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ACTION SCIENCE AND ETHNOGRAPHY: A REPLY

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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 qualitative 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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