Knowledge as Social Praxis:

A Review of Selener's (1997) *Participatory Action Research and Social Change*

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I was very pleased to be invited to review Daniel Selener's book, having met him and discussed his project—albeit briefly—at Cornell University and later at the World Congress in Participatory Action Research at Cartagena, Colombia in 1997. And having also spent my professional life working to establish collaborative forms of action research from a different (but I thought sympathetic) ideological base from Selener's (Reason, 1994b; Reason, forthcoming-b), I was keen to see what he had made of this exploration of action research in different traditions and in different contexts.

So as I sit down to write this review I am curious as to why it has taken me so long to get into the study of the book and the writing which I had agreed to do with such alacrity. Part of it is undoubtedly my own conceit: having edited books which were intended to explore the diverse field of participatory approaches to research (Reason, 1988; Reason, 1994a; Reason and Rowan, 1981) (and being in the early stages of putting together a *Handbook of Research Practice* (Reason and Bradbury, in preparation) devoted to participatory forms of action research), I was without doubt anxious about approaching the work of a man, clearly very intellectually competent and ideologically committed, who might be approaching this job "better"—both more comprehensively and more from a more radical ideology—than I could do. The reader should know that this may have coloured my perspective, and in any event, I am not a neutral commentator, having advocated the conduct of inquiry in collaborative and action-oriented forms.

But my delay in getting into this review cannot be put entirely to my own anxiety, nor to my busy-ness. From first hearing about Selener's book and first flipping through the pages, I found the project and the prospect of reviewing of project of this magnitude quite daunting—and

the cover claims the book to be «The most complete book for those committed to research, participation and social change». From the start, glancing through it, I found the book both appealing and rather off-putting. And now that I have read it carefully, I discover I both like and dislike it, think it is like both extraordinarily comprehensive and quite inadequate at the same time. And it is difficult to write an adequate critical review of such a complex work by a man who I fundamentally admire and whose enterprise I wish to support. So I will give an account of my reading of Participatory Action Research and Social Change, distinguishing as I go between the parts I like and the parts which trouble me.

The book starts with a personal preface which is exemplary. For Daniel Selener tells us very frankly of his commitment to his «radical political paradigm» (p. 1) and the difficulties he experienced in approaching writing about research in other ideological paradigms. He tells us how he labelled the work of people in management and education «pseudo-participatory research» (p. 1) (and the paranoid part of me imagines he might have included me in this!). He tells how, by reading some «neoliberal works», he thought of himself as a «traitor to the revolutionary cause», that he was committing «intellectual and political suicide» (p. 2). And he tells us how:

«I learned to balance my deep ideological beliefs and political commitment with my thirst for liberating knowledge. I decided to practice what I preach, i.e. to attempt to understand things from different points of view.» (p. 2).

In writing this introduction Selener not only tells us that he is attempting to understand different points for view, he is telling us the point of view from which his understanding is developing. For me this is an essential aspect of participatory research: for we need to not only participate with other human persons, but as we ourselves are inevitably part of the field, we are participating in the creation of knowing. Since Selener tells us so much about "where he is coming from" we can see how he participates in the creation of knowing and can judge more thoroughly the quality of his contribution without having to second guess his perspective. If only more writing started with such an honest and straightforward account of the process of writing.

The book then moves in to the first section, which sets out the four major areas in which Selener has discovered approaches to participatory action research: in community development, in organizations, in education, and with farmers. He attempts to give us a comprehensive account of the thinking and practice in each of these fields—and provides four bibliographies which themselves extend to 77 pages. I think some of my problems with the book start here, for I see his choice of these four as quite arbitrary: after all, some communities are also organizations, schools and other educational establishments are organiza-

tions, and farming takes place within communities. And what about action research in healthcare, in social work, in policing, in churches and in many other fields? I suspect the book would be more satisfactory (and less repetitive) if some other, and maybe more conceptual typology, were used as the base of its organization.

I immensely enjoyed Chapter Two, the account of participatory research in communities, for Selener gives an wonderful account of this work's origins (which he claims to be primarily in South America) having its origins in the work of Marx, Engels, Gramsci, liberation theology and the sociology of liberation, and of course the liberationist teaching of Paulo Freire. He provides a critique of research based in a positivist tradition, and outlines the intellectual origins of participatory research in pragmatism, humanistic idealism and historical materialism. And he makes very clear that the aims of participatory research in communities is both to solve practical problems and to change the balance of power in favour of poor and marginalized groups by working with them so that they become social actors:

«Knowledge is a fundamental element in the theory and practice of participatory action research. This approach assumes that social science is not value free or neutral. All research is political in nature, and has the potential to affect the distribution of power in society. Research can serve either to maintain or to challenge society's existing power relations.»

«Participatory researchers maintain that knowledge has become the single most important basis of power and control… and that the oppressors' power is, in part, derived from control of both the process and the products of knowledge generation» (p. 24).

And of course, this knowledge is not just what is written in books and articles, knowledge is social praxis: «generated by a community group to promote activities for social change» (p. 34).

Selener very clearly knows his stuff here, knows it with his heart as well as with his intellect, and knows it practically as well as from books. Yet already I am curious about the omissions, in particular that there is no reference in the text to the work in Southern Africa by Marja-Liisa Swantz and her colleagues—particularly as I understand it was she who first coined the term "participatory action research" for this kind of liberating action research among deprived people of the South—nor the work based at Highlander in Tennessee which contributed so much to the Civil Rights movement in the USA.

I strongly urge all management and organizational researchers to read this chapter of the book and to ponder on it before moving on the next section. It is powerfully written, ideologically committed, and intellectually thorough. Participatory research from this perspective is a chal-

lenge to us all, whether orthodox "objective" researchers, insider/outsider researchers (Bartunek and Louis, 1996), action researchers (Elden and Chisholm, 1993), action scientists (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985), or co-operative inquirers (Heron, 1996), and particularly if we are involved in organisational interventions.

Daniel Selener then turns his attention to action research in organizations, and it is here that I find his account much more questionable. He offers a review of the roots of action research in organizations, tracing these back to Lewin (whom he rightly credits with valuing creating social change through participation), Elton Mayo, William Foot Whyte and the researchers from the Tavistock Institute, Trist, Bamforth, Rice et al., but omitting the important group dynamics work of NTL. However, when he lists the sources he draws on for his account of the main components for action research in organizations (on pages 63 and 65), they do seem very partial and dated. Dated, since the latest listed is Shani and Pasmore (1985); and partial because significant writers such as Argyris (e.g. Argyris et al., 1985), Torbert (1991), Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), Gustavsen (1992; see also Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996), Levin (1996) and others from the Scandinavian quality of work life projects, the contributors to the special issue of Human Relations on action research (Elden and Chisholm, 1993), while listed in the extensive bibliography are not discussed in the text at all; other important influences such as Senge (1990) and Weisbord (1992) are completely omitted. (There is no index to this book which is a serious omission for a work which attempts to organize and compare so many sources.) Further, most of this chapter has the quality of lists—lists of main components, lists of underlying assumptions, lists of values, lists of methodological guidelines, so that it adds up to little more than a rather dated primer in organization development. The problem seems to be that, in contrast with the previous chapter, Selener only knows this work intellectually, not practically and emotionally.

His main critical thrust is that action researchers in organizations have served managerial purposes and ignored the needs of those with less power:

«*There is overwhelming evidence that action researchers have traditionally worked with and for management rather than the lower levels of an organization… Action Researchers are hired and paid by, and work with the consent of, management to achieve goals and objectives set for by the organizations hierarchy*» (p. 78).

This is a serious charge, and one which has at least a partial ring of truth to it. There are of course counter arguments, one of which is that interests do not simply lie with either management or employees; that organizations will only change if senior managers learn to change in the direction of more inclusive, democratic and problem oriented behaviour; that we must understand the difference between first and second

order change etc. But none of these issues are explored, and although Selener does return to issues of power, participation and action research in a later chapter, he does seem to be working from an either/or view of power. This chapter doesn't get to grips with the kinds of questions of epistemology or practice that I hear debated at (some) American Academy of Management sessions, amongst enlightened organization consultants (Harrison, 1995), or that I read in the modern literature on action research in organizations (e.g. the journal *Concepts and Transformations*).

Selener's chapter on action research in education provides a thorough introduction, drawing strongly on Kemmis' and his colleagues critical theory perspective on action research as an emancipatory process. He contrasts usefully traditional-positivist, practical-interpretivist, and emancipatory-critical forms of action research (pp. 116-120). But I soon got tired of being presented with lists, with repetitions from previous chapters, with the brevity with which important issues were addressed (for example reading that the emancipatory-critical approach to action research rejects «positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth in favor of a dialectical view of rationality» [p. 120]. What does this really mean?).

The final chapter of part one concerns farmer participatory research and is concerned with work with poor farmers. It discusses how models of research based on transfer of technology have not been successful and argues for a full participation of farmers in research into improving methods on their farms, on the assumptions that the farmers indigenous knowledge is of immense value, and that they have capacity for experimentation. I know very little about this kind of work— although I have listened to a village farmer from Central America talk with enthusiasm about his village's collaboration with a young American forestry graduate—but to my mind the chapter has the merits and drawbacks of the previous two, being a useful brief introduction that will not take the mature reader very far at all.

The second part of this book contains four reflective chapters: chapter six looks at different aspects of participation in Selener's forms on action research; chapter seven at questions of power and control and who benefits, chapter eight at theories of social change, and the final chapter at questions and recommendations for practice.

Chapter six introduces a framework of types of participation differentiating between «genuine» participation and «pseudo-participation» in eight steps ranging from «manipulation» to «citizen control». Selener then examines examples of action research from each of his four categories, exploring the nature of participation in each. This chapter makes important and useful distinctions, albeit still suffering from brevity of treatment. Selener shows how participation to solve «technical» problems can lead to empowerment, but also how it can simply lead to

«domestication» if employees in an organization are simply used as a source of «data», emphasising again how people in organizations must become more aware of the impact of power relations on the research process.

The question it raises for me is whether we can understand participation without also understanding authority and autonomy. For as I have argued:

«(…) institutions need to enhance human association by an appropriate balance of the principles of hierarchy, collaboration, and autonomy: deciding for others, with others, and for oneself. Authentic hierarchy provides appropriate direction by those with greater vision, skill and experience—and is always concerned with transforming relationships so that those in relatively subordinate positions move toward greater skills in collaborative and autonomous action (Torbert, 1991). Collaboration roots the individual within a community of peers, offering basic support and the creative and corrective feedback of other views and possibilities (Randall and Southgate, 1980). Autonomy expresses the self-creating and self-transfiguring potential of the person (Heron, 1992). The shadow face of authority is authoritarianism; that of collaboration peer pressure and conformity; that of autonomy narcissism, wilfulness and isolation. The challenge is to design institutions which manifest valid forms of these principles; and to find ways in which they can be maintained in self-correcting and creative tension (Heron, 1989; Heron, 1993).» (Reason, forthcoming-a).

Selener's concern with the participation dimension alone narrows his view of what is required for a vision of an emancipatory inquiry practice and, I think, results in an over-simplified argument, for we cannot understand community and participation without also understanding liberating authority and individual autonomy. And since power is such an important dimension in his argument, it is strange that his book does not include a more sophisticated discussion of the theory and nature of power. Selener notes when commenting on a case of farmer participatory research:

«It is interesting to note that shifts in power in this community did not occur, though power was acquired through the creation of a cooperative within the context of a major social and political movement. This suggests that the acquisition of power does not always involve taking it away from somebody else, especially in the context of social change-oriented governments or institutions in which empowering the poor does not require changes in power structures. However, participation of women in decision-making is evidence of the redistribution of power formerly held exclusively by males in this society» (p. 225).

We could do with a much more thorough exploration of the nature of social power than this: Selener seems to view power primarily as a

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commodity in limited supply which can be acquired or re-distributed, although at times he hints at a more subtle and complex, as in the second sentence. The absence of an exploration of theories of power makes chapter seven less useful than it might be, and chapter eight on theories of social change is simply too short to encompass its own agenda. But I cannot but cheer wholeheartedly at the unequivocal statement:

«For action to be empowering, the political system, the society, and the organizations in which action research takes place must be democratic. Even when working within an oppressive setting, activities oriented to changing that situations can be empowering. While some contexts are conducive to the successful implementation of participatory action research for social change, and some are not, we must remember that an oppressive context is the principal reason and motivation to engage in an activity of this type in order to change that reality» (p. 258).

And again, I cannot but cheer at the last chapter, which in a short and sharp fashion focuses the agenda of the whole book in a set of questions that researchers should be asking themselves about the impact of the work on power and on social change. These are the kind of questions which raise questions about power relations in research, and should be addressed in every PhD dissertation and every research proposal. They expand our notion of validity in inquiry to include not only the epistemological but the social, and ask us to show how our research process has increased the capacity for inquiry amongst those with whom we have worked. Selener's questions remind me of the important questions John Rowan raised long ago about research, questions not just about truth, but about authenticity, alienation, power, patriarchy, legitimacy and relevance (Rowan, 1981).

So what to make of this book? As I write this review I feel uncomfortable about the degree to which I have been critical, yet at the same time feeling sure these criticisms are justified for a book which makes a claim to completeness. But Selener has undertaken an absolutely huge task in reviewing the whole field of participatory action research—a task that I was asked to undertake for the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* and only managed by reframing it as an exploration of *three* approaches to collaborative inquiry (Reason, 1994b). He provides us with a quite extraordinary (but not complete) range of material in his study, and thus offers an extremely useful bibliographic resource. And Selener does us a particular service by focusing our thoughts so thoroughly on the issues of power and participation in action research, and challenges action researchers in organisations to consider carefully whose interests we serve.

So I think action researchers in organizations will find this book practically useful as a resource, both stimulating and annoying for what it includes and what it omits. Read the Preface as a fine example of the

relationship between the personal, political and theoretical, and if you are not familiar with the literature of participatory research in communities and among disadvantaged people, buy this book for chapter 2 alone.

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