

Why Action Research?
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- Because it is participatory in the sense of being “from within” our living involvements with those around us, and does not assume an external “God’s eye” or “Archimedean” vantage point from which one is claiming to conduct one’s research.
- Research into our ways of life cannot be conducted in the same, value-free way as in the Natural Sciences.
- In fact, quite a different set of questions are involved: How can we learn something general, something that we can carry across to other circumstances, from something rare, unrepeatable, unique, fleeting, and utterly particular? Why do we value unique works of art so much? Why are Wittgenstein’s “reminders” so useful? Why is it worth repeating to ourselves: “Nothing is hidden” (PI, no.435).
- And quite a different set of attitudes and involvements also: Something very special emerges over time in the spontaneous, living, bodily, expressive and responsive relations occurring between ourselves and the others and othernesses in our surroundings: invisible, very real “presences” can emerge in these dynamically unfolding relations which can teach us new ways of going on.
- Our modes of inquiry are not, as in the Natural Sciences, based in self-consciously conducted, input-output, external observations, but depend on sensing something in the course of an involving interplay continued over a period of time.

Example: We can take Oliver Sacks’s (1985) case of Dr P. -- the case of the man who mistook his wife’s face for a hat -- as a case in point here. Dr P. looked at Sacks not so much stony faced as if scanning him... there was in Dr P’s looking, says Sacks, “some failure in the normal interplay of gaze and expression” (p.8).

The case of Dr P. is important because it demonstrates so very well the crucial role of our spontaneous, living, bodily, responsiveness to our surroundings in providing us with a shaped and vectored orientational sense of how, practically, “to go on” within them. Dr P., trying like a good Cartesian to calculate it out, sometimes got it wrong -- hence, a hat shaped entity at the height of the hat-stand he remembered placing his hat on when he first enter Sacks’ consulting room... an understandable mistake for a Cartesian.

- A central theme running through PAR, is to with how we might come to know a unique other or otherness as unique, as who or what they are in themselves, to “enter into” their world, to acknowledge and respect the otherness of the other.
- Or, to put it another way, how is it possible for a person (of a company, or whatever) to express their own unique individuality within a language made up, seemingly, of only a limited number of repeatable forms... or, for a work of art, to teach us a new way of looking at, or listening to, the world around us, a new way or style of looking or listening, a new sensibility?

- This is connected with another theme, to do with how we might understand change.
- We are very used to talking of change as something that can be explained in terms of principles, rules, or conventions, of changes taking place within a reality already well-known to us, with what we might call ordinary changes.
- Instead, in PAR, we can be concerned with surprising changes, with changes that happen unexpectedly, changes that strike us with amazement or wonder, extraordinary changes, changes in the very character of what we take our reality to be.
- In short, instead of changes of a quantitative and repeatable kind, we can talk about first-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a qualitative kind.
- This leads on to a third topic, one that seems to me an utterly new topic in that -- although it is quite well-known and familiar to us in an everyday sense -- it has not yet aroused in us any distinctive acknowledgment of its very special nature. This new topic is simply "life" or "livingness", the properties, characteristics, or aspects of living bodies, of organic forms as enduring, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, structurizing structures.
- A fourth topic -- arising out of the special nature of living things -- is that everything of importance to us in PAR occurs in meetings of one kind or another.
- Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to respond to each other (more happens than them merely having an impact on one another).
- As Wittgenstein (1953) puts it: "our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different" (no.284).
- But more than this, there is in such meetings the creation of qualitatively new, quite novel and distinct forms of life, which are more than merely averaged or mixed versions of those already existing.
- Elsewhere (Shotter, 1980, 1984) I have discussed this under the heading of "joint action", and more recently (Shotter, 1993a&b) as "dialogically-structured" activity, but here I want to go a step further and talk of it as "chiasmically-structured" activity, following Merleau-Ponty's (1968) account of its nature in his last book.
- As Bateson (1979) noted in *Mind and Nature*, it is the chiasmic interweaving of our visual relating to our surroundings through our two eyes, that gives rise to the presence of depth in our looking.

Given these all these themes so far, let me try to sum up their influence by saying that, running through PAR is a focus on spontaneous, living, bodily, expressive and responsive activity:

- spontaneous, because it is immediate and not pre-mediated;
- living, in that it has its existence only in a continuous responsive and adjustive relation with events occurring in its surroundings;
- bodily, in that it is not hidden inside individual people's heads;
- expressive, in that it is a kind of activity that moves others to respond to it;

- and responsive, in that it occurs spontaneously in response to events having their source in the activities of the others and othernesses in its surroundings.

These are some of the reasons for my commitment to PAR.