods of engagement within organizations. McLagan (1989) made this point by stating that flexibility in HROD practice is welcome and that HROD cannot be prescribed through a cookbook approach or in a set of procedures. At the same time, existing organizational research and theory oftentimes fails to reflect organizational realities. For example, the organization development (OD) and change literature often describes change in a linear fashion. Within this linear process, manipulation of variables is said to affect organizational change in the desired direction (e.g., see Porras & Silvers, 1991). However, as many OD practitioners and researchers confirm, organizational realities are complex and messy. Instead, change can be seen as a spiraling process in which practitioners seek to understand the context, take action, and understand what happened (Weick & Quinn, 1999). The spiraling process occurs in multiple, overlapping cycles. Action research has been adopted as the primary approach in organization development (OD) for understanding and facilitating this spiraling change process in organizations (Burke, 2002).

In many HROD textbooks (Cummings & Worley, 2001; Swanson & Holton, 2001) and in some literature dealing specifically with AR (Cunningham, 1993, McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996), AR is presented as a specific technique or method to diagnose and solve organizational problems. In other words, authors tend to focus on describing what steps need to be followed, and subsequently develop models to illustrate that process. For example, Lewin's (1947a) work has been commonly reduced to the famous "unfreeze, move, and re-freeze" model, which has become a dominant approach for viewing AR in the HROD field. Scholars have developed other AR models to guide the work of action researchers and OD practitioners. Typically the stages of the AR process in HROD include (1) an initial analysis and contracting phase, (2) joint diagnosis and feedback to the client, (3) planning and developing the appropriate intervention, (4) implementing it, and (5) institutionalizing and evaluating the intervention.

There is no doubt that these AR models provide useful frameworks for AR and OD practice. In fact, all three orientations to AR discussed in this paper follow these or similar steps. However, AR is more than a method to diagnose and solve organizational problems, as predominately described in the HROD literature. In 2001, Swanson and Holton, two leading scholars in the HROD field, claimed that AR does not even constitute a research method. However, they have recently included an entire chapter on AR as a mixed method approach to conducting research in organizations (see Swanson & Holton, 2005). This might point to a change of thinking and an increasing acknowledgement that AR is not just a problem solving technique. The AR literature has long moved beyond this narrow conceptualization of AR by stressing that AR is not just another method in the repertoire of organizational consultants and researchers. Instead, AR is a particular way of thinking about and acting in human inquiry, a worldview which expresses itself in a specific set of practices, and a collaborative process of mutual and liberating inquiry (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Gustavsen, 1992; McArdle & Reason, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). These ideas seem to suggest that in addition to solving problems, the potential of AR lies in the creation of mutual understanding and learning in and through dialogue, critical reflection, and action. This perspective is sometimes ignored by purely procedural and instrumental conceptualizations of AR that dominate HROD research and practice.

In addressing these issues, we begin with an overview of historical origins of AR that, in our judgment, have left their mark on how AR is approached in HROD today. Next, we introduce a framework of AR practices, which is used to classify different emphases of AR practice within HROD. The framework highlights two spectrums of AR practice, namely the methodological process of inquiry and the level of critical intensity. Within this framework, we propose three possible categories for approaching AR: conventional AR, critical AR, and dialogic AR. Dialogic AR is an emerging perspective, which we explore more deeply than the other two perspectives. We provide three examples of dialogic AR in organizational settings, before our concluding discussion which considers the promises and challenges of the respective approaches to AR.

Origins of Action Research

When considering the history of AR, individuals such as John Collier and John Dewey or more recently, Chris Argyris and Stephen Kemmis have shaped the various branches of AR. However, we limit our discussion to Kurt Lewin and the social scientists at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. In our view, these ideas still exert a major influence on how AR is approached in HROD today.

Kurt Lewin. To our knowledge, Lewin wrote only two papers that specifically address action research (see Lewin, 1946, 1947b). Nonetheless, he is often credited with coining the term AR and is considered the father of AR (Cunningham, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Marrow, 1958). His historical significance in this field likely results from his longstanding attention to integrating social theory and action, in order that the abstract and the concrete were no longer separated. Lewin saw AR as a way to solve practical problems such as easing racial tensions and addressing problems faced by minorities, in addition to providing a basis for formulating general laws that influence group life (Lewin, 1948a). In Lewin's view, the site of social problems should be the site of social science research. Instead of studying the behavior of individuals and groups from a disengaged and distant perspective, Lewin practiced an experimental approach in field settings. He brought scientists and local actors together in an effort to both *understand* and *address* the problems people were facing in their everyday lives and practices.

Lewin greatly influenced OD practice with his conceptualization of change as a three-stage process consisting of the unfreezing, moving, and refreezing phases. In order to explain the causes and drivers of behavioral change, Lewin drew on field theory from the physical sciences (Lewin, 1947a, 1936). More specifically, Lewin described human behavior as a function of a person interacting with the environment. The so-called life space is one of the key concepts of this theory. Lewin contended that the life space consists of a person's psychological environment, including goals, desires, needs, and anxieties. It is the composite of one's psychological past, present, and future, and it determines people's behavior at any given moment (Lewin, 1943). The Lewinian model of change rests on the assumption that a person or a social system remains in its current state (i.e., the field of forces remain in equilibrium) unless there is some kind of confrontation or external stimulus. Therefore, a destabilization of the status quo, or *unfreezing*, is the first necessary step to affect behavioral change. Lewin (1947a) stated that "to break open the shell of complacency and self-righteousness it is sometimes necessary to bring about deliberately an emotional stir-up" (p. 35). However, the individual life space and/or a group's social space are influenced by both helping and restraining forces. These forces either support or hinder a shift from a lesser to a more desired state. Once identified, the movement or change from an existing state to a more desired state requires an intentional alteration of the field forces in order to create disequilibrium. This *moving phase* can be accomplished by reducing the opposing forces or adding forces that facilitate a movement in the desired direction. Once the desired state is reached, specific actions are necessary to *re-freeze* the new state and new behavior. This re-freezing is necessary because individuals and groups can regress to previously undesired states like moving from a high performance state back to a previous low performance state.

Levin (1994) claimed that this model still guides most OD practitioners' consulting work in the United States. The Lewinian change model has been criticized for conceptualizing organizational change as a short-term intervention or a single event that is brought about intentionally (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Marshak, 1993; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Alternative conceptualizations see change as incremental, evolving, and continuous. In Greenwood and Levin's (1998) view, AR should be a vehicle for continuous, sustained change, and participative learning with a greater emphasis on ongoing dialogue.

Lewin's experimental approach also has some resemblance to traditional social science methods in that the social scientist was largely in control of the research process (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Like conventional social scientists, he was clearly interested in establishing causal relationships of social phenomena (e.g., see Lewin, 1943), but his approach represented a major

departure from that of other social scientists. Instead of conducting distant and disengaged studies of social phenomena that could be quantified and measured, he emphasized the study of intersubjective meanings of local actors. Even though it might seem that Lewin was mainly interested in behavioral change, he viewed change as a process of re-education “in which changes of knowledge and beliefs, changes of values and standards, changes of emotional attachments and needs, and changes of everyday conduct occur” (Lewin, 1948b; p. 58). This belief is evident in one of Lewin’s most famous contributions to the field of group dynamics, the so-called Training Groups or T-Groups, which provide an early foundation for contemporary dialogic approaches to AR. During a workshop aimed at training staff to address intergroup tensions, Lewin and his associates discovered the importance of providing feedback about individual behavior in groups (NTL Institute, 2008). The feedback and the facilitated group dialogue turned out to be a rich learning experience about issues such as interpersonal relations, personal growth, and leadership. Subsequently, T-Groups were designed as relatively unstructured small-group sessions without pre-defined agendas during which individuals would share their experiences in order to gain insight about their own and others’ behavior. This process could lead to better interpersonal relations within the group. Other outcomes associated with T-Groups are increased openness, awareness, open communication, and increased listening skills (Cummings & Worley, 2001).

Tavistock Institute. In Great Britain, shortly after World War II, a group of researchers joined together and became known as the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The British government called upon these researchers as part of the efforts to rebuild the British industrial base after the war. In comparison to the early as well as present action research tradition in the United States, there was a greater emphasis on issues of workplace democracy in Great Britain (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In fact, the researchers at the Tavistock Institute were greatly responsible for the emergence of the industrial democracy movement, which advocated greater participation of workers in industrial decisions that affect their working lives. For instance, Tavistock researchers studied the link between industrial democracy and efficiency at Glacier Metal Company. This was one of the first studies in which management, labor, and social scientists worked closely together in an effort to remove inequalities and injustices. Action research methods were also employed when Tavistock researchers found that an organization can be more effective when the technical system of production and the prevailing social system are considered simultaneously. This often-cited research from coal mines is the foundation of the theory of organizations as socio-technical systems (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Further developed by Emery (1959), it represented a major departure from theories which focused mainly on designing work flows according to technical requirements (i.e., scientific management). The differences in performance between high-performing and low-performing coal-mines, which employed the same technology, was explained by the differing work arrangements. For example, in the high-performing groups, leaders turned to employees for advice in implementing new technology. In the low-performing teams, employees merely followed the instructions of industrial engineers who lacked hands-on work experience in that environment.

The distinctive features of both Tavistock’s and Lewin’s approaches to studying social phenomena was to closely relate knowledge and action and a commitment to collaboration. Their aim was to generate knowledge relevant to the specific circumstances that social groups were facing, and in Lewin’s case, also developing general laws of group life.

Current AR Approaches in HROD. Although neither Lewin nor the Tavistock researchers specifically address the question of values in research, it is apparent that they

strongly believed in and were committed to democratic ways of organizing and leading groups and organizations. In advocating democratic approaches, these researchers strengthened the human relations movement, which is recognized as one of the foundations of the organization development (OD) field. They also influenced other organizational researchers and scholars such as Edgar Schein and Chris Argyris.

In spite of the humanistic value orientation that many HROD professionals undoubtedly have, their practices often leave little room for dialogue. We argue that dialogue is necessary for a more critical engagement with organizations. It seems reasonable to assume that HROD consultants could lose for-profit corporations as clients if they engage in overt emancipatory or consciousness raising approaches to organizational change. For similar reasons, academic researchers would experience resistance in gaining access to organizations if they take such approaches. The power-dominated discourse setting (i.e., the manager-worker relationship), organizations' tendency toward conservatism, and management's fear of the potentially subversive effect of dialogue (Factor, 1994), are all strong forces working against dialogic and critical modes of engagement. As an additional barrier to critical modes of engagement, research and science in organizational studies is still heavily influenced by positivist approaches which emphasize value-neutral research and prioritize the building of theory over engagement in organizations. Under such approaches, disengaged researchers affect practice by developing theories through their own judgment, which are "tested" later in real-world practice (Torraco, 1997). As part of the process of emulating natural science and its tendency toward accumulative predictive theories, researchers have sometimes been pressured to present AR using conventional reporting styles, essentially sanitizing the action out of the report (Dick, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In light of these issues, it is not surprising that most HROD researchers and practitioners have "chosen" a predominately value-neutral, process-oriented reading of Lewin's model of change. However, as we explain later, conventional approaches, which tend not to acknowledge and inquire into research participants' value stances, beliefs, feelings, and assumptions, can be combined with other approaches to AR in politically savvy ways. These approaches can provide organizations with more complex and sustainable results, in addition to facilitating more humane workplaces and societies.

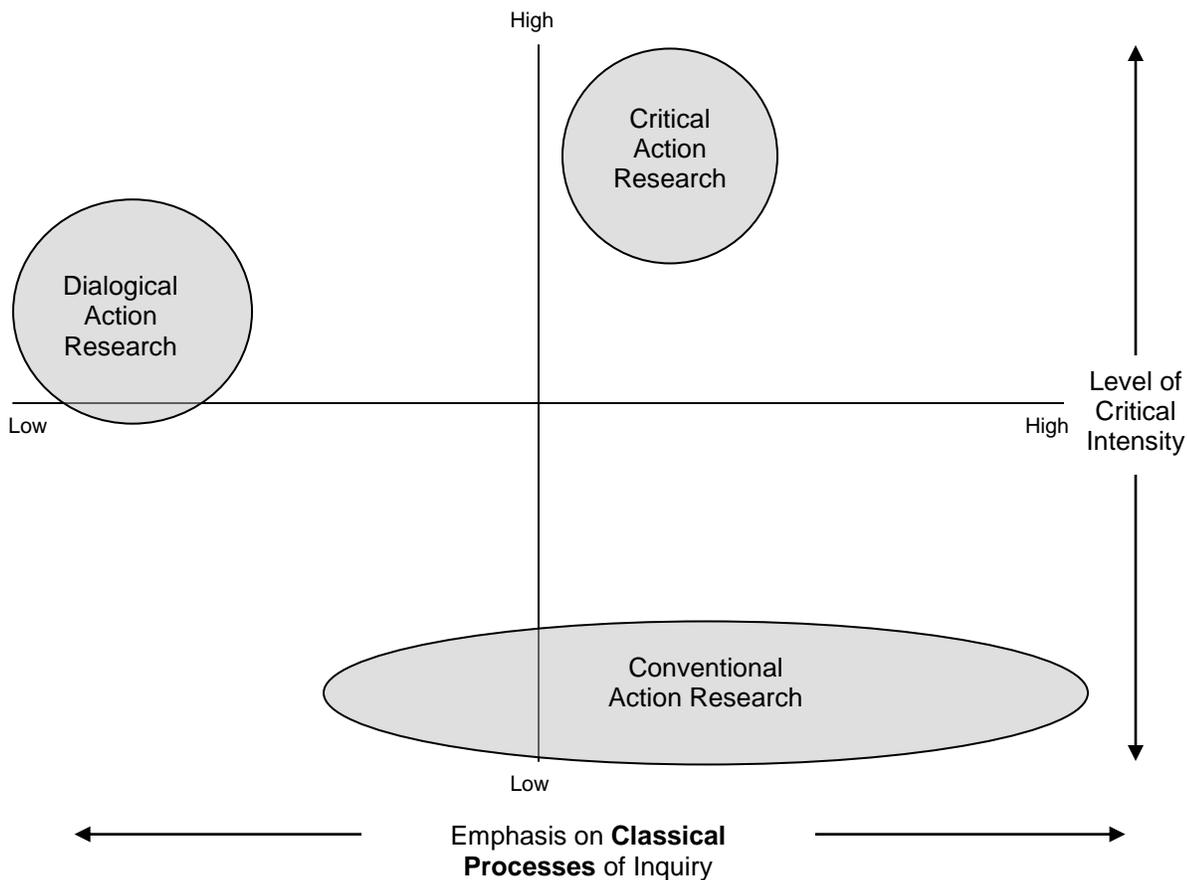
Approaches to Action Research

Action research draws on a wide range of philosophical frameworks, resulting in a variety of approaches to doing AR. Reason and Bradbury (2001) stated that AR's theoretical and philosophical roots lie primarily in pragmatic philosophy, critical thinking, social constructionist theory, systems theory, the practice of democracy, and, more recently complexity theory. According to Reason and Bradbury, the refusal to adopt one single theoretical and philosophical perspective "can be seen as an expression of a post-modern sentiment" (2001, p. 3). However, it seems that AR, as it is understood, talked about, and practiced in HROD, has not been heavily influenced by these perspectives. It is widely perceived as a method to solve organizational problems (e.g., see Akdere, 2003; Cummings & Worley, 2001; Swanson & Holton, 2001).

In order to structure the following discussion about various ideological readings of AR, we created a framework that considers both the degree of criticality and the emphasis on conventional scientific research methods in common approaches to AR (Figure 1). Horizontally, we consider the extent to which action researchers focus on classical methodological rigor, by drawing on Schwandt's (1997) discussion about the nature of values in human inquiry. Vertically, we consider the levels of critical intensity in various approaches to AR by utilizing Habermas' (1971) distinctions between technical, emancipatory, and practical or hermeneutical

knowledge interests. Within this framework, we locate three broad categorizations of AR: conventional AR, critical AR, and dialogical AR. These broad categories include multiple types of approaches and techniques. We do not intend to imply a strict separation between the AR categories outlined below. There is considerable overlap between various categories since AR projects cannot be assigned neatly to specific categories. Additionally, these categories do not constitute three distinct and equal areas of AR practice that each follow different sets of practices. Nonetheless, as we will attempt to demonstrate, some AR projects display more tendencies toward certain categories. These categories allow us to consider differing approaches on the basis of level of criticality and the emphasis on methodological process.

Figure 1: Approaches to Action Research



Conventional Action Research

On our continuum of AR approaches, conventional AR represents a relatively uncritical mode of engagement. This approach to social inquiry emphasizes the role of an expert researcher who generates knowledge *about* an object of interest, in stark contrast to the dialogic AR approach discussed later (Schwandt, 1997). Furthermore, conventional AR is supposed to be approached from a value-neutral attitude, which can frequently be observed in consulting relationships. However, when researchers and consultants take a value-neutral stance, we argue

that they primarily serve the interests of management. Thus, more often than not solutions are pursued that reflect the values of management and those of the AR practitioner who applies his or her knowledge and expertise to the issue at hand. Their decisions and actions are to some degree influenced by their own value stances, but these do not tend to be openly reflected upon and discussed. This value-neutral orientation also dominates the social sciences where researchers often attempt to keep the social world under investigation at arms' length and claim to be objective, emotionally detached, and describe the world "as it is." This position is sometimes referred to as "naturalism" because the social scientist borrows methods from the natural sciences. This point of view was articulated by the social scientists and philosophers Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Both argued that the primary goal of the social scientist is to explain and predict the social world. The nature of social reality is assumed to be fundamentally stable, enduring, and "out there" (Sussman & Evered, 1978), and the kind of knowledge produced is primarily procedural and technical. These ideas represent an empirical-analytical approach to research which is dominated by a technical, instrumental, or means-end knowledge interest (Habermas, 1971). This interest aims at mapping and controlling social and natural processes, and finding generalizable laws. Within our proposed framework, this knowledge interest represents the lowest levels of criticality because there tends to be little to no space for questioning existing systems and/or practices.

Kemmis (2001) pointed out that there are literally thousands of examples of AR which fit this paradigm. He explained that this type of AR seeks to solve problems and fulfill goals predetermined before the project begins. These goals are not necessarily questioned. For example, French and Bell (1999) define action research as

the process of systematically collecting research data about an ongoing system, relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system, based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data (p. 130).

Another illustration of this rather uncritical problem solving approach can be found in Akdere's (2003) conceptual article, which suggests an integration of the AR paradigm in organizational training and development activities. While acknowledging the humanistic and democratic value orientation of AR, he repeatedly describes AR as a problem-solving technique aimed at improving organizational performance. When comparing the roles of action researchers to that of trainers, Akdere (2003) stated that they share the aim of "helping employees identify and adopt more efficient ways of performing and operating job-related tasks" (p. 420). This view of action research is predominant in organizational consulting and consists of a relatively uncritical cycle of information gathering and feedback (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). McKernan (1991) referred to this type of AR as the scientific-technical view of problem solving and Grundy (1988) called it technical action research. The action researcher or the OD consultant assumes the role of an expert. Although stakeholders in the organization are involved in the research process and can directly communicate with the researcher/consultant, their participation is peripheral compared to other modes of action research. While this may sometimes be necessary due to practical considerations as the example below will illustrate, in other occasions opportunities for a more inclusive and reflective AR practice might be foregone under this approach. The intervention itself is usually short-term and aimed at fixing a problem. Lippitt and Lippitt (1978) stressed that this approach, with its emphasis on the role of the researcher/consultant as an expert may lead to an increased dependence on the consultant.

As we pointed out earlier, AR studies often display characteristics that can be placed at various points in our proposed framework. Kowalski, Harmon, Yorks, and Kowalski (2003) provide one such example in their AR project that sought to reduce aggressive behaviors and stress in the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). It displays characteristics of conventional and value-neutral AR at the beginning stages, but as the project matured, the researchers employed more critical modes of engagement and less focus on the mechanics of the methodological process. A steering team consisting of academic researchers and higher-level VA members guided the three-year project. Local action teams at eleven different sites supported the activities of the project. Because of the high value placed on numerical data in the VA for decision making, the steering team used rigorous quantitative data collection and analysis techniques in the first stage data collection. In addition, the research team dealt with a culture in which employees typically asked for permission instead of acting independently. The steering team also had the technical responsibility of educating the local action teams about workplace stress and aggression issues. As a result of these circumstances, the action researchers had to initially assume the role of expert consultants, leaving virtually no space for dialogue or critical inquiry. This role changed significantly as the project moved forward, but their initial engagement with the VA did not include challenging of the existing culture and values. In the early phases of the project, we see a strong focus on methodological rigor and the creation of objective knowledge *about* the issue at hand (i.e., causes and effects of stress and aggression and their impact on business results within the VA). We argue that this part of Kowalski et al's (2003) AR project corresponds to conventional AR. The steering team understood the realities of organizational practice, which demanded techniques closer to the conventional approach. AR practitioners' values were certainly at play here (e.g., their preference for a democratic workplace, or their implicit assumption that better business results can be achieved in a less stressful environment), but these value stances were not actively acknowledged or discussed at this stage of the project. The case provides a good example of utilizing conventional approaches in one stage and dialogical AR in another stage, as we will explain later.

The conventional approach to AR is often criticized by proponents of appreciative inquiry (AI) (e.g., Bushe, 1999; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). AI stresses that it is the researcher's duty to help make organizations and the individuals within organizations aware of the system's life-giving forces by promoting positive values within the system. AI proponents see the problem-solving approach as based on logical positivist assumptions, in particular the assumption that there is a fundamentally stable psychological and social reality. They argue that this approach is of limited use for changing and transforming social systems, which results in significant changes in stakeholders' points of view, preconceptions, priorities, identities, and relationships with each other. Positivist approaches ignore the power of language to create new social and psychological realities and to dramatically change practices.

Critical Action Research

Critical inquiry promotes a particular set of ideas and is essentially emancipatory and political in nature (e.g., AR practices based on feminist or Marxist theories). *Participatory action research (PAR)* often refers to AR carried out within this paradigm. Critical AR aims to create knowledge and results in action, but also aims to empower oppressed people, through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge (McArdle & Reason, 2008; Schwandt, 2001). According to Schwandt (1997), the conventional and the critical frameworks share a quest for creating knowledge *about* an object by means of professional inquiry. However, they differ in

regard to the type of knowledge being created. Critical AR aims at generating emancipatory knowledge that questions underlying ideologies and power structures, while the knowledge interest of the conventional approach is technical (Habermas, 1971). In both approaches, social research is a systematic and methodological process, although there is less emphasis on methodology in emancipatory forms of inquiry (Schwandt, 1997). Within HROD, critical approaches have gained more attention in recent years as a way of helping organizations to become more humane and ethical by considering societal issues as part of HROD practice (e.g., Fenwick, 2005). Critical approaches to AR provide one way of integrating these critical perspectives into actual HROD practice while minimizing the risk of elitism (Githens, 2007). However, critical projects can be difficult to undertake within some organizations, especially for-profit companies. Fenwick (2004) argues for a focus on “small wins” by utilizing critical approaches in small-scale ways, in order to minimize risk to HROD practitioners (also see Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Kemmis’s (2001) work with Australian universities provides an example of critical AR. Kemmis’ work used Habermas’ theory of system and lifeworld to critique modern societies. Through these conceptual ideas, Habermas claimed that modern societies are characterized by a colonialization of the lifeworld by its rationalized systems such as bureaucracies and markets. These systems are dominated by money and power, which leads to disruptions of the communicative lifeworld. The lifeworld consists of contexts of meaning through which individuals understand and interpret their situation and environment (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). Additionally, the lifeworld facilitates the formation of identities and relationships to other people. Kemmis (2001) identified two sides of universities. The systems side operated according to one set of principles, with its tight monitoring of professors’ work through a focus on resources and expenses and university policies that restricted academic freedom. On the other side, the lifeworld or the social setting had quite different dynamics, ideas and values. Kemmis and his AR participants shed light on some of these relationships which impacted their lifeworld, such as the increasing amount of interpersonal conflicts resulting from these dynamics. This work mirrors Habermas’ (1971) emancipatory knowledge interest, which is characterized by deep reflection and critical inquiry in order to free individuals and organizations from false assumptions, ideological distortions, and social distortions.

Dialogic Action Research

Dialogic AR emphasizes the critical engagement of individuals, organizations, or communities when undertaking action-oriented investigations into organizational issues or problems. This engagement occurs through a critical reflection upon current practices, in particular through an examination of the beliefs, values, tacit assumptions, and mental models informing and shaping practices (Schwandt, 1997). Schwandt argues that dialogic and critical social inquiry share a commitment to matters of everyday life as opposed to focusing on finding solutions and solving social problems in goal-rational ways (i.e., asking how to best achieve a pre-determined goal without questioning the goals themselves). But a key distinction between dialogic and the other two approaches outlined earlier is the role of professional inquiry. Schwandt maintains that dialogic approaches *abandon the concern with classic scientific method* which characterize the conventional and to some extent the critical approaches. However, this does not mean that dialogic research approaches *abandon method and the AR process altogether*. On the contrary, the stages of a dialogically oriented AR project will most likely resemble that of a conventional approach. Dialogic inquiry requires careful planning and skillful application of

techniques that lead participants to dialogue through inquiring into accepted norms and mental models and allowing them to question dominant values. This type of dialogue rarely occurs automatically or naturally. The emphasis on reflective practices, such as double-loop learning, also differentiates dialogic AR from conventional AR. To facilitate double-loop learning and to foster the dialogue process, Argyris, Putnam, and McLain Smith (1985), Argyris (1997), and Tee and Liang (2005) used specific methods to facilitate dialogue processes while exploring organizational development issues. Although these authors undertook specific steps and processes, the overarching “method” of dialogic research is the concern with inquiring into our values, assumptions, and preconceived notions about what is important. In other words, a central goal of the *method* is deep and sustained inquiry into “why” the inquiry itself is important (Friedman, Rothman, & Withers, 2006).

In the dialogic research tradition, social inquiry is redefined “as a dialogical and reflective process of democratic discussion and philosophical critique” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 35) that is no longer preoccupied with generating knowledge *about* an object (e.g. human practices). Instead, it focuses on the cultivation of practical or hermeneutic knowledge, which seeks *Verstehen* or inter-human understanding both within and between cultures and may be achieved by entering into a dialogue. This knowledge is “useful to people in the conduct of their everyday lives” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2) and practices. However, this kind of knowledge is not absolute, but is subject to change over time. Similarly, Flyvbjerg (2001), who critiques the classical method-driven social sciences seeking to emulate the natural sciences, calls for a social science that focuses on value-rational questions (e.g., questioning whether a certain goal is desirable and asking what should be done about it). According to Flyvbjerg (2001), the goal of such a science is to “produce input to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in a society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge” (2001, p. 139). Because inquiry of this kind does not explicitly seek emancipation and critique, but still might lead to critical reflection upon existing practices, we place it closer to the middle of the axis that represents the level of criticality (see Figure 1).

Specifically, Greenwood and Levin’s (1998), Forester’s (1999), and Gustavsen’s (1992) approaches to AR fit this description, emphasizing the creation of arenas for dialogue as a medium for reflection, mutual learning, and democratization. These ways of doing AR represent relatively unexplored terrain in HROD. For the most part, they are informed by pragmatist and hermeneutic philosophy (in particular philosophical hermeneutics), and given their philosophical underpinnings, they take an anti-foundationalist stance epistemologically. Pragmatic philosophy, especially John Dewey’s and Richard Rorty’s works, has received attention by AR practitioners (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason, 2003). However, Greenwood and Levin (1998) expressed their surprise that the work of philosophical hermeneuticists, in particular that of Gadamer, have not yet been examined by the AR community. There is considerable common ground between these philosophies, such as their emphasis on the practical and their rejection of Western dualisms such as the separation of mind and body, action, and thought. First, we examine definitions of dialogue, explore links between pragmatist philosophy and AR, and make suggestions as to how philosophical hermeneutics could inform a dialogic AR practice.

What is dialogue? Isaacs (1993) defined dialogue as “a discipline of collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it” (p. 25). Edgar Schein (1993) referred to dialogue as a “communication technology...that focuses on getting in touch with underlying assumptions (especially our own assumptions) that automatically determine when we choose to speak and what we choose to say”

(p. 43).. For Barge (2002) “dialogue is...a collective and collaborative communication process whereby people explore together their individual and collective assumptions and predispositions” (p. 168). Similarly, Ellinor and Gerard (1998) describe dialogue as:

Seeing the whole rather than breaking it into parts; seeing connections rather than distinctions; inquiring into assumptions rather than justifying or defending them; learning through inquiry and disclosure rather than persuading, selling or telling; and creating shared meanings rather than gaining agreement on one meaning (p. 21).

All of those definitions imply that dialogue can help a group of people generate shared understanding and learn together, and they point to the importance of surfacing individuals’ assumptions, values, and ways of thinking. This process is the distinguishing feature of dialogue not found in other forms of talk such as a negotiation, a debate, a personal quarrel, or idle chatter.

Pragmatism. Pragmatism has been defined as “an approach to philosophy, primarily held by American philosophers, which holds that the truth or meaning of a statement is to be measured by its practical (i.e., pragmatic) consequences” (Pragmatism, 2002). To be more precise, pragmatists reject the notion that one infallible truth can be found by appealing to epistemological criteria. Rather, pragmatism suggests that truths are bound within everyday practices and concerns, validated by people’s experiences, fallible, and therefore always subject to further revisions. Knowledge, according to pragmatism, is highly practical and ought to be used to solve problems that affect social conditions. Thus, pragmatist philosophers refuse to separate theory from practice or thought from action. These characteristics explain to a large extent the appeal of pragmatism to AR practitioners. In particular, Greenwood and Levin (1998) have embraced pragmatism as a guiding philosophy of their approach to AR.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) draw on John Dewey’s and Richard Rorty’s work in their explication of a pragmatic AR approach, particularly Rorty’s criticism of the epistemological project, which is a critique of modern philosophy’s aim to create well founded knowledge through a system of rigorous and reliable methods. Rorty advocated what he called edifying philosophy, which aimed to engage in ongoing conversation over finding objective truth. Put differently, the question of validity of knowledge cannot be addressed by imposing external criteria, but rather by a judgment in terms of its practicality, usefulness, and workability (Reason, 2003). Workability refers to whether or not the actions arising from AR actually solve people’s initial problem(s). This judgment, according to Greenwood and Levine, is social and collective in nature. AR participants themselves are able to judge whether or not the solutions they put into practice resolve the issue they were faced with at the beginning. Greenwood and Levin (1998) also connect elements of Dewey’s pragmatism to AR. For example, they mention Dewey’s conceptualization of democracy as a continuous process of seeking societal improvement by collectively working with those at all levels of society, his strong belief that knowledge should not be separated from action, and his claim that all scientific knowing results from continuous cycles of action and reflection.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and Dialogue. Philosophical hermeneutics (PH) is a philosophy concerned with the nature of (a) understanding and interpreting, (b) dialogue, and (c) the practical. Its most famous proponent is the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). Gadamer does not reject the application of scientific methods in our attempt to create understanding and knowledge in the human sciences. However, his ontological conception of human knowing and understanding addresses the limitations of scientific methods and the one-sided view of what it means to know in the mainstream social sciences. In the mainstream social sciences, knowing is presumed to be a monologic process in which a “disinterested” researcher

creates knowledge *about* an object, maintains objectivity vis-à-vis his or her research participants, and is in no way changed or influenced by what he or she is studying. Gadamer's conception of knowing is not centered on the objective scientific grasp of an object, but rather on coming to an understanding with someone in dialogue in which both sides potentially learn and change (Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Consequently, it is not the interpreter/researcher who decides the right or wrong interpretation or understanding. Rather, understanding is something that emerges in a dialogic relationship between dialogue partners (Schwandt, 2000). Gadamer (1992) claims that our understandings are subject to revision and are always tentative.

Through a constant merging of perspectives, it is possible to generate new, shared understandings. For Gadamer (1992), understanding is not merely a cognitive process in which we grasp what others say. Rather, it is coming to a new and shared understanding of oneself, the other, and the subject matter through a transformation from earlier positions (Warnke, 1987). Gadamer also rejects the notion that we can understand the other by means of projecting ourselves into someone else's mind. In his view, human understanding is constrained by our "horizon of understanding" (Gadamer, 1992), which consists of our knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, experiences, and preconceptions. According to Gadamer, we can neither rise above this horizon, nor can we project ourselves into someone else's horizon. At best we can re-examine, put to test, and broaden our horizon as a result of a dialogue with the unfamiliar. We can never achieve a complete and final understanding. Thus, the dialogic meeting is central in order to reach a mutual and new understanding of the participants' positions and the issue at hand. The view that dialogue can serve as a platform for the creation of common meaning and understanding is shared by organizational scholars (Isaacs, 1993; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Senge, 1990). Consequently, shared meaning and understanding about the subject matter can only emerge in a dialogic encounter between dialogue partners (Gadamer, 2001). This dialogue meeting requires that dialogue partners acknowledge that they lack knowledge; are influenced by prejudices, need to listen to the other, and to be communicatively accessible; and need to be willing to risk confusion and uncertainty about themselves, the other and the issue at hand (Gadamer, 1992). Svenaeus (2003), applying Gadamer's ideas to medical practice, wrote that "the clinical encounter can be viewed as a coming-together of two different attitudes and lifeworlds of doctor and patient aimed at understanding, which can benefit the health of the patient" (p. 416). In a similar fashion, when the AR practitioner meets with local participants and stakeholders, each party brings different horizons of understanding to the encounter. Typically, there is a fundamental asymmetry between professional action researchers and local participants in terms of knowledge about the specific problem and the skills necessary to overcome the problem. Through genuine dialogue, a common understanding of the issue can emerge, which eventually leads to mutual learning, decision making, and action. When this process of dialogue generation is integrated with pragmatist ideals, the end goal is an actual change in outcomes in a group, organization, or society.

Dialogue to Surface Values. The conventional approach to AR has a tendency to ignore value orientations and commitments of some stakeholders (Bierema, in press). Specifically, participants, professional researchers, and local stakeholders represent a variety of value orientations and commitments that influence both the courses of action and the goals of a project. This tendency toward ignoring values results from the adoption of scientific-technical approaches to AR. These approaches originate in society's larger instrumentalist tendencies that cause us to ask "how-to" questions, as opposed to exploring larger questions about meaning and purpose (Block, 2002). Dialogue provides one way to bring these value commitments to the

surface. Hence, it creates the conditions for double-loop learning, which involves surfacing and re-evaluating our governing variables, assumptions, and beliefs that guide our actions. For instance, Karlsson (2001) stated that a dialogue “is an exchange of ideas and meanings that develops our thoughts and helps us to be aware of what we think and how we value things” (p.168). Isaacs (1993) quoted a manager of a steel mill reflecting on his experience of an organization development intervention based on the principles of dialogue:

What we’ve done is to dedicate the time, to slow down and then create a space to listen to each other so that people can collectively learn the values of a lot of various people as opposed to the same people (Isaacs, 1993, p. 33).

In summary, dialogue entails the need to challenge one’s current understandings and preconceived ideas which individuals have about themselves, the other, and about the particular issue or problem at hand (Gadamer, 1992). It requires interlocutors (i.e., those participating in a conversation) to remain open to information or ideas which do not fit their prior understanding, preconceptions, and preconceived ideas. During any AR project both the client and the researcher will encounter many situations which require such genuine openness. For instance, a group might be confronted with unexpected and uncomfortable feedback and information that challenges their core assumptions about the organization or social system. However, without the willingness to further explore the situation in light of this new revelation, any attempt to create a shared understanding based upon which action plans can be formulated will be futile. A willingness to scrutinize one’s foundational understandings and openness to abandon or modify them in light of new information or circumstances is a central idea in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. This requires listening to and conversing with others, while having an open attitude and mind. Eventually, consultants and others might revise their points of view and come to an improved or changed understanding of the subject or of themselves. Both Taylor and Gadamer imply that a change in these understandings might eventually lead to transformations in ourselves, in our identities, as well as in our relationships to others. This process very much resembles what might be defined as learning, both on an individual and on an organizational level. For instance, Brown and Starkey (2000) conceptualize organizational learning as “a virtuous circle in which new information is used to challenge existing ideas and to develop new perspectives on the future and new action routines through organizational dialogue” (p. 103).

Examples of Dialogic AR

Dialogic action research has recently been described as a particular approach to organization development that has dialogue as both its object and its method (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004). Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen explain that in their dialogical approach to AR, organizational members are trained on how to engage in dialogue that eventually leads to practical solutions. Based on Gadamer (1992) and Buber (1967), they conceptualize dialogue as a process in which partners aim to create “a better understanding or to become wiser together” (p. 373). This process is characterized by participants’ willingness to share knowledge with one another, their willingness to risk and challenge their own and other’s assumptions, and a caring attitude that emphasizes honesty and forthrightness.

Bang & Olufsen, Denmark

By means of a first and second-person inquiry into the their assumptions, beliefs, values and mental models, Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2004) illustrated how unexamined and taken for granted perspectives came to bear on their practice as action researchers working with the

Danish company Bang & Olufsen. First, the researchers noticed that during supervision conversations between project managers and their supervising managers, the supervising managers interpreted their colleagues' perspectives according to their own a-priori perspectives and ways of thinking. For example, one of the project managers pointed out to his supervising manager that lacking resources had been preventing him from successfully completing his tasks. The supervising manager, on the other hand, emphasized how successful the employee had been in getting things done and that he did not see a deficiency. Thus, the supervisor did not let the employee's reality count at that moment. Secondly, after viewing video tapes of feedback conversations with research participants, the researchers realized that they could not fully appreciate and understand the research participants' experiences either, for the same reason as the supervising managers could not. When referring to a conversation with a junior employee, Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen (2004) state that "We implicitly impose our 'regime of truth' on him instead of trying to co-develop or unfold his ability to take initiatives" (p. 380), which, in their view reduced the quality of this research. Nonetheless, the researchers engaged in a reflective process by considering their own pre-conceived ideas and assumptions and held conversations with research participants about their experiences, which opened up a dialogue about issues that had not surfaced previously. In particular, issues of managerial work life quality and health issues emerged. The authors summarize that "improved quality in our action research project depended on mutually risking ourselves as managers and action researchers. In those dialogic moments, we all became vulnerable human beings in search of improved quality of work life" (Kristiansen & Bloch-Poulsen, 2004, p. 385).

Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen's (2004) main focus was to illustrate the potential of reflective practices employed by the researchers and how these practices enabled dialogue. The knowledge that emerged from the dialogue was mainly about inter-human relationships and communication between researchers and research participants and among research participants themselves (i.e., project managers and their supervising managers), which clearly indicates a hermeneutic knowledge interest. The authors also illustrated how the imposition of their own perceptions and regimes of truth upon the research participants denoted an exertion of power. This insight reflects a somewhat more critical perspective, but it is directed mostly at their own practice as action researchers, and not at Bang & Olufsen's way of doing business. While the authors did not explicate at length the research methods they employed, the reader can infer that they followed a plan to carry out and analyze this research. However, the researchers did not emphasize the use conventional scientific research methods typical of a data-oriented empiricist research approach. In the approach used, Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen were deeply engaged with the Bang and Olufsen managers and employees in conversations that helped the managers, employees, and researchers reflect on their practices and improve their communicative skills while challenging their assumptions, values, and ways of thinking. Thus, this study employs a dialogic way of knowing, a way of knowing that rejects the polarity between the *observer* and the *observed* in conventional scientific inquiry. Instead, researchers are required to surface their self-understandings, preconceptions, and prior knowledge and to critically examine their responses to what seems strange or unusual. For the abovementioned reasons we consider Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen's (2004) study representative of dialogic AR.

U.S. Veterans Administration

While Kowalski, Haron, Yorks, and Kowalski's (2003) AR study with the VA Department was largely process oriented at the beginning stages, later project phases displayed

several characteristics of dialogic AR. The action researchers assumed less of an expert role and relinquished control to the local action teams. The action teams' increasing levels of initiative and independence were largely the result of training interventions that focused on the project's practices, methods, and other relevant issues. In particular, Kowalski et al. (2003) attribute much of the project's success to the action teams using reflective techniques such as the Argyris' Inference Ladder.

When describing the work of one of the local action teams, the authors state that, "although the team does not talk explicitly about 'reflection and inquiry,' team members do question each other's positions or views and bring sensitive issues into the open that before would have festered" (Kowalski et al., 2003, p. 48). The authors further report that these reflective practices, which are based on open and free exchange of ideas, feelings, and information (i.e., dialogue), changed the quality of conversations to more open, less judgmental and authoritative ways of communicating than existed before this intervention. There were also measurable work-life improvements in terms of labor-management relations, reductions in grievances and complaints, as well as reductions in reported sick leave. Lastly, the survey results confirmed linkages between workplace aggression, stress, and organizational performance. While this last finding represents knowledge *about* the issue at hand, or a technical knowledge interest, the researchers' observations about improved work-life and quality of conversations reflect a hermeneutic knowledge interest. This improvement of everyday conditions was not a result of seeking control of or knowledge about social processes, but was attained through an emphasis on social competence and inter-human understanding. While not a defining characteristic of the AR project, we conclude that the knowledge created was also emancipatory in some regards, as it questioned existing ways of doing business inside the VA. One observation made by the authors warrants this assumption: "Senior leadership at some sites remained skeptical of the project's underlying counter-cultural values, and consequently less supportive. It would have been better to connect with leadership far earlier in the process" (p. 50). This case illustrates how AR projects may combine features of different AR approaches, and how they may be integrated in an AR project carried out in measurement-oriented organizational settings.

The Swedish Leadership, Organization, and Codetermination Program

Gustavsen (1992) reported on a large-scale program in Sweden co-sponsored by the Swedish Work Environment Fund and 150 participating organizations. The program aimed at developing new forms of work organization involving management, labor, and professional researchers from these organizations. He formulated a range of criteria for a democratic dialogue to occur. These criteria were not developed arbitrarily but against the backdrop of the theory of participatory democracy (Gustavsen, 1992). We provide some of the highlights of these principles (Gustavsen, 1992, p. 3):

- The dialogue is a process of exchange: ideas and arguments move to and fro between the participants.
- Everybody must be able to develop an understanding of the issues at stake.
- All arguments that pertain to the issues under discussion are legitimate. No argument should be rejected on the ground that it emerges from an illegitimate source.
- The workrole and authority of all participants can be a subject of discussion—no participant is exempt in this respect.
- The participants should be able to tolerate an increasing degree of difference of opinion.

- The dialogue must continuously produce agreements which can provide platforms for practical action.

In order to make these and other principles of democratic dialogue actionable and operational in actual workplace change practice, Gustavsen (1992) proposed a number of specific strategies. For example, he proposed the use of dialogue conferences, which served as arenas or platforms for the exchange of ideas and experiences. These conferences were organized according to specific principles. For instance, two working modes were applied. First, discussions occurred in small groups. Conclusions were developed in the groups but presented later in large plenary sessions. Furthermore, lectures or other attempts to establish authority were not permitted during the conferences. Instead, talks could only be given in the form of brief comments regarding specific issues that emerged naturally from the conference. While Gustavsen remains skeptical that the above mentioned principles of democratic dialogue can be fully realized in working life, he emphasizes their importance as guiding and regulatory principles.

Gustavsen's (1992) principles of democratic dialogue provide an example of how AR practitioners can create conditions conducive to dialogue. Other organizational scholars, such as Ellinor and Gerard (1998) and Isaacs (1993) also provide specific guidelines for facilitating dialogue in OD interventions. For example, they explain the need for identifying and suspending one's judgments, assumptions and certainties; suspending roles and status; listening to one's own listening and listening without resistance; slowing down the inquiry; respecting differences; and befriending polarization. Dialogic AR requires practitioners skilled at facilitating reflective discussions and dialogue, balancing the interests of various stakeholders, promoting critical inquiry into participants' understanding of the issue, and practicing systemic thinking. Many HROD professionals possess these skills and could easily position themselves to facilitate dialogic AR.

While we argue here that the expansive quality of dialogue may result in deep individual as well as organizational change and learning, we also acknowledge the importance of conversations that lead to problem solving and decision making. These conversations are often referred to as discussions (e.g., Barge, 2002, Isaacs, 1993) and, in contrast to dialogue, discussion has a funneling quality with the aim of narrowing things down in order to arrive at a specific course of action and/or decision. The need to make immediate decisions and to take action in modern organizations tends to favor discussions, and this often happens at the expense of dialogue. Nonetheless, discussions are essential to generate actions, but ideally they take place only after a careful consideration of multiple perspectives, values, assumptions and opinions which can be best achieved in and through dialogue.

Conclusions

We have presented three broad approaches to AR. The viability and practicality of each approach depends on the specific circumstances within an organization. Dialogic approaches to AR have not received much attention from academic HROD circles, given the often-cited criticism that AR in general is unscientific. From a practitioner point of view, the challenge to dialogic AR centers around OD practitioners' need to respond to clients who want quick results and answers. Employees are tied up with their day-to-day work and cannot commit much time to participate in dialogue conferences and other similar activities. Additionally, some organizations might be reluctant to apply a dialogic approach because it clearly fosters individuals' critical reflection upon foundational organizational practices. Nonetheless, as the examples of dialogic

AR demonstrate, such approaches are feasible in organizational contexts, and HROD researchers and practitioners are not limited to pursuing conventional approaches to AR only.

Opportunities exist for utilizing these approaches in smaller scale ways that might be less disruptive and time consuming to organizations. As Kowalski et al. (2003) show, these approaches can be combined with more conventional forms of AR in order to meet immediate organizational goals. Participative critical approaches can be combined with conventional approaches to lead to results that are sustainable, that benefit all stakeholders involved, and that produce more ethical, longer-term results. There also seems to be a greater interest in and openness to critical approaches in HROD (Fenwick, 2005). HROD professionals increasingly acknowledge that engaging with organizations raises moral, ethical, and political questions, which cannot be answered solely through technical empirical investigations. Instead, these issues need to be addressed within the context of a particular situation. As Karlsson (2001) argued, these questions deserve more careful, thoughtful, and reflexive consideration and dialogue could serve as an arena for such reflection and reconsideration.

When considering the political risks involved in conducting critical AR within organizations (Githens, 2007), we conclude that dialogic AR may be a promising option to pursue in addition to or in combination with conventional AR. While the political risks involved in overtly conducting critical AR create challenges that can make it difficult practice, dialogic AR holds promise in allowing for exploration of critical issues in more subtle ways through the exploration of values, beliefs, assumptions, and feelings, attempting to achieve understanding, and focusing on transformation. Dialogic AR has great potential for both connecting with organizational goals and helping to create more humane workplaces.

From a research perspective, it might be worthwhile to inquire into the extent that organizations with strict hierarchical structures and/or more authoritarian cultures are receptive to this dialogic engagement. In particular, a worthwhile line of inquiry could explore the small spaces in which dialogic AR is practiced within organizations with such cultures. Previous literature has explored the creation of entrepreneurial, counter-cultural spaces within bureaucratic organizations (Pinchot & Pellman, 1999). Forester's (1999) PAR project in a community setting suggests that despite the high power differential between community members and those equipped with political power, the participatory AR process may result in more equitable relationships. Through future articles, sharing about AR projects, and ongoing dialogue about AR, HROD scholars and practitioners can challenge each other's work and help to explore future possibilities and conceptions of AR.

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