ACTION SCIENCE AND ETHNOGRAPHY: CORRECTING THE ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORD!

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David Coghlan's article 'Research as a Process of Change: Action Science in Organisations' (IBAR vol 15, 1994 pp 119-130) provides a very clear introduction to action science. In doing so, he makes a very welcome contribution by showing the benefits that this often neglected qualitative methodology can make to social and management research. During the course of his argument he make some interesting comparisons between action science and ethnography; comparisons that warrant a little more attention. Coghlan argues (p125) that the 'ethnographic participant-observer role and the action scientist role are closely inter-connected and sharply distinguished'. This statement is undoubtedly true. However, during the course of his argument Coghlan discusses only one expression of ethnography. As a result his treatment of ethnography, while useful, is somewhat shallow at times. This, of course, is understandable as his focus is on action science and not ethnography. However, in the interests of raising the level of debate about qualitative research methods, it is useful to correct the ethnographic record!

During the course of his discussion David Coghlan draws on the work of Schein (1987) who helpfully suggests that the similarities and differences between action science and ethnography can be surfaced by examining four key questions;

1) Who initiates and drives the research?
2) What is the implicit model of the organisation held by each?
3) Whose needs drive the process of inquiry?
4) What is the psychological contract operating between insider and outside?

His analysis of questions 1 and 3 are well thought through and argued; his discussion of questions 2 and 4 less so. The reason for this lies in his narrow conceptualisation of ethnography. Accordingly, this response will present ethnography as a much broader approach to research that his definition suggests.

Participant Observation And Ethnography

Firstly, Coghlan suggests that participant observation and ethnography are synonymous. They are not. Participant observation is only one expression of ethnography. Ethnographic

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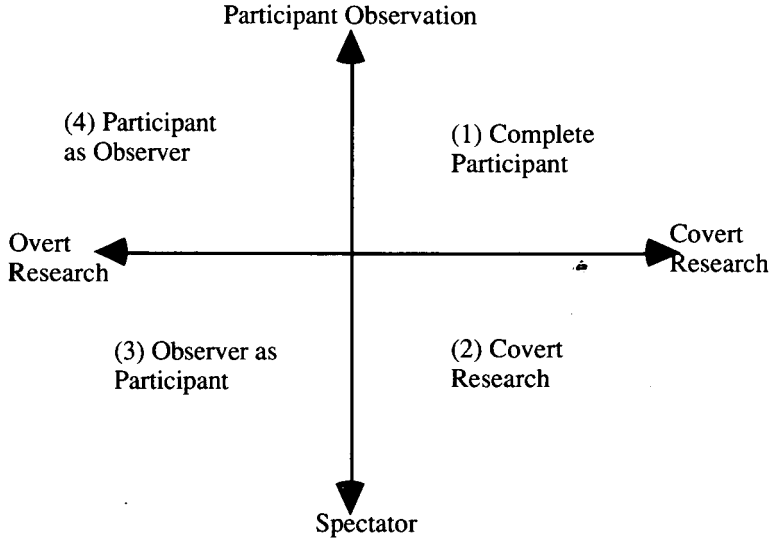
field roles are much wider than the participant observer model. For example Gill and Johnson (1991: 112) build on the work of Gold (1958) and Junker (1960) by suggesting that ethnographic field roles might be distinguished according to whether the researcher is overt or covert and whether s/he is a spectator or a participant. By intersecting these two dimensions the following taxonomy can be developed.

Roy's *Banana Time* (1960), a study of the use of time in a machine shop, provides a good example of quadrant one: the researcher as a 'Complete Participant'. The first part of Filby's research into the work culture of a group of public relations specialists in a state bureaucracy (Filby and Willmott, 1988) provides a good example of 'Covert



Researcher' role. This role, however, was re-negotiated into a more overt 'Observer as Participant' role in subsequent fieldwork. Other notable examples of the 'Observer as Participant' role include Gouldner's (1954) *Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy* and Benyon's (1973) *Working for Ford.* Finally, Burawoy's (1979) *Manufacturing Consent* and Michael Rosen's (1989) *Crashing in '87: Power and Symbolism in the Dow* provide good examples of the 'Participant as Observer' role.

In light of the above, the comparison between action science and participant observation (as the sole expression of ethnographic research) may not be the most appropriate comparison for the following reasons. Firstly, participant observation is but one expression of ethnographic research. Secondly, the role of the observer as participant is now a more common field role than that of the participant observer. A fairer comparison would therefore have been between the ethnographic observer as participant role and action science. In addition, a comparison between the ethnographic

observer-participant role and the action scientist would have been more appropriate because in both cases the researcher is external to the organisation, whereas the Participant as Observer is necessarily internal to the organisation.

Ethnography and Change

During his discussion of Schein's second and fourth question (see above), David Coghlan makes a number of statements about action science, ethnography and change. In doing so, he quite rightly shows that action science is a unique form of research because change lies at its very heart. However, he is not entirely correct in suggesting that ethnographers are not interested in changing their subject group. Certainly, the majority of ethnographers agree that 'the subject group is there to be understood and left intact' and that they are 'not to be obtrusive lest they change what they are trying to study' (p126). However, there are examples of ethnographers who are very much concerned with changing their subject group. Good examples of such ethnographies include Nichols and Benyon's *Living with Capitalism* (1977), Willis, *Learning to Labour* (1977) and Michael Burawoy's *Manufacturing Consent* (1979) and Filby's *Analysing Organisational Culture* (1989). Willis, for example, in his ethnographic study of a group of kids in an inner city school concludes his work with a number of principles to aid the penetration of the cultural/structural dialectic and the development of an emancipatory praxis. Equally, Filby shows how the ethnographer's questions can lead to a heightening of consciousness which may or may not lead to the development of praxis.

Perhaps a better way to examine the potential for change that action science and ethnography affords is by examining them in the light of Habermas' (1972) knowledge -constitutive -interests. Action Science is guided by a technical knowledge -constitutive -interests and is concerned with change that improves the degree of prediction and control over the system. The majority of ethnographic research is motivated by practical knowledge -constitutive -interests; that is, research aimed at developing mutual understanding. Critical ethnographies, however, are motivated by emancipatory knowledge -constitutive -interests and are concerned with freeing social actors from domination, both from the domination of others and the domination by forces they do not understand or control, including forces that are humanly created and reproduced. Nichols and Benyon, for example note that there book 'carries the conviction that the struggle for the new socialist view is now a matter of great importance (ibid: p vii) and seek to promote that view through their ethnographic examination of a chemical factory.

To suggest that ethnographers share an 'implicit model of the organisation' necessitating a sharing of assumptions about ontology, epistemology and human nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) is therefore unreasonable. Rather, ethnography is far more diverse, both in terms of field roles and cognitive interests than either Schein or Coghlan seem to have appreciated.

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ACTION SCIENCE AND ETHNOGRAPHY: A REPLY

David Coghlan

Ivan Filby's response to my article on action science, and particularly his desire to address some points in my references to ethnography, is most welcome. He makes some important clarifications with regard to distinctions within ethnography, especially with regard to the role of the participant observer.

There is a clear distinction between action science and ethnography, which I think needs to be re-emphasised. In action science the agenda is set and driven by the client. The researcher is essentially a consultant who has been hired by a client system to help solve some problem. The consultant-researcher works in a facilitative manner with the client system so that the members of the system generate their own valid and useful information, can then make free and informed choices and be committed to those choices in their remedial action (Argyris 1970). At the same time, the consultant-researcher engages the client system in a reflection of what is going on so as to generate

understanding and, in doing so, contributes to the generation of usable generalisable knowledge from the process.

There is a growing understanding and utilisation of the notion of consultation as research. The different terms used - action research, action science, action inquiry, clinical inquiry, appreciative inquiry - expressed in the work of Schein, Argyris, Torbert, Gummesson and others illustrate the complexity of this important approach to organisational research. In a current article, Schein (1995) is very explicit on the difference between action research and the clinical inquiry. In his view, clinical inquiry is synonymous with process consultation and is always driven by client needs. This client-centred perspective has significant implications for how data is gathered and used.

A dialogue between different approaches to qualitiative research, such as engaged by Filby in this instance, contributes to the continuing development of understanding, not only between different approaches, but within approaches.

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